The Brief History and Politics of Teacher-led Schools

P. S. Myers
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

Teacher-led, teacher-run, and headless schools are a relatively new reality in American public schooling. This literature review looks at the work around teacher-run schools and tries to contextualize the theory, history, and opposition to this movement in education. With little academic writing in the field, this work engages periodicals beyond the peer review process in hopes of providing a well-rounded view and a floor for future scholarship on the topic.

Keywords: teacher-led schools, teacher-run schools, charter schools

Many of the negative appraisals of K-12 public education center on teachers. Spencer (1996) explains that “[p]ublic criticism of teachers comes from a number of sources that arise from the low status teachers hold in our society. Their low status means that those in higher-status positions can define their rights, duties, and obligations, as well as assess them” (p.15). Ingersoll (2007) notes that despite their relative lack of power and standing within education, inclusive of the very schools which employ them, the responsibility for a number of in-school and out-of-school problems are placed at the teacher’s feet. The skepticism directed at teachers ignores the link between being accountable and being empowered. This is especially true of schools serving minority and/or underprivileged children, where, despite years of evidence that outcomes are largely attributable to out-of-school factors (Coleman, 1997; Kerckhoff & Campbell, 1977), teachers are blamed beyond their reach. This review seeks to understand a
relatively new advent in the charter era: teacher-led schools. While they are small in number nationally, there has been a surge in the growth of this model of schooling. This literature review seeks to understand the foundations of this movement, issues around teacher-led schools, and hopefully add to the body of literature while also providing a critical lens. Beyond teacher-led schools, a greater question of the mutual exclusivity of democratization and marketization drives this work. The proliferation of market-based solutions in education has been the subject of much scholarly critique. This brief review is of consequence because it asks if teacher-led schools (or any school design for that matter) can truly occupy the space between democracy and the liberalization of choice-driven consumerism in schooling.

Given their relative newness in the charter era, most of the scholarly writing around this model has been advocacy. Some writing has appeared in peer-reviewed journals, though little empirical research has been done. Much of the work has been found in respected educational magazines and recent newspaper articles.

Teacher-led schools, also known as teacher-run or headless schools, are schools that, for the purpose of this writing, operate without a principal or central administrator, or such personnel operate at the temporary behest of the school’s teachers. The liability and guidance for student performance, curriculum, personnel, and budgetary issues rest solely with the collective teachers of a school. There may be other models of teacher empowerment, but headless schools arguably represent a model where teacher vision and voice are least encumbered by hierarchy. This argument is grounded in the theory that teacher-led schools are more democratic than the typical model of public schooling (Dixon, 1959), and, thus, teachers are either equally or more productive than they would have been as a part of the traditional chain of command (Dahl, 1985). This democratic formulation of schooling would lead to a sense of ownership, increased satisfaction, financial stability, and engagement with the broader community (Duke, Showers, & Imber, 1980; Foley, 2006; Gunn, 1984). Such conceptions of the role of democracy and self-determination in schooling will be explored using three seemingly competing views of democracy and its role in schooling. In doing so, a further theoretical and pragmatic grounding of teacher-led schooling is proposed.

**Seminal Theories on Schooling and Teaching**

Neil, Friedman, and Dewey have each played a pivotal role in our conceptions of education. Their works are seminal and provide the underpinnings for many reforms within education. Teacher-led schools may be no exception. These three scholars’ views are largely disconnected regarding the nature of schooling. This stems from their understanding, in part, of how democratization happens. Nevertheless, there may be some confluence between their interpretations as to what democracy is. Democracy for each is grounded in the individual, society, and self-determination. From these theorists, in order for a teacher-led school to exist and for schooling to reflect a democratic ethos, teachers must have a greater ability to determine the nature of their work – whether it be a contractual agreement with the state or a liberalization of the state. Teacher-led schools may be grounded in any or all, or, least likely, none of the paradigms offered by these
thinkers – socialist, pragmatist, or economic liberalist. With the lack of a track record or much existent scholarship, these three paradigms could each define teacher-led schooling as democratic. While the definitions have some mutual exclusivity, teacher-led schools may indeed occupy the shared space, being both driven by commodification and democratization. As these schools develop across different locales, this question will need to be answered beyond theory or supposed context.

