Rethinking Teacher Leadership with Prospective Teachers

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An Action Research Study

This is an action research study, my attempt at examining rigorously the curriculum of a course on teacher leadership for prospective teachers. The structure of the research process is an action spiral (Anderson, 1995), in which the actions of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on particular educational phenomena in a real educational scene take place. I monitored my own reflective ideas on the course as well as those of students in the classes. I used student journal entries (a course assignment) as the primary method for tracking student insights on the course.

This attempt at discussing teacher education is highly contextualized, not only to the university teacher preparation program in which I work, but also, more particularly, to the deep examination of a course I teach within this program. My hopes for this manuscript differ from other types of research articles that often appear in journals. I don't make the claim that this study generalizes to other contexts. In fact, its main purpose is to inform my own work, and by extension the work of my close colleagues. Ancillary purposes then extend to you reader, upon whom much responsibility lies for getting something out of this piece. What I hope for is transferability, what Stake (1995) describes as the possibility that you will see connections between this study and your own work that transfer; maybe you will glean something from this particular description of a teacher leadership course.

Situating Myself in the Study

Getting teacher education “right” is a massive, never-ending, potentially impossible undertaking. Some of us attempt to influence the big picture of educating prospective teachers well. We conduct research and write papers and present them at conferences. Sometimes such little change in the field frustrates us, and at others, we wish for reformers to just leave well enough alone. But most of our time we spend trying to do the best we
can with the structures, programs, and students we have to work with in our own little corners of the universe, that is, we try to get it “right” for our students. We are charged to do our best with the students and programs we have, and to work simultaneously within the structures to transform them (Goodlad, 1994). Like any good curricularist or teacher educator, I know that context matters (Eisner, 1994).

One of my faculty roles is to teach the course for preservice teachers on teacher leadership entitled, “418: School Organization and Curriculum Development.” Hundreds of students take the course each year; our Educational Leadership Department allots considerable teaching time and people to the endeavor. When I arrived on campus before my first fall semester and began reviewing the existing course syllabi and assigned readings, I found myself questioning the pedagogical assumptions of the past. In short, I couldn’t imagine teaching the course as others had done. I found the readings for the course to be outdated. Activities for the course seemed disjointed and disconnected from any overarching themes or anchor texts/ideas. No documents existed that clarified the overall, guiding principles of the course beyond the catalog description.

I talked to as many people who had taught the course as I could, and they generally agreed that reconceptualizing the course would be a prudent course of action. I asked for permission from the department chair to pilot a revised course focusing on teacher leadership for secondary students. A new colleague assigned to teach the other section for secondary students agreed to adapt a version of my syllabus and leave the old course readings and activities behind. I have been studying the impact of the course on students over the course of this school year.

A Brief Historical and Political Overview of the Course

Preservice teachers enroll in 418 during their junior or senior years; at the same time, they enroll in several other education courses offered by the Teacher Education Department and Educational Psychology. These courses comprise a “block” of courses
that allows flexible scheduling so students can take required field experiences concurrently in local schools.

Four-eighteen, as I came to understand it in both historical and political terms, has been around for quite a while and hasn't changed much during that while. Traditionally, instructors lectured on issues in school organization, school law, school labor, and school finance. But the course had fallen out of the good graces of faculty members from other departments and preservice teachers taking the course for a number of reasons. For instance, several years ago, our department, supposedly, didn't deliver on an alleged promise to assist the Teacher Education Department in supervising the field experiences taking place concurrently with the courses. Students complained about the course being dry, the readings outdated, the material and pedagogy disconnected from their early experiences in the field as teachers.

Discussions heated up in the school regarding the course and its place as a “core” course in almost all of the licensure programs we offer. These discussions occurred while we considered all of the courses in the programs in a curriculum review process mandated by the state. Some of our faculty -- even some from my own department -- perceived 418 as a course that could easily be discontinued. There were also those in the department who recognized the course’s shortcomings but hoped we could revise the course and remain involved in the undergraduate preparation of teachers as leaders. This is an area of expertise that we have as a department, the reasoning goes, and we ought to make a contribution that is substantive and “right.”

When looking at the block of courses taken concurrently with 418 from a macro perspective, it is obvious that little or no coordination exists among the courses in the in terms of professors sharing ideas, a curricular rationale, and/or assignments. This is a major weakness to me and it is obvious to our students.

