



The Ethical and Educational Ambiguities of Teacher Leadership

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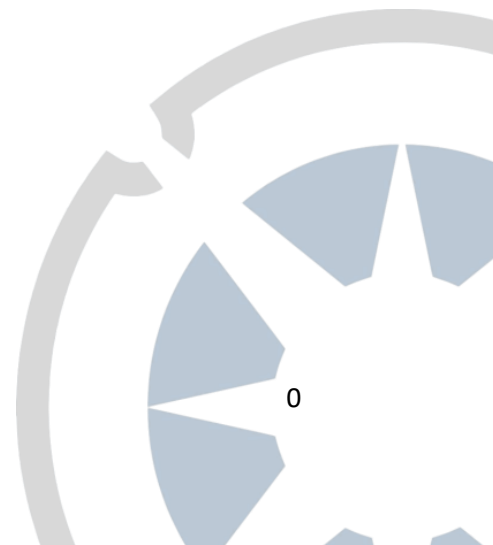
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Introduction

While educational leadership used to refer almost exclusively to principals and other key administrators, in recent decades the concept has expanded to include “teacher leaders”. While definitions of the term vary, generally speaking, teacher leaders are those who take on formal or informal administrative and/or instructional roles that involve them in supporting their peers, their school, or even other schools. The involvement of teachers in these kinds of efforts, beyond their classroom teaching, has come to be referred to as “teacher leadership”. In this paper, I first review the literature on teacher leadership, noting the lack of attention paid to the dark side of leadership. My theoretical framework is informed by scholarship on bad leaders, as well as the moral psychology of Iris Murdoch. I then apply this framework to teacher leadership, outlining some of the ethical and educational ambiguities to which it gives rise, as well as some of the issues with the concept of social change with which it is sometimes associated.

Literature review

Teachers are now frequently encouraged—whether in the context of initial training, professional development, or certification courses—to be leaders or to exercise leadership. In the United States, the concept of teacher leadership seems to have emerged in the 1980s as part of a broader effort to raise the status of teaching as a profession (Hunzicker, 2018). By the late 80s and early 90s, in the wake of major national reports on the state of education, teacher leadership expanded to include participation in a vast array of educational reform efforts (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The rationale was that greater involvement of teachers themselves—who were after all the targets and/or protagonists of most school improvement efforts—would enhance the effectiveness of these reform endeavours in a variety of ways. The hope was also that this kind of participation would be a source of professional development and, in some cases, career advancement. In addition, teacher leadership would help spotlight certain capable teachers who could then act as exemplary role models for their less experienced peers, influencing them indirectly and directly (Hunzicker, 2018).

Legislation in the early 2000s placed new pressures on schools to be accountable, and, as a result, teacher leaders were increasingly mobilized to help schools meet these new demands, especially in enhancing student achievement. In the decades since, teacher leadership as a concept has continued to become more widespread. At the national level in the United States, for example, the Teacher Leader Model Standards were published in 2012; the Teacher Leadership Initiative was launched in 2014, which laid out a list of competencies of teacher leaders; that same year, Teach to Lead was established, a national program for the professional development of teacher leaders; and in 2016, the Teacher Impact Grants program was made available to teacher leaders to support innovative projects (Hunzicker, 2018). Besides these national initiatives, it is worth highlighting the Teach For America organization, as well as its sister organizations across the world (Teach First in the UK, Teach First in New Zealand, Teach First in Norway, Teach For Bangladesh, etc.), associated

through the Teach For All (TFAll) network, which have also emphasized the concept of leadership (Straubhaar, 2020). These organizations offer brief trainings to prospective teachers, who are then typically meant to spend at least two years in classrooms, which, it is thought, equips them to be leaders.

