Claiming the Political: The Forgotten Terrain of Teacher Leadership Knowledge

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This article argues that leadership knowledge should be included in teacher education curricula. The authors discuss the political realities that affect teachers and how these realities are best met with teacher leadership knowledge. Failure to include ideas of educational leadership in teacher education denies teachers an understanding of the activities they practice daily. More important, knowledge of leadership would enable teachers to label what they see and do. Such knowledge would help teachers understand and navigate the micropolitical environments of their work and, therefore, make more informed actions to improve schooling for all and correct some of our democratic injustices as they relate to education more broadly. The article presents examples of three kinds of teacher leadership practices: managerial, professional development, and social responsibility. The authors conclude with proposed opportunities for the teaching profession to reclaim its pedagogical and curricular knowledge and to understand its own acts of leadership.

TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND LEADERSHIP

Knowledge of educational leadership within teacher education programs is often marginalized or completely absent (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 1996; Wasley, 1991). Unfortunately, maintaining such a conceptual absence in teacher education programs fortifies teachers' roles as technicians. Too many descriptions of instructional leadership are left within the principal's purview, raising serious questions about the role of teachers. Attempts to appoint principals as "instructional leaders" raise questions about how teacher education programs prepare beginning teachers for the political realities within schools. It also raises the argument of who represents the experts concerning curriculum, pedagogy, and learning. It is vital to disrupt the discourse that promotes

1See, for example, the EEPA Special Issue on Education Leadership (Stein & Nelson, 2003).

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the idea that principals or those outside the teaching profession as the definers of instructional knowledge.

We argue that principals are poor choices for instructional leadership particularly because principals are no longer required to have pedagogical and curricular experience in many states (Thomson, 1989). More important, the current debates within principal preparation literature suggest that most principals assume positions of organizational managers and administrators (McInerney, 2003), policy bureaucrats (Patterson & Marshall, 2001), new school executives (Maxcy, 1991), and technocrats who swell the educational middle-management (Apple, 1998). Instead, teachers need to reclaim their professional capacity and assert their professional judgment in their work (Coulter & Wiens, 2002; Zepeda, Mayers, & Benson, 2003). This is an urgent matter in an era of accountability that treats teachers as subservient policy implementers rather than active policy leaders.

The article is organized in three sections. First, we summarize the current theoretical conceptualizations of teachers’ knowledge. This summary notes two important limitations within the current area of scholarship. As such, we suggest that the limitations of teacher knowledge have provided entrance for a number of groups to claim legitimacy to teachers’ actions and purposes. We argue that the positioning of educational leaders to manage teachers’ so-called knowledge inconsistencies is a disingenuous approach to educational leadership. Instead, we argue that teachers need to reclaim their pedagogical and curricular knowledge, and understand the acts of leadership they perform each day.

Second, we describe how our conceptualization of teacher leadership is related to issues of educational politics, including how teaching is essentially a political act related to a teacher’s “awesome power” (Raywid, 1995; Reed, 2000). We illustrate three types of teacher leadership practices (i.e., teachers as managerial leaders, teachers as professional development leaders, and teachers as social justice leaders) with examples from our previous work on teacher leadership.

Finally, we argue that without opportunities to learn about education leadership teachers are less likely to become facilitative and critical leaders as demanded by many school improvement initiatives. Instead, sans knowledge of leadership practices, teachers are more likely to rely on traditional structures of management and administration—structures that reinforce their subjugated positions and structures that have repeatedly shown an inability to meet the needs of schools in the new millennium.

TEACHER KNOWLEDGE: PROVINCES, LANDSCAPES, AND BOUNDARIES

For nearly three decades, scholars have debated the sources of teacher knowledge and the kinds of activities preservice teachers ought to experience when learning to teach (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Shulman, 1986, 1987; Webb, 2007). The debate centers on the extent to which teacher knowledge is developed by practical, situational experiences that are event structured, episodic, or context specific (Carter, 1990; Clandinin, 1992; Elbaz, 1983), and the extent to which teacher knowledge is theoretical that can be generalized and applied to practice (Shulman, 1986, 1987).