Neil’s (1944) views and work, while furthest from the present mainstream, share a great deal in common with the later scholarship of Bourdieu and Bowles and Gintis (1976/2011). Neil argues that the schools of World War II England were sites not of democracy or autonomous being, but of capitalistic reproduction. Neil states that readers in his moment should “[g]rant that democracy is largely a sham, that the workers in this democratic county are slaves to their capitalist masters” (Neil, 1944, pp. 48–49). Neil maintains that teachers often adopt the values of capitalists in spite of their true class affiliation and, in so doing so, uphold the status quo. Neil also argues explicitly for young teachers to buck tradition, seek to teach a curriculum that centralizes caring for the child, and take up teacher cooperatives. Of younger teachers, he expresses that, “Naturally, they want an educational Communism in the school, a communal responsibility”, and that, “…the future belongs to cooperation” (1944, p. 136).

Bowles and Gintis (1976/2011) discuss free schools, which are Neil’s lasting legacy to education. While they shun the politics around free schooling during the time their book was authored, they see its potential as the kind of revolutionary reform in schooling needed to cast aside social and economic reproduction mirrored in the educational system. This is made most clear as they state, “…a politically radical free-school movement could well provide the sea bed for revolutionaries. The content as well as the process of free schooling has an important role to play” (p. 255). This process can be understood, in part, as the idea of cooperation, both among and between students and teachers, which is typified in many teacher-led schools.

Dewey (1903, 1904) equates democracy with a freedom and liberation of thought. Explaining that teachers do not have the power of self-determination or the ability to engender democracy for students, he calls for the empowerment of teachers. Noting that outside forces have a great deal of power in shaping the learning that occurs in schools, Dewey argues that the attractiveness of wanting to teach has been diminished because there exists no demand upon the teacher to engage in thought. Though not directly considered in Dewey’s writings, teacher-led schools may offer teachers the opportunity to be more reflective as educators serving as managers of their own work. Additionally, Dewey’s life and work suggests that he had no problem with the principal and superintendent hierarchy as his wife was the principal of the Chicago Laboratory School (Lagemann, 1996), but he understood that their support of teacher autonomy or, more accurately, teacher subversion of the curriculum, was tenuous (Dewey, 1903). Dewey notes that, “Superintendents and principals often encourage individuality and thoughtfulness in the invention and adoption in the methods of teaching…” (Dewey, 1903, p. 196). Yet, the managerial hierarchy may not always support this action as “[the principal] may withdraw his concession at any moment” (Dewey, 1903, p. 196).

Friedman’s model for freedom in education is based in economic theory. While
Myers

believing in compulsory education as a basis for democratic citizenship, he does not accept the publicly-funded system beyond elementary education. Arguing that the liberalization of schools would create competition, provide for needed capital improvements to schools, and justly compensate teachers, Friedman desires that the federal government remove itself from public education (Friedman, 1962/1982, 1997; Friedman & Friedman, 1999). This decentralization would lead to innovation and efficiency through competition and the possibility of teacher self-rule. Lauglo (1995) supports Friedman’s thesis of decentralization and states that this system would allow for teacher professionalization and autonomy. To this end, he states, “Liberalism would rely on market forces or professional self-regulation, but would also generally justify much freedom for individual teachers and schools from intrusive forms of external evaluation” (Lauglo, 1995, p. 25). In such a context, teacher-led schools, as well as other models of school management, could exist. Friedman provides the argument behind much of the economic liberalization of schooling presently.

