An autoethnography of a (reluctant) teacher leader

Melinda C. Knapp

Oregon State University-Cascades, 650 SW Columbia Street, Bend, OR 97702, USA

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ABSTRACT

Many believe teacher leaders can play a central role in meeting the needs of students in schools, but it is presumptuous to think that teachers intuitively know how to lead their colleagues or schools without any focused support. This paper describes how one middle school mathematics teacher learned to enact leadership through an informal role as a teacher leader. The results of this autoethnographic study also reveal how the teacher's view of leadership changed during the year of the study. As that leadership identity transitioned, the researcher found that adopting a lead-by-example and lead-learner stance supported her work with colleagues. A presentation of findings related factors that supported and hindered the transition from mathematics teacher to that of teacher leader are shared. Factors that supported teacher leadership included maintaining a disposition of continuous learning, developing a community of practice with colleagues, and developing a systems view of leading. The experiences and factors that hindered the process of becoming a teacher leader included confusion about one's leadership role, navigating the middle ground between colleague and leader, and the lack of communication with administration. The findings in this paper suggest several courses of action for supporting emergent teacher leaders.

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1. Introduction and background

> *I never intended to become a teacher. On the contrary, I resisted that thought throughout my formative years. I had many teachers in my extended family, and I remember being told that I would make a good teacher. I am not sure why I was opposed to the idea, other than it seemed ordinary to me. Little did I know that being a "good teacher" is far from ordinary, and my eventual decision to become a mathematics teacher has fulfilled my life in innumerable ways*
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> *Similarly, once a mathematics teacher, I never intended to become a teacher leader. Such a shift in thinking was as immense for me as the shift in identity from teacher to teacher leader. Leadership never crossed my mind when I was a beginning teacher, but through my experiences of introspection, examination, change, and professional growth, I eventually found myself in the position of teacher leader. (Melinda, journal entry)*

New to my school, I was asked to be part of a grant-funded professional learning opportunity. Reluctantly, I agreed to spend three weeks during the summer for the next four years taking mathematics content courses and engaging in leadership seminars. Over time, I was expected to bring part of my learning back to my colleagues, but feeling comfortable doing this was not easy. I barely felt adequate "trying on" some of the new teaching approaches I was learning with my own students, let alone opening my classroom door for others to observe.

E-mail address: melinda.knapp@osucascades.edu

Shortly after the previous grant opportunity ended, I was approached by one of the district administrators to serve as the "Math Studio" teacher for another grant-funded professional development project that aimed to develop Math Studio classrooms (Teachers Development Group, 2010; Margolis & Doring, 2012). Math Studio can be described as a model of professional development that is intensive, ongoing, and tightly connected to teaching practice. It focuses on students' mathematics learning, provides support for teachers during the rehearsal of challenging aspects of teaching, and focuses on the development of strong working relationships among teachers (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). The Math Studio professional development also sought to help schools focus on structural changes "where a classroom is transformed from a space for teaching students to a place where teachers can learn about teaching students on a regular basis. The Math Studio classroom highlights reform, and individual lessons serve as snapshots and conversation-points for that reform-in-action" (Margolis & Doring, 2012 p. 863). For me, being the Math Studio teacher meant allowing others to observe my teaching practice as I taught my students. Although I was unaware of the implications, I agreed to participate.

While I did not realize it at the time, that decision would greatly change the trajectory of my career. That step was the first of many that contributed to my development as a practitioner and later, as a teacher leader. After being involved in the district's Math Studio professional development for two years, I was asked to join a group of nine other teachers for a third grant aimed at developing teachers as leaders through a Noyce Master Teacher Fellowship (MTF).

The Noyce MTF grant was embedded within what we were already doing through Math Studio, but this grant concentrated on developing teacher leaders within the context of Math Studio. The intent was that MTFs would remain active as classroom teachers and facilitate the professional growth of colleagues while receiving concurrent coaching and leadership development. In the project, MTFs served as Math Studio teachers, they helped plan and facilitate Math Studio professional development and, in some cases, would eventually assume the role of a mathematics coach. This position quickly placed me in a position of teacher leader and this is where my leadership story begins.

This research articulates the first-hand experiences in education that shaped and deepened my understanding about how to build instructional capacity through teacher leadership. Mangin and Stoelinga (2008) discuss the importance of teacher leaders and coaches to "provide teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary for continued instructional improvement and ultimately, enhanced student learning" (p. 1). The purpose of this research was to better understand the leadership development process and explore the effect that development had on one middle school mathematics teacher researcher. To this end, the specific research questions that guided the study were (1) What experiences and factors supported and hindered the process of becoming a teacher leader? and (2) How is teacher leadership enacted?

2. Theoretical framework

This research takes a situative perspective on learning to lead. This perspective on learning about leadership and subsequent analysis recognizes a participatory and socially distributed nature of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Learning happens as a social process, occurring among peers and within an environmental context. Because the theory suggests that learning is social, this approach allows for the inclusion of artifacts, activities, and organizational influences as mediators upon individual growth (Gallucci et al., 2010). In addition, this perspective suggests that a teacher's own school and classroom are powerful contexts for learning (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Situative theorists describe learning as a change in participation in socially organized activities as well as an individual's use of knowledge as a part of their participation in social practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By situating teacher leadership "in practice" novice teacher leaders can come to understand leadership by engaging in activities that are at the heart of a teacher leader's daily work. In that regard, teacher leaders develop knowledge through analysis of real situations and dilemmas that are typical to their contexts. Using this view, this study utilized the everyday work of mathematics teaching and leading as the object of ongoing investigation and inquiry (Ball & Cohen, 1999).

3. Related literature

3.1. Teacher leadership

In the past few decades, teacher leadership has attracted more attention as an important aspect of school leadership. Mangin and Stoelinga (2008) have argued that teachers are uniquely positioned to promote change within schools because teachers are well versed in the complexities inherent in teaching. Like others (Curtis, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004; Muijs & Harris, 2003, 2006), Wenner and Campbell (2016) saw teacher leaders as potentially among the most influential leaders in schools.

To utilize this untapped potential, schools have launched new teacher leadership roles without recognizing the persistence of traditional norms within schools (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011). Schools and districts have traditionally underprepared teacher leaders and their colleagues for changes that intended to improve a school's performance, but will likely provoke resistance.

Teacher leadership blurs the traditional division between teaching and leading and forces teacher leaders to revise conceptions leaders hold of themselves as professionals (Struyve, Meredith, & Gielen, 2014). Struyve et al. (2014) noted that