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) coined the metaphor professional knowledge landscape to map the cognitive geographies and territorial provinces of teacher knowledge. Shulman
(1987) defined the phrase pedagogical content knowledge as an endemic territory—a unique province—of teachers within his larger framework of teacher knowledge. The idea of pedagogical content knowledge was Shulman’s attempt to territorialize teachers’ knowledge for the professionalization of teaching.

Much of the research on teachers’ knowledge has defined a set of knowledge that forms a basis from which to act pedagogically often in relation to curricula and teaching. Unfortunately, the research on teacher knowledge has not sufficiently articulated ideas about leadership that would assist teachers to use this pedagogical knowledge in policy environments that contest such knowledge (or prey on the fissures for political purposes). Neither adequately addressed the extent to which teachers should be cognizant of the power, politics, and normative frameworks within such landscapes that exist in schools nor leave space for preservice teachers to sufficiently grapple with the idea of teachers as political entities by the nature of their job. Teachers can no longer close their classroom doors and assume that they are not being monitored by skeptical policy makers.

The nature of teaching is political. Our belief is that teachers ought to control their knowledge, limitations and all, rather than other macropolitical interest groups—including principals. By having knowledge of politics and leadership practices, teachers can recognize and respond when their professional knowledge is being questioned and undermined by principals who are appointed as instructional leaders. Today we understand the political expertise a teacher must have—and that often teachers practice—as being best described by the phrase: teacher as leader.

THE POLITICAL TERRAIN OF TEACHING

A variety of contexts threaten and challenge teachers’ professional expertise; therefore, teachers need to develop the commitments, abilities, and knowledge required for teacher leadership to shape contexts that support and sustain their professional knowledge (Lieberman & Miller, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Certainly, politics exists at every level of school life (Apple & Buras, 2006), where, for our purposes, “politics is a form of social conflict rooted in group differences over values about using public resources to meet private needs” (Wirt & Kirst, 1997, p. 4). There are politics involved at the most obvious levels—how teachers interact with their students and how they interact with parents. Additionally, how teachers interact with colleagues, principals, superintendents, teachers union, school board members, and local or state community members is also political in nature (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Spring, 2005). More important, these groups have competing and conflicting ideas over an array of important educational ideas and practices including but not limited to curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and funding (Forster, 1997; Oakes & Lipton, 2003). Politics is not just a piece of their professional lives, it is what they do everyday. The work of teaching is situated in political spaces.

In this sense, teachers are political activists, or at least active contributors to public life. However, many teachers do not want to own or claim that title, perhaps even discouraged to think about their work in these ways (Barth, 2001). If teachers are to be prepared, interested, and educated participants of transformation and change, then teacher educators have a responsibility to inform teachers about how the use of leadership practices play out in political spheres of education reform and in relation to the kinds of curriculum and pedagogical knowledge they use everyday (Oakes & Lipton, 2003).
A limited conceptualization of leadership limits teachers' effectiveness as leaders of change (Jones, 2009; Neumann, 2007a; Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000; Wasley, 1991). Developing teachers' professional knowledge of leadership can do more than just raise teachers' awareness of the political nature of schools and their assumed roles within such organizations. It can help teachers draw upon a complex understanding of leadership so they may more effectively recognize, understand, and respond to the motives of others during school reform efforts (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1997). Teachers need to understand the conflicting purposes for school improvement and understand how they can be unique leaders for more socially just schools (Oakes & Lipton, 2003). In addition, teachers need to understand the political context schools are situated in and how to respond to the political nature of schools, so that all students' needs are met and the best education practices employed. Teachers can no longer be spectators in the education arena but important players in its operation and development (Coulter & Wiens, 2002).

A teacher's presence is inherently political because she or he is a key power player in the school. However, teachers have never been recognized for the power and knowledge that they have. Many teachers remain unaware that questions about power, professional knowledge, and leadership even exist in their work (Oakes & Lipton, 2003) and by that lack of recognition, teachers themselves do not recognize the power they wield. "The essence of a political act is the struggle of private groups to secure authoritative support . . . for their values" (Wirt & Kirst 1997, p. 27).

Teachers do apply their power in the variety of ways, particularly in how they respond to school reform. Some teachers push or sustain reform efforts, whereas others resist or actively subvert them. In the end, almost all teachers make adaptations to reform efforts (Datnow & Castellano, 2000). Often imposed change creates a mismatch between teachers' personal beliefs and knowledge about how students learn. The most common reaction to change mandates was to reject them and carry on as if nothing happened (Sikes, 1992). Our purpose is to help teachers better participate in improvement efforts. Specifically, we want to help teachers create structures that support their professional knowledge within contexts that threaten its implementation and/or legitimacy.

