Community, Critical Reflection and Action:
Developing Agency in Teacher Leaders for Social Justice

Cathryn Smith
Doctoral Candidate

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In this paper I present material from my doctoral research completed during 2013, which focused on developing the ability of teacher leaders to lead for social justice in their schools and communities. I have titled the paper: “Community, Critical Reflection and Action: Developing Agency in Teacher Leaders for Social Justice.” Through this research I aimed to answer the question: “How can I as an educational leader most effectively influence change to improve educational outcomes for those students who are the least privileged in society?” My vision was to create a leadership development program which would enhance the ability of teacher leaders to lead for social justice from within schools.

The literature I explored to determine what was already known in the field focused on social justice, teacher leadership and leadership development. This research study is situated at the intersection of these three topics and was designed to address what I perceived to be gaps in the research including: how peer networks can support social justice educators, how teachers develop critical consciousness, what is the influence of leadership theory on teacher leaders’ practice, what facilitation skills are most effective for social justice, and finally what contributes to the agency of teacher leaders?

To address these gaps and solve the research dilemma I had identified, I posed four research questions:

1. What are the knowledge, skills and dispositions that empower teacher leaders to be critical change agents in schools?

2. In what ways do the specific elements of a leadership development program assist teacher leaders in acquiring the knowledge, skills and dispositions to serve as change agents in schools?
3. How does participating in a co-constructed community of practice support teacher leaders in acquiring the knowledge, skills and dispositions to lead for social justice?

4. “What leadership development model enables teacher leaders to acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions to serve as critical change agents in schools?

I determined that the most appropriate theoretical framework to explore these research questions would have three distinct parts: Critical constructivism (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004), change theory (Fullan, 2008; Kelley & Shaw, 2009; Smith, 2011; Spillane, 2009; Wagner et al., 2006) and reflective practice (Kincheloe, 2004; York-Barr et al., 2006). Critical constructivism is comprised of critical theory (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2004; McLaren, 2009) which explores the impact of power; social constructivism (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1979) which explores meaning-making through dialogue; and complexity theory (Davis & Sumara, 2006) which considers the phenomenon of synergy accomplished through collaboration. Change theory addresses the experience for participants of being change agents and also outlines ways in which participants can stimulate change in schools. Reflective practice indicates a focus on critical reflection through learning-focused conversations and learning-focused relationships (Lipton & Wellman, 2003).

Based on the research questions and the theoretical framework, I determined that the most appropriate methodology for this study would be qualitative participatory action research. Qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) is appropriate when a study takes place in a natural environment with a transformative paradigm. Action research (AR) (Herr & Anderson, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, 2010; Stringer, 2004, 2013) is suitable for studies which are action-oriented, work through multiple cycles of look, think, act, reflect (Lewin, 1946), focus on both process and outcomes, and involve continuous data analysis throughout the
study. The study is considered participatory action research (James, Milenkiewicz & Bucknam, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998, 2005; Nygreen, 2008; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992) because it is collaborative, focuses on activism, social and adaptive change, and is done within a community of practice.

Once the research methodology and design decisions were made I secured an ethical research certificate from the Education, Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB) of the University of Manitoba. I positioned myself as a participant researcher, someone who would facilitate as well as participate in the leadership development sessions. As a critical researcher, I embedded frequent opportunities for participants to provide feedback and critique, and participate in interpretation of data throughout the study. The four categories of validity standards sought out for this study indicated recommended practices for social justice research, action research, cooperative inquiry as a sub-category within action research, and transformative teacher study groups (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994; Creswell, 2013; Griffiths, 1998; Heron, 1986; Saavedra, 1996).

There were two distinct phases to this research study. Phase One took place during the spring of 2012 and consisted of developing an instrument called the Social Justice Teacher Leadership Self-Assessment (SJTLSA) and a second instrument called the Social Justice Teacher Leadership Peer Reflection (SJTLPR) both which would be used during the study. Last year at this symposium I presented Phase One of the study so this year I will move on to Phase Two. Phase Two, June 2012 to May 2013, involved participant recruitment, an Orientation Session, six full day Leadership Development Sessions and a Validation Session.

