

**“This whole process has turned me into ‘that teacher’”: Teacher leaders in a post-truth era**

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This spring, 75,000 Arizona teachers walked out of their schools for 6 days in response to dismal conditions in the state’s public education system. Crumbling buildings, low salaries, huge class sizes, and low per student spending, compelled teachers to follow the lead of those in West Virginia, Kentucky, and Oklahoma. The teachers had several demands including salary increases for teachers and support staff, as well as increased per pupil funding. This walkout and associated demands is a direct response to the way in which neoliberal policies have manifested and affected students, teachers, and community members more broadly.

The state of Arizona is a particularly stark example of the effect neoliberal reforms have had on public schooling. Since the 1970s, marketization and privatization carried out under the banner of ‘school choice’ have ushered in the expansion of the charter school system alongside the disinvestment in district public schools. According to 2015-16 statistics, nearly 16% of students enrolled in public schools in the state attend one of 535 charter schools. At the same time we have seen a parallel process of widespread defunding of public education. As of 2017, Arizona is 48<sup>th</sup> nationally for per student expenditures and schools struggle to maintain safe facilities. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, public school teachers in Arizona have seen a 10.4% decrease in their salaries since 1999 and Arizona has the second highest student to teacher ratio (23.5/1) in the country, with many high school science classrooms in the most economically oppressed communities reporting class sizes of 40+ students.

Teacher shortages abound. Four months into the 2017-18 academic year, nearly 2,000 teaching positions remained unfilled in the state. State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Diane Douglas, attributed vacancies to a combination of low salaries, an overly bureaucratic teaching environment, and restrictive rules on how teachers can provide instruction (Fischer, 2017). The state response to the shortage, however, has not been to improve working conditions, but rather to continue to reduce teacher certification requirements with the intention of ‘attracting’ more people to the profession. As of spring 2017, no formal teacher training, certification, or experience is required for employment, notwithstanding widespread evidence of the importance of quality teacher training (Cochran-Smith, Feiman-Nemser, McIntyre, & Demers 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2013). Despite a robust body of research that shows the negative effects neoliberal policies have on students, teachers, and communities more broadly (Apple, 2001; Hirsch, 2007), emotional appeals to individual choice have proven to be consistently persuasive in shaping policy across the state.

**Conceptual Framework and Methods**

It is in this context of defunding and marketization that we began a collaborative research project with public school science teachers in early 2018. This project aims to better understand (and mitigate) the challenges they face as they work to enact a pedagogical praxis that links science to larger societal issues

of inequality, oppression, and discrimination (i.e., a sociopolitical approach to science education (Tolbert and Bazzul 2017)).

Our overarching conceptual and methodological framework is grounded in inquiry as stance, practitioner research, (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and feminist/critical pedagogy (Darder, 2011; Freire, 1971). We meet monthly to share resources for teaching politicized science education (e.g., for doing citizen activist/science projects, for resisting opp(ressive) school and/or state policies (Rodriguez, 2010), etc.). At group meetings teachers share their experiences and knowledge related to inequity and science education and we work collectively to determine possibilities for action. These meetings consist of discussions regarding their varied motivations for wanting to teach science in a sociopolitical way, experience enacting this approach, the challenges they face, and how they might negotiate these challenges, as well as periodic presentations by scientists and educational researchers whose work could be used to inform lesson development. In late summer 2018, the teachers self-identified working groups based on the grade-level they teach and topical interest in order to work together to develop lessons to implement during the 2018-19 academic year. Lesson topics include food access and nutrition, the spatiality of the urban heat island effect as it relates to socioeconomic status, and water harvesting for community needs. Through this process, teachers collectively generate perspectives, including “interpretive frameworks and theories of practice” that are useful in their own problem-posing contexts that can be applied to other local contexts as well (p. 188, Cochran Smith & Lytle, 2009).

This approach makes explicit and centers the very ways in which researchers and research participants work collectively to understand the world and produce knowledge. Drawing on the theoretical insights of feminist scholars, we see personal experience and collaborative reflection as legitimate forms of evidence—not simply opinions or anecdotes—that inform what we know about the world. In addition to the analysis that takes place within group meetings and discussions, meeting transcripts are analyzed using an inductive approach in which we identify emergent themes. For this particular paper and presentation, we focus on a central theme that has emerged from this work: How do teachers find the space to resist harmful educational policies in a right-to-work state in which job security and worker protections are limited? And, how do individual acts of resistance relate to widespread collective action?