TEACHER LEADERSHIP KNOWLEDGE: NAVIGATING ACTS OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Teachers already lead within their schools, whether implicitly or explicitly, for good or for bad, proactively or reactively. All teachers are leaders by the action of their work. However, the qualities of one's leadership will always be colored or enhanced by the qualities of the individual (Gardner, 1995). Therefore, teachers need to have the knowledge, abilities, and dispositions to envision (and reenvision) goals and purposes, make decisions, as well as analyze and assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of those decisions (Fullan, 2007; Phelan, 2005). By including leadership knowledge as an additional area of professional knowledge—in addition to knowledge of curriculum and to knowledge of pedagogy—teacher educators can empower teachers to utilize their knowledge in order to participate in school change that will lead to a more shared consensus about what defines a "good" school (Crowther et al., 2002; Oakes & Lipton, 2003).
In what follows, we illustrate three types of teacher leadership acts born from teachers’ implicit (and often unacknowledged) knowledge of educational leadership: managerial, professional development, and social responsibility (see Figure 1). Our illustrations of teachers as leaders are derived from our work with teachers in schools and preservice teacher education programs (Jones, 2001; Neumann, 2007b; Webb, 2002). These acts of teacher leadership also illustrate the highly political environments in which these professionals work.

Teacher Acts of Managerial Leadership: Public Landscape and Private Territories

We have documented traditional acts of teacher leadership that employed teachers as managers of curriculum materials and other administrative details (Doyle, 2000). This is the most common form of teacher leadership we see in schools today. Teachers have no real power in this traditional example of managerial leadership (Silva et al., 2000). For example, Karen, the teacher leader for...
a fourth- to fifth-grade team, offered a response that was typical of other teacher leaders in her school district. She explained:

In the very beginning of the year our biggest focus was . . . to get all the materials organized, because all of a sudden we were inundated with boxes, boxes, boxes, and boxes of materials for all the different [curriculum] units. Organizing them and putting them in bins, and labeling. We developed a check out system, a form for each unit, for teachers to give us when they needed materials. Because we wanted to be able to keep track of where they were and have them returned. So that’s one thing we have done as a teacher leader group and then I’ve been in charge of the assessments . . . We need to be sending the assessments in to the district. So kind of keeping tabs on the different teachers, where they are, and what units and if they haven’t turned in the assessments.

In this example, teachers perpetuated the hierarchical role of managerial leadership when completing administrative tasks and keeping tabs on their fellow teachers. Obtaining, organizing, and keeping track of instructional materials is important, and without gathering the requisite instructional material the actual work of curriculum implementation would be thwarted. However, why are principals, district administrators, or secretarial staff not providing these materials? This managerial form of teacher leadership does not even begin to tap the knowledge teachers have about good teaching, and it limits teachers’ instructional leadership to the administrative aspect of instruction.

Furthermore, when teachers primarily focus on what goes on in the classroom, instead of using their power to improve the schools, teachers’ efficacy becomes isolated and transactional rather than collaborative and transformative. Transactional leaders often seek an exchange, or transaction, from followers to promulgate a particular organizational vision (Nguni, Sleegers, & Denessen, 2006). In the next section, we illustrate how the additional understanding of teachers’ work as acts of leadership can better prepare teachers to meet the demands of renewal in today’s schools.

**Teachers Acts of Professional Development Leadership: Communicating Between Provinces**

Teachers who provide professional development, particularly to fellow colleagues, is another example of teacher leadership knowledge. For example, the immediate need to raise test scores in one school district led the superintendent to mandate a common mathematics curriculum at the elementary schools. To support teachers’ implementation of this new mathematics curriculum, 12 teachers from across the district provided the professional development program Developing Mathematical Ideas (DMI) for their colleagues (see Neumann, 2007a).

During this professional development work, these 12 teacher leaders realized that they had to motivate their colleagues to participate in DMI. BethAnne, a participant in the study and who provided DMI professional development reported, “I’m willing to sell this product of getting teachers excited about DMI . . . because the more I look at it, the more I see so much value in it.” The idea of “selling” a product demonstrates BethAnne’s knowledge of motivating and promoting the participation to her colleagues—she understood the importance of getting teachers excited about the professional development experience.