To recruit a cohort of teacher leaders for the study I incorporated a variety of strategies including theory-based, maximum variation, random purposeful, opportunistic and strategic
recruitment (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). The cohort began with eight participants in September and grew to include nine participants by November. By far the most successful recruitment strategy was nomination by organizations (theory-based), then self-referral (opportunistic) and finally strategic recruitment. Participants in the cohort were of different genders, employed in seven different Manitoba school divisions, taught at a variety of grade levels and occupied different roles; many also held leadership positions in their local teacher associations and special area groups.

Data sources utilized in the study included a variety of sources in the broader categories of interviews, observation and artifacts (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Specifically I collected: videotaped focus groups and leadership development sessions, participant and researchers’ reflections, pilot testers’ feedback, self-assessment and peer feedback, mentoring conversations and curricular design process notes. Data analysis techniques included content and thematic analysis, constant comparison, logic models and structural analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; James et al., 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Thomas, 2009). Themeing (Saldaña, 2013), theory triangulation and crystallization were conducted across multiple sets of data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002). As recommended for action research, data analysis was cyclical, reflexive and ongoing throughout the study (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Within Phase Two I conducted an action research inquiry into my own facilitation of the six leadership development sessions to answer the question “How do I facilitate the Teacher Leadership for Social Justice sessions to develop the agency of teacher leaders for social justice?” The sessions were guided by a design frame (Lipton & Wellman, 2003) in which I articulated the principles and intent of the sessions for participants as well as their rights as
members of the cohort. I created a ten step process to collect, analyse and learn from each session and applied the findings to subsequent sessions throughout the six cycle sequence.

The first step in the process was the researcher’s action research cycle, which provided me with direction and a four-step process to follow as I worked through each session and prepared for the next. I developed agendas for each session which articulated my vision for each day and provided a helpful and predictable structure. By developing facilitation guides I was able to be very specific about my intent for each learning activity during sessions and prepare a script for the instructions I would deliver to the group. The fourth step in the process was to prepare a researcher’s checklist in which I laid out a plan for attending to logistics during the sessions and recorded my emerging research technique. Using the audio video recordings of each session I prepared a rough transcript which I called “Participants’ Response to Activities” or RA for short. This transcript served as detailed documentation of each session and captured the voices of participants.

At the end of each session I gathered participant reflections which provided me with feedback as well as input into what they would like to see in subsequent sessions. I also reflected as a researcher at the end of each session, by dictating into a digital recorder, my observations of recently completed activities and my speculations about emerging themes in the research. The eighth step in the process was to create a logic model which synthesized each session in table or chart format to facilitate comparison and analysis. Once I had analyzed all of the previous data sets for a session I created a Session Summary in which I outlined everything that had occurred and what I had learned through the data analysis. These session summaries helped to contain each of the sessions and made it possible for me to move on to planning for subsequent sessions. The final step in the ten step process was to generate cumulative themes from the Session
Summaries. These themes stretched across the different activities and sessions and provided synthesis and analysis of my emergent findings.

Once this tenth step was taken I would return to step one, the researcher’s action research cycle and complete the final quadrant of the AR template (Reflect) in which I summarized the cumulative themes and the feedback from participants. This final step concluded the “Look – Think – Act – Reflect” cycle and also initiated the beginning of the next AR cycle by indicating appropriate goals for the next session. It was through this ten step process that I was able to move through the six cycles, do data collection and analysis on an ongoing basis and articulate what I was learning while I was in the process of learning it. The process directed, captured and synthesized my researcher’s action research inquiry into my facilitation of the leadership development sessions.

