Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

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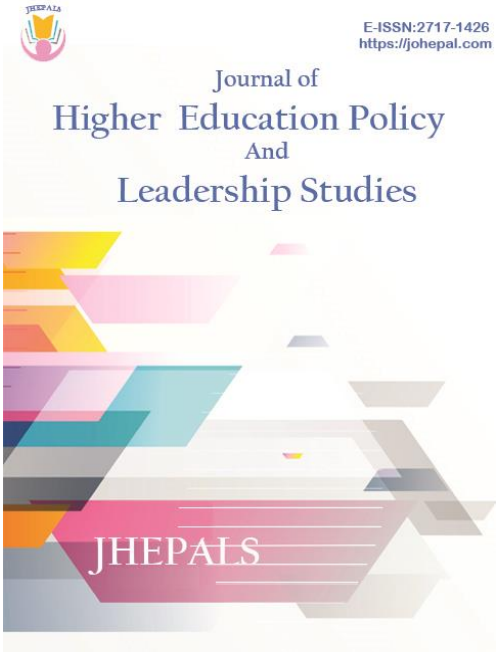

My Professional Life in Higher Education: The Journey of Teaching and Leading

Stephanie Chitpin
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, CANADA

Email: steph.chitpin@uottawa.ca

Article Received
2020/12/03

Article Accepted
2021/01/19

Published Online
2021/01/21

Cite article as:

Chitpin, S. (2020). My professional life in higher education: The journey of teaching and leading. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies, 1*(3), 56-63. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.29252/johepal.1.3.56

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[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.3.56]

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E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 1 Issue: 3
pp. 56-63
DOI:
10.29252/johepal.1.3.56

The horizons of our knowing shift and change as we awaken to new ways of "seeing" our world, to different ways of seeing ourselves in relation to each other and to the world.

– Connelly & Clandinin, 1994, p. 154

Stephanie Chitpin *

Keywords: Life; Education; Narration; Leadership; Opportunity; Higher Education

My Earliest Journey

Before pursuing a doctoral program at the University of Toronto, I had been teaching in the public school system for more than a decade. Leaving the classroom was not something I had actively sought out, at least not in a conscious way. My ongoing commitment to issues of personal and professional growth stems from my early experiences as an orphan, raised in a Buddhist temple.

In this orphanage temple, as I grew older, I began to realize that the children were not educated in a particularly modern fashion. I reflected upon this and came to the conclusion that many of the Buddhist nuns, who oversaw the daily care and feeding of the children, as well as their education, had not themselves received much education, let alone an education that would meet Western standards of a good education. It was this realization that prompted me to understand that I needed to get a good education if I was ever to be able to free myself from the circumstances of my childhood. The intervening years between my experiences at the orphanage and my eventual metamorphosis as a public school teacher where taken up with a struggle to leave the orphanage in order to receive the education that I so desperately craved.

*Corresponding author's email: steph.chitpin@uottawa.ca

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My Student Years

Slowly, I became aware that I would have to leave my native Mauritius if I ever wanted to succeed. While I knew that education was an important goal, I also realized that education was not only a process but also a product. Education was an asset that could be used to promote social justice and the notion of equitable treatment for all. It was at this pointy that I decided to become a teacher, just like the nuns who had tried to teach me, back in the orphanage. The big difference between them and me was the fact that I had obtained a solid foundation for my education. This education provided me the opportunity to become a teacher in Canada, my country of choice.

By the time the new millennium was on the event horizon, I was working as a teacher in the Peel District School Board in Mississauga, Ontario. The school where I taught was rife with teacher frustration and, therefore, teacher turnover was high. The students were very needy and the staff did not feel supported. Many of the students spent a good part of their school day sitting in the principal's office. While the students' behavioural problems were not outside of the normal range of student issues, the schools' ability to deal with such problems was limited. As a result, the school administrators recommended that the staff attend after-school workshops on classroom management in order to acquire the skills and strategies that they would require in order to cope with their students. However, the staff, unfortunately, did not feel that the workshops met their needs. Sadly, the information presented at these professional development sessions was used by only a few of the very committed teaching staff.

