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FEMINIST TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Disrupting the Patriarchal Binary

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For the last 14 years, we have developed teacher leaders for formal graduate programs, state endorsements added to certifications, and a large professional development research grant for science teacher leaders. As we promote our various teacher leadership programs, we are continually asked what we mean by teacher leadership and what would being a teacher leader involve in concrete practicalities. Our response is usually: teacher leadership provides teachers with opportunities to take on informal and formal leadership roles through distributed, school, and district-wide leadership. They work individually and collaboratively within and beyond the classroom "to reason, reflect, and critically analyze professional practice, and to make well-informed instructional decisions in collaborative contexts" (Trabona et al., 2019, p. 13). Teacher leadership positively affects job satisfaction and teacher retention, increases one's professional trajectory, and leads to higher student achievement. After sharing our definitions of teacher leadership, we are often asked: "What will I really be able to do as a teacher leader? Will I get a pay increase? Will I have a new title?" To which we often reply nebulously, "Well it depends on your personality, school, district, administrators, community, colleagues, etc." The slippery nature of teacher leadership plagues both researchers and practitioners.

Our perception that teacher leadership is hard to define is not simply ours (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). How we define teacher leadership depends on who is asking, their positionality as the classroom teacher, the team leader, the principal, the superintendent, or the professor. Besides the lens of the definer, there has been a 20-year debate about whether teacher leadership should be conceptualized as formal or informal. Educational leadership scholars tend to favor the formal version, believing that teachers can lead only if they are appointed to a recognized position at the grade, school, or district

level and function as part of the hierarchy of a school as quasi-administrators. Teacher educators, on the other hand, tend toward the informal and believe that to teach is to lead; and they recognize that informal teacher leaders often derive their authority or expertise through the professional and personal relationships they have with colleagues, rather than because of assigned formal roles or titles (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Gordon et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2011). The challenge of this binary formal/informal debate is that the conversation inevitably ends up at one of two extremes with informal teacher leadership seeming to be too ambiguous and ambivalent and formal teacher leadership too structured and reliant on the determination of the administration. Binaries limit us, our imagination, and the creation of what is possible. In this chapter, we explore the inadequacy of the binary and how we might reframe teacher leadership through a feminist lens.

Disrupting the Patriarchal Binary of Teacher Leadership

We have never been satisfied with these simplistic and static conceptualizations of teacher leadership. Why should we consider teacher leaders through a dichotomous lens when we know that being an effective teacher leader is much more complex and centers around a multiplicity of roles, responsibilities, and skills? Defining teacher leaders as either/or exemplifies the patriarchal static notions of power that perpetuate inequitable power hierarchy in schools. It is not surprising that these binary constructs of teacher leadership exist. Teaching has historically been feminized or positioned as women's work in Western patriarchal societies (Maher, 2012), both because most teachers are women but also because the kind of work involved in teaching is considered by others to be the caring and nurturing work of women (Noddings, 2012). This feminization extends to notions of teacher leaders, frequently making their agency reliant on administration, positions that gain their power through title rather than expertise, wisdom, and respect. Traditional constructs of leadership, built from patriarchal, hegemonic knowledge, perpetuate binaries that position administrators and teacher leaders in ways that are neither neutral nor fluid. These constructs are viewed through a lens that privileges white, Western, masculine ways of being so that often teachers find it difficult to have a voice or to be in an empowered position (Klein et al., 2018; Maher, 2012). While we recognize that many administrators also may feel their power is limited, in fact much of their status and respect from others come from their position. These binaries are problematic and become more problematic when "authority," through a patriarchal model of educational leadership, is privileged with more power than "nurturing" or "care."