Research on teacher leadership is both plentiful and diverse. York-Barr and Duke (2004) wrote one of the earliest and oft-cited reviews, covering the period from 1980 to the early 2000s. More recent reviews include Neumerski (2012), Wenner and Campbell (2016), Gumus et al. (2018), Nguyen et al. (2020), and Schott et al. (2020). Pan et al. (2023) offer the most recent and comprehensive bibliographic review of the teacher leadership literature between 1964 and 2021, which gives a good sense of its extension in time (great increase since the 2000s), place (predominantly Western, though Asian studies are on the rise), and language (mostly English), as well as some of the key journals, authors, and documents in terms of impact and citations. Most reviews note that teacher leadership itself is defined in a variety of ways, there not being much consensus about its precise meaning or the way in which it “works” (Nguyen et al., 2020; Schott et al., 2020). The most popular models appear to be distributed leadership, instructional leadership, teacher leadership, and transformative leadership (Gumus et al., 2018). There is some research suggesting that leadership has an influence on the achievement of students (e.g., Leithwood et al., 2010), as well as the teacher leaders themselves and their schools (Nguyen et al., 2020), but it seems that, at this stage, the overall evidence base is somewhat limited. Schott et al. (2020), for example, conclude that our current knowledge in the area “is primarily based on qualitative studies, sometimes with unclear definitions, focusing overly on positive effects ..., and altogether showing high variance in research quality” (p. 13).

The mention of “focusing overly on positive effects” as a critique of the research on teacher leadership should, I imagine, give pause. How could leadership possibly have *negative* effects? Leadership is one of those words that wins almost universal approval, at least in the Western context, just as cruelty elicits condemnation. But whereas cruelty rightly elicits condemnation, *should* leadership automatically garner approval? There are, after all, *bad* leaders, and they are, unfortunately, far from being rare; some may even argue that they are in more plentiful supply than good leaders. There is in fact a small literature on this theme (e.g., Örténblad, 2021), which I now turn to as a segue into my theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework

Once one begins to think about the prevalence of bad leaders, one is astonished by the relative lack of attention to this phenomenon in the practice and theory of teacher leadership (Schott et al., 2020). But why are there so many bad leaders? Some scholars suggest that, given the position in which leaders find themselves, they are likely to receive praise (and even flattery), which can over time inflate their egos (Flanigan, 2021). Excessive attention to their own accomplishments, which perhaps helped install them as leaders in the first place, can also boost the ego. Little and Bendell (2021) argue that mainstream discourse about leadership, some of which they call “leader-pulp”,

invites people to think of themselves as special as they seek and gain more authority in organizations and societies, and even more special once they begin to be praised for their leadership. The impact of this concept of leadership on individuals who consider themselves aspiring or actual leaders is important to consider. It could invite and reward narcissistic self-regard ... (p. 375)

Receiving a constant stream of praise, thinking of oneself as special, and focusing on one's own accomplishments can lead to overconfidence and excessive pride, hubris, and even narcissism (Boak, 2021). These processes, it is suggested, provide fertile ground for the emergence of "toxic leaders" (Abdulai, 2021), a term that brings many ready examples to mind.

A more sophisticated moral psychology would bring these concerns about leadership into clearer focus. To this end, I turn to Iris Murdoch (1971), whose work is becoming increasingly recognized for its insight by educators (e.g., Bakhurst, 2018; Nakazawa, 2018; Laverty, 2019; Zrudlo, 2023). A full exploration of Murdoch's moral psychology is beyond the scope of this article (see Diamond, 2022 for an accessible overview); I will therefore only draw out a few important elements for my current purposes.

Key to Murdoch's moral psychology is a nuanced and arguably more realistic view of the self than that promoted in some branches of psychology. She describes in some detail the subtle workings of what she calls our "fat relentless ego" (1971, p. 51) and emphasizes the importance of understanding the workings of this ego and identifying possible techniques for silencing, combatting, or defeating it. Our ego, when unchecked, can distort the power of our imagination, generating fantasies that veil us from reality. Of course, we are not *only* fat egos: there is the "part of us that is most worthy" (p. 60), in which love is inspired by worthy objects of attention.

Attention is another of Murdoch's key terms. Murdoch identifies our "capacity to love, that is to see," (p. 65) with our freedom from the fantasies generated by the selfish side of our nature. She continues:

The freedom which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy, that is the realism of compassion. What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called 'will' or 'willing' belongs to this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love. (p. 65)

Learning to pay attention to nature, to good art, to objects of study, and to the realities of the human beings around us is essential for moral development because this attention counters the inertia generated by our egos, leading us out of ourselves and towards reality. The moral agent, in her estimation, learns to look at particular others with a "just and loving gaze" (p. 33).

She also argues that “anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue” (p. 82). The quality of our consciousness is therefore vital, and Murdoch strives to meticulously explore this dimension of our psychology in her work. She is interested in how we can improve the quality of our consciousness, and links this with virtue, especially the virtue of humility. “Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, ... like having an inaudible voice,” she explains; rather, “it is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues” (p. 93).