Towards the end of the 1999 school year, as Chair of the School Success Team, I was invited to attend a meeting where the school administrators and superintendent discussed the implementation of the Ontario Education Quality Accountability Office (EQAO) testing process. This, of course, was intended to support teachers' growth and students' learning. At this meeting, the superintendent asked a pivotal question, "What is your vision for the kind of professional development that results in teachers taking control and ownership of their own learning and which, in turn, maximizes students' success?"

I responded to this question by alluding to a number of assumptions that I believed were significant. Peer-mentoring in promoting teachers' growth and development was one method, among many others, that was being discussed. Little did I know, at that time, where that discussion would lead. Eventually, I found out that it would lead to the doors of the Ontario Institute for Studies n Education, the University of Toronto's Faculty of Education. Shortly after, I found myself enrolled in a doctoral program, studying teacher professional development.

Previously, I had read the work of Karl Popper and was intrigued by the possibilities of what Popper's approach might mean for teachers' growth of professional knowledge. I wanted to help provide those structures and language that would benefit teachers. This could be accomplished by helping them to articulate their own professional philosophies. I wanted to use Popper's schema as a vehicle for teachers to recognize, articulate, communicate and question their own professional knowledge and skills and, in so doing, to find the essence of what it is that drives them, as teachers My hope was that, through a sustained process of inquiry, reflection and communication, teachers could become avid learners about and developers of their own expertise.

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My Professional Identity

When I first conceived the idea of doing a doctoral study in 1999, there was a growing awareness in education that, in order for teachers to have a better understanding of the processes of teaching and learning, it was important for them to get a clear sense of who they are, their aspirations and what it was that teaching would require. What it is that they are assigned to do is important, so how they saw themselves in the role of the teacher was equally important in the pursuit of their careers.

Research evidence suggests that, despite personality and ideological conflicts we may encounter with peers and more experienced educators, it remains beneficial for us to work together and to share with one another those ideas and perspectives that have been invaluable for our own professional development. However, like most teachers, I had spent a good portion of my time alone, teaching, researching or doing community work, isolated from colleagues, behind closed doors.

Today, my identity as a teacher has emerged and developed through my interactions and conversations with different mentors. That is to say, I benefitted enormously through the hard work of peer mentors, and through the process of peer-mentoring, I am able to reflect not only on past events but also, more importantly, upon my own professional development. Now, it is those events, seen through the eyes of an experienced teacher, that have informed my present and future activities.

Reshaping my Identity as a Professor of Leadership

Reflecting on my teaching practice has allowed me to not only achieve a conscious awareness of how I practice my craft but also how to articulate that knowledge. Further to this, such reflection has highlighted the important role that mentoring has played in fostering not only my reflective practices but also has helped me to refashion my identity as a Professor of Leadership. The verbalizations of my experience in teaching have provided me with a window to view my own professional development, as I move forward to embrace leadership initiatives.

I have invested some time and much effort in conversations with a significant mentor, this past year, in order to acquire skills, knowledge and strategies to better align my courses to the needs of teachers who are also pursuing leadership roles. It was only when I began comparing the practices of my mentor, through these important conversations, that I began to realize the need to balance theory and practice in my teaching and in my leadership work. It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of having a mentor to work with when trying to re-design a teacher education course to better meet the needs of aspiring teacher leaders.

Reflection has been heavily advocated in teacher education since the 1980s as a result of the work by numerous scholars, such as Donald Schon, to promote reflexivity and reflection. Reflection was thought of as a way to steer teachers and leaders into new and better ways of thinking, acting and acknowledging the complexity of the education project. It was also seen as a way of enhancing the autonomy of educators. Furthermore, all educators, from pre-service teachers to administrators, may use reflection as a strategy for developing a knowledge base, founded on practice. While there are many definitions of reflective teaching and leading, some scholars emphasize introspection and retrospection, focusing specifically on actions and thoughts before, during or after teaching. Other definitions take a broader stance and embrace the concept of reflection within social and political contexts of programs, schools and communities.

