

Flipping the script: Teacher leadership for knowledge generation

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The intensification of teaching (Apple, 1986; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) has resulted in a loss of control of teachers' instructional practice, leaving teachers to most often assume the role of knowledge consumers. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) exacerbated this trend as federal, state, district, and school leadership expect teachers to engage in "research based," "best" practices. Teachers are expected to implement these best practices without much question, their motivations tied to high-stakes standardized tests that narrow the curriculum and appear to tie their instructional hands (Apple, 1986; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Ravitch, 2011). The effects of this being teachers' input devalued by the very institution that relies on it. Opportunities for teachers to engage in reflective conversations surrounding big questions of their teaching are scarce (Servage, 2006/2007).

Viewing and respecting teachers as leaders is an opportunity to flip this script. Doing so requires a shift in the roles teachers are expected to take and the voice they are expected to have (or not have). This paper details how a group of teachers in one elementary school have worked to flip themselves from knowledge consumers to knowledge generators, thus promoting teacher leadership as job-embedded professional learning. A group of teachers in the school engaged in an action research group over two years conceptualized and led by a novice colleague.

In our study, we examined three questions:

1. How do the members of this action research group develop together as learners?
2. What barriers or opportunities influence the group's progress?
3. How does the teacher leader of the group exert her leadership and to what ends?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The teachers at this school engaged in action research led by a colleague in her third year of teaching. Underlying their work was what we know about teacher leadership and action research.

### **Teacher Leadership and Professional Development**

Teacher leadership is conceptualized as a means for teachers to recognize and enact their agency. It is a way for power within a school or larger system to be shared with those who do the work of teaching (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). There are many roles for teacher leaders as they work out who they are as leaders and where their comfort lies (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012). These roles involve varying degrees of leadership- from committee work to professional development endeavors. It is the latter that we are concerned with in this paper. Current views of leadership have shifted from the principal as the sole decision maker to a distributed conception that recognizes the voices of teachers as central to a well-functioning school. Those voices should be well-informed and able to seek out answers to important questions while utilizing and strengthening the human capital of those around them (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

### **Action Research**

Teachers leading their own professional development and developing skills of inquiry is often done through action research. Action research is “a process of systematic inquiry, usually cyclical, conducted by those inside a community...[I]ts goal is to identify action that will generate improvement the researcher believes important” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 4). Action research positions teachers as researchers, turning the ideas of teacher as technician (Gray, 2007) on their heads. Teachers as researchers seek to surface and problematize taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie work in schools. Reflection is intentional and inward (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). There are many models of action research, but all follow a similar flow. Typically, it all

begins with a question. A question that a teacher or group of teachers are interested in that will somehow better student learning and expand their pedagogical knowledge. The teacher then seeks out more information about that question by consulting with professional practitioner resources, and ideally, academic research. Using what they learn, they tweak their question into something researchable and design an action plan to address the question. The plan includes the collection of data to monitor the action's outcomes. The data are analyzed, the teacher reflects on the findings, and they determine the next steps or the next question that has now been raised (see for example, Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Mills, 2014; National School Reform Faculty, nd). The action research process is often depicted as a sequence, but in reality, this process mimics the life of a classroom- it is nonlinear and messy as teachers move through and between steps. Action research assumes a sociocultural and situated view of learning whereby the researcher and their findings cannot be separated from their context. This view parallels the view most often held by teachers as the theory to practice gap is often cited when new initiatives are pushed down and seem disconnected from the realities of their classrooms.

As we investigated the literature on action research as a form of teacher leadership, we discovered that there was very little research investigating action research groups that were developed by teachers (rather than by some sort of external source), and even less research, if any, investigating such groups led by a novice teacher. This led us to our study of one school's efforts in this area.

### **Methods**

Over the course of two years, a novice teacher led two groups of her colleagues through action research. By capitalizing on her knowledge that she was not alone in questioning her instructional practices, she reached out to colleagues and began an action research group. To

study the work of this group, we conducted interviews with participants from each year of the group and gathered archival material from the groups' meetings. The archival material was used to provide context to the study and to participants' responses. This was a case-study of a single school. We asked the questions:

1. How do the members of this action research group develop together as learners?
2. What barriers or opportunities influence the group's progress?
3. How does the teacher leader of the group exert her leadership and to what ends?

