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The role of teachers in educational reform: A 20-year perspective

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Abstract
Teachers' professional lives and their role in change efforts have always been central to the Journal of Educational Change. Articles have addressed teachers' motivation for and commitment to reform, their belief systems, their professionalism, their networks, and their professional development, among other topics. Unequivocally, teachers are central to educational change. In this article, I will reflect upon my own work over the past 20 + years as a lens through which to examine this topic, and drawing out implications for research, policy, and practice. The common threads across this work include issues of agency, power, and social justice that have influenced the role of teachers in various waves of reform. I discuss teacher agency in reforms ranging from bottom-up change efforts to externally developed comprehensive school reform models and those that rely on teacher collaboration and participation as research partners.

Keywords Teachers · Educational change · Educational policy · Agency

I was fortunate to join the faculty at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) in 2000, just as the *Journal of Educational Change (JEC)* was founded. I was a new assistant professor and Andy Hargreaves was a mid-career scholar who was making important moves in building the field of educational change. The *Journal of Educational* Change was one such effort by Andy. To be sure, the field of educational change had a strong base at OISE/UT at the time, with Michael Fullan as Dean and notable scholars including Ken Leithwood, Lorna Earl, Stephen Anderson, and Nina Bascia, among others. The university was a clearly hot bed of educational change research. OISE/UT was also very international, attracting visiting scholars and students from across the globe. For all these reasons, it is fitting that it was the birthplace of the journal.

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As explained in a review of the *JEC's* content and focus over 15 years, the journal has covered a wide variety of issues related to K-12 educational change, reflecting important topics and questions in the field such how to scale up reforms, how local context shapes school change efforts, and the implications of evidence-informed improvement strategies (Garcia-Huidobro et al. 2017). Across the years and waves of reforms, teachers' professional lives and their role in change efforts have also always been central to the journal. Articles in the journal have addressed teachers' motivation for and commitment to reform, their belief systems, their professionalism, their networks, and their professional development, among other topics (Garcia-Huidobro et al. 2017). Unequivocally, teachers are central to educational change. In this article, I will reflect upon my own work over the past 20+years, some of which has been published in *JEC*, as a lens through which to examine this topic, and drawing out implications for research, policy, and practice. The common threads across this work include issues of agency, power, and social justice that have influenced the role of teachers in various waves of reform. I discuss teacher agency in reforms ranging from bottom-up change efforts to externally developed comprehensive school reform models and those that rely on teacher collaboration and participation as research partners.

Teacher agency, gender, and power

My early work in the mid-1990s focused on teacher agency, an a critical issue especially at that time when decentralization was seen as a vehicle for teacher professionalism and educational improvement at the local level. While there were indeed grass roots and policy efforts that capitalized on efforts of teachers, it was also clear that teachers were not unbridled agents. Teacher agency was and is deeply intertwined with the structures and cultures of which it is a part, both within the school and beyond it (Biesta et al. 2015; Bridwell-Mitchell 2015; Datnow et al. 2002). Moreover, some reform policies at the time emphasized teacher professionalism and empowerment but involved false promises or exploited teachers' labor (Dillabough 1999).

The deep connection between micro and macro levels of change came into full view in a restructuring school I studied with a research team led by Jeannie Oakes and Amy Stuart Wells in the 1990s. This high school was one of ten schools in a study of detracking in racially mixed schools (Oakes and Wells 1996). At this school, reform efforts were led by a forward thinking group of teachers called the Idea Team. This team involved a group of teachers, mostly women but not all, who had the strong support of school leadership. These teachers had a social justice agenda. They were seeking to restructure the school to allow access to high quality, rigorous instruction for all students, including the largely low-income Latinx population that had historically been underserved. As the team struggled to redefine "school," they met with a range of political challenges, revealing the often understudied micropolitics of school change (Ball 1987). A group of teachers, a predominantly male group known as "the Good Old Boys" (who were comfortable with this name themselves), stood to lose status in the course of the reform. They quickly learned that they

couldn't fight the school restructuring effort on educational grounds, as it was based on sound planning and research-based practices, so they resorted to gender politics. Shifting the discourse of reform to the terrain of gender helped these teachers to preserve the status quo (Datnow 1997). Indeed, teacher agency has to be considered in terms of the "gendered positioning of teachers and the role of the structured inequality plays in constraining women teachers' agency in practice" (Dillabough 1999, p. 390).