Kathy, another participant in the study who provided DMI professional development courses to her colleagues, also saw the imperative of motivating teachers to participate in the professional
development program. As she revealed in an interview, she foresaw some of the complications of getting teachers to take DMI.

Right now the people in my group that I’m facilitating are people that have volunteered. . . . I know that the idea is for it to spread out farther, in a grass roots way. . . . but I think that the further down the chain you get and the more they say you have to do this, the less likely it is that people will want to put up with the homework. . . . I find myself doing a lot of talking it up to people, telling them why I like taking it and why it’s different than [other professional development experiences].

Kathy realized that forcing teachers to participate in DMI would not be beneficial to them, their teaching, or their students’ learning. She believed that promoting the professional development experiences would be better than mandating participation. Her leadership role as recruiter, promoter, and moral supporter motivated colleagues to share in her vision of good mathematics instruction.

As professional development leaders, teachers work to develop and maintain an inclusive school culture who foster staff development and work with others to solve problems (Peters, 2002). In this sense, teachers often strive for shared leadership, which for teachers is more egalitarian and reflects the teachers’ professional culture more than traditional hierarchical forms of leadership (Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Leaders and followers negotiate a vision of good instruction, mobilize commitment to that vision, and institutionalize change measures so that everyone adopts new behavior patterns to implement better teaching practices (Crowther et al., 2002; Witherspoon, 1997).

Ultimately, we found that teachers’ acts of professional development leadership displayed incredibly complex knowledge of organizational leadership and leadership skills that initiated change which led to democratic participation for some individuals in the organization. In the examples from this section, we saw teachers working to influence their colleagues’ thinking about instruction through professional development. However, this does not end their sphere of influence (see Jones, 2001). In the next section, we discuss how teachers use knowledge of critical leadership practices to initiate dialogue about organizational inequities.

Teacher Acts of Leadership for Social Responsibility: Transforming the Terrain

To shape contexts that support and sustain their professional knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy, teachers can develop the commitments, abilities, and knowledge required for teacher leadership (Lieberman & Miller, 2005). In addition, teachers need to understand the conflicting purposes for school improvement and understand how teachers can be unique leaders for more socially just schools. By having an understanding of critical leadership or teaching for social justice, teachers will be more prepared to identify and resist the variety of contexts that threaten their professional expertise and contexts that deliberately question their professional knowledge.

Critical leadership (Foster, 1989; Furman & Greunewald, 2004, Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Ryan, 1998) attends to the issues of social justice and social responsibility. It attempts to create and maintain equitable social relationships and practices for all members of the organization. A fundamental concern within the practice of critical leadership is for all members to collectively reflect on how well they are creating and maintaining a level playing field. Furthermore, a vision of organizational equity and social responsibility is fostered primarily through reflection and dialogue regarding the community’s vision of its goals and ideals.
Teachers in schools, then, need to help create and maintain an ongoing dialogue about how they can best work together to identify inherent biases and inequities in their school organization and in the schooling practices that are being used to educate students. In fact, in our previous work, we found that teachers often felt empowered when asked to create spaces of transformation for themselves and for their students even though they were skeptical to do this kind of work with colleagues.

In one particular context, a group of teachers were engaged in acts of critical leadership in the area of an English/Language Arts classroom. Apple and Buras (2006) argued that the materials used to teach English/Language Arts have always been inherently biased toward the cultural values and norms of the larger society. Wendy, one of the English Language Arts teachers in one of our teacher education courses, believed that her job was not only to help her students become capable readers and writers, but also to be able to identify the biases within the language and to critique or change the language being used. In discussing her pedagogical practices, Wendy said:

My whole philosophy is based around the fact that if you aren’t connected with the kids and you don’t have a connection with them, then they will not learn... you have to understand where they are coming from. [The issues they bring to class]... are just as important as to what I think about teaching.