It is not uncommon for teachers, and especially women teachers, to feel uncomfortable with authority. Throughout our own research about teacher leadership, we have noted how uncomfortable teachers are with naming themselves as teacher leaders (Taylor et al., 2011). This can be attributed to deep societal

messaging that encourages women to shy away from the notions of authority, as claiming one's authority somehow detracts from one's sense of acting as a "good girl" (Gallop, 1994; Luke, 1996). Our notion of authority more closely resembles what Applebaum (1999) described as an authority that "is derived from the bonds of respect, concern, and trust" (p. 315) between people. Building from Applebaum (1999), Taylor and Coia (2006) furthered, "caring and authority are not only complimentary but also need to be seen . . . in relation with each other" (p. 65).

This narrow, limited conception of teacher leaders does not reflect the complexities of the work and how teacher leaders shape-shift to advocate for students, negotiate administrative hierarchies, navigate institutional obstacles, and act as liaison to families and communities. Unlike that of administrators, much of the work of teacher leaders comes without formal title, traditional power, or status but is rather premised in relationships. The authority of teacher leaders among peers, administrators, and parents develops through relationships because "leadership is not an individual action; rather, it requires a relationship among the teacher leaders themselves and with members of their schools to influence curricular and pedagogical change" (Klein et al., 2018, p. 93). For teacher leaders to fully reach the potential of their spheres of influence, they must be comfortable embracing their own authority of expertise and continually pushing the institutional boundaries separating them from administration. They cannot wait for administration to empower them to take action; rather they need to own their authority, build networks of teacher collaborators both within their schools and districts as well as beyond, and work with the administration to invent and reinvent their roles and responsibilities (Taylor et al., 2011). Only when feminist teacher leaders fluidly take up notions of caring authority and shape-shift, working from a multiplicity of perspectives, are they successful in influencing and collaborating with their peers and administrators and making change. This is an incredibly daunting, and at times exhausting, task that involves wearing multiple hats and moving fluidly in and out of different spaces. We suggest, however, that there is no other way to do this work well.

To illustrate what a reimagined feminist teacher leadership framework looks like, we describe Melissa (pseudonym), a teacher leader who participated in the Wipro Science Education Fellowship (SEF) Program. To develop this exemplar, we drew from our research with teacher leaders from the Wipro SEF Program spanning approximately a decade (Klein et al., 2018; Rahman et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2018; Trabona, 2020; Trabona et al., 2019). We begin by describing the program, followed by the case study of Melissa, a teacher leader from the Wipro SEF Program. We selected Melissa as an exemplar to highlight what it looks like when the traditional patriarchal binaries in schools are disrupted and teacher leadership is reenvisioned through a feminist lens. Throughout the case, developed from five years of written reflections, interviews, and observations, we provide a feminist analysis to point out what happens when teacher leaders reject traditional

power and authority constructs that limit the ways in which they enact their leadership. We do want to acknowledge that Melissa did not necessarily self-identify as a feminist teacher leader, but her experiences clearly offer concrete examples of what feminist teacher leadership could look like.

Wipro Science Education Fellowship Program

The Wipro SEF Program was a professional development program designed to develop experienced K–12 science teachers as teacher leaders within their districts. For our program, we worked with teachers of varying disciplines and grade levels from five high-need school districts. The five-year program was funded by Wipro Limited, a global information technology and consulting corporation with a vested interest in public education, in both India and the United States. The program was developed by the University of Massachusetts Boston and was implemented in similar ways across four universities. For this chapter, we focus on the program at Montclair State University.

Fellows applied to the program and were accepted in a two-year cohort model that provided them opportunities to grow into teacher leaders, improve their instruction, give feedback to other fellows, and complete a project that aligned with district priorities. Through these means, our goal was to create sustainable teacher-driven change in the school districts. We completed the initial five-year Wipro SEF Program in June 2017 with 60 fellows. We then offered an extension (Phase 2) to foster implementation of teacher leadership within these districts by trained fellows working collaboratively with principals and/or administrators.