Although gender politics were central to the story of reform at this school and another I studied, there were lessons about teachers and change that went well beyond gender. First, this case reinforced the fact that the school culture is an ideologically contested terrain. Even now, years later, when we think about shifting cultures in schools, we often focus on the values that are held in common, without attending to the conflicting views that are present in every school. Second, we learn from this case about how systems of hierarchical social relations influence life in schools. To be sure, gender is a defining feature in teachers' professional lives, as we often hear about teaching as a gendered profession (Apple 1986; Smulyan 2006). We have less information about how it influences reform in schools and districts [for exceptions see Ball (1987), Burns (2019), Paechter (2003)]. Yet gender, power, and knowledge are inextricably connected and influence teachers' reactions to reform and the contestation of meaning within schools (Paechter 2003). Gender is highly salient in teachers' professional lives, but there are other intersecting identities as well. Teachers experience school change from different social locations (e.g., racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, career stages, disability status, ideological commitments), and their positionality impacts their role in the politics of school reform. Clearly some locations enjoy a more privileged status than others, and unequal relations of power between teachers influence their interactions in reform.

The role of teachers in comprehensive school reform

Different waves of reform offer new lenses on the issues of power and agency in teachers' professional lives. As the policy climate in education shifted away from grass-roots educational change towards change initiated at other levels of the system, teachers' roles in reform shifted as well. As my worked moved into this arena, my interests in the process of change and the concerns of teachers and underserved students remained central. During the mid-late 90s and well into the first decade of the 2000s, *comprehensive school reform* became a major focus in the US and to some extent elsewhere, including England. Thousands of schools and districts adopted comprehensive school reform models or engaged assistance from "design teams" based in universities, non-profits, and other organizations. These were whole-school models for change, designed to affect many elements of a school's functioning (Datnow and Stringfield 2000). The growth of these models in the US was bolstered by federal legislation providing funding for schools to adopt them. Research on the positive effects of some of these reform models led educators and policymakers to dive into comprehensive school reform with both feet, investing significant resources in implementation (Borman et al. 2003; Cohen et al. 2013). Along

with Sam Stringfield and a team of researchers, I had the opportunity to study many facets of comprehensive school reform.

Even now, examining the role of teachers in comprehensive school reform (CSR) is important for a number of reasons. First, the reform models, even if they were loosely structured, originated outside the school so efforts were mostly not teacher-led. Often, the opportunity to adopt a model was brought to teachers by district and/or school administrators, often because schools were deemed underperforming. What unfolded after that was a rather interesting story of power and politics, but in a different way than I had documented before. A hierarchical approach was often evident in reform adoption processes. For example, in two districts that promoted CSR, principals were required to conduct a vote among teachers to show a sufficient level of "teacher buy-in." In spite of the good intentions of district administrators to include teacher voices in decision making, the way the process unfolded meant that teachers often felt coerced. As one principal said, "the handwriting was on the wall," meaning that it was clear that district leadership wanted every school to adopt a reform (Datnow 2000, p. 361). This led some schools to adopt reforms they weren't entirely committed to or lacked knowledge about. Some educators also adopted reforms so that they could show participation to district leaders but didn't plan on changing a great deal. In these cases, teachers voted for reforms that appeared the least intrusive. In several cases, a principal championed a particular reform model, and teachers were asked to vote several times until the principal got their way. Teachers, therefore, often felt relatively powerless in the reform adoption process. Predictably, in all of these cases, the fact that teachers were not fully engaged with the idea of reform at the outset negatively affected implementation.

An in-depth look at how teachers responded to comprehensive school reform once implementation was underway in their schools is revealing of some important dynamics with respect to school change. One set of schools we studied were implementing Success for All (SFA), a research-based, whole-school reform model aimed at improving students' skills in reading (Slavin et al. 1996). Compared to some other models, SFA is highly specified and provides comprehensive implementation guidelines. Teachers are expected to closely follow lesson plans in order to ensure implementation fidelity. We found that the majority of teachers in the schools we studied saw value in the consistent schoolwide approach to teaching reading and believed it was beneficial for their students. However, no matter how much these teachers appreciated the program, they argued it constrained their autonomy and creativity and found that adaptations were necessary to meet the needs of their students. This is perhaps not surprising as teachers often implement reforms in ways that fit with their "pedagogical pasts" (Tyack and Cuban 1995) or in ways that make sense in their particular contexts (Coburn 2001; Spillane et al. 2002). Strong support from leaders and trainers is often not enough to guarantee "fidelity" of implementation to a model. Some teachers also had reservations about SFA simply because it was developed by an external group even though their prior local approaches had not proven effective. In the end, this study led us to argue that creating ownership for reform requires some level of local adaptation (Datnow and Castellano 2000). As Berman and McLaughlin (1977) pointed out in reference to an earlier wave of reforms, mutual adaptation is not only inevitable, it is desirable.