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My Professional Identity in Cooperation with Colleagues and Students

Simply thinking about teaching, however, does not necessarily constitute reflective teaching. Teaching and leading must have a reflective dimension. If a teacher never questions his or her assumptions, the goals and the values that guide his or her work, or the context in which he or she teaches or leads, the individual is not engaged in reflecting teaching. The practice of a reflective teacher leader must include reflection about the unexpected outcomes of teaching and administrative work, since teaching and leadership, even under the best of conditions, always involves unintended outcomes. This element of unpredictability leads educators into troublesome areas and, occasionally, reflection leads educators into an uncomfortable awareness – as in my case, where I needed to be open- minded and take responsibility for my own professional development with whole- heartedness. I needed to examine my own assumptions and beliefs with a desire to improve my own teaching and leadership skills. In reflecting on my practice, it not only changed my practice, it has also changed me as a teacher and as a leader.

A Word of Advice

It has been argued by some researchers that counseling encourages reflection. For example, mentoring involves professional development, whereas counseling represents a therapeutic purpose. Nevertheless, reflection is always an inward journey, particularly when a leader has a problem which cannot be solved simply. Educational leaders are encouraged to examine specific, problematic events in order to articulate an "ideal situation" and to critically examine extant limiting factors that prevent the realization of the ideal situation. The concentric circles of an onion may illustrate, metaphorically, the different levels of reflection.

At the outer edge of the onion lies behaviour, and as one progresses inwards toward the centre of the onion, we see the various levels of competences, beliefs, identity and mission. Mentors may wish to encourage their mentees to explore these levels, as the mentee may possess certain qualities that may be brought to bear on the situation. These qualities might relate to empathy, flexibility, sensitivity and courage. Of course, qualities vary from individual to individual. In addition, mentees are encouraged to activate these core qualities in order to effectively plan new and improved behaviours. Learning by reflecting requires teacher leaders to critically examine their own motivation, thinking and practice. In this way, they may become reflective learners of leadership.

Thus, reflection may become a process of connecting and coordinating existing knowledge with new evidence. For example, reflection has helped me to critique theories or conjectures of others (and of my own) so as to remove inconsistencies from my theories and to modify, refine or replace them when they do not do what they are intended to do or when contradictions occur. Furthermore, because human beings and their scientific knowledge are inherently fallible and subject to error, there is a need to seek out and eliminate errors through critical discussion, experimentation or application of new theories in order to gain new insights and understandings relating to our teaching and leadership practice in order to contribute to our own and others' knowledge growth.

Being mentored provided contexts for enhanced understanding of my students' learning experiences and my role in them. Given that teaching and learning, not to mention leading, is a lifelong task, an autobiographical act, I continue to learn about learning to lead, even though I continually feel as if I have just returned from a great adventure, where I have made important

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discoveries. Here, I have attempted to set down what I have learned about mentoring and reflection while trying to connect these concepts with teaching, learning and leading. I have come to understand that, through mentoring, learning to lead is a labourious, time-consuming and reflective process. It is more than acquiring strategies, delivering contents, resolving conflict and assessing student and teacher development.

My life experiences influence what and how I lead, and they will continue to do so. However, I realize that, through mentoring, the importance of continually reflecting on the dynamics of my teaching and leadership practices (and who I am) influences how I teach. By reflecting upon my own practice, I connect my understanding to my own stance, I invoke communication between theory and practice, and the more I am aware of my stance, the more I can reflect on and respond to my own strengths and biases. In addition, understanding my stance and my philosophical underpinnings means that I can model the concept of a teacher leader as a reflective practitioner who is aware of and responsive to one's own teaching practice. This knowledge is advanced through my willingness to engage in critical self-reflection, to examine my espoused beliefs and to determine how they have or have not been consistent with my leadership practice. Finding out who I am as an individual and as a teacher has influenced the ways I have delivered my courses and the approaches I have used to lead my students' development.

Award for Excellence in Research

In 2020, I received an award for excellence in research. In reflecting upon the significance of this award, I realize that the thoughts I share here are from my own professional journey through mentoring. However, there is more to becoming successful than merely playing the power game. As I bring these observations to a close, I want to note that my love for research actually outpaces my passion for teaching. This is not to trivialize teaching and learning but it is to say that we teach best when we are learning. Research is one way that I ensure my learning trajectory.