Melissa

Melissa entered the Wipro SEF Program as a Cohort Two fellow in the summer of 2014 with a total of six years of experience teaching a variety of science subjects that ranged from life science to forensics and biology in middle and high school settings. She completed the Wipro SEF Program and continued during Phase Two as a fellow. She was selected as a fellow because of her deep pedagogical content knowledge of science, evidenced in her application by her undergraduate degree in biomedical science, as well as her analysis of a unit on cellular organelles. In her application, Melissa demonstrated her stance as a reflective practitioner, detailing her daily journaling as a way to reflect on her teaching and analyze and tweak her lessons. She valued collaboration with other teachers and recognized the research-based teaching strategies and knowledge she had to offer them.

Defining Teacher Leadership as Fluid

Melissa understood that to be an effective teacher leader, she would need to move outside of her relatively siloed position as a teacher and build relationships

with multiple stakeholders in her school, district, and community, as shown by this statement in her application: "A teacher leader makes the effort to build positive relationships with many individuals within the school and community to provide them with several resources to help overcome obstacles." Aware that a teacher leader works fluidly between teachers and administrators, she continued:

> I believe that it is especially important for a teacher leader to form relationships with administrators to make change within a school successful. A teacher leader does not fear administration, but attempts to blur the line between administrators and teachers so that true progress within education can be made possible.

Melissa entered our program aware that to make change, she would need to be able to work in the in-between spaces of teacher and administrator, challenging the hierarchical patriarchal binary of leadership that so many teachers fear, and moving in and out of different roles (Minh-ha, 1986/1987). Similarly, Melissa posited that a teacher leader works in spaces between her own classroom with her students, the classrooms of her colleagues, the overarching school community, and "professional learning communities, both within and outside of their own district, where they can feel free to voice their opinions and collaborate with other teacher leaders to work toward improvement and growth."

From the beginning, Melissa conceptualized teacher leadership as being a dynamic process of becoming, an idea that is a significant feminist principle (Britzman, 1995; Ellsworth, 1989). She recognized that teacher leaders act and that their actions are what define them. The actions of teacher leadership cannot be "routinized, stable, and predictable" (Lather, 2006, p. 1); rather, they require movement and change. As Melissa wrote:

> I believe a teacher leader is defined by his or her actions. For example, when presented with a roadblock, a teacher leader will use her communication skills to reach out to others and listen to their ideas. Even when discouraged, their positive attitude and determination will not allow them to give up until they have succeeded.

Teacher leaders cannot effect change if they are stuck in one role or if the scope of their work is limited by their role as teacher; they need endless room and opportunity for "moving about" (Minh-ha, 1986/1987, p. 7). To effect change, they must work across roles and positions, moving fluidly and embracing some uncertainty, unpredictability, and unknowability, so that they open possibility rather than remain static in how they interpret their teaching, collaboration, agency, and advocacy for their students (Britzman, 1995; Coia & Taylor, 2013).

Finding One's Authority of Expertise

Within her second year in the Wipro SEF program, as part of her growth plan, Melissa volunteered to lead a one-hour professional development workshop for 20 of her science colleagues at the high school. Moving into this new role of professional development facilitator, Melissa first met with her district coordinator to negotiate the content of the workshop. Together they decided to focus on the use of Google Sites. Having found Google Sites useful for her teaching for the five years prior to the workshop, she knew that she would be able to talk about it passionately and that passion is often contagious. She constructed a list of reasons why she thought Google Sites would be helpful, and she developed a process for demonstrating the service, as well as a mini lesson.

The session was a success because Melissa not only demonstrated how to use Google Sites, but she also invited teachers to create their own websites during the session while she could provide one-on-one help with any problems they encountered. Melissa reflected:

> I was surprised how comfortable I was delivering this presentation; I expected to be more nervous. It was very empowering to be able to stand up in front of other teachers, most of whom have many more years of teaching experience than I do, and be able to teach them something that I knew would help them. I received a lot of positive feedback and the teachers seemed really engaged throughout the session.

In the act of acknowledging that she had expertise in a certain area, and preparing and running the professional development effectively, despite being nervous, she found her authority as a teacher leader, not because she was given a title or status. Her authority was derived from her growing expertise and her recognition of her newly forming identity as a feminist teacher leader.