Studying the comprehensive school reform movement also yielded important lessons for the field about the role of teachers in the scale up process. Across the US, schools were implementing reform designs that had been successful in one or numerous places, and they had now been transported to other locations with different students, staff, communities, and school and system features. While some models had long track records in a range of schools, others had never been used in schools serving English learners or had been used in suburban schools but not urban schools. This raised social justice concerns for teachers who had to find ways to make the reform models fit the needs of their students. The importance of context led us to bring together data from several studies to develop a grounded theory for understanding reform implementation (Datnow et al. 2002). We argued that understanding educational reform as *a co-constructed process* and as a dynamic relationship between structure, culture, and agency was helpful in making sense of the complex complexities of school improvement. We critiqued the technical-rational model of school reform in which the causal arrow of change moves only in one direction, from the statehouse to the schoolhouse, so to speak. With respect to teachers, we argued that not only are teachers active agents in reform, but their actions influence actions and interactions at the school, district, and societal levels. In other words, the arrow of change can move in an upward direction, rather than only in a downward direction. With respect to comprehensive school reform models, we found examples of both the actions of design teams influencing teachers actions, but also the bottom-up actions by teachers influenced design teams and their models. The uptake of teachers' collective feedback—or in some cases, pushback—reinforced that teacher agency had an important place in these externally developed change designs. The interactions of educators and policymakers at other levels was also consequential, and system integration between the district, state, and school level strongly influenced reform sustainability (Datnow and Stringfield 2000).

The role of teachers and teacher collaboration in data use efforts

By the early- to mid-2000s, the district, or system level, was being seen as an increasingly important player in educational reform. This coincided with heightened attention to accountability with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in the US in 2002. Data-driven decision making and evidence use more generally became priorities of policymakers across the globe. Many school systems in the US invested in data management systems, adopted benchmark assessment systems, and developed protocols to guide educators in the examination of data. The belief guiding these efforts was that timely access to relevant data would help teachers customize their instruction to meet students' needs. For about a decade, Vicki Park and I and numerous other colleagues examined data use efforts in US schools. In the first phase of work, we focused on the structures and cultures at the school level that enabled teachers to engage in data-informed decision making (e.g. Wohlstetter et al. 2008; Datnow and Park 2014). In the second phase of this work, we delved deeply into the role of teachers, examining efforts to build teachers' capacity for data use

(Datnow and Hubbard 2016) and how data were actually used to inform instruction (Datnow et al. 2012; Park and Datnow 2017).

The data use movement has yielded several important lessons for thinking about the role of teachers in school change. First, there is the issues of motivation. Many districts promoted a culture of evidence use, attempting to convince teachers that using data to inform instruction would make them more effective teachers. We studied districts that used medical analogies to convince teachers of the importance of basing decisions on evidence and to help them make sense of this reform within their classroom contexts. As one district administrator noted, "Just like for doctors, lab reports are not a bad thing." They attempted to depersonalize the process of data use in order to build teachers' trust and assuage concerns. Administrators reinforced the need to act upon data, rather than simply just gather it. A leader likened this to taking one's blood pressure, arguing that you can take your blood pressure daily, but if you don't do anything to address it, then you might as well stop taking the reading (Datnow and Park 2014). This shift to a culture of evidence informed education was convincing for many teachers who came to see the value in using evidence on their students' learning. As one teacher reflecting on her students' learning told us, "How are you going to get better if you don't know how you did?"

At the same time, our own work and that of others has documented many instances of teachers who have not been motivated to use data, were skeptical about data use, or simply felt underprepared to engage in this kind of work (Gummer and Mandinach 2015; Means et al. 2011; Marsh 2012). Data use simply did not make sense to them. It is clear that most reform efforts aimed at data use have not adequately considered the professional development needs of teachers. Teachers often feel unsure about how to analyze and make sense of data, and most importantly, they are seldom provided with support in how to adjust instruction on the basis of data. Thus, in some schools, data use is a superficial activity that does not lead to meaningful instructional improvements (Park et al. 2012). In these schools, data use is framed as an a bureaucratic task or an overly linear model instructional improvement in which teachers diagnose learning needs and apply remedies accordingly. A deeper look into data informed instruction suggests that the process is quite different from this. On a daily basis, teachers consult a wide variety of sources of information on student learning, including their own professional wisdom, and make a range of instructional decisions that take this information into account. Also, as with other reforms, teachers' instructional decisions on the basis of data are strongly influenced by the context of their work.