### **Participants and School Site**

The elementary school site of the study is located in an affluent suburban area of the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This school is a Title One school with forty-one percent of students on free/reduced priced lunch. Students' racial demographics are 39% Hispanic, 36% White, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, 6% Black, 4% multiracial, and 2% American Indian/Alaska Native.

The school is a Professional Development School (PDS) in partnership with the the local university. The lead author, who is not assigned to the school, came to work with the teachers through the elementary education partner program. The second author, Emma, who is a third grade teacher at the elementary school, contacted the elementary education program for resources related to action research. The lead author was then put in contact with Emma. After discussing Emma's desires to start an action research group at her school and her experience with action research, the lead author volunteered to help facilitate and support Emma in leading the group.

Emma was in her third year of teaching when she began the group and is a graduate of the partner elementary education program. During her teacher preparation in the program, she

participated in a capstone research course where she learned about action research. In the course, she did not have the opportunity to conduct her own research as the course was over the summer and at the conclusion of her program. However, based on what she learned in the course and in discussions with her principal, she knew that action research might lead her to some of the answers she desired about her practice.

Spurred by an email about grit from her principal, Emma started doing her own internet research on the topic: “I clicked on that article and then I clicked on another one and then two hours later I was like, I still don’t know how to *do* grit!” But she knew that it was something other people were questioning and it was something she wanted to learn more about with her own students. After meeting with her principal to ask about the space for such inquiry, Emma learned that there was previously a teacher research group at the school and he encouraged her to start it again. Emma contacted the university and was connected with the lead author. The lead author talked with Emma about her goals for own research and her goals for the group. She shared resources with Emma and helped her to plan out the group’s timeline for the year. The lead researcher also attended several of the group’s meetings, but each meeting was clearly led by Emma, with the lead author there for support as necessary. The group met monthly both during the school day enabled by substitute coverage provided by the principal and before school when substitute coverage was not available. At the end of year one, the group presented their research at a district sponsored teacher research conference. Year two teachers presented their work at the school, but not at the district as the teacher research conference was postponed that year.

Eight teachers began in the group for year one, but three transitioned out. As a result, five teachers engaged in the full group process during year one and five teachers engaged in year two.

Two teachers were in the group both years, including the leader, Emma. To better understand the experience of the group members as they transitioned into knowledge generators, interviews were conducted with three teachers from the group during the first year and four teachers of the year two group. Teachers all taught in the same elementary school. They spanned first grade through sixth grade.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

To address our research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author with three participants from year 1 and four participants from year 2 for this case study. Interviews asked questions regarding participants' action research (what they studied, why, and how), their reasons for joining the group, how it influenced their teaching, benefits/supports, challenges, and future intentions regarding action research. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were analyzed inductively by the lead researcher by first open-coding the data. Open codes were then refined into focused codes and themes were identified.

### **Findings**

As teachers generated their knowledge, it was a nuanced process that seemed to rely on the leadership of their colleague to guide them in making sense of their action research endeavor. These findings tell the story of how this group of teachers developed together as learners with one shared goal- to better their practice for their students.

### **Development as a Group of Learners**

**Relationships and recruitment.** The action research group was a voluntary effort. All teachers who participated did so for reasons other than monetary rewards. Perhaps the most significant reason cited for participation was relationships. Emma's leading of the group relied on her relationships, and the participation of those in the group relied on relationships. Starting

with recruitment for year one, Emma used what she termed “word of mouth.” She started with the people whom she regularly talked with about instructional issues. She noted that “people I would go to to talk about my kids, those seemed to be the people that were really interested in joining the group.” One of these teachers graduated with Emma from the same teacher preparation program. Once this teacher was on board, Emma sought out others. From there, she was put in touch with a sixth grade colleague who was already doing a paperless classroom and would already be studying it. Finally, she recruited two of her grade level teammates who were intrigued enough and seemed to trust her enough to “just... give it a try.” Only two teachers this first year, Emma and her graduate peer, had any entering knowledge of action research.

