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Teacher Leadership Final Essay

I began this course as a skeptic. In my first leadership log entry, I wrote “Throughout my time in education, I have often heard the term leadership thrown around as a buzz word with very little meaning attached. I have often wondered why schools want to teach everyone to act as leaders. If we are all leaders, does leadership really work?” My preconceived notions and harsh criticisms of leadership threatened to devalue my educational experience in this class. Fortunately, I decided to suspend my skepticism and open myself up to new perspectives. Through our course readings, in-class experiences, and real world observations, I have completely reshaped my leadership mindset. I have transformed from a skeptic into an advocate for teacher leadership. This transformation required intense personal reflection and in-depth academic study. As my definition of teacher leadership evolved, I realized that effective teacher leadership efforts must be local, collaborative, and reflective. I now understand that teacher leadership is not only possible but necessary for authentic educational reform.

After reflecting on my learning experiences this semester, I have identified a core group of recurring themes that have structured my knowledge of teacher leadership. First, I recognized that the emphasis on school-based efforts is vital to the teacher leadership model. Throughout his text entitled *Learning by Heart*, Roland S. Barth (2001) maintains that American teachers can revolutionize the educational system from within their own schools. He describes his vision when he writes, “The expression *improving schools from within* has at least two meanings: first, those who work under the roof of the schoolhouse must do it; second, school people must confront the cautious, resistant, fearful “other” that resides within each of us before confronting the others who are without” (p. 2). Barth deconstructs the myth of an effective top-down reform approach and pushes in-service teachers to lead local efforts to improve schools. I gradually accepted Barth’s arguments and began to think of school-based initiatives as the origins of authentic teacher leadership.

Along with grassroots change, school culture becomes an integral part of transforming schools from within. Barth (2001) defines school culture as “the complex patterns of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization” (p. 8). Barth claims that a healthy school culture relies on teacher leadership and vice versa. He recommends that educators first assess the prevailing cultures in their own schools. Teachers can begin this process by reflecting on the numbers of “nondiscussable” subjects that exist. Barth claims that healthy schools have only a few “nondiscussbles” (p. 9). In addition, Marilyn H. Katzenmeyer and Gayle V. Moller (2009) discuss the importance of school culture in their work entitled *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders.* They describe how healthy schools should exhibit a democratic school culture, which allows teachers to become legitimately involved in the decision-making process. In a democratic culture, educators feel empowered as professionals and leaders in their schools. Barth, Katzenmeyer, and Moller helped me understand that I must use my teacher leadership abilities to improve school culture.

School-based reform that transforms culture requires collaboration. In *13 Steps to Teacher Empowerment,* Steven Zemelman and Harry Ross (2009) envision a distributed version of teacher leadership. They discuss how everyone working within a school can work together to create and pursue a common vision. They claim, “Plenty of schools operate simply as a collection of individuals, each operating with no real sense of shared purpose, running on the inertia that long-established organizations acquire” (p. 139). Although this description may be the norm for American schools, Zemelman and Ross imagine an innovative learning community that creates and commits to a common goal. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) similarly emphasize the importance of a shared model of leadership. They write, “When power is shared, leadership is no longer defined within a person; rather it is an attribute that moves from person to person within the workplace depending on the situation and who holds the power” (p. 29). This quote helped convince me that teacher leadership could be universal. On January 21, I wrote in my leadership log, “I was relieved to read that these authors do not expect all teachers to lead all of the time. Instead, they conceptualize teacher leadership in a more communal way with school members rotating who exercises leadership. Although I cannot say that I am completely convinced of the necessity of teacher leadership yet, I have to admit that my mind is starting to change.” If the readings pushed me to accept the inclusive nature of teacher leadership, my experiences collaborating with my classmates dispelled the remains of my cynicism. Through formal and informal group discussions, we shared ideas and challenged each other. These interpersonal interactions have proved invaluable to my development as a leader. I now understand that educators cannot exercise leadership in isolation but must work together to promote authentic change.