The teacher team is a particularly important context for data use, as teacher collaboration has been the key capacity building lever for this reform effort (Farley-Ripple and Buttram 2015). Many schools and districts have organized teachers into collaborative groups for the purpose of engaging in data-informed decision making. In other cases, they have taken advantage of existing collaborative structures, including early release days for teacher planning or professional learning, and layered data use on to the agenda. In the US, groups of teachers tend to meet in grade level teams in elementary and in course-alike or departmental teams in secondary schools. Important work has been done examining norms, routines, and structures shaping teachers' data use conversations (e.g., Horn and Little 2010; Young 2006).

Our own research in this area addressed these issues and also focused on the role of leadership in supporting or constraining the work of teacher teams. Whereas some teams viewed leadership-driven protocols for examining data in meetings as a relief, others viewed them as an imposition on their autonomy or as “contrived collegiality” (Datnow 2011; Hargreaves 1994). While school leaders often try in earnest to foster a culture of evidence use, a careful balance is required so that collaboration time is not overly structured, stifling vibrant teams within a school (Lockton 2019).

So why should teachers collaborate to examine evidence of student learning? What’s in it for them and for their students? How do teachers exercise agency in this process? For many teachers in schools dominated by an accountability mindset, data use involves going through the motions of examining data, looking at their watches wondering when the meeting will be done, or worse yet, feeling shamed and blamed for their students’ results (Schildkamp and Poortman 2015). Clearly, there has to be a better way. In our recent book, we argue that professional collaboration is most productive when it is guided by a broader purpose (Datnow and Park 2019). Data use in and of itself is rarely a motivating frame for teachers. I have yet to meet a teacher who was inspired to enter the profession because they had a passion for data use. But I have met many teachers who strive to provide an equitable and excellent education to their students. We have found that collaborating around this common purpose can compel teachers towards professional collaboration. In terms of agency, professional collaboration can help buffer teachers through policy changes and can be a site for collective resiliency or resistance.

Four mindsets are needed for thoughtful collaborative practice aimed at equity and excellence (Datnow and Park 2019). First, teachers must truly believe that all students are capable, and this needs to be reflected in their talk about students and in their classroom practices. Shaped by accountability systems and policies that categorize students in myriad ways, talk about students as “high” or “gifted” or conversely “low” or “slow” is common in schools. Unwittingly, this type of teacher talk is influenced by various biases, shapes expectations of students, and is reflected in the culture of the school. To have a mindset that all students can learn means questioning this kind of talk and exploring how school organization, school reform policies, and teaching practices influence diverse students’ opportunity to learn. Teachers also need to plan for student growth by identifying student strengths, a second important mindset. Opportunities for dialogue, with purposeful facilitation around data, can help teachers move away from deficit framing of students and towards discussions of student growth. Third, the needs of all students must be considered, not just a select group, as if often the case in data use efforts that use a triage approach (Booher-Jennings 2005). Multiple forms of information about students’ learning must be considered as well. Finally, professional collaboration must be guided by a mindset of learning, as teacher learning is a vehicle by which student learning occurs. If teachers don’t have regular opportunities to engage in deep learning, how can we expect them to sustain deep learning for their students? Teachers need the freedom to take risks, learn from mistakes, and be supported in engaging in experimentation and exploration (Datnow and Park 2019).

What we call professional collaboration with purpose is characterized by broad thinking about student learning, the use of a wide rather than narrow range of data,

and coherence by not conformity in instructional planning. Professional collaboration also embodies genuine respect for teachers as professionals and recognizes that collaborative spaces can support teachers in navigating through shifting policies and be a source of emotional support and growth. This emotional piece is incredibly important, and yet often ignored in studies of teachers and reform (Hargreaves 2005; Saunders 2013; Zeymblas and Barker 2007). Collaboration can be a joyful setting in which teachers gain inspiration for improving practice, have meaningful discussions, and celebrate successes in student learning. But collaboration can also be emotionally draining, as teachers try to keep the peace among "angry birds" or struggle to work with a negative colleague. All teachers deserve to have collaboration experiences that are fulfilling and make good use of their precious time. Leaders play an important role in supporting this supporting teacher empowerment and learning within the context of collaboration (Datnow and Park 2019). We often see the opposite in underperforming schools, where teachers can feel demoralized as they struggle to learn in the context of multiple top-down, often conflicting, initiatives, a parade of coaches who are dispatched to their schools, and narrow measures of accountability. How do we ensure that research knowledge and practical wisdom are brought to bear so that far fewer teachers have experiences like this?