The first of the four research questions focused on identifying the knowledge, skills and dispositions of teacher leaders for social justice. Data considered for this question included feedback from the Focus Groups and Pilot Test while developing the self-assessment and peer reflection tools, the items included in the SJTLSA and the leadership development session summaries. Knowledge areas confirmed as important across the different data sources included knowledge of social justice, leadership and learning frameworks, collaboration and the change process. Skills considered pertinent to social justice leadership include facilitation, critical reflection, capacity building, collegiality and relationships. Dispositions considered essential for teacher leaders for social justice include being open, empathic, committed, action oriented and optimistic.

A second level of characteristics of teacher leaders for social justice focused on various forms of agency demonstrated by research participants. Beliefs which support the agency of
teacher leaders are a combination of knowledge and dispositions and include belief in inclusion, equity, empathy and growth. Strategies for teacher leaders combine knowledge and skill and focus on action, sustainability and teacher leadership. Data indicated that it takes both positive dispositions and skill to develop non-judgemental relationships as a teacher leader. Maintaining these relationships requires active listening and ongoing conversations. Frameworks for social justice and teacher leadership combine the knowledge, skills, dispositions, beliefs, strategies and relationships which participants find support their agency in schools. These concepts are represented on a Venn Diagram which shows how the different aspects of teacher leadership for social justice are inter-related. The diagram is enclosed within an area called the context of change which represents the environments in which teacher leaders enact their leadership for social justice. What has been outlined here constitutes a theory-in-context (Stringer, 2013) of the knowledge, skills, dispositions and agency of teacher leaders for social justice.

The second research question focuses on the elements of the leadership development sessions which helped teacher leaders acquire the previously identified knowledge, skills and dispositions for social justice teacher leadership. Seven elements of the leadership development sessions were identified as contributing to developing agency and these are: journaling, action research cycles, learning-focused conversations, dialogue, self-assessment, peer feedback and critical reflection. Journaling was done during every session and provided participants with privacy, a place to express emotions, a prompt for reflection and was also a mnemonic device. Action research cycles were created by participants to guide their leadership practices in schools. The AR cycles provided participants with a clear focus and process to follow, a way to notice growth and work through the change process. The opportunity to have learning-focused conversations with the researcher and other participants helped teacher leaders reach clarity,
develop skills, refine their vision and develop agency. Dialogue was incorporated as both the purpose and the process for session activities in small and large groups. Dialogue provided opportunities for validation, connection, insight and inspiration. Self-assessment was conducted in the first and sixth sessions using the SJTLSA tool developed in Phase One of the study. Participating in self-assessment developed participants’ awareness and perspective, provoked conversation and stimulated curiosity. Peer feedback was collected from two to three colleagues nominated by participating teacher leaders. These critical friends responded to the SJTLPR instrument items based on their familiarity with the participant’s leadership in shared contexts. Participants also provided each other with peer feedback during leadership development sessions. Participants reported that peer feedback provided them with a sense of perspective on their leadership work, increased their self-awareness, provided validation and balanced their self-assessment. Finally, each of the afore-mentioned elements provided either content or a process for critical reflection. Participating in various forms of critical reflection developed participants’ understanding and learning which led to transformation. Critical reflection was at the core of each of the other elements listed and a critical aspect of the leadership development sessions.

The third research question focused on the impact on participants of being part of a co-constructed community. There were eight ways in which community was developed with the cohort members: sharing facilitation of leadership development sessions, sharing learning from other sources, sharing feedback with each other, profiling the group’s inter-personal dynamics, completing participant reflections, participating in sharing circles and activity breaks and collaboratively co-constructing the community.