Although teacher leadership is not an individual endeavor, it requires educators to reflect upon their personal experiences in the classroom and assess their natural abilities. Barth (2001) discusses how educators can transform so-called “war stories” into “craft knowledge.” He pushes teacher to push past simply retelling tales of classroom management nightmares and actually evaluate the lessons present in these challenging situations. He argues, “One thing is sure: if we expect academics and policymakers to value what school people learn from experiences in the schoolhouse—our craft knowledge—we first must take ourselves seriously and value our own craft knowledge” (p. 63). Barth’s work illustrates how teachers can use personal reflection to influence educational policy. Dr. Carol Pope’s (1999) article entitled “Reflection and Refraction: A Reflexive Look at an Evolving Model for Methods Instruction” corroborates Barth’s findings. Dr. Pope describes how educators can move past reflection and challenge themselves through the refraction process. Refraction requires teachers to become self-critical and examine their practices from new perspectives. In order to achieve this new level of reflection, we have to challenge our assumptions and admit our mistakes. Refraction adds new dimensions to the age-old reflective practice and leads to the development of craft knowledge. This course has allowed me to practice refraction through formal reflections in my leadership log, in-class discussions, and informal conversations with my classmates.

Beyond pedagogical musings, teacher leaders should use personal reflection to achieve a deep intrapersonal understanding. In his article entitled “Managing Oneself,” Peter F. Drucker (1999) claims, “We need to know our strengths in order to know where we belong” (p. 100). I agree that a person must know him or herself before taking on a leadership role. Drucker advises, “Do not try to change yourself—you are unlikely to succeed. But work hard to improve the way you perform. And try not to take on work you cannot perform or will only perform poorly” (p. 104). Drucker helped me understand that leaders must hone their natural abilities instead of constantly attempting to acquire new skills.

After my experiences in this course, I have come to a new understanding and acceptance of teacher leadership. Barth (2001) dispelled the last of my skepticism when I read, “Leadership is making happen what you believe in. Everyone deserves an opportunity for school leadership” (p. 85). I could not disagree with this statement and finally embraced teacher leadership as a fully inclusive concept. Once I admitted that all educators could exercise leadership, I began to define the concept for myself. Since the beginning of this class, I have been attracted to the concept of leaders as models. Barth (2001) echoes my own thoughts when he writes, “Leading by example is perhaps the purest form of leadership-the one over which each of us has the most control. You can only lead where you will go.” (p. 102). I was moved by this quote and believe that it forms the core of my personal definition of teacher leadership. Overall, I define teacher leaders as individuals who foster school-based reform successfully through rigorous reflection, ongoing collaboration, and effective modeling.

Now that I have a clear vision of teacher leadership, I plan to grow as a leader within my own school and the broader educational community. I have already begun to exercise my leadership abilities in my current school. In March, I joined the staff development team, which plans our professional development opportunities. Through my membership in this group, I hope to learn from experienced teacher leaders and positively impact my school’s culture. My goal is to create professional development sessions that facilitate the creation of craft knowledge and support the refraction process. I have articulated this goal to my fellow team members, and I will work to make sure that these ideas are at the forefront of our minds as we move forward. I have also volunteered to join the learning rounds team. This initiative allows teachers to observe each other in order to form a composite picture of teaching and learning within the school as a whole. I think that my work with this team supports teacher leadership because it aims to bring educators out of isolation and allows interdisciplinary collaboration. I hope that my participation in these groups will help me become a part of school-based reform. Additionally, I want to push for widespread policy changes within the bureaucracy and legislative bodies on a state and national level. During our advocacy night, I had the opportunity to write the North Carolina State Superintendent and advocate for a heterogeneous class structure. This exercise showed me that I can not only model teacher leadership within my own workplace, but I can also use my leadership to benefit the entire American public school system. Although I am concluding my time in graduate school, I am confident that I will continue to develop as an educational leader and engage in the scholarly discourse.

References

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