Bolstering teacher agency through research-practice partnerships

Our field, with the *JEC* as a key contributor, has amassed a significant knowledge base about the role of teachers in educational change. As we examine the shifts in teachers' roles in reform over time—from agents of change in grass-roots efforts to recipients of top-down mandates to collaborators in research—several things become clear. We know that genuinely promoting teacher empowerment and drawing on teachers' wisdom and collaborative professionalism are important to the success of reform efforts. At the same time, there are challenges due to power dynamics within and outside schools, the hierarchical arrangements by which many reforms arrive in schools, and the lack of alignment between reforms, policies, and the day-to-day realities of teachers.

An ongoing issue is how to ensure that this knowledge makes its way to into school improvement efforts so that teacher agency can be bolstered *for real.* Although there are myriad ways in which this can occur, one particularly promising avenue is research-practice partnerships (Cobb et al. 2013; Penuel and Gallagher 2017). In one such project I am involved in, a significant number of teachers who felt demoralized teaching in underperforming schools have shifted from being skeptical of reform to actively engaging in opportunities to bolster their math pedagogical content knowledge, co-teaching with the support of a coach, and seeking out each other for informal as well as formal collaboration opportunities (Lockton et al. 2019). If the system can capitalize on these teachers' energy and growing professional expertise, there is promise for deep learning for teachers and the students they serve.

In another research-practice partnership between an interdisciplinary team at my university and a local school district, we are studying children's learning and

development in a comprehensive way and involving teachers as key partners. In monthly *Teacher Researcher Collaborative* meetings, over a dozen educators join with us to shape the ongoing direction of the project, collaboratively interpret research data, and co-plan pedagogical strategies. Team members work together in an iterative process of reflecting and refining practice on the basis of research. This project began with us listening to teachers about pressing questions and problems of practice. For example, teachers expressed concerns about how to best meet the needs of their wide range of students, including those who may be experiencing immigration-related trauma. They are eager to reform the early years of primary education so that achievement gaps are no longer evident (Datnow and-Doyle 2019). We are designing our project accordingly. Moreover, we intentionally linked multiple stakeholders who do not routinely collaborate. As the interest in research-practice partnerships grows among researchers in our field, we will be able to learn important lessons about productive ways to partner with teachers.

As it enters its third decade, the *Journal of Educational Change* continues to be an essential venue for articles on the intersection of teaching and educational change (among other topics of course). Under Dennis Shirley's thoughtful leadership at Boston College, the journal has explored new directions and also continued to embrace research that provides a critical look at the shifting global and local policies and practices that shape educational change, often centering the implications for teachers.

With respect to teachers, there are some issues that are important for our field to address going forward. We desperately need more cross national studies of how reform initiatives shape teachers' professional lives. Such studies will ideally provide a close look at teachers' work on the ground, yielding information about how their contexts and experiences with change efforts influence their daily interactions with each other and with students in schools. For example, time—an essential organizing feature in teachers' professional lives—looks very different for teachers across the globe and significantly impacts reform efforts.

We also need studies that delve into the more difficult aspects of change—the micropolitics, the tensions, and the interpersonal, but very real, dynamics that shape reform experiences for teachers. This is particularly important in reforms with a social justice agenda, where resistance needs to be understood in complex ways (Hynds 2010). There is also a critical need for research that helps us understand how teachers promote and successful navigate the barriers to equity-oriented change efforts in schools. Six years ago I argued that we need more dialogue between educational change researchers and researchers interested in social justice (Datnow 2013). Now I believe we need more educational change researchers who have an social justice agenda themselves. Social justice involves all aspects of education—from leadership and policy to teaching and learning—and is *the work* of educational change (Ryan and Rottmann 2007; Santamaria 2014). The agency of teachers both within reform efforts and as active partners in research is essential in this endeavor.

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