What emerged from analysis of the co-constructed community were the following critical features: the individuals in the group, the nature of the group itself, the time spent together and
the processes that were followed. The individuals in the study described each other as generous, passionate, optimistic, committed and knowledgeable. Meeting each other provided them with feelings of acceptance and validation. The group displayed qualities of being open, trusting, inspiring, risk-taking and like-minded; the opportunity to learn together as a cohort generated feelings of belonging and challenge for participants. While these qualities describe this particular cohort, facilitators of co-constructed communities must become knowledgeable about the qualities of particular groups and the individuals who constitute them to be able to respond appropriately. The time spent together as a cohort was significant because it was focused, planned, extensive, sustained and protected; this lead to a more meaningful and supportive experience. Finally, the processes experienced by research participants were varied, strategic, invitational, incremental and participatory; experiencing these processes developed participants’ leadership capacity. These last two qualities of a co-constructed community, time and process, are considered significant and relevant for different cohorts. The co-constructed cohort made a significant contribution to participants’ learning.

The fourth research question asked what type of leadership development model would strengthen the agency of teacher leaders for social justice. The model which emerged from this research has three phases. Phase One includes the program design, recruitment and intent and remained largely unchanged from a leadership model proposed at the outset of the study. The lower half of Phase One focuses on the recruitment of teacher leaders committed to social justice and the make-up of that cohort. The upper half addresses the intent to develop the skills and leadership knowledge of participants through the intentional use of a collaborative cohort. Phase One also introduces the themes present throughout the diagrams. The first theme is the teacher leadership skills participants develop through the leadership development sessions. The second
theme focuses on the leadership knowledge participants acquire through belonging to the cohort and participating in the leadership development sessions. The third theme represents the social justice community in which the research takes place and the nature of that community within and beyond the leadership development sessions.

Phase Two of the model captures the enactment of the leadership development model during the study with a focus on features of the cohort and session content. Phase Two also synthesizes the findings from each of the first three research questions. Two versions of phase two are presented, one which includes graphic representations and one version is only in text form. In the lower half of this figure the practices incorporated into the study are identified: reflective practice, cycles of inquiry and a collaborative cohort. The upper half of Phase Two lists the critical elements in the model, the valued content and the impact of the co-constructed cohort. The second version of Phase Two includes the key concepts of each graphic in text rather than graphic format. The six steps in the cycles of inquiry replace the original ten utilized in my researcher’s inquiry and represent the six strategies recommended for non-research based leadership development cohorts.

Phase Three of the leadership development model includes the outcomes or impact of the leadership development sessions conducted with research participants. As a result of participating in the leadership development sessions, participants reported that they had transformative experiences, which they associated with the learning-focused conversations, risk-taking, learning to facilitate and action research. They gained new frameworks for action specifically those framed around equity, agency and leadership. Finally, they reported that belonging to the cohort helps them sustain their engagement in social justice leadership, increase their personal wellness, their willingness to lead and form strong inter-personal relationships.
The iris at the top of phase three is a symbol of the metaphor I have selected for social justice leadership.

When all three phases of the model are presented together the three themes are noticeable as well as the three distinct phases. Phase One is labeled by the leadership context in which this work is conducted: distributed and teacher leadership. Phase Two is named the context of change, which describes the stage in the process where change occurs as a result of participating in the leadership development sessions, and the context in which teacher leader work is done as a constant state of flux. The third phase is named agency as that is the intended outcome and the intent of the leadership development program. The three phase leadership model is modular in design to facilitate modification and adaption for different contexts. Substitutions can be made at any stage in the model to adapt the design for different environments.

As mentioned, the image of the iris is used in Phase Three to represent social justice leadership. Iris plants are hardy perennials that grow from rhizomes located just below the surface of the soil. Irises persist in difficult growing environments such as sandy soil, send out multiple shoots and emerge to flower when the conditions are right. Similar to social justice work, most of the growth for rhizomatic plants happens underground. The three levels of the iris plant are the roots, the rhizomes and the flower or sustainable growth. The roots of a rhizome dig down deep, which represents the deep systemic inequities which drive our work in social justice. The root phase of the plant aligns with Phase One of the model: design, intent and recruitment or the foundations of the program design. The rhizome of the iris is the center for growth; this aligns with Phase Two, the enactment of the sessions, the place where change occurs. The flower and leaves are the most visible as symbols of sustainable growth. They align with Phase Three, the outcomes or agency of teacher leaders.
Most aspects of the design of the leadership development model were confirmed as important through the study. Of particular importance were the frameworks which I identified in the literature and used to guide the study and sessions with the participants. These frameworks fall into five categories: frameworks for supportive networks, frameworks for social justice frameworks for social justice leadership, frameworks for leadership development and frameworks which guide teacher leadership.

