



Politics, School Improvement, and Social Justice: A Triadic Model of Teacher Leadership

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Abstract

This article describes a comparative framework for identifying, analyzing, and practicing acts of leadership. The triadic framework identifies transactional, transformational, and critical domains of leadership, and argues that teachers, heretofore ignored or neglected in discussions of school management, are pivotal leaders in school reform efforts. Empirical data from the authors' current studies are used to illustrate how teachers engage in acts of leadership, and contemporary literatures on leadership are used to extend these descriptions. This discussion intends to be educative; that is, this article intends to better define the elusive concept of leadership, better understand the dynamic processes involved in decision-making, and better describe who leaders are.

What is leadership and who are leaders? Are teachers leaders or simply subordinates in the educational hierarchy? If possible, what might teacher leadership look like and what purposes would it serve in school reform efforts in a pluralistic society?

Within current school reform and accountability environments, schools exist in very complex political arenas. The push to improve student learning is too large a problem for any single leader to handle alone. In the past, teachers have been expected “to be led” rather than “to lead” school renewal projects (Sirotnik 1989). Schools in the new millennium, however, require teachers to assume an integral role in school reform. In fact, without teachers’ participation in formulating and implementing change, most reform efforts have failed (Fullan and Steigelbauer 1991). Teachers need to see themselves as leaders or having the potential and responsibility for leadership. Teachers provide a powerful and insightful voice regarding decisions about school change because teachers have knowledge of local school conditions—knowledge that policy makers and

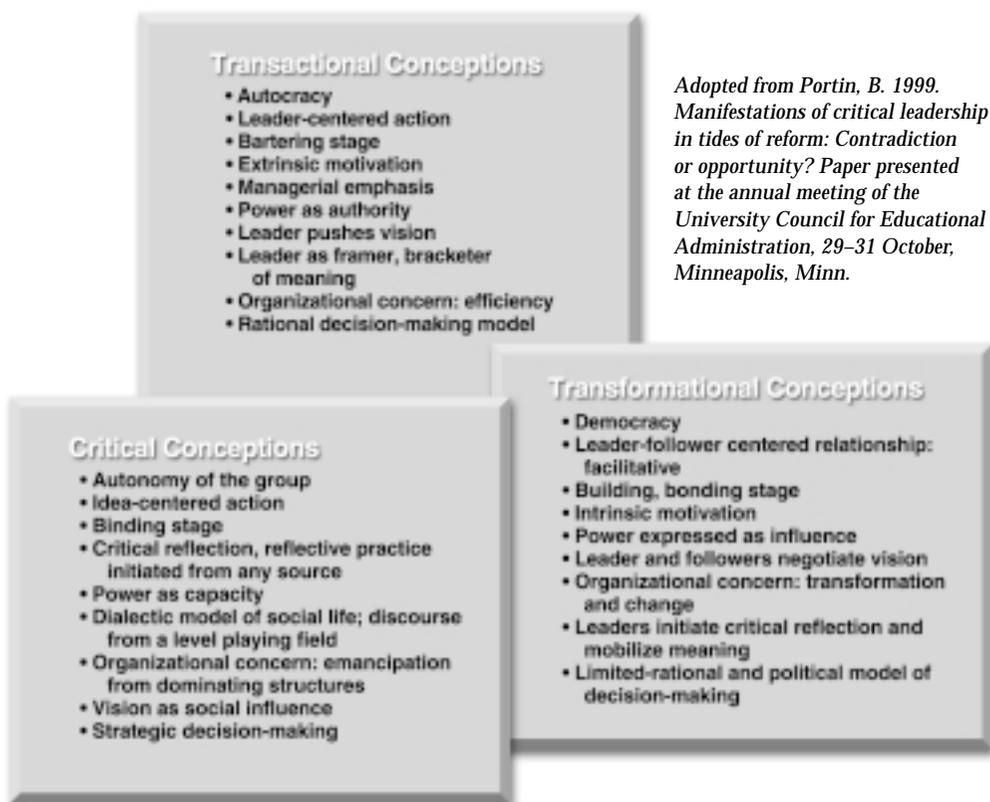
curriculum developers rarely have—to facilitate successful reform attempts (Hargreaves 1996).

Teachers have capacity and power to participate in change efforts that traditionally either have been tacitly assumed by them or deliberately defined by others. The Carnegie Report on Education, *A Nation Prepared* (1986), called for teachers to take more leadership roles in schools. The report argued that for reforms in education to have a significant impact, improvements needed to be rooted in the classroom with teachers. Unfortunately, teachers have not been trusted to participate in school reform activities (Darling-Hammond 1997) or have become targets of policies designed to usurp their classroom power (Corbett 1991). This article develops the idea that a teacher’s power is essential both within and beyond the walls of the classroom. This discussion describes a theoretical model of leadership to transcend traditional boundaries of professional identity and replace traditional attempts at school renewal (Burns 1978; Portin 1999; Smyth 1989; Witherspoon 1997).