In this instance, Wendy is acting as a leader for social justice by simultaneously having the goal of teaching her students how to be literate and working on understanding the literacy her students already have. Some would describe this as a demonstration of critical pedagogy (Wiggins, 2005; Wink, 2010). For Wendy to be a successful teacher of literacy, she understood she needed to validate the identities and the social realities of her students. Gee (2001) would say this teacher was helping her students to develop a “powerful literacy—an ability to use the language of the discourse community in order to critique the inherent biases in the discourse itself” (p. 8). This attention to developing transformative and empowered learning spaces for schooling validates the connections between the classroom and the community.

Another elementary school teacher in one of our courses made initial attempts to act as a leader for social responsibility. Melissa made the connection that in trying to address management issues in her class she enabled the boys to receive more substantial mathematics instruction. She wrote,

As I reflect on [my classroom management strategies], it becomes clear that the boys who were acting out and not being cooperative were actually rewarded with more opportunities for learning! I look back over my transcript and realize that I tried to manage behavioral issues in the class by inviting the disruptive person to the front of the room and asking them a high-level math question. ... In all cases, the disruptive students that I engaged in high level questioning were boys. ... I did not realize that this was rewarding behavior with opportunities to learn math. Based on the data collected, I rewarded girls more cooperative behavior with non-academic praise/encouragement. I did not realize that I was reinforcing the stereotypes by giving subtle messages to the girls that I expected them to just sit still and listen, while I expected the boys to participate in more high-level math discussions.

Melissa realized that she rewarded negative behavior by having the boys answer questions that helped push their mathematical thinking. The students who sat quietly did not have that same opportunity. With this awareness she planned to change her practice by asking high-level questions to students who were sitting quietly. The analysis of her teaching made her more cognizant of the impact her classroom management style had on the instruction she gave all her students.
She acted as a leader for social justice because she stopped to question those who were in control of the conversation and how the dialogue dramatically changed depending upon the type of leadership that was in play. Melissa recognized that her actions diminished the opportunity for not only female students to learn but for all students who were not behavior problems.

**ADDS POLITICAL TERRAIN TO TEACHER KNOWLEDGE: BECOMING TEACHER LEADERS**

Adding teacher leadership to teachers' professional knowledge is necessary because teachers are already leading in ways we have described. We illustrated explicit acts of leadership we have seen teachers employ and draw connections between their acts as teachers and leaders. More important, these examples of teacher leadership were developed from teachers' own knowledge and compliment their existing knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy.

Failure to include educational leadership curriculum in teacher education denies teachers an understanding of the activities they practice daily. More important, knowledge of leadership will enable teachers to accurately label what they see and do. Such knowledge would also help teachers understand and navigate the micropolitical environments of their work at a local level, and therefore, make more informed actions to improve schooling practices as they relate to education more broadly.

Teachers must be recognized as the leaders they are in school and local communities. Political leaders, who are unaware of teachers' work in the classroom and how students learn, make too many decisions about teaching and student learning. By making leadership an explicit item in teacher education, teachers are acknowledged for the power, brokerage ability, and voice they have outside the classroom and inside their school and local communities (Silva et al., 2000). Knowledge of leadership is essential for teachers because it also provides them with powerful ways to understand how schools operate and provides them with ways to act within the organization. Teachers need assistance to understand that schools are sites of social, political, and economic influence and to recognize that they play key roles in either maintaining the status quo or in creating environments that are transformative and equitable for all members. In other words, teacher education must assist teachers to become cognizant of their leadership and its effects and develop deliberate commitments for such action unless they remain culpable within the organization (McDermott, 1995).

Teacher knowledge is much more than knowledge of what happens in a classroom. It is more than understanding content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, learning theories, and classroom management strategies. Being a teacher means becoming a professional leader who is active in the political environments of the school and the broader community. More important, teachers who act as leaders improve the entire school community, not just manage their respective classrooms (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 1996; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The teachers of today and tomorrow need to be prepared to step out of the confines and comforts of their classroom "to forge a new identity in the school, think differently about their colleagues, change their style of work in a school, and find new ways to organize staff participation" (Liberman, Saxl, & Miles, 1988, p. 163). Teacher educators must not minimize the leadership work that teachers undertake everyday but rather maximize the opportunities to educate all students on how to recognize and use teacher power in all aspects of their professional work. In short, teacher education needs to
conceptualize teachers as serious power brokers and develop their awesome power as effective leaders in all areas of the educational landscape.

REFERENCES


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