I sit in my block of education classes and I am sad because I waited three years for my block classes that would magically tie everything together. I sat through so many classes that I thought were irrelevant to my future as a teacher. I have learned the most about teaching from my field experiences. (Jerry Journal)
A Rebirth for 418

So I reconceptualized the 418 course as a teacher leadership course. This felt “right” since we are a leadership department. There was consensus within the department that our contribution to teacher development through the class should move past the notions that preparing teachers for teaching and leading has to do primarily with introducing students to content about the topics of school organization, labor, law, and finance.

We shouldn't just explain to students how schools are currently organized or should be organized and run, using only traditional models in practice as guides or management systems or hierarchical/authoritarian theories as theoretical lenses. Instead we need to shift our focus to how schools and teachers and students and communities "might" be organized or are actually being reorganized in reform movements. We shouldn't just tell students how they would be expected by school districts and states to go about curriculum development, as if the authorities’ mandates unexamined are the only important considerations and that teachers have no power to create curriculum together, with communities, and with students (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; McCutcheon, 1995).

This is not to say that school organization, labor, law, and finance aren't important areas for study or that faculty teaching this course have taken only this tack; actually they remain as focus areas in the syllabus, but not exclusively. Instead we need for beginning teachers to be able to situate themselves as teacher-leaders who can reconstitute the organizational structures of institutions and who can place themselves as productive contributors in the process of creating the best curriculum and communities in their own classrooms and schools. Teachers who lead in tomorrow’s school communities will create 1) inquiry-oriented classrooms where children and adults generate knowledge and understanding together; 2) knowledge about teaching and share it with colleagues developing professionally with them; 3) connections between classroom and community for students and families; and 4) democratic processes in classrooms and boardrooms that
invite multiple perspectives and voices to make decisions that best serve the common good (Sergiovanni, 1996).

Teachers for 21st century schools need more than a picture of how things are, or of what happens every day. In fact, with very little prompting, students can explain in detail how things are because they have lived in schools for nearly two decades. What they need is an education that challenges assumptions both about what schools are and what they might be by carefully examining school organization theories; community theory; leadership roles; curriculum development; deliberation and decision-making processes; and methods for conducting group and individual inquiries about teaching and curriculum development (action research).

A course of study in teacher leadership should charge prospective teachers to think deeply about the possibilities for schooling. A course of study on leadership should provide students opportunities to experiment, not just learn from instructors transmitting knowledge. They need for their methods and leadership courses to be interconnected, to be rigorous, and to demand thinking and reflection. They need for their coursework to be connected with their field experiences and the processes they employ in making meaning out of their journey toward teaching and a lifetime of professional development.

We owe our students and ourselves the best pedagogy possible, the kind that allows us to explore important issues; to discover and generate new knowledge about ourselves, our experiences, school communities, teaching, and learning; to practice new roles and actions; and to test developmental and decision-making processes. In essence, the course should be about becoming a teacher leader by practicing community leadership, by engaging in processes for building school community through democratic means, by examining the possibilities of the roles of teacher as steward, as inquirer, and as constructivist, among others (Sergiovanni, 1996). This vision of teacher leadership sharply contrasts with traditional practice. Instead of conceiving of teacher leaders as being simply able to replicate the actions and structures of schools as they are constituted in every
day practice, prospective teachers become thinkers who conceive of themselves as teacher leaders who approach their calling by wondering “What is possible?”

**Exploring What Is “Possible” in the Literature on Teacher Leadership**

Sergiovanni (1996) suggests that new and vital teacher leadership and administrative leadership in schools are to be found in the purposeful actions of helping a school build community, specifically by helping the school culture to identify and commit to shared ideas, purposes, goals, values, and beliefs. Leadership reveals itself in the types of classrooms teachers create, potentially places where students and teachers are members of learning communities, places where constructivist principles of learning and teaching that employ habits of inquiry replace our students’ habits of filling out worksheets, listening to teachers talk, and memorizing information. Leadership is to be found in the democratic governance structures that give shape to our school classrooms and communities, where multiple perspectives and voices are cultivated and honored, where the focus on contractual obligations are replaced by covenantal ones. What is at stake is our moral center, wholly attached to our answers to the question: How will the things we do in schools be centered on the possible benefits those actions hold for student growth?