The Complexity of Teacher Leaders

Portin (1999) initially developed a triadic model of leadership to organize the vast literature on the study of leadership. This conceptualization of leadership is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Triadic Model of Leadership



Adopted from Portin, B. 1999. Manifestations of critical leadership in tides of reform: Contradiction or opportunity? Paper presented at the annual meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration, 29–31 October, Minneapolis, Minn.

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More importantly, Portin's (1999, 4) triadic model was intended to "push our thinking toward complex understanding of leadership beyond a simple exercise of positional authority." The model examined alternatives to traditional allocations of power through positional hierarchies. Although the model organized and categorized different aspects of leadership, it was not intended to draw absolute boundaries around these distinctions. Rather, the work was intended to illustrate a theoretical model of leadership that captured some of the complexity and interrelations involved with the practice of leadership. The triadic model of leadership approximated the practice of leadership from multiple perspectives that depend on and interact with one another.

While school leaders may recognize their actions within a single frame of the model, the practice of leadership, we argue, is the ability to move in and out of the three different conceptualizations. We believe that adept and skillful leaders use aspects of all three domains according to varied purposes and shifting situations. More importantly, the model "opens up" discussions of who leaders are. We examine how teachers practice leadership by providing evidence that both describes teacher leadership and illustrates the triadic model of leadership.

Transactional Leadership

Burns (1978) coined the term "transactional leadership." This idea of leadership describes social action as leader-centered, dominated by rational models of decision-making, and regulated by concerns of *efficiency* with regard to organizational maintenance. Transactional leaders are sometimes referred to as "benevolent dictators" who direct organizations through heroic and charismatic efforts. Often, though, the organizational culture remains tacit and hidden, controlled by the leader. Transactional leaders attempt to define and *frame* the reality of others to maintain organizational harmony (Smircich and Morgan 1982). Thus, leaders often seek an exchange, or transaction, from followers to promulgate a particular organizational vision.

The ability to manage organizational cultures in the school is a powerful way teachers control the meaning of their professional efficacy. Because teachers have unique knowledge of their practice, they use this knowledge to shape how others perceive their professional efficacy (Blase and Anderson 1995; Meier 1995). In a study conducted by the authors, Dalton, a sixth-grade teacher, discussed the roles of portfolios in his classroom, both as a tool for student assessment and as a tool to shape his principal's perception of his efficacy. He stated:

I keep portfolios of the kids' work and I assess them quite frequently. . . . She knows that I'm on top of things and she said to me one time, 'Well good, I don't have to worry about you.' What's important though is that I don't have to show what's in the portfolio. Just the idea that I have a portfolio [indicates to her that] I'm on the ball. I didn't even take out the pieces that I wanted to show. 'Oh here are the writing pieces and here's evidence for reading and math.' Just the idea that I've got this portfolio—it looks kind of official, it's got the kid's name on it, it's got my name on it, and it's got the principal's name on it—is enough.

The portfolios in Dalton's class were emblematic of good pedagogy because the principal did not examine the contents. The portfolios represented good instruction rather than serve as instruments to discuss classroom pedagogy or student assessment. More importantly, Dalton discussed how to maximize the effect of the portfolio when trying to shape others' assessments of his work. He believed that as long as the portfolio "looks kind of official, [that] it's got the kid's name, my name, and the principal's name on it," then the portfolios were effective symbols to shape others' perceptions of his work. To a large extent, the principal judged the book by its cover. Dalton knew this and was able to frame the meaning of his practice.

In the same study, teachers also shaped others' perceptions of their efficacy by walking students quietly down hallways. This is an example of how teachers used a management practice to garner favorable assessments of their work. Harley, a third-grade teacher explained:

The most obvious status builder at our school is walking in the hallways. More importantly, do you have control of your children? If you have control of your children, then you're a good teacher. Forget about your knowledge base. I mean that's really a quick and dirty strategy that the principal and other teachers use to [evaluate] teachers. Teachers do that, you know. People believe that teachers who have trouble with their kids in the hallways are the ones whose kids are always in the office. When you pass their classroom all you hear is chaos. The logic is they can't teach because they can't manage their classroom.

Several participants in our work agreed that teachers were expected to be in control of students' behavior. As such, several teachers walked students quietly down the hall to garner reputations as good teachers from principals and other teachers. The use of walking students quietly down the hallway was a strategic act designed as an *exchange*.

Teachers were aware that teaching itself was emblematic and could be used to shape others' assessments of their practice. These examples of teachers' transactional leadership skills illustrate the kind of power teachers have in schools. These examples also demonstrate the limits of transactional leadership. Instead of using their power to improve the schools, teachers protected the meaning of their efficacy in individual and isolated ways. Participants could create nearly any reality they wanted to, but they decided not to interact substantively and intellectually with their colleagues. Transactional leadership is a limited form of leadership to transform schools because it lacks a shared consensus about what a "good" school could be.

