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Learning to Lead: Exploring How 1st-6th Year Teachers Develop Informal Leadership

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Learning to Lead: Exploring How 1st-6th Year Teachers Develop Informal Leadership

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Abstract:

Scholars have called for promoting teacher leadership as a way to improve schools, but few have addressed how we can promote teacher leadership among newer teachers. This paper uses extant research to identify five possible positive influences on 1st-6th year teachers developing informal leadership skills: professional development, professional learning communities, on-line learning communities, mentoring, and administration. Surveys and interviews with staff members at four secondary schools point to professional learning communities as the most promising of these possible means. Beyond these five possible influences, participants identified getting involved with colleagues and with school activities as promising first steps for 1st through 6th year teachers to develop the knowledge, reputation, and skills to become leaders.

Learning to Lead: Exploring How 1st-6th Year Teachers Develop Informal Leadership

Introduction / Problem Statement

A number of scholars have called for promoting teacher leadership as a way both to improve teaching and to improve schools. If we want to develop teachers who are not just doing the core work of instruction with students well, but who also are developing the skills and dispositions to be effective leaders, it would make sense to consider how development of teacher leaders might begin during the formative first years of induction into the profession. Developing teachers who are empowered to play a role and have a degree of influence with colleagues might not only pay dividends when these novices exert leadership; such novice teachers may be able to use their influence to get the kinds of resources and support they need to be successful teachers.

New teachers, however, can find it quite challenging to exert or develop leadership in their schools. Many schools grant more privilege to those with more experience (Johnson & TPNGT 2004). Less experienced teachers may lack the experience or understanding of their school's climate to effectively influence their schools (Kurtz, 2009), and they may be viewed as lacking leadership qualities by senior professionals (Stoelinga, 2008). Despite these issues, 1st-6th year teachers may bring several qualities that would help them contribute leadership, such as their training with the most current pedagogies (Xu and Patmor, 2012), questions and energy that could help experienced mentors as well as mentees to learn (Feiman-Nemser & Birkeland, 2012), and comfort with the latest technologies, social issues, social media, and popular cultural trends (see Bensen & Chik, 2014; Thornburg, 2011).

This inquiry project emerged out of a group of preservice teachers' masters year seminar. These 13 social studies preservice teachers were in an integrated bachelors/masters program; they had had two years of education coursework prior to this MA year, including a student teaching practicum the prior

semester. During their Masters year, a course in teacher leadership and their programs' wider call for teachers to develop as school leaders made them wonder whether and how the newest teachers might develop as leaders. Their interest initially focused on novice teachers, as they would soon be; they borrowed Feiman-Nemser's definition of novice teachers as those in their first three years (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). The group decided they would also like to learn from the kinds of leadership that teachers in the three years after their initial growth might achieve, figuring that new opportunities might open up after those first three formative years of addressing their own needs. Thus, they decided to do a group inquiry project addressing the question, "according to 1st – 6th year teachers, veteran teachers, and administrators, how do 1st – 6th year teachers develop as teacher leaders?"

This paper shares the results of their inquiry into what new teachers are doing and could be doing to develop as leaders. New teachers and others pointed to the importance of 1st through 6th year teachers engaging in collaboration, becoming involved in school activities, demonstrating a positive attitude to others, and learning to work with diverse others and connect with colleagues in a variety of ways. Survey data regarding the five activities that might let 1st-6th year teachers develop and exert leadership strongly pointed to PLC's as a promising site for nurturing such leadership based both on the amount of time teachers can have in PLC's and teachers' sense of their impact on teacher leadership; interview data confirmed this finding. Various participants identified getting involved with colleagues and school activities as promising first steps for 1st through 6th year teachers to develop the knowledge, reputation, and skills to develop as leaders.

Conceptual Framework: Informal Teacher Leadership and Factors That Support It

Stoelinga (2008) broadly separates leadership into two types. One is formal leadership, which is the more traditional variety of leadership, where there is an established hierarchy from the top-down. A second is informal leadership, which serves to lead from the bottom up; in such leadership, teachers "make connections and exert influence" but aren't part of a traditional hierarchy or power (Stoelinga,