Our approach to teacher leadership differs from much of the existing research on this topic in terms of how we’re conceptualizing what leadership means and therefore how it can be observed. While a central tenant of teacher leadership as defined in much of the existing literature is the capacity to influence others (e.g., one is a teacher leader when they impact other teachers’ educational practices or influence policy) (Wenner and Campbell 2017), our approach to leadership focuses instead on the experiences of individual teachers and centers their capacity to put their ethical, pedagogical, and political beliefs into action in the face of institutionalized pressures. For the purposes of this paper, a teacher leader is not someone who necessarily influences other teacher or larger policies (though they may), but is necessarily someone who finds the capacity to resist destructive and violent neoliberal oppressive education policies in their everyday educational practices. As will become clear, we take this approach because our research participants continually illustrated that the everyday acts of resistance that they engaged in were related to, informed, and enabled their participation in larger-scale collective resistance to influence state educational policy.

## Discussion

Our project intended to identify and overcome the challenges associated with teaching politicized science in a context of disinvestment and neoliberalization, so conversations often turned to how they found space for resisting policies that they found counterproductive or destructive. At the same time, sometimes conversations were characterized by a hopeful outlook and other times they were characterized by a sense of feeling completely overwhelmed, even defeated. We see these ebbs and flows as a very “normal” (word choice?) part of this type of social justice work, whereby teachers, as subversive leaders, are working against and within incredibly challenging institutional and political constraints.

### **What is Teacher Leadership in Neoliberal Settings?**

When asked if and how they see themselves as teacher leaders, teachers responded with a degree of tentativeness and even rejected or refused the idea of “teacher leadership” in the contexts of a state in which public education is highly devalued. One teacher shared frustration about how using “effective teaching methods or trying new things and having successes” leads to being given “all of the hard stuff to do” that actually prevents you from moving into a true leadership position or taking on new opportunities for professional growth:

They just give you more challenges because they think you can handle it....like we have a high attrition rate with freshmen, and so they basically told me that you’re not allowed to teach any other classes...you can’t teach any electives, like you have to teach this core class because they [students] don’t leave your class. And so I basically have all the other opportunities taken away to expand on programs and stuff.

Another teacher shared that the only real valued leadership position, from an economic standpoint, is becoming a principal. She pointed out that there are no more opportunities to take an additional leadership responsibilities that are actually paid beyond becoming an assistant principal or principal:

I’ve been like really struggling with this personally, to be honest. Like um, I am at the stage in education and I love being a teacher, but when I think about like the longevity of my career, I really like, being a teacher leader, I know I am and I know I can be, it’s just like, the next step to being a leader and that’s like valued monetarily, is a principal. Like there’s no next thing in education so teachers like burn out, they-or they can complacent or they leave the profession and I’m in this like spot right now where I’m like questioning what’s next for me because I feel like I’ve reached this capacity where I’ve, like I want to do more and I know that in the classroom I can do a lot, but like really creating the change that I see that needs to happen in education, like can’t happen in the classroom alone. But like, is being a principal what I want to do? Like not necessarily, um, especially in [the district] right now, the more I see it I’m like whoa. Um, so like I, like that’s teachers weren’t made to me leaders I guess is like my observation because there’s no way for like there to like a ladder, like any other profession you would expect to like, it’s like yeah, do more work but there’s no such thing as a bonus, like you don’t clock in, you don’t clock out. Like there’s no... you just work, work, work um, and it’s like I feel like um, sometimes I’m being taken advantage of. Not necessarily at my school, but just like as the profession of a teacher. Like I’m being taken advantage of and I’m not being treated with the respect and the um, like, opportunities that I feel like I deserve.

Importantly, in most instances, the teachers we work with do not identify themselves as leaders. This is due in larger part to the limited opportunities available to become a formal leader in their schools and districts without moving out of the classroom and into administration (see also Hanuscin, Rebello, and Sinha, 2012). In turn, their understanding of what “teacher leadership” means in practice in their schools

is taking on more responsibility without any additional pay. The lack of opportunity combined with the structural reality that framed teacher leadership as a position of exacerbated exploitation, led to their resistance in self-identifying as teacher leaders. Despite their reluctance to identify themselves as leaders, we frame this aspect of our research findings as teacher leadership because we believe it helps us better understand the varied conditions that compel and enable teachers to act in the face of unjust and harmful educational systems. We also feel these and other recurring tensions that teachers have expressed about the limitations of their leadership capacities are integral to understanding what teacher leadership means within neoliberal contexts that are diminishing opportunities for public education both locally and globally.