It should already be clear how Murdoch’s moral psychology accommodates the prevalent phenomenon of bad leaders. The inflated ego of these individuals consistently obscures reality from their view, including those in their care. The true needs of those around them flee their consciousness. They become unable to direct a just and loving gaze towards others. Humility fades into the background and may even be regarded with contempt. Their pride makes it difficult for them to learn from others or even from established bodies of knowledge.

There is one more idea I want to bring into view, one which Murdoch never mentioned explicitly, but which is germane to her thought: the double hermeneutic effect. Giddens (1987) was the first to elaborate the idea, although many have since taken it up (e.g., Blakely, 2020; Taylor, 2016). The effect names the peculiar phenomenon, unique to human beings, where our self-understanding and actions are influenced by the very words we employ to understand ourselves and our activities. For example, if I tell a child that she is “introverted”, I am doing more than simply describing her, especially if I occupy some position of influence (say, her teacher). She may begin to *think* of herself as introverted, to *see* herself as introverted, and this will in turn change her behaviour; or perhaps she will rebel against this description and will deliberately act so as not to be perceived as introverted. Either way, I have altered her self-understanding. A young person may not even need to be told they are introverted; she may simply read about this “kind of person” (Zrudlo, 2021) online and resonate with the description, taking it on, or again, rejecting it decisively and moving in what she sees as the opposite direction.

What I want to suggest is that calling teachers “leaders” or encouraging them to exercise leadership—the very words leader and leadership—may influence them in subtle, sometimes unpredictable ways. By promoting teacher leadership, we are not merely recommending a set of additional practices in which teachers should engage; we are recommending they take on an *identity*, one which admits of a variety of interpretations. The results are not always predictable, particularly when the conception of leadership is not well-defined, as is the case in the research on teacher leadership. It is the ambiguity generated by this variety of interpretations that opens the doors to certain ethical and educational dangers, which I explore below.

The dark side of teacher leadership

At the outset here I should hasten to emphasize that I do not mean to suggest that all or even most teacher leaders are “toxic leaders”; far from it, most are probably doing good work. But the lack of

attention to the dark side of leadership, both in teacher education and professional development as well as the scholarship on teacher leadership, creates ethical and educational ambiguities that may generate significant risks—for teachers themselves, but also for their students and the entire educational system. The subsections below explore the ethical and educational ambiguities of teacher leadership, as well as the related theme of social change.

Ethical ambiguities

Although the concept of teacher leadership can be interpreted in a variety of ways, a range of plausible interpretations would see the teacher leader at the centre of things—whether it's the classroom, a workshop for other teachers, or a school-wide reform process. Deliberately and (self-)consciously placing oneself at the centre of things is generally a dangerous move, ethically, since virtue involves a turning away from the self, a silencing of our fat relentless ego. Teachers who are encouraged to assist their peers will of course naturally end up being at the heart of various processes of reform at a given school, but *seeking* to be at the centre of things *as a leader* can easily slide into problems.

For example, one might become used to being consulted on all kinds of school improvement projects under way at one's institution. If at some point one is not included, for some legitimate reason, one might still become offended, having become used to being at the centre of things and developed a sense of entitlement in this regard. "I'm a teacher leader after all," one might think, "they ought to have consulted me!" Promising improvement efforts should, rather, be a source of joy to a teacher, regardless of whether he or she is directly involved.

The issue here is partly one of attention. A good teacher attends primarily to their students, students' accomplishments and challenges in class, the needs of colleagues, etc. But when one seeks, or places oneself at, the centre of attention, one inevitably begins attending much more to oneself. The direction of our attention, as Murdoch explains, is vital to our moral lives. Focusing our attention on ourselves is likely to distract us from our responsibilities as teachers, including paying close attention to the needs of our students. Even genuine progress in virtue can be compromised by the direction of our attention. No one illustrates this better than C. S. Lewis (1942) in *The Screwtape Letters*. The novel is a series of letters containing advice from a senior devil to his nephew, who is striving to corrupt a man (his "patient"):

Your patient has become humble; have you drawn his attention to the fact? All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is especially true of humility. Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, 'By jove! I'm being humble', and almost immediately pride—pride at his own humility—will appear. If he awakes to the danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, make him proud of this attempt—and so on, through as many stages as you please. (p. 69)

Pride poisons the quality of our consciousness. Proud of my own accomplishments, I may fail to see or appreciate the accomplishments of others. I may even succumb to jealousy or envy, neither of which make it easy to collaborate with colleagues. That the discourse on teacher leadership does not explore these themes is concerning.