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978) used the term transformational leadership to represent leaders who shape, alter, and elevate the motives and goals of the institutional members. Leithwood (1992) defined the goals of transformational leadership as developing and maintaining a collaborative school culture that fosters staff development. In another study conducted by the authors, teachers Kerry and Lois facilitated the professional development program, Developing Mathematical Ideas (DMI), for their

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colleagues. During this professional development work, the teachers found that collaboration was the key to shaping and elevating their thinking about how mathematics should be taught. Lois reported:

Our role is basically for staff development in facilitating DMI. [That involves] talking to teachers about math that their kids are doing. I think it's really important to see how kids are thinking . . . and to work with teachers on learning how to understand how their students are thinking, why students are thinking a certain way, and how to give students experiences to get to the next level.

Lois's use of the phrase "next level" demonstrates Burns's (1978) idea of transformational leadership. Kerry also reported the importance of collaborating with colleagues to foster a transformational school culture. She stated:

You're influencing what people are doing but you're not there to say what they're doing is wrong. I mean they are doing what they feel is the right thing to do. . . . We're really trying to help explore teachers' understanding of mathematics and also understand math and progress.

Both Kerry and Lois understood their roles to be *facilitators* about professional development and not "experts" who use their positional status as leaders to bestow information about best teaching practices to their colleagues. They believed their work to be a means of creating dialogue about transforming their mathematics curriculum and pedagogy.

One aspect of being a transformational leader is *influencing* followers about the *intrinsic* value of their professional work. Beth Anne, a second grade teacher and teacher leader, talked about how she became involved in DMI:

I first heard about DMI from [Kerry] and because she knows me and knows I really like math, she started saying, 'DMI is really cool. You discuss ideas about teaching mathematics at a real intellectual level . . . really getting into the heart of what we're teaching.' [Kerry] really enjoyed DMI and kept trying to sell me on it. Basically, she did.

The teacher leaders identified here believed the work they were doing with their colleagues would help bring about changes in mathematics teaching that would improve students' learning in their district. As a result, when the leaders persuaded other teachers to participate in the professional development experience, all the teachers involved were motivated to develop a shared vision for teaching mathematics. This new commitment helped these teachers *build* a cadre of learners.

Ultimately, transformational leadership fostered a community where members had the opportunity to negotiate change. This idea of shared leadership redistributed power and authority to the teachers who took on the role of leaders. Kathy, another teacher leader in the study, emphasized the significance of being "able to

split up the duties so that nobody felt burdened.” In these examples, shared leadership *mobilized* a more *democratic* school culture and built an organizational concern for improvement.

Transformational leadership helped teacher leaders initiate change that led to democratic participation by some individuals in the organization. The teacher leaders identified in this section elevated the motives and goals of their colleagues with respect to mathematics instruction. Although this conceptualization of leadership is more robust than transactional leadership in fostering improvement in schools, limitations also exist for the transformational model. For instance, the degree to which change is transformational is directly dependent on how critical the leader is in his or her reflection and action. The degree of transformation for the organization depends on the people the leader serves. In the examples of teacher leadership described in this section, the teachers never questioned the effect of the new pedagogical set defined by DMI. Participants assumed that DMI was transformative. Teachers understood equity as being defined by issues of teacher workload rather than a more broadly defined view of social justice in schools. As a result of implementing DMI, teacher leaders never considered questions such as, “Will all students benefit equally from the new curriculum?” and “Are all teachers equally served by the new professional development plan?” While the teacher leaders in this section were transformed by acting as leaders, it remained unclear whether or not the organization had significantly improved.

Teachers provide a powerful and insightful voice regarding decisions about school change because teachers have knowledge of local school conditions—knowledge that policy makers and curriculum developers rarely have—to facilitate successful reform attempts.

Critical Leadership

Critical leadership is a process of emancipation for all members of the organization. This idea-centered conceptualization of leadership does not establish power relationships in which there are exclusively defined leaders and followers. Power neither manifests itself as authority nor as influence. Critical leadership measures power by the capacity of all members involved in the interaction. The question of “who is the leader” cannot be established by traditional titles of authority. As the group works together, at any given time, the leader can become the follower. Foster (1989, 61) stated:

[Critical] leadership is a consensual task, a sharing of ideas and a sharing of responsibilities where a ‘leader’ is a leader for the moment only, where the leadership exerted must be validated by the consent of followers, and where leadership lies in the struggles of a community to find meaning for itself.

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Consequently, those engaged in critical leadership must always work toward maintaining the humanity of both the leaders and the followers in ways that are emancipative for all.