### **Teacher Leadership as Connecting to Broader Social Movements**

We have found that the teacher leaders in our inquiry group often rely on, support each other within, and connect to broader social movements. For example, at one point in our discussion, some of the teachers were talking about how difficult it can be to teach social justice-informed topics in science in a way that inspires students to action, rather than making them feel defeated, particularly when teachers themselves share this sense of feeling defeated as well. The conversation turned to how anger, and feeling angry, can also be a pathway for social change, so even when there is no clear action to be taken, becoming aware of and even angry about an issue can be an important critical teaching opportunity. In that moment, one of the teachers shared:

Can I hijack this conversation for a quick sec? Have you all been following the Sunrise Movement and the sit-ins in Pelosi's office and the youth engagement right now for a green new deal that's like, that is, so it's a really rad inspiring moment, I think that we're in right now. And it's really as far as I can tell, primarily youth led, um and they've, there's been a lot of pressure on congress members to sign on, there's a think eleven right now that support, and um, so I just, I do think that there are things out there to galvanize youth and I took three kids today to meet with [our district congressperson] and it was a really cool moment um, and I guess I'm just, I'm wondering if there isn't a piece that might not even be within our like, that's not within our control and that is like showing them that way, and that's giving them a platform for that way, but it might not be in the school and it might not be curriculum based, but I think that there's a there's an avenue right now and there's a moment in time for youth super involved, in a pretty radical way.

Facilitator: Well, [also] the Parkland youth activists, right? How many was it of the NRA backed candidates that didn't get elected or re-elected this year?

Research Assistant: I heard one of the girls from the Parkland shooting last week, it was powerful.

Connecting to broader movements is an important aspect of subversive leadership, in situations where teachers are challenged to impact others' practice and/or school or local policies. (WORDING needs help)

### **Constraints as enabling conditions for action**

While we anticipated factors such as relationships with administrators, collaborations with other teachers, and access to professional development opportunities to mentioned (Pantic 2017; Lieberman and Miller 2005), we were surprised to hear the teachers reflect upon the ways in which disinvestment and teacher shortages were an enabling condition for action. As one upper elementary teacher commented:

*I think I've just gotten to this point where there's such a need for education reform especially in our state and we're somewhat at the advantage that there is a teacher shortage so it's kind of like, are you really going to fire me because I have Spanish books [in my classroom]?....It's almost like advantageous that we are in Arizona as teachers right now because [even though there is a lot of pressure put on us by districts and at the school-level] I still kind of feel like well, I'm going to do what I think is best for kids and if you don't think that and you have a really big problem with it then we can talk. But no one's ever come and talked to me.*

As this quotation illustrates, teachers have reframed widespread teacher shortages as a context that provides the opportunity and space to act in ways that transgress policies in the name of doing what is best for students—not what is compliant. What is often (rightly) seen as a crisis of our educational system is reframed as an opportunity for action. As a middle school teacher expanded:

*I have a mantra from one of my mentors...[she says], 'when there's a line of people outside the door that are waiting to take your job, then worry about that. But until then, do what you think is best for your classroom and your students.'....It's very empowering when you realize that.*

Teacher shortages ironically contribute to a context in which teachers feel agency to transgress neoliberal policies as they engage with their students and in their classrooms. This is not to suggest that neoliberal policies are good; rather, it is to reveal how resistance emerges at the margins of oppressive policy moves such as disinvestment, privatization, and marketization in educational systems (Anyon, 2014). The work of feminist scholars such as geographers Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006) has important shown how all-consuming narratives of subjection and oppression by capitalism limits our ability to see the already existing spaces and practices of resistance that give us hope and inspiration for a world otherwise. Failing to recognize the multiple and unexpected forms resistance takes is crucial to providing a complex understanding of how to resist harmful policies and the discourses that drive them. As Convertino (2016) writes, “when we fail to recognize resistance in all forms and in all places...different forms of teacher agency are made invisible or erased” (90). Collaborating with and listening to the perspectives of teachers provides insight into the multiple and diverse ways in which resistance emerges and takes place.

While the small acts of everyday resistance the teachers we're working with spoke about are not nearly as spectacular as the 75,000 clad in red who marched at the state capitol, they are important for they underlie the context from which widespread collective action emerges. As a middle school teacher commented: “[Everyone] has a reason to be afraid for their job, but the reality is sometimes that they have a lot more freedom than they know.” While right-to-work laws and union-busting tactics aim to inhibit labor organizing by creating a sense of precarity and fear among workers, we have seen that disinvestment, deprofessionalization, and marketization foment resistance in both big and small forms as teachers come to realize that they have more space to act, even publicly, than they had previously thought (or been led to believe).