Multiple conclusions were reached for each phase of the research. I provide here one example from each section of the conclusions in my dissertation to provide some indication of the range and specificity of the content.

• Recruitment: “The involvement of educational partners facilitated recruitment of a diverse cohort of active and committed leaders from across the province.”

• Researcher’s inquiry into facilitation of the leadership development sessions: “The researcher’s action research methodology built upon prior experience, ensured a critical reflective stance, and modeled action research for participants.”

• Research Question One: “The skills that empower teacher leaders to be critical change agents in schools are: knowing how to facilitate groups, dialogue, and problem-based conversations, how to use critical reflection to create positive change, and how to develop strong relationships and leadership capacity in others.”

• Research Question Two: “Engaging in dialogue helped participants to process content and experiences, move through the stages of transformative learning and connect personal experiences to theoretical ideas.”
• Research Question Three: “It is essential that teacher leaders for social justice have networks for support and challenge in which to develop their visions of a socially just world, develop knowledge and skills and enhance their personal wellness.”

• Research Question Four: “The modular structure of the leadership development model facilitates improvisation and maximizes flexibility and transferability to other contexts.”

• The iris metaphor: “The rhizomatic nature of the iris plant metaphorically represents the potential of the outcomes of this study to influence growth and change by stimulating new growth in many directions and multiple contexts.”

This research has implications for teacher leaders, facilitators of adult learning, researchers and policy. Teacher leaders benefit from: opportunities to participate in critical reflection, the emotional and practical support of networks, access to learning-focused conversations and conducting action research. Teacher leaders were empowered by these experiences. Facilitators strengthen their practice when they are strategic about designing adult learning environments and incorporate responsive facilitation into leadership development sessions. Theoretical implications include the knowledge, skills, dispositions and agency of teacher leaders for social justice proposed as a theory-in-context (Stringer, 2013); the proposed leadership development model and the iris metaphor which represent theories-of-action (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Implications for researchers are the suggestions of a new hybrid researcher positionality called “Insider Outsider Reciprocal Collaboration” as well as the ten step AR methodology followed in studying my facilitation of the leadership development sessions. Implications for scholarship respond to the initial gaps identified in the literature. As result of this research study, we know more about the impact of participating in a network of social justice teacher leaders, how to develop the critical consciousness of teacher leaders, the impact on
teacher leaders of learning leadership theory, the facilitation skills they find most useful in their work and what contributes to the agency of teacher leaders.

The results of this study warrant further research into the following questions:

- What determines who participates in social justice work?
- How do you develop critical consciousness in teachers?
- What is the impact on teachers of developing strength-based and social justice perspectives?
- What are the potential uses of the SJTLSA and SJTLPR tools?
- What is the impact of teaching conflict resolution strategies to teacher leaders?
- How will the cohort experience impact research participants over the long term?
- How can the Leadership Development Model be used in different contexts?
- What would be the impact of differentiating for developmental levels among participants in leadership development sessions?

I initiated this study because I felt compelled to influence the educational success of students in marginalized populations. The cohort based leadership development model developed over the course of this study brought together a small group of committed like-minded individuals to engage in facilitated and sustained dialogue about social justice leadership. The strength, effectiveness and sustainability of teacher leaders for social justice were enhanced through belonging to an ongoing community. I am confident that their shared leadership capacity will help Manitoba teachers develop critical insights and strengthen educators’ abilities to respond effectively to the needs of our most vulnerable students by adopting asset attitudes and engaging in critical, reflective and collegial practice.
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