All members of the community must be empowered for the community to engage in and maintain a state of critical leadership. This empowerment happens primarily through reflection and dialogue regarding the community's vision for how equity is distributed within the organization. Though transactional and transformational leaders may frequently engage in reflection and dialogue regarding the issues at hand, the question of who is in control of the conversation, what is considered an appropriate topic of discussion, and how the dialogue progresses dramatically changes depending on the type of leadership that is in play (Heckman 1996).

In critical leadership, organizational members consciously attempt to engage in dialogue about *a level playing field*. The collective group, rather than any individual, determines the vision that is established through the dialogue. The dialogue must remain critical in nature with an ongoing goal of identifying inherent biases and inequities in the community. The purpose of the dialogue is to help the community develop a plan to collaboratively *emancipate the organization from dominating structures*.

The example of Dalton presented earlier in this article shows how critical leadership differs from transactional and transformational leadership. In transactional leadership, the leader *pushes* the vision and serves as the *framer/bracketer* of meaning. In Dalton's case, it was his principal who was responsible for identifying portfolios as an example of "best practice." If Dalton had seen his role as an agent of critical leadership, rather than simply a follower, he not only would have been dissatisfied by the principal's lack of attention to the quality of the materials in the portfolio, but he also would have seen it as an opportunity to initiate a critical discussion regarding why the principal believed portfolios were important in the first place.

In transformational leadership, the leader is expected to *facilitate* and *initiate* the organizational change, even though both the leader and the followers *negotiate* the vision as it is being carried out. In the section on transformational leadership, the change that was initiated came from an authoritative body—a transformational professional development program. Critical leadership does not require that the impetus for change come from a designated leader. The reflective practice that helps initiate the change can come from any member within the organization.

Furthermore, if school communities are to become places where critical leadership can be fostered and maintained, then students also must be seen as viable participants in the process. Foster (1989, 59) posed this question:

Rather than seeing children as individual products being processed through the system, certified according to their achievement test scores, what would it be like to consider the children and the adults as participants in a practicing democracy, where each has the chance to live out a meaningful narrative of their own lives, and where all can exert leadership?

In Dalton's case, there was no indication that the students had been asked what they saw as valuable in creating performance portfolios. Instead, Dalton relied solely on the principal—the authority—to determine the value of the assessment procedure. If efforts had been made to confirm that there was a transformative rationale for the portfolios, it is quite possible that, at the very least, Dalton would be freed from his overattention to making the portfolios “look kind of official” from the outside. His vision regarding the value of the portfolios would have been radically transformed.

Portin (1999, 7) suggested, “Critical conceptions of leadership are probably the most slippery to pin down.” One facet that remains constant in characterizing teacher leadership, however, is the fundamental need for teachers to deliberately take on the responsibility of agency in their work. As difficult as it may be to realize the goals associated with critical leadership, teachers need to claim the role of critical leader so they can better understand the power of the content that they teach, and better empower their students' and themselves within school as well as in society. This conceptualization of a teacher's power is a radical shift from both the transactional and transformational versions of leadership. A critical teacher leader is not a substitute for the traditional authority figure in schools, nor is he or she the only one responsible for facilitating or negotiating the change. Instead, the critical teacher leader is responsible for consciously dialoguing with all other members of the school community regarding “the practices of schooling in relation to the social, cultural, political, and economic context of education” (Angus 1989, 84).

The greatest limitation to the critical model of leadership is the reluctance or the inability of community members to engage in an ongoing emancipating conversation. If teachers are to be effective in transforming the organization and its social context, they must be willing to raise critical questions regarding how they can best teach all their students. They must strive to create classrooms and schools where all members of the organization—students, parents, fellow teachers, and administrators—have the opportunity to engage in a dialogue that is both participatory and self-critiquing.

Conclusion

We are at a time of great professional change in education that requires dynamic models of decision-making. This discussion has argued that a triadic model of leadership is best suited to manage, transform, and ultimately reform schools in the United States. Understanding leadership from multiple perspectives provides leaders with several specific tools, strategies, and practices to respond effectively to complex and competing demands on schools. More importantly, any model of educational leadership must genuinely include teachers in the decision-making process. Teachers provide valuable insight into knotty problems of school reform—knowledge that has all too often gone untapped. Precluding teachers from leadership roles, as conceptualized in this discussion, serves only to deny them roles they practice anyway.

A central tenet related to all three leadership domains is the focus on providing the organization with structures that support a deliberative work environment. These structures include superintendents, principals, and administrators who believe all teach-

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ers are leaders or have the potential for leadership. They also include structured time for teachers to discuss issues related to teaching, student learning, leadership, and decision-making. Moreover, these structures (which may vary in different organizations) must support teachers in collaborative practices that inform the work of teaching and learning. The work of the school concerns teaching and learning. Leaders must develop practices, procedures, and resources for that work to be systematically supported and developed.

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