Sirotnik (1995) defines teacher leadership as “the exercise of significant and responsible influence” (p. 236). While simply put, the definition respects the contextuality of teacher leadership, its varying nature from scene to scene. It weighs in heavily on three words, “exercise,” “significant,” and “responsible.”

The word “exercise” is intended to convey a deliberate, decision-oriented, acting-taking concept of leadership (in contrast to a passive, laissez-faire type of notion). The word “significant” is meant to signal that leadership is not without substance, not without a content of importance. For example, although always a matter of judgment, influencing decisions about teachers’ access to supply cabinets is arguably less significant than influencing decisions pertaining to students’ access to knowledge and the structures and practices (e.g., tracking and ability grouping) that affect it. By “significant,” therefore, I am also intending to convey the broader idea of *instructional* (or, even better, *pedagogical*) leadership. Perhaps most important is the word “responsible.” Embedded in this word is the moral core that derives from the tacit agreement entered into by educators by virtue of an occupation directed at significantly and profoundly influencing the lives of children and youth.
In fact, it is this agreement (and the attendant moral obligations) that constitutes the essential warrant for arguing that the occupation is a profession (Soder, 1990). (Sirotnik, 1995, pp. 236-237)

Glickman et al. (1995) urges us to consider the development of teachers, to pay attention to the need for teacher education and development programs to foster flexible, tolerant, adaptive, and creative teaching and thinking among teachers. To conceive of teaching as a simple act requires us only to respond with educational programs that focus on compliance and competence in the technical, mechanical pursuits of teaching. While these areas can’t be ignored, they do not constitute the essence of teaching. For teaching is a complex, moral, ever-changing enterprise, which requires autonomous, abstract, and dynamic thinking and action. We want beginning teachers to be competent in the mechanics of teaching, of course, but teaching is more than being a technician. We must demand as an institution and as a culture that teachers are ready to participate in making more democratic, vibrant, learning environments in their new schools. This requires that they conceive of schooling and of teaching in ways beyond the status quo, and that they begin to consider why and how they might go about it in practice (Glickman et al., 1995).

**Arguing for a Focus on Leadership while Learning to Teach**

Even insiders and supporters of reworking 418 have questioned my conception of encouraging prospective teachers to explore teacher leadership. Their primary concern is that new teachers must earn the right to lead by proving that they are good teachers in a school over a period of time. My response is that our schools don't need new teachers who are merely good foot soldiers, educators who blindly follow orders and merely get the “job done” efficiently until they are called upon for higher duty. We also don't need elitists, of course, who think they know everything from the beginning and just cause trouble as a matter of course throughout their careers. What we do need are savvy, aware, experienced, responsible, witting, conscientious, student-centered, action-oriented teachers from the very beginnings of their careers. To socialize them into accepting the traditional
role of teaching as obedient worker doesn’t seem to me to offer much to the field of education except compliance.

The fact is that in most cases new teachers simply won't be able to find their way as teachers over time and then get invited to participate in teacher leadership activities later; there is an alternative reality of current and future public school life for teachers, a new rite of passage, if you will. New teachers are consistently being invited into the fray by principals and lead teachers from the very beginning and need to be able to take productive action as a part of their simultaneous learning journey -- learning to teach in a particular classroom and developing more broadly as a human being, professional leader, and community member all at the same time.

One student validated this perspective -- this reality of learning to teach and developing professionally as a school leader simultaneously in the midst of massive public school reform -- when she reported in her journal about a presentation she attended the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Meeting:

I listened to a panel of first-year teachers speak at a session. There was a lot of emphasis on curriculum changes in their school, some integrated curriculum changes, a focus on building and maintaining professional relationships with colleagues and administration, and block scheduling. As first year teachers, the women on the panel all found that when they got to this school they were the ones who had to support and even implement the changes. No one came to them and with the ideas for implementation -- they had to be bold, take risks, and even challenge the traditional structures in their school. (Martha Journal)

The truth is that the next generations of teachers will be expected to learn to teach and to lead simultaneously. Young teachers are being expected to pull their chairs and minds up to the deliberation table regarding curriculum development, school governance, evaluation of teaching, and other important topics with their voices and their best ideas (McCutcheon, 1995). School leaders and school communities are moving past bureaucratic and personal leadership approaches in which positional power and getting people to move towards pre-set goals by bartering with them are the central factors (Sergiovanni, 1996). Community and school leaders are encouraging and adopting more
transformational, community-oriented leadership approaches in which shared decision-making and the development of common ideas, values, and commitments guide action in the school and in the community. The role of school leaders becomes more than acting as a figurehead/boss, managing paperwork, and producing and maintaining order. The new skills for 21st century leadership lie in getting people to face their problems with deep insight and care in order to come up with solutions that are educationally sound, good, and right for students, teachers, parents, and communities long term (Sergiovanni, 1996).