Research continues to play an important role in my career, as evidenced by this award. However, it is not the sole award that I have received over the years. The Academic Excellence Award was presented to me in 2000 by the Department of Curriculum Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE). I cherish this award because it is the first time that I felt that my efforts at becoming a scholar and a researcher were truly recognized and valued by the academy. This early success led to two important and relatively new areas in my professional career. The first was my development as an editor and the second refers to my service to the university. My first incursion into the world of editing came through sitting on editorial boards for a number of prestigious journals, such as the *International Journal of Educational Management.* Such positions on editorial boards led to a number of guest editor roles and the development of several Special Issues, among a number of reputable journals, that featured topics of interest.

Never one to be satisfied with today's achievements while tomorrow awaits, I propelled these achievements and my burgeoning experiential knowledge into the development of several Series Editorships, most notably my current series, *Transforming Education through Critical Leadership: Policy and Practice.* In addition to developing these book series, I am also proud to be the founder of the Equitable Leadership Network (ELN) https://www.equitableleadershipnetwork.com/ Research Unit in my Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. This network provides a forum for educational leaders and physicians to meet and discuss issues relating to the leadership and

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management of their organizational units. This network is nation-wide and continues to grow in terms of its membership.

Another aspect of my career path, to date, is my service to the university community and beyond. I have been honoured to represent my university and my country at a number of invited presentations. Most notable among these was a paper that I was invited to present at the Sir Karl Popper and the Open Society Symposium, held in Annville, Pennsylvania, in 2013. Three years later, in 2016, I was an invited plenary speaker at the Eighth Annual International Congress of The Centre of Research in Theories and Practices that Overcome Inequalities. This conference took me to the University of Barcelona. In addition to numerous presentations around the world, one of the most important presentations, for me personally, was my presentation as an invited guest speaker at Oxford University https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Voi3t4klF1U&t=4585s. This presentation allowed for me to retrace the development of my knowledge pertaining to one of the greatest philosophers of all modern time, Sir Karl Popper. After serving for a number of years in the academy, I still found my recursions into Popper's work to be challenging and exciting, as I continue to work towards bringing his work into educational circles, specifically, and into the social sciences, in general.

Since Popper's work was a feature of my doctoral thesis, and because his work is so very important to me as a scholar and as an educator, a book on this scientist was almost preordained. In honour of his work, I wrote a book about Popper's contributions to education. Although he may be most remembered for his contributions to scientific philosophy, Popper had a great deal of wisdom when it came to the education of children. I have attempted to honour his contributions in this book, *Popper's approach to education: A cornerstone of teaching and learning* (2016). Other volumes, written or edited by me, include several books on decision making, as well as books on educational policy.

Of course, much of the work that I have accomplished has been supported by grants. Contributors to the funding of my projects have included grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) of the United States of America and a huge million-and-a-half-dollar grant awarded by the Ontario ministry of Education. Needless to say, the appreciation of my work by all of those who have contributed to funding and disseminating my efforts has not only been rewarding, it has also been very humbling. When I look back over the landscape of my life, I remember my humble beginnings and, when I look at my contributions to my university and to the society in general, I am very moved by the good fortune, the good friends and the good advice that I have benefitted from along the way.

Concluding Remarks

As I bring this retrospective to a close, I believe that the good advice I have received from any number of people should be passed along. First of all, I believe that it is important to pay attention to everything that is going on around one. Even apparently insignificant details may allow for the Butterfly Effect, well known to chaos theorists. In addition to this, many people read only what they believe to be important to their work. I challenge this by saying that one should read as much as possible from as many sources as possible. This prevents one from become closed to new ideas and interpretations that can advance one's thinking. One never knows when something new will simply fall into place. Serendipity is real and is alive and well. Another piece of advice that I mean for

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beginning academics is this; never throw anything away. I learned very early that what you discard today may become important tomorrow. My humble beginnings taught me this and it is a tenet that is as applicable today as it was long ago. When a paper does not come out right, when one's work bogs down in a confusion of ideas, when it is easier to turn around and retrace one's steps than it is to proceed, this is when one must resist the urge to throw partial papers and projects away, as if they no longer represent anything of value. I have had these moments and more. In these moments, one must corral one's frustrations and place the offending piece in a place of honour – the folder marked "For the Future." I cannot tell you how many times those long-forgotten pieces have assumed new importance in later works.