During year two, once again, relationships and the teacher leader’s reputation acted as recruitment measures. What occurred the first year had gained traction in the school. Emma’s “word of mouth” was successful and the idea that what they were doing was beyond check boxes and paperwork was enticing. One participant who had experience with action research at a previous school, but did not join the prior year’s group did so this year because he saw value in the group’s members:

The group that was coming together, it was one of those groups where I was like, how could I not take part in this? And I think that was one of the other pieces that really drew me to it was how highly I respect the people who were participating in the group and how much I knew that everything that was going to happen there was going to be for the betterment of kids and I wanted to be part of that.

Those who joined the action research group had questions that they wanted to explore but that by itself was not enough for them to join the group. They needed to feel that those leading it, and those who would be in the journey with them, were motivated by their students-- more

specifically, by enhancing themselves as teachers in the service of their students. This sentiment is expressed by the following participant from year two:

[The] co-teacher relationship question in particular has been bubbling in my head now all five years of teaching, and I think we having the opportunity to have the time to and structure to formally look at it, was a very interesting thing to me, and I think the other side of it was just that, I mean community, it's really the people who were doing it. All teachers [whose professional knowledge] I value.

Not only did the members recognize the value in others' knowledge, but they also knew they had something to offer as well. As Emma stated, "I saw teachers come forward who saw value in their own teaching experience and felt safe and energized enough to share it with others." The action research group allowed teachers the space to follow their passions and that meant teachers had the space to be energized.

**Gaining experience with leadership and action research.** In year 1, only two out of the five group members had knowledge of action research, and those two group members had not actually conducted any research. Emma was one of these two teachers, so she was in the unique position of leading others through a process that she knew about theoretically but not practically. To address this, she sought out resources from the local partner university. She structured regular, focused meetings each month with the group. Although this was Emma's first leadership endeavor, Emma noted that she jumped right into leading the group and did not let her lack of leadership experience be a blockade.

I don't think I spent really much time worrying about like my leadership qualities or you know like that part of it...I think I just tried to focus on making the process simple for the

group so that we could do something with whatever came out, whatever the output was going to be.

To fulfill her new leadership role, Emma kept her focus on a) students and b) her colleagues. She seemed to jump right in with the risk-taking attitude that whatever they were doing, it needed to be useful for the group and their students. Keeping this mindset seemed to enable her to lead the group forward in a relaxed, but focused setting. Each meeting had a focus and tasks to accomplish (for example, refining the research questions or planning for data collection), but there was also space for teachers to air their challenges and get feedback. During the meetings, talk was common across the projects. For example, during one meeting, where the group was pulling academic research articles to inform their research, members were clearly offering one another ideas for applying the learning in their own setting. The previous year, the group met at the local university to use their article databases to search research but while useful to gather articles, they had very little time to actually read and process what they gathered. In response to this, in year two, Emma structured the meeting so that the group stayed at the school and used newly discovered district database resources. She structured the meeting time so that the teachers were finding and reading their articles while together in the group. This group structure where the group members physically met and had the space to independently work but also call on one another was a strong leadership decision by Emma. It allowed the sharing of resources and impromptu discussions to arise.

Interestingly, in year two, those who joined the group all had experience with action research. Four had learned about action research during their preservice preparation and one had conducted action research at a previous school. It is unclear why the second year drew out those with research experience, but not year one. Explanations for joining year two included having a

question “bubbling” on their mind for some time, relationships with and reputation of the group members, and hearing good things about the first year of the group. As one participant said, “[previously] I was like, I need to do this, I can do this [but] life moved on and stuff came up and so forth. Every year [Emma] presents it really very well at one of our staff meetings, and I said ‘ok, this year I’m going to try it and get back in here’.”