The 418 Curriculum for Teaching Teacher Leadership

I changed the course materials, readings, and processes for the 418 sections for secondary students to reflect my commitment to merging learning about a new kind of leadership with learning to teach. My decisions are bounded by fledgling conceptions of leadership that support the action of beginning teachers in multiple roles, simultaneously, as they learn to teach over the course of their professional careers. The materials and activities for the course, therefore, had to be balanced in terms of offering students the opportunities to experience foundational ideas about what a school learning community might look like and be, and about how a teacher leader might make a contribution to developing and maintaining that learning community.

My pedagogical beliefs play a central role in conceptualizing the course. I believe that prospective teachers enter teaching with knowledge and talents that need to be nurtured, probed, challenged, and developed. Prospective teachers are not blank slates fit merely for the acquisition of knowledge. Instead, they are adults ready to continue the lifelong process of translating great ideas into action. The challenge is to help them to examine critically the values, beliefs, and experiences (their “apprenticeships of observation,” Lortie, 1975) upon which their decisions are based. As future teachers, they will be required to think on their feet, to inquire, to generate knowledge, and to inspire
others to see themselves not merely as passive recipients but as moral, thoughtful, reflective, creative generators of knowledge (Schon, 1983).

I try to organize the classroom as a constructivist learning community, engaging the students in activities and discussions (very little lecturing) that bring the salient issues to light and connect them with current and past experiences. A traditional, lecture-oriented pedagogy does not adequately support the kind of curriculum that seeks to engage students in challenging the status quo. Students need to work together as school leaders, so they are given a chance to do so and to critique the processes of teamwork as they go. Students create projects and exhibitions that reveal their growing knowledge and ability to act on it and subsequently share these projects with their classroom colleagues.

I decided upfront that the course would cover three broad areas of focus: 1) helping students challenge their assumptions about teaching, school organization, and teacher leadership; 2) showing students how to become inquiring teachers by generating knowledge about teaching and learning through disciplined self-reflection and classroom inquiry; and 3) situating the emergent self as reflective practitioner in roles of school leadership by engaging students in meaningful, “real-life” leadership activities. I attempted to accomplish these aims using several avenues, on several different levels.

The course readings for the secondary sections include Sergiovanni’s (1996) *Leadership for the Schoolhouse* and Sizer’s (1996) *Horace’s Hope*. These texts offer alternative visions and ideas for understanding the nature of the school community (as opposed to organization). They suggest challenges to many of the assumptions future teachers often bring to the many topics, including among others, school organization (it has to be hierarchical), curriculum (only specialists and legislators develop it), and leadership (you have to be in a certain position or role to do it). Other course readings address topics more specifically as they arise during the semester such as understanding what curriculum is and might be (Eisner, 1994); deliberating on and developing curriculum (McCutcheon, 1995); addressing the issues of school labor, law, finance, and inclusion (Lipsky &
Gartner, 1997; Newman, 1998) and a teacher leader’s relationship to the issues; approaching multicultural education and issues of leadership for social justice (Banks, 1994; Hilliard, 1989); making an integrated, interdisciplinary course design (Drake, 1993).

Specific projects support the pedagogy and course materials: 1) an autobiographical sketch designed to help students understand and challenge their “apprenticeships of observation” (Lortie, 1975) and their fledgling “personal, practical theories of action” (McCutcheon, 1995); 2) a continuous, semester long reflective journal for keeping notes about readings, classroom experiences, and field experiences; 3) case inquiry reports, in which teachers and colleagues share incidents, insights, and reflective ideas about teaching and leadership based on classroom experiences in the field (Huyvaert, 1995); 4) a curriculum deliberation project in which small groups of deliberation teams design a course of study to present to their peers for review and reflect upon the interpersonal, relational aspects of the deliberation process (McCutcheon, 1995); and 5) a professional development portfolio that includes philosophical reflections and artifacts/exemplars from classes and field experiences supporting their conceptions of best practices as teacher, learner, curriculum-maker, school leader, and community member (Cook & Kessler, 1995).