Melissa's understanding of teacher leadership reflected a feminist lens and therefore she saw herself as a teacher leader always under construction. The week after her workshop, she met with Emily, one of the authors of this chapter and her university mentor, to discuss both the progress she had made on her professional growth plan and the hurdles she had encountered. In particular, she was feeling limited in her expertise in instructional technology. Acknowledging that in her role as a feminist teacher leader she had to move beyond teaching in her classroom, they brainstormed the best ways for her to continue to cultivate her expertise, draw from professional resources outside of her school community, and further develop ways to share what she learned. Hoping to model what she had learned and was continuing to learn herself, she opted to create a website where she could organize and share digital resources.

It is important to note, too, that she planned to do all this while she was on maternity leave. Her to-do list for her maternity was: "I will find and join online

educator communities, I will use social media to help with my research process, and I will develop the website that I will use to share my lessons and experiences with this program." Like many women and feminists, Melissa did not sharply separate her work as a teacher leader from her work as a parent. Two months later, she reported that she had begun work on the website on Google Sites. She shared:

> I set up the basic template for the website and began to work on the "social media" page of the website. Currently I am organizing information on Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest, and I plan to add more over time. For each of the social media outlets, I am including information on what it is, how it can be used by biology teachers, and a very basic how to set it up.

Enacting Feminist Teacher Leadership With Authority and Care

During Phase Two of our program, Melissa demonstrated her growing sense of authority as a feminist teacher leader by taking the initiative to propose and organize a community of inquiry for K–12 science teachers in her district. Using our Wipro model as a guide, she invited teachers to explore a teaching practice together, select and discuss a research article about the practice, implement and video record the new teaching practice in their own classrooms, and then provide feedback on each teacher's videoed lesson using a warm/cool protocol, whereby others offer warm or positive feedback and cool or constructive feedback. To organize the group, Melissa put together a flyer, recruited three teachers, and organized their binders outlining the objectives, steps needed to prepare and video record the lessons, and the guidelines for reflection meetings. She compiled a list of potential educational strategies to explore with the group, hoping that they would select a practice to focus on together for the year. Additionally, she created a Google Site for the group where they could share materials.

Melissa began the first session by sharing her own experiences with these reflective practices and—as she wrote— "how much it has helped me as an educator." Recognizing the emotional stress associated with the vulnerability of sharing videos of one's teaching, Melissa compassionately shared, "I also showed them a portion of one of my video-taped lessons to help alleviate some of their stresses regarding watching themselves on video (which I remember being very nervous about, too!)." Her decision to share of herself was a key example of what caring looks like in feminist teacher leadership and what distinguishes it from patriarchal notions of authority (Noddings, 2013). Making oneself vulnerable is an important means of building a caring collaboration with others. As Taylor and Coia (2006) wrote:

> We found the ways in which we care for each other, listen to one another, provide a space for vulnerability and for risk-taking as a strength, not a

criticism. . . . It seems that for a collaboration, as with good teaching, there has to be risk and trust.

<div align="right">(p. 63)</div>

Melissa's caring stance continued when Denise (pseudonym), the first teacher scheduled to share her video, approached her with concerns about her lesson. Denise "was feeling rushed because snow days had pushed back her lessons, and quarterly exams were coming up," and "she could not think of a lesson to videotape and was beginning to freak out." Melissa reflected:

> After allowing her to vent for a little bit, I told her that this process does not have to be disruptive, we just need to figure out a way to incorporate problem-based learning into one of the lessons she would be teaching.

She immediately recognized that Denise needed emotional support to allow herself to be vulnerable and some scaffolded brainstorming to push through her anxiety. Melissa suggested that Denise incorporate a problem-based learning lesson while teaching carbon-dating. Denise welcomed the suggestion and as Melisa described "seemed to feel much better" after their conversation. Acknowledging that her responsibility as a feminist teacher leader involved both drawing from her own lived experience, offering compassion, and still pushing Denise to grow and gain confidence through her authority as a teacher leader, Melissa reflected:

> It felt really good to help Denise through her frustration. . . . My experience with this process allowed me to help Denise, because I remember feeling exactly like she did during my first year with Wipro. However, after completing the process, I was able [to] provide a different perspective that seemed to help.

