A Cross-Cultural Consideration of Teacher Leaders' Narratives of Power, Agency, and School Culture: England, Jamaica, and the United States
Book Review

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Education is a fundamental right in the 21st century (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). For education to serve its purpose in preparing students for future endeavors, we need teachers who can be trusted to guide them. In many societies around the world, however, the teaching profession is held in lower esteem than other professions (Fullan et al., 2015; Leana, 2011; Saltman, 2014). Teachers are not afforded the deference other professionals receive. As such, their voices are silenced in favor of those perceived as more capable of making decisions that affect education (Fullan et al., 2015). The guides of societies are thus left weakened and unable to meet their full potential in creating educational contexts where all stakeholders thrive.

In challenging this premise, Eleanor J. Blair, Carmel Roofe, and Susan Timmins present an alternative future for teachers in their book, *A Cross-Cultural Consideration of Teacher Leaders' Narratives of Power, Agency, and School Culture: England, Jamaica, and the United States.* Each of them within their respective countries set out to define the role teacher leaders can have in strengthening their educational contexts to ensure students meet their educational needs. The authors advocate for the preparation of teachers to serve in leadership roles. This focus is especially pertinent for many EdD candidates who are working to advance the needs of their colleagues, students, and communities.

To enlighten our understanding of the importance of teacher leaders, the authors conduct a phenomenological study with 36 teacher leaders in England, Jamaica, and the United States (12 teachers in each country) to attain this goal. The authors describe the experiences of participant teachers and how their roles as teacher leaders exemplify the potential they may have in improving the education students receive, and in doing so strengthening society. While teachers in each of these countries engage in situations informed by unique historical, cultural, and social factors, the authors contend there are overall themes shared amongst teachers in these three countries.

The authors present their findings related to teacher leadership in three distinct sections devoted to each country. Within each section, the first chapter is devoted to a description of the general context and the methodology each author employed. The second chapter focuses on the findings of the phenomena under investigation. The third chapter presents an analysis of the findings. The authors in their conclusion weave the various themes that emerged from teachers' experiences and insights in these three countries to the themes shared amongst them. The authors reflect on these themes as they contemplate the future of teacher leadership within each of their countries.

The authors maintain teacher leaders are well placed to support their colleagues, students, and communities as they are embedded within their educational contexts. Since the late 20th century, politicians in numerous countries have increasingly applied a top-down management model of education with mandates and standards (Fullan et al., 2015). Teachers are seen as receivers of orders they are to implement with the idea that standardized practices will lead to school improvement. The reality, though, is that contextual factors influence the implementation of mandated standards that requires leadership on the ground to address them as they occur. In each of the countries, many of the interviewed teachers shared that dissonance between what is mandated at the top to what is feasible at the bottom. When such situations arise, teacher leaders, as the authors argue, are best positioned to deal with them because of their intimate understanding of their students and contexts. As they stated, "Teachers based on the nature of their roles possess a great deal of power within schools that school leaders need to utilize for the benefit of all" (p. 8). How to foster that power and recognize it within oneself is an endeavor EdD programs should have for their students.

When teacher leaders are afforded a voice and agency within their contexts to influence change, they can engage with stakeholders to move forward in ways relevant to their situations. Any teacher who asserts agency may claim this role. As Roofe explained about teacher leaders in Jamaica:

Consequently, the construct of teacher leadership being promoted by this Jamaican study is not about a formal role of leadership, but more about the agency that resides in those who offer their expertise and those who are committed to impacting the experience of learners and their colleagues

without being assigned a formal role or without knowing what the reward will be. Their sole aim is to improve the teaching and learning experience and schooling for all. (p. 110)

Teacher leaders, though, will at times need guidance in how they may use their agency. Teacher educators are well-positioned to provide that guidance as doctoral students take on leadership roles within their contexts.

While teacher leaders are agents of change, teacher leaders also need the support of other teachers and administrators (Edwards, 2005). When teachers are formally acknowledged as leaders within their schools, they provide opportunities to lessen tensions between school administrators and their fellow teachers. Such tensions hinder the development of schools, students, teachers, and administrators. When the focus is on delineating roles between who can act, energy is spent on internal politics. This focus comes at the expense of ensuring students prosper and fostering their development.

These tensions exist, in part, due to the semi-professional status teachers are afforded. Each of the three authors asserts that unlike the fields of medicine or law, many leaders at various levels of government tell teachers what the problems are and how to solve them. Teachers are understood as passive mediators for policies others have enacted. The ramifications are that there exist discrepancies and resistance to policies ill-suited for specific contexts. The authors contend that when teachers and administrators share power and are provided compensation for their efforts, schools and students benefit. Teacher leaders, additionally, are well-positioned to identify areas for improvement and intervention. They, though, need to take active steps in meeting their potential. As Timmons contended about teachers in England:

Teacher leaders need to come forward and make a stand for how they believe our children should be educated and how our schools should be led into the future. No more passive acceptance of systems and testing which have a damaging impact on children, but marching forward bravely disrupting the status quo for equality, social justice and our future generations. (p. 58)

Teacher leaders are able to work to build stronger relationships with students and local communities, which affects student outcomes. Due to their intimate understanding of their contexts and the people within them, teacher leaders are uniquely situated to enact meaningful change. Yet, there is a need to recognize that potential and make meaningful and well-reasoned changes. These are lessons doctoral students need to learn in their EdD programs so they may apply what they learn into their contexts with confidence and awareness of why the change they advocate is appropriate.