I want to address two potential objections here. First, there are of course conceptions of leadership that are more aware of the dark side of leadership and try to position the leader differently. One of the most well-known is probably the slightly paradoxical term “servant leadership” (Greenleaf, 1977). But, with a few exceptions (e.g., Stewart, 2012), the servant conception of leadership is not particularly prominent in the discourse on teacher leadership. Gumus et al (2018), in a review of the different models of leadership prevalent in the literature, include servant leadership at the very bottom of a list of fourteen models, ranked by the frequency with which they were mentioned in the hundreds of papers included in the review (Table 4, p. 37). In any case, if one suggested that the best leaders are the ones who do not think of themselves as leaders, or at least who do not emphasize this in their minds, I would hasten to agree; in fact, this only proves my point: that the very terms “leader” and “leadership” introduce ambiguities that can open the door to certain ethical risks.

Second, one may think that I am suggesting that teachers should be entirely altruistic and never think of their own needs or development. Chris Higgins (2011) has taken a stand against the framing of teaching as a purely altruistic profession, arguing that it does not allow teachers to envision how their careers contribute to their own flourishing and well-being. I agree with Higgins that the development of teachers themselves—morally, intellectually, etc.—is vital, and that this should be kept in view when conceiving of the profession. Teachers should certainly be encouraged, and supported materially, to continue developing their abilities and capacities in a variety of ways. But I am sure Higgins would agree that if their primary object of attention became their own professional development, their students relegated to an afterthought, something will have gone wrong. What is more, paying attention to others, as Murdoch would insist, *is* morally beneficial for oneself. Learning to pay close attention to particular individuals leads to moral progress, and thus contributes directly to the ongoing ethical development of the teacher. Focusing on the benefits one gets from the process, especially while I am with the students I purport to be teaching, is a misdirection of attention.

Educational ambiguities

In addition to ethical concerns, there are educational ambiguities associated with the promotion of teacher leadership. Focus on the self and concentrating attention on oneself can also make it difficult for the teacher leader to *learn*. While the work of teachers involves imparting knowledge to students, it is also necessary for them to be in a constant mode of learning. They need to learn from their students and from the families of their students; to deepen over time their understanding of the subject(s) they teach; to glean insights from the work of their more experienced colleagues; to come to a more profound appreciation for the dynamics of classroom practice; and so on. The idea of “being a leader”, especially under certain interpretations, does not necessarily position a teacher

for effective learning, which requires certain qualities and attitudes on the part of the learner—the most important being humility.

Murdoch (1971) provides an insightful description of the dynamics of learning, using the example of learning the Russian language:

If I am learning, for instance, Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal. The honesty and humility required of the student—not to pretend to know what one does not know—is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory. (p. 87)

Learning often involves “confronting ... an authoritative structure which commands my respect”. For teachers, an example of this “authoritative structure” might be, for example, the subject they teach or the family situation of a student. These objects of learning need to be approached with respect if one is to apprehend them faithfully, and not merely project one’s own fantasies upon them. Leaders, for the most part, might be thought to be “authoritative structures” themselves, or might take themselves as such, which is hardly conducive to learning. Learning requires honesty, while leaders often find themselves in situations in which it is easier and looks better to pretend to know when in fact one does not know. Learning requires humility, which is not a quality that comes naturally to someone who is highly conscious of “being a leader”.

What comes out in Murdoch’s description, and in other writings on the posture of one who is seeking to learn (e.g., Bakhurst, 2011), is that a certain degree of ready receptivity is required. Ready receptivity may be a quality associated with some forms of leadership, but certainly not the most common models. Being full of oneself and one’s own ideas leaves no room for new ideas, insights, and knowledge. Our fat relentless ego can take up a lot of room, making it difficult for learning to occur; the “self” acts as a kind of epistemic veil, preventing us sometimes from even seeing that there is something new to be learned. Self-absorption is, in a sense, the most widespread and natural form of prejudice.