The History and Proliferation of Teacher-led Schools

Teacher–led schools are not a new idea, nor are they strictly based in the present ideas of competition and commodification in schooling. Prior to the charter school era, educators in the 60’s and 70’s had great interest in experimentation in school models, including teacher-led schools (Lichtenstein, 1985). In that moment, Deborah Meier’s Central Park East (Meier, 2002) and the High School in the Community of New Haven (Bailey, 2012a, 2012b) were started without principals. These schools were preceded by others in Norway (Court, 2003) and Switzerland (Gorman, 1958). There are presumably other international models, such as that in Greece (Natsiopoulou & Giouroukakis, 2010), of teacher-led schools presently in operation. In the American charter school era, the Minnesota New Country School was founded in 1993, two years after Minnesota became the first state to pass charter legislation. There are no classes and teachers serve as advisers. Teachers at this school have allowed students more determination within their own education. Along with the founding of the Minnesota New Country School came the creation of a teacher-cooperative as a governance structure. To manage the Minnesota New Country School’s cooperative, EdVisions, which continues as a manager of teacher cooperatives, was founded. EdVisions, which has received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is largely responsible for the replication of the teacher-cooperative/teacher-led school model from Minnesota to Wisconsin and other Midwestern states. To date, Milwaukee has 13 teacher-led schools (Hawkins, 2009; Kerchner & Muffinger, 2010; Kolderie, 2002; Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, 2012; Newell, 2002; Williams, 2007). Teacher-led schools, at the time of this writing, have opened in Los Angeles, Denver, Minneapolis, Chicago, Nashville, Detroit, Boston, New York, and Newark. Teacher-led schools have been tried in middle-class white and poor minority neighborhoods, but the majority of these schools do serve in poorer areas (Bousquet, 2012; Kerchner & Muffinger, 2010). While still rare, teacher-led schooling has become more publicized and recognized as a reform model. Teacher-led schools were mentioned explicitly as a part of the 2012
Democratic National Committee platform (Democratic Party Platform, 2012).

Teacher-led schools pose a set of unique challenges for teachers as they accept additional responsibilities at school. Self-regulation and evaluation, curriculum programming, and issues of student discipline now fall in the purview of teachers. Models of internal accountability attempt to attend to the democratic notions that undergird teacher-led schools. The desire to have a flattened but responsive hierarchy has led to peer review, such as the “360-degree evaluation system in which everyone evaluates everyone” at the Avalon School in Minnesota (Hawkins, 2009; Williams, 2007).

**Unions**

Teacher-led schools and teacher-cooperatives have also had to manage relations with teacher unions. As expected, these relationships have been brokered differently at different sites. The schools in Minnesota operated without union support, as EdVisions supports many of the schools in the way that a union might (Kerchner & Muffinger, 2010). This also allows for teachers to fire their own should problems arise. The 13 schools in Milwaukee operate with a memorandum-of-understanding with their unions, and teachers are essentially “leased” from the local union (Kolderie, 2002). The teachers in these teacher-led schools do not wish to subvert or break away from the union. Schools in New York and Chicago have been union-run, although their models differ. The American Federation of Teachers has given support to teacher-led schools in Boston, Denver, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Los Angeles (Gardner, 2010; Hu, 2010). Teacher-led schools do not have to be at odds with unions, nor does the survival of this flexible model have to come at the expense of unions. However, unions presently are under attack in many states, and many states are considering and passing right-to-work legislation. The advancement of teacher-led schools with unions will likely continue to be determined by the strength of the unions where the schools’ founders wish to open their teacher-led school.