Her caring as a feminist teacher leader involved what Noddings (2013) described as "stepping out of one's personal frame of reference into the other's. . . . When we care, we consider the other's point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us" (p. 23). The following month, Melissa reported that Denise had successfully video recorded her lesson and had uploaded it onto Google Classroom. After the feedback session following Denise's lesson, Melissa shared how positive Denise felt about the feedback she received. She reflected, "She was surprised by all the warm comments, saying they made her feel more confident in her teaching skills," and "She also said that she found the cool comments to be very helpful and . . . can help her to improve her lesson design, not only for this lesson, but for all of her lessons in the future."

Would Denise have been as open to the warm and cool feedback if she had not felt "cared-for" by Melissa? Allowing for a combination of thought and feeling

provided a way for Denise to both build self-confidence and consider new ways of designing her lesson.

As was her practice as a reflective feminist teacher leader, Melissa also journaled about the overall process of facilitating the community of inquiry. Balancing her authority as an instructional leader with her caring stance, she proposed that her group "may benefit from watching a short video to review problem-based learn-ing and why it is so important" as a means of clarification and inspiration. She also intuitively paid attention to the tone of the first debrief meeting. She wrote:

> When the meeting first began, it felt a little stiff and I was nervous that this group wasn't going to have the same type of reaction to the process that my original group did two years ago. After a few minutes, we started to get into a flow and you could see people perking up, thinking of new ideas, and getting excited.

For Melissa, her authority of expertise, which in this case was centered around the instructional practice of problem-based learning, was inextricably linked to her caring about the teachers in her community of inquiry. Their well-being and comfort in giving and receiving feedback were as important to her as their acquiring new ways of thinking.

Similarly, Melissa described the importance of meeting with our larger local Wipro community regularly as a means of nurturing her own needs as a feminist teacher leader. In a final section of her reflection, she recognized the value and power of being heard and seen through talking to other teacher leaders outside her district about similar challenges faced:

> First, it is a really great opportunity to get to sit down and talk to teachers from other districts from various grade levels and subject areas from time to time. It is really eye-opening to hear about some of the issues that other teachers face and some of the issues that we all have in common. . . . I feel like our Wipro group has become this little family where we are able to discuss our difficulties as well as our successes without judgement—and that is really helpful. . . . The work we are doing is truly appreciated by our colleagues and by our MSU [Montclair State University] mentors, which is something that I don't always feel in my day-to-day routine at school. I always leave our group meetings feeling empowered and motivated to do more, and for that, I am really thankful.

Having the experience of being cared for within the context of an intellectual environment provided both the necessary scaffolding for taking ownership of her authority as a feminist teacher leader and the emotional support. For Melissa, the lived experience of this model helped to shape how she then worked with the teachers in her community of inquiry. In her final summative video, she also

extended this professional collaborative community to include Wipro fellows at sites across the United States.

Becoming a Feminist Teacher Leader

In exploring the portrait of a feminist teacher leader, we attempt to offer a vision that disrupts binary notions of how teachers can work within a variety of structures and ways of leading within classrooms, schools, and communities. In doing so, we highlight four features of feminist teacher leadership that emerge from our analysis. We note that this is not a fleshed-out framework for feminist teacher leadership but constitutes foundational ideas emerging from this particular portrait—an opening into the nonbinary space that we believe teacher leadership authentically occupies.

Responsive Authority Through Care

A feminist teacher leader moves to and through authority by the nature of the leadership act—responding to the context of needs and individuals involved. Key to Melissa's ability to engage in leadership was her seeming rejection of the notion that she needed approval from above, as she shifted away from being "feminine" and asking for permission, and instead acted as a feminist. Her authority came through her relationships, expertise, and "responding" to moments where that authority and leadership might be needed. Although she collaborated with administration, she did not require them to give "permission" in moving forward but was driven by the context of the leadership act. Feminist teacher leadership and authority occupy and emerge from a particular momentary space rather than from a set of fixed roles and titles. Even within those spaces, the teacher leader may move in and out of authority as Melissa did, dependent on the needs of both contextual and individual role demands.