Even among the small group of teachers with whom we are working, we have also seen shifts in how these teachers have become more politically empowered through their participation in the teacher strike and Red for Ed movement. As civil rights scholar-activist Jean Anyon (2014) has written, “We see that as political identities emerge from participation in protest, repertoires of action and altered cultural forms develop concurrently, as people take part in contentious politics” (p. 142). One middle school teacher commented on how her participation in the strike has made her even more emboldened:

*I'll tell you what, though, like I think the whole process has turned me into that teacher, right? [laughing] I may have been on that side before, but now it's kind of whatever little bit of fear...I had, of like, well I shouldn't do this, it's not there anymore. Like there is no reason to do anything other than what...I should do, Right? So I think that's been really nice because our [school] site was unified, our parents were organizing drives up [to the Capitol], they were standing out there with us every day, our district, our principal... it was 100% a unifying feeling, and it was very empowering to feel like, you know, you're not alone all the time. That's nice.*

Anyon (2014) describes how human agency is essential to the mobilization of a social movement—people have to feel like there is an opportunity to enact agency but that recognizing the possibility of change often happens in the midst of political and economic precarity: “Situations that [are] previously understood as oppressive but immutable can be re-imagined and viewed as useful” (p. 133). We see this in the teachers’ recognition of the ironic potential inherent in ongoing teacher shortages and the effect of realizing the sense of solidarity that comes from leverage in numbers. Both an increasing sense of individual agency and community solidarity ignited teachers toward more public forms of resistance, all within contexts of immense precarity and injustice. Indeed, these contexts are driving forces behind a collective movement such as the Red for Ed movement in Arizona and its effort to transform how the public understands and supports public education.

Through our work with local teachers we have seen that both small and big acts of resistance are necessary for resisting the decline of public education. In some situations, disinvestment, marketization, and deprofessionalization has, ironically, created the very conditions that enable resistance. As teachers realize that they ‘have a lot more freedom than they know’ they are empowered to act and a powerful feedback loop emerges where resistance snowballs and movements build.

### **Contribution to the Field**

These teachers demonstrate the way in which teachers serve as leaders and advocate for more just educational systems and settings in individual classrooms and beyond. Teacher advocacy literature increasingly explores advocacy as a form of leadership whereby teachers engage on behalf of marginalized students in order to improve access to resources and opportunities, and also influence the behavior and approaches of their colleagues. For example, Bradley-Levine (2018) argues that teacher advocacy should be understood as a practice of leadership. Her work “advances a new theoretical understanding of teacher advocacy as both a practice of teacher leadership, as well as teaching and leading for social justice, or critical teacher leadership” (47). However, her approach to teacher leadership still hinges on the ability to influence the practices and behavior of others: “Teacher advocates challenge other teachers to meet students’ needs more fully while supporting teachers as they try new instructional approaches. Collaborative leadership is a way of working with colleagues that allows teacher advocates to influence their colleagues’ teaching practice towards co-development” (54).

Our conceptualization of leadership as *not necessarily* requiring an impact on the behavior of colleagues pushes the definition of teacher leadership even further to recognize the importance of individual classroom actions and quiet protest to informing and enabling collective struggle. This analysis challenges the way in which leadership is conceptualized in much of the field by focusing on the everyday and banal ways in which teachers find the capacity to act in line with their political, ethical, and pedagogical beliefs *regardless* of whether or not these actions influence colleagues. In doing so, we suggest that understanding teacher leadership and the factors that enable its varied forms requires that we pay

attention to the expected and unexpected processes and relations that shape how teachers understand themselves and their agency.

Our work illustrates that teacher leadership takes many forms as teachers work to positively affect teaching/learning environments at multiple scales and highlights the courageous work of teachers in some of the most challenging circumstances in the United States. At the same time, our methodological approach points to the importance of consistent engagement with educators as a means of better understanding the challenges they face, the ways they resist, and how their motivation and energy to engage in the name of positive change ebbs and flows over time. The insights gained through small-scale in-depth studies can be used to inform the development of larger scale analyses that are able to assess the generalizability of trends and patterns. Just as small acts of everyday resistance are important for informing and enabling large-scale collective action, small-scale studies are not simply anecdotal; rather, they are often necessary for providing the insights necessary to inform the development of overarching hypotheses and theories. Teacher leadership, in all its varied forms and scales, is crucial for transforming our educational systems to be more just and for ensuring that students value research and understand how to evaluate claims. This project is one step towards better understanding ways in which teacher leaders are created and sustained in a time of neoliberalism and a post-truth era.

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