For that to happen, though, leaders must be willing to share power and nurture the development of teacher leaders. Also, teacher leaders must see themselves as agents of change instead of actors of change. As the authors explained:

Teachers must change their mind-set, instead of believing that they have no power, they must believe in themselves; as they are intelligent, highly trained, and highly skilled, and their voice is very important and very powerful. Teachers themselves need to be the ones to implement change, not wait for change to happen. (p. 181)

This shift requires a new way of understanding school leadership that is more dispersed to those within schools that are best suited for those tasks. Such work requires a paradigm shift as the authors contend, but one with the promise of empowering teachers and enacting change that benefits all stakeholders. As EdD programs include students who are administrators or teachers within their contexts, teacher educators can help develop this understanding with the facilitation of dialogue amongst doctoral students.

There is a need to understand who these teacher leaders are and their roles in advocating for schools and students within the current discourses about education (Cohen & Mehta, 2017; Fullan et al., 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2013). Equally important, though, is to acknowledge there is a wide breadth of leaders within schools. The authors in selecting their participants focused on teachers their colleagues identified as leaders. Yet, those recognized by others tend to stand out in light of other leaders who seek to enact change and lead in subtle ways that others may not recognize (Meyerson, 2001). In this endeavor to push teacher leaders and the profession forward, it is important to realize that leadership styles exist on a continuum. To acknowledge one style of leadership over others substitutes one form of authority over another form. Many EdD programs are situated to help encourage leaders from diverse backgrounds and personalities to explore different styles of leadership and to find the style appropriate for them. In this way, doctoral students develop their awareness of how they can be leaders and be true to themselves within their contexts. The goal for school leadership, as such, is for a dispersed and democratic sharing of power.

Notwithstanding this concern in how leaders are defined, the authors' focus on teacher leadership and the ascension of teaching as a recognized and respected profession is relevant to discourses of education's role in society. Much work in education, specifically in teacher leadership, is focused on specific contexts to allow for a deep understanding of the phenomena under study. Yet, the application of what is learned in one context to another, while explained as an important endeavor in any research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), is more limited in application. Each author's work with teacher leaders presents compelling insights into who teacher leaders are and the barriers they face within their settings. When their insights are combined, though, they present a compelling case of how issues, such as globalization and neoliberal policies in education, occur across boundaries and affect stakeholders in similar ways. That information is important to realize and explore as issues of equity, social justice, and economic parity exist in many jurisdictions (Bridges, 2014; Darian-Smith, 2020). As Blair explained, "Teacher leadership is not simply a personal issue; it is about making schools and education inclusive environments for all people; it is about supporting democratic values of equity, freedom, and justice for all" (p. 164). These educational issues require local solutions; teacher leaders have a crucial role to play. Understanding who they are and the environments they emerge in provides insights into the influence they have in making schools better for all stakeholders.

Eleanor J. Blair is a professor in the College of Education and Allied Professions at Western Carolina University in the United States. She has primarily focused her work on the use of qualitative methodologies to critically explore teaching and learning in different cultural contexts. Carmen Roofe is a senior lecturer at the School of Education at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. She has worked extensively on topics related to teacher quality and preparation across cultural contexts. Susan Timmins is a senior lecturer in the School of Education and Professional Development at

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Myers Education Press published *A Cross-Cultural Consideration of Teacher Leaders' Narratives of Power, Agency, and School Culture: England, Jamaica, and the United States* in 2020. Available in paperback, hardback, and e-publication, the book is 200 pages in length and includes a forward by Paul Miller, a table of contents, index, tables, and references.

The authors have developed a well-researched and insightful book concerning teacher leaders in England, Jamaica, and the United States. Scholars focused on teacher leadership and cross-cultural education will find this book a useful resource. For those within EdD programs, this is especially pertinent as many of the practitioner-scholars that graduate from these programs will take on leadership roles within their contexts. In preparation for those responsibilities, there is a need to understand who teacher leaders are, how to support them, and why they are important in their contexts. The authors help provide those insights.

The teacher leaders in this book contend with issues of neoliberal education policies, equity, and power dynamics within and around their learning environments. I, too, contend with similar issues within my educational setting in China (e.g., Feng, 2021; Wu, 2019). Other educators in different places likely will find similar connections with the issues the authors present. That is the power of cross-cultural studies such as this one. The ability to find ourselves mirrored with those in different places and times helps build our empathy and understanding that we share similar goals and face similar obstacles (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). While we each will need to develop appropriate and pertinent solutions for our situations, we can open dialogues with one another, learn from one another, and together build more just and equitable learning environments. The authors of this text help with that endeavor. This book would be an incredible resource for those leading EdD programs to use with their doctoral candidates.

Outside academia, this book is also accessible for those who wish to hear the voices of teachers and their perspectives on what it means to be a teacher in the 21st century. The voices of politicians, commentators, and social influencers have helped shape the discourse on teachers; the voices of teachers are more often than not drowned out in favor of these individuals. Blair, Roofe, and Timmins, however, elevate the voices of the 36 participating teachers so we may learn from and understand those who work within the education systems of England, Jamaica, and the United States. With this contribution, the authors help us better understand how the work teacher leaders do is more than teaching students. Teacher leaders' work focuses on guiding and supporting the future citizens of a globalized world that needs to be more equitable and just for everyone. Teacher leaders are well-positioned to steer that effort.

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