2008; also note a similar distinction between “administrative” and “teacher” forms of leadership in Xu and Patmor, 2012). Others have noted the presence and importance of this informal kind of leadership. Frost (2008) notes the importance of teachers having influence when he defines such teacher leadership as being “not so much about teachers sharing administrative responsibility and taking on formal leadership roles; rather it is about the right of teachers to fulfill their human potential, which necessarily entails having influence over their surroundings and each other” (Frost, 2008, 340). Haycock envisions the complementarity of such informal teacher leadership with the role of formal leaders, noting that teacher leaders “are not big, outsized personalities and they are not the only leaders in their schools. Especially in the larger schools, the principals know that they can’t get it all done themselves. Those are the places that improve.” (Haycock, quoted in Wallace Foundation, 2008, 2). This view of leadership allows for anyone—and encourages everyone—to contribute to the overall goals of the school. Danielson highlights another strand suggested by these definitions; teacher leadership is collaborative, and requires colleagues to support ideas and organize a plan (2007).

Our definition of leadership draws heavily from these ideas about teacher leadership. 1st–6th year teachers, rarely have the opportunity to have formal leadership positions, but our definition of teacher leadership captures a style of leadership that seems more possible for all teachers, including less experienced teachers. We define informal teacher leadership as *using one’s classroom experiences and content knowledge to influence others’ teaching practices and/or to improve the school, including its policies and culture.*

We are not aware of studies that conceptualize or focus on the development of teacher leadership in less experienced teachers; thus, we read literature more broadly to see if we could identify school-based factors associated with supporting new teachers or the development of teacher leadership which might reasonably be expected to contribute to new teachers development of this kind of informal leadership. As illustrated in figure 1 and discussed in the sub-sections below, we identified five factors that could support 1st-6th year teachers exercising and/or developing as leaders.

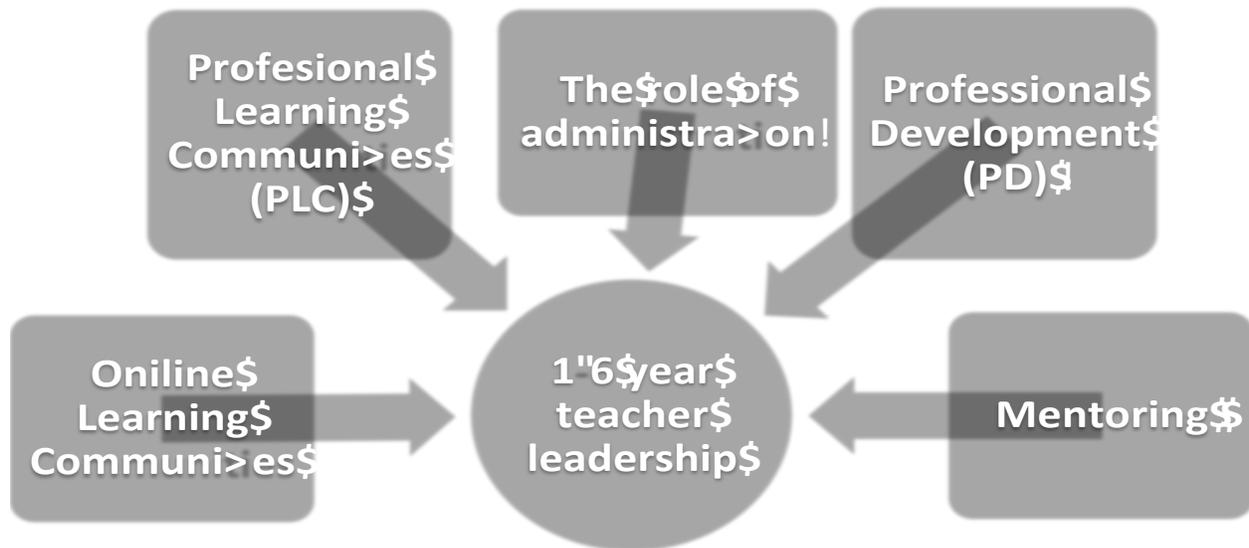


Figure 1: 5 Factors that May Influence 1st - 6th Year Teachers

Professional Development

Professional Development (PD) is a common training tool that serves the purpose of managing the gap between teacher preparation and the larger, standards-based reform occurring in education. Teachers value PD experiences in which they were able to be active participants and PDs where the content itself was woven into new strategies for teaching (Birman, Desimone, Porter and Garet, 2000). Since the inception of No Child Left Behind, professional development has become a means of accountability for student achievement, i.e., a system by which teachers are taught the skills and content needed to teach one's students the content to pass standardized tests (Hochberg and Desimone, 2010). This