Negotiating Fluidity in Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationships

In her leadership, Melissa fluidly moved through various roles, relationships, and responsibilities with a variety of stakeholders, taking risks, modeling vulnerability, and acting with courage. For example, in one of her final Wipro-related projects, she led a team of teachers in developing and implementing a summer STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) program for middle school students as a means of enthusiastically introducing them to the high school and orienting them to science. The team wrote new curricula for four courses, and in engaging with this work, she met with a variety of district administrators from principals to assistant superintendents and even the superintendent. We do not suggest that Melissa did not "see" the roles and the hierarchies around her (in fact

other teacher leaders in her district struggled with these), but in framing her work around the complex needs of teachers, students, schools, and districts, she was able to see those roles as fluid, as resources for the work rather than as obstacles or gatekeepers. Thus, in any moment she could be a teacher (sharing her work and constructing curriculum), learner (asking questions, learning from others around her), leader (initiating work to support others), and administrator (organizing meetings, garnering resources).

Care for Self and Others

Throughout her reflections, Melissa was able to enact leadership with care for herself and others, using empathy and compassion as linchpins of her work. We have noted in our own work that teaching is an act of vulnerability; and for many teachers, sharing this deeply personal and vulnerable space with others who might judge one's teaching can be emotionally taxing to such a degree that it inhibits their own professional growth (Taylor & Klein, in press). One of the most powerful ways to combat this inhibition is having a leader share their vulnerability in the classroom. We note that in her description of her work with Denise, Melissa acknowledged the emotional work of engaging in transparent teaching and learning and was able to work toward the curricular and pedagogical. Too often in teaching and teacher education, we miss this crucial step, forgetting that feeling safe is key to being able to take risks. In exposing her own vulnerability, Melissa preemptively combatted shame for teachers worried they would not be able to "get it right." This seems to us to be a hallmark of feminist teacher leadership.

Engaging With a Professional Community to Foster Collective Responsibility

Melissa was able to hold a space for herself simultaneously as leader and learner. She rarely seemed to engage in one without the other, and that shape-shifting sensibility meant that even as she was taking on an increasing variety of leadership positions, she grounded herself in being part of a professional learning community where she could problematize her leadership, both locally and nationally through the Wipro SEF Program. We note this as a feature of feminist teacher leadership because she took on a responsibility beyond herself, both to her larger community in sharing her local work and in drawing from the larger community to support her school and district-based work. Melissa saw both herself and her work as part of a larger educational collective, and she contributed to and drew upon that collective, not merely to improve her individual experience and knowledge, but to grow and make change.

Again, we note these four features as hallmarks of an emerging framework for feminist teacher leadership. They are by no means meant to be finite or prescriptive (which would be inherently anti-feminist) but rather the initiation of a

dialogue, an attempt to push beyond the binary language with which leadership is usually discussed. We urge scholars and practitioners to begin to frame things beyond ideas such as "individual versus collective" and "formal versus informal." Even as we have attempted to locate teacher leaders on a continuum in these categories, the very nature of identifying two end points along a continuum limits our imagination and understanding of how teacher leadership may actually be enacted.

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Study Questions

1. How would you describe the relationship between authority and care in the work of teacher leaders?
2. What metaphor might you use to describe the authority of teacher leaders?
3. How does defining teacher leadership in a more fluid way change the way we think about the work of a teacher leader?
4. How does a feminist teacher leadership framework influence the ways in which we perceive teacher leaders?
5. How do you see your relationships with others as part of your leadership, and in particular with administrators? What does Melissa's story suggest to you about how you might rethink some of those relationships?

Additional Readings

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