Another important piece of advice is that one can learn from everyone. Each of us is a unique and precious individual. We each have our own knowledge and experiences that help to shape our lives. The very person who may appear to have little capital of any description may also be the one who is able to craft remarkable pieces of art or observations or something that the rest of us would likely miss. Again, even if that knowledge or that experience appears to be un-useful at the time, tuck it away. One never knows when opportunity will present itself and that little fragment of beauty may emerge to grace one's work. Along with this notion of preservation and stewardship comes an appreciation for others' knowledge and experience. A key point here is to respect all aspects of one's own life as well as the lives of others. In so doing, one is creating a certain harmony, not only within oneself, but within the world – the Butterfly Effect in operation.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the fact that working in academia, for all its rewards, can be a lonely, uncertain and frustrating business. One cannot do it alone. This is why friendly critics and critical friends are important allies. In addition, one must also not allow the drive for productivity to undermine one's health. Remember to call an end to the working day before the next day arrives. Sleep really does "knit up the raveled sleave [sic] of care" (Macbeth). Health, habits and exercise are important components that help the body to keep the mind sharp and fresh. Academia can be punishing and, so, it is important that one is at one's best, not only mentally, but physically, as well, simply because stamina is required to meet deadlines, keep all of the various work expectations in order and to keep the whole mess flowing smoothly. In this vein, it is important that one sees unity in chaos, happiness in servitude and commitment to see the end results of one's labour being rewarded, not necessarily in terms of honours or kudos, but in terms of a sense of accomplishment that brings with it a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself.

One point that I would like to make, in closing, is that we are the products of our histories. Here is an example; one day, while I was at the orphanage, I was told by one of my classmates that I would never amount to anything. Now, many years later, I could simply dismiss this criticism. However, in truth, this is the main reason why I work so hard to teach well, to research rigorously and to provide quality service to my university and to the wider community for the greater public good. This has been very rewarding but it does not come without its issues. As my work has gained attention, my origins have also received attention. I find that it is true that, as a member of a visible minority, I have to work many times harder than those who come from the dominant culture. Also, I am often talked down to, am often harassed and am frequently verbally abused. I do not know if this is because I am female, or because I am not tall, or even because of the colour of my skin. These are not things that I can change but, for the things that I can change, I work assiduously to make society more just, inclusive and equitable for all people.

This paper represents but a tiny fragment of my own professional journey; a place where I stopped to think about where I was in my teaching a few years ago and where I am heading, in terms

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of leadership, for the future. For me, acknowledging some of my not-so-successful teaching experiences has allowed me to view the future through a different lens – the lens of leadership. Any change I make in my teaching or in my leading, from now on, will depend more on intention than on happenstance. This requires thoughtfulness, diligence and respect. Whether mentoring, as a model of professional leadership development, should be adopted in higher education, in times of changing academic landscapes, where teaching and leading is so often focused on obtaining high scores in student achievement, is for the leader's own critical reflection and judgment.

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Dr. Stephanie Chitpin is a Professor of Leadership at the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Canada. Dr. Chitpin's principal contribution to leadership and to the professional development of principals rests on her rejection of the inductive method. She argues that knowledge is acquired by hypotheses deductively validated as "falsifiability criteria". Her research funded by The Social Sciences Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and The Ontario Ministry of Education, Canada, are international in scope, and includes the analysis of the Objective Knowledge Growth Framework (OKGF) based on Sir Karl Popper's critical rationalism, as a new tool for understanding principals' decision-making. Dr. Chitpin's works include *Decision Making in Educational Leadership: Principles, Policies, and Practices (2015), Popper's Approach to Education: A Cornerstone of Teaching and Learning (2016),* Confronting Educational Policy in Neoliberal Times: International Perspectives (2019), *Understanding Decision-Making in Educational Contexts: A Case Study Approach* (2021). She is also the Series Editor of *Transformation Education Through Critical Leadership, Policy and Practice* published by Emerald Insight Publishing: https://books.emeraldinsight.com/page/series-detail/transforming-education-through-critical-leadership-policy-and-practice/?K=e202010071341434789

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