Overall participants in year one and year two found the action research group to be valuable in offering them the opportunity to share perspectives and gain feedback on their research. However, one participant in year two noted differences between the two groups due to the differing experiences with action research and the fact that the group did not present their research together like they had in year one. In year one, the group presented at the district’s teacher research conference. They presented their research together under one umbrella theme. In year two, the district postponed the research conference and the group instead individually presented their research at their school site. Each teacher shared their work in their classroom during five minute presentations at the end of a school day. It was open-house style and colleagues visited rooms to learn about group members’ research. This participant viewed this change in presentation format, along with the entering action research experience, to affect the group’s collaboration.

It was like, we were sort of toddlers at parallel play, and there weren't really the coming together discussions and working together that we did in the previous year. While we had separate projects the previous year because we were presenting, we had to come together and sort of talk about how we wanted to present it, how we wanted to organize our thinking, how we wanted to make connections between what we were doing, and we didn't do that this year, in large part because we didn't present. And the previous year

people didn't know what they were doing. I think that was also another reason why there was a lot more, like 'how do I do this? what do I do?' and.. so there were a lot more discussions around the teacher research group in process than there was this time. It was like people are like, ok, this is what I'm going to do and they were sort of off doing their own thing.

This is a notable perspective because it points to the value of the shared experience when group members seemed to be all in the same (leaky) boat. Once group members had the know-how and there was not a shared end product, this participant who was a member in both year one and two, saw a drop in the level of actual collaboration. No other participants from either years one or two shared this perspective, but they also did not have the same comparison opportunity. As one member of year two stated, she found the shared purpose of the group to be motivating: "I think that's why I really enjoy that we're coming there. We want to necessarily systematically kind of take a look at some aspect of our teaching, and refine it, improve on it." This perspective was shared in varying ways by all participants from both years one and two.

**Creating an authentic professional learning community.** The opportunity to learn from colleagues was key to the participants. They joined the group voluntarily because enhancing their professional knowledge was paramount to them. Emma shared that she was motivated to better her practice after hearing a podcast that stated teachers plateau in their skills after their fifth year of teaching. This prospect affected her greatly. She stated that she felt "that is so depressing so I have to do something." Teachers who joined the group desired for authentic and meaningful connections with their colleagues- connections outside of the the school's mandatory professional learning communities. One participant from year two likened the group

to a “think tank.” One participant from year two additionally shared that the group enabled him to gain perspectives on his research about mentoring that he otherwise would not have had.

When C sat at the table and was like one of the things that I'd love for you to consider is how would you select your mentors. And that was something that I haven't really take into account. It was always like well, you know we take people who have the certain number of experience and the people who have shown interest in the past and this that and the other and you know I hadn't really taken into account that there are new teachers who meet that criteria of being you know veterans for this amount of time who are interested in doing it and we kind of just fall back on the same people and say, oh well you've done it before I'd love for you to do it or you've done it before. And so being able to kind of step out of the role that I'm in and see things from perspectives that I was less aware of was one of the biggest benefits to me.

Two of the participants in year two conducted their action research together. Since they were currently co-teaching and their question focused on co-teaching, they utilized their already scheduled planning times for collaboration outside of the group meetings. One of the partners stated that she felt the action research endeavor was “just that much more than engaging because it's what you're doing every day anyway, and it provides a little bit more meaning to it because something that I truly am interested in my own profession.” She was directing her own professional development and generating her own professional knowledge.

The connections that participants drew on in the group were significant. Although one of the participants felt that there was more collaboration during year one, year two brought with it its own opportunities for learning with and from one another. For example, during one meeting, a group member lamented that a new instructional directive conflicted with her beliefs about

teaching math, and she expressed her dislike of “blanket solutions” since each class is different. She stated that she kept asking for the research supporting this new idea, but it was not being recognized. As she sat searching research to inform her own study, the conflict in expectations was evident. She was expected to just ‘do’ this new ‘thing’ without explanation but as she worked to generate new knowledge through her action research, she knew the importance of having strong evidentiary support. As she talked, her group members empathized and offered suggestions for moving forward, but they also expressed feeling exhausted from “swimming upstream.” They ended this part of their discussion feeling as though they had to “agitate change.” This type of conversation, enabled because of the group’s structure and culture, represented the community of learners and change agents that was created and recognized in this group.