**Opposition**

One critique of teacher-led schools stems from the idea that this form of schooling is not a meaningful change in education. Larry Cuban has noted that teacher-led schools are not a new idea, but their recent attention is. The existence of teacher-led schools does not alleviate the need for understanding “how to school…the diversity of low-income children that enter public schools” (Cuban, 2010). An additional critique of teacher-led schooling could be that it does not go far enough. As Bowles and Gintis (1976/2011) note in their seminal work, only the truly radical and revolutionary forms of education will break the correspondence between socioeconomic class and education. While it could be argued that teacher-led schools are akin to a social democracy in structure, a revolutionary outcome may not be what teachers and unions supporting this model actually want. As the language of business has been ported into all facets of life, including education, the schools may simply be a new take of managerialism and efficiency, as the lack of building administration is noted as a cost savings (Glatter & Harvey, 2006; Sachs, 2011; Williams, 2007). A last critique of teacher-led schooling
could be that teachers are teachers, and have not been trained to manage schools. Teachers operate within the confines of the classroom and may be unaware of the larger issues of school administration. This additional stress is not better for teachers or the schools in which they operate. For example, the UFT Charter School in Brooklyn has not met state benchmarks and, at the time of this writing, may be closed (Gardner, 2010).

**Many questions unasked and unanswered**

The politics that trouble the expansion of teacher-led schooling exists at the school, district, state, national, and philosophical level. The short history of teacher-led schooling has led to successes and struggles for teachers, students, and the overall idea. The proliferation of this idea has engaged its fair share of proponents and opponents. Teachers-as-stakeholders in a paradigm devoid of central administration threaten the current power structure in ways that may make current stakeholders anxious about their place amid a sea-change. An optimistic outcome of teacher-led schooling might see teachers gain the praise and/or contempt that is actually commiserate with the power to induce changes in schools, though presently there is little data to make such a claim. Teacher-led schooling also brings into question the role of unions as both the firewall and political apparatus for teachers. However, neither teachers nor administrators are the most important constituencies in schools. Schooling should give primacy to students and their development. The teacher-led school may allow for a kind of development that Dewey and Neil agreed should be the driving ethos of education. This ideal is best stated by Wells et al. (1999): teacher-led schools “offer the possibility of liberatory and even emancipatory reform to the extent that these educators have embraced curricular and pedagogical practices that are more successful with and inspirational to the students they serve” (p. 195). However, with respect to the present market-based orientation and teacher-led schooling’s association with the charter movement, it remains a question as to whether this form can be actualized democratically for both students and teachers. If it is indeed an emancipatory model for schooling, then, in light of its positioning in the charter movement, what should be said of the ability to blend capitalist and collectivist ethos? Reflexively, as a former teacher, these questions are of a unique interest. I have seen how school bureaucracy, in both traditional public and charter schools, does not always seek to attend to teacher and learner needs as a first priority. So I will watch intently as teacher-led schools presumably become more commonplace. This review is limited, somewhat by the newness of the model, but also by having to rely on some works completed by persons with vested interest and a lack of scholarly curiosity. Hopefully this review begins or helps others to fill some of this void in research.

**References**

The Brief History and Politics of Teacher-led Schools


Lichtenstein, P. M. (1985). Radical liberalism and radical education: A synthesis and


**Author**

P. S. Myers earned his bachelor’s degree in African American Studies from Northwestern University and his M.Ed. in Elementary Education from DePaul University. He is currently a Ph.D. student in the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research interests include educational governance and the schooling experiences of marginalized persons; specifically, he is interested in the spread and effects of education-related policy across contexts and other considerations therein.
The Journal

The Mid-Atlantic Education Review is a peer-reviewed, online journal that provides a forum for studies pertaining to educational issues of interest to educators and researchers in the Mid-Atlantic region. The Review publishes articles that contribute to the knowledge base of researchers, policy-makers, teachers, and administrators. To appeal to a broad educational audience, articles cover a spectrum in their level of analysis, subject focus, and methodological approach. The journal is available at http://maereview.org.

The Mid-Atlantic Education Review is edited and published by the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, New Jersey. Founded in 1923, the Rutgers Graduate School of Education (GSE) community creates new knowledge about educational processes and policies. The GSE is a national leader in the development of research-based instructional, professional, and outreach programs. Additional information is available by visiting http://gse.rutgers.edu.