Social change

In addition to ethical and educational ambiguities, a range of conceptions of teacher leadership bring with them a questionable approach to social change. This is especially the case with the organizations that make up the growing Teach For All (TFAll) network, which emphasize the concept of leadership a great deal (Straubhaar, 2020). Scholars have noted that

TFAll (and its predecessor and sister programme Teach For America) combines business language and corporate culture with progressive social ideals (like social justice and civil rights) to promote a corporate-friendly vision of how to end social inequality: through the fostering of future generations of business-minded leaders ... (Straubhaar, 2020, pp. 245-246).

This somewhat controversial conception of leadership (Brooks, 2021, pp. 49-50) may not be shared by the majority of those promoting teacher leadership, but the TFAll network is sufficiently large that it influences the mainstream discourse. Straubhaar (2020) found that TFAll primarily conceptualized leadership as “being a change agent through urgency, grit and persistence” (p. 250) and that there is a direct connection between this conception of leadership and their “corporate-friendly” conception of social change, which can only be brought about by such change agents. The idea is that students and teachers involved in the kind of education promoted by the TFAll organizations will become leaders who can generate innovative solutions to the world’s problems, pushing against them urgently and persistently.

Notwithstanding the genuine value of *some* of the attributes TFAll hopes to develop in its leaders, it is far from clear that quickly multiplying the number of such leaders globally is a solid path to social change. Some of the world’s current problems have arguably been caused by the kind of leader mindset promoted by the TFAll network. Anand Giridharadas (2018) lays out some of the chief problems with the mindset and approach of many business-led efforts for social change in his trenchant book, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*. Giridharadas argues that we cannot “business-innovate” our way out of some of the world’s most pressing problems, which require genuine community and democratic participation, as opposed to technical solutions designed by those far removed from the material realities of the mass of people who find themselves in increasing poverty. Solving these problems requires, certainly, individuals who can inspire others, etc., but these individuals need a host of other attributes—humility being one of the most important, a quality that one rarely sees mentioned in this context.

Some critics of leadership have gone further, suggesting that the concept itself is closely associated with systems of domination—such as patriarchy—that continue to plague society (Liu, 2020). This suggestion bears considering, especially in relation to certain contexts. Are there settings that are *systemically* corrupted by forms of domination that distort the way leadership is perceived? This certainly seems to be the case in some instances of corporate culture, in which bad leadership may even be *rewarded*. Boak (2021) notes that the dark personality traits associated with bad leaders (narcissism, pride, etc.) may not necessarily threaten one’s career prospects as a leader. In fact, in some organizations, these traits may even assist one to advance up the ladder. Fatfouta (2019) suggests that narcissists “come across as assertive, competent, and likeable at short-term acquaintance” (p. 4). Narcissism seems to relate “positively to leader emergence” but “overall it does not relate positively to leader effectiveness” (Den Hartog et al., 2020, p. 264). To be strident and assertive, to be ruthless and calculating, etc., may help one, at least in some contexts, “succeed”. These are signs of a corrupt culture, which in turn corrupt our conception of a good leader.

Now, I am sure that most schools do not resemble the worst of corporate America. Teacher leaders operate in a much less systemically corrupted setting. However, this brief discussion of corporate culture should help us see that leadership always takes shape in a context. It is thus important to keep in mind the shifting culture in a given school or set of schools, and how discussions of teacher leadership or teacher leaders interact with that culture. What kind of behaviour on the part of leaders is incentivized or rewarded? Does this behaviour align with the kind of social change we want to see in schools? In society at large? And it is important to remember that, regardless of the context, “saints are not likely to elbow their way to the front of the leadership queue” (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 2). Ambitions for leadership are generally suspect. The best “leaders” may in fact be those who never seek leadership.

Conclusion

To reiterate, the basic rationale behind the promotion of teacher leadership in schools is of course sound: teachers are the key agents of any educational reform and as such need to be involved in these efforts in various ways. There is also a need within each school or district for some kind of system in which more experienced and capable teachers can help those who are earlier in their careers or struggling in various ways. The ethical and educational risks I have outlined do not contradict these statements. The problem lies with how we may be encouraging teachers to think of themselves, which, in light of a more sophisticated moral psychology, risks being counterproductive or even dangerous, ethically and educationally. Some scholars within the field seem to be aware of this issue when they, for example, call for de-emphasizing the idea of training “teacher leaders” in favour of talking about teacher leadership generally (e.g., Lovett, 2018). Raising capacity without boosting the ego is a formidable task, and one that will require a great deal more thought and research to clarify.

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