### **Supports and Challenges**

One of the most cited supports to the action research group was administrator support. The school’s principal, who encouraged Emma to begin the group, provided half-day substitute coverage for the group to meet during the school day as much as possible. When it was not possible to meet during the day, the group met before school. One teacher from year two found the meetings so beneficial that she desired more meetings for greater check-in with “what’s working, not working” in their research. Relatedly, the collaboration with colleagues was cited as a significant support for participants, as well as the group leader. When Emma reflected on her leadership of the group, she shared that she learned a great deal about who she was a leader, and also that a leader is not a sole position.

I learned that my approach to leadership is calm, focused on building consensus, and open to possibilities. While these traits are helpful for creating an encouraging

environment, I gained a deeper understanding of how largely ineffective my approach is on its own. I needed the creativity, organization, support, and energy of both the group members and school administration to keep momentum.

Additionally, it was noted that more opportunities for sharing with other schools were needed. This included sharing processes of action research but also sharing the knowledge that they had generated. While their district had a teacher research conference, it was not well advertised and resources for conducting action research were not readily available. For example, the teachers did not know that their district had access to academic databases until year two. It was noted that greater visibility of these types of resources and opportunities for connection would be beneficial.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The study of this teacher leader and the experiences of her colleagues developing as knowledge generators contributes to our understanding of how teacher leadership can develop organically within a school setting. The findings tell a story about the necessity for administrator support, the importance of peer collaboration for motivation, and the road traveled by a novice teacher attempting to grow in her leadership for learning.

One of the most striking elements of the study is the motivations of the participants. Most research investigating action research does so with teachers, inservice or preservice, who are either required to participate, offered important incentives, and/or are approached from either administration or a higher education institution (see, for example, Cain & Harris, 2013; Sales, Traver, & Garcia, 2011; Yuan & Lee, 2015). While group members potentially earned professional development recertification points for participation, this incentive was an afterthought. During year one, it was not even mentioned to participants as a possibility until the

group was well underway. During interviews, while participants mentioned the desire for more time or even greater collaborative opportunities, not one participant mentioned greater incentive for participation. This group began because a novice teacher worried that she would fail her students if she did not take action to keep improving herself, and she brought others into the fold who felt the same way. The professional development via knowledge generation that occurred here was the very definition of bottom-up.

While the group developed organically from the teachers, could this group have survived without the support of their principal? It's hard to say. The support of the principal enabled time within the school day for the group to meet. The principal also projected the value of the group through his attendance at some of the meetings and the research sharing sessions. During year two, Emma conducted co-research with her colleague regarding lesson study. To conduct their version of lesson study, it required the participation of colleagues to observe and offer feedback—something that they needed within school time to do. Without that support, it most certainly would have been more difficult to create and sustain this group. Before the start of year three, the principal announced he was moving schools and one of the school's assistant principals took on the principalship. The action research group has not continued into year three. Two of the authors posit that a reason for this is lack of positive pressure. The new principal has a lot on his plate as a first year principal and while he would be supportive, he is not providing the check-ins they feel that they need to continue making the space for the group. As one participant stated, there needs to be a meeting between bottom-up and top-down. This is an interesting development because it alludes to the criticality of administrator support even when the efforts are borne from the teachers.

As a leader, this novice teacher recognized that she has many more questions to answer. Even though she was able to recruit group members based on her reputation, those teachers were like-minded. They joined because they knew that a space would be created to wrestle with some of the questions that rarely get explored in the race to cover material and meet data expectations. But as she considered the larger implications of her leadership, she wondered how do you reach people who are either complacent about their teaching practice or unsure of the benefits action research provides? Even within the group members who joined these first two years, how do you transform a spark of interest into a dedication to embedding professional development within your practice, especially when external pressures continually work to dampen that spark? As this teacher leader moves forward in her attempts to generate knowledge with her colleagues, she must be continually aware and thoughtful as to how her leadership intersects with the many demands on teacher time and enthusiasm. Additionally, further research should follow novice teachers like Emma as they seek to flip the script of a teacher's role. Their development will offer key insights into how we approach knowledge expectations for teachers and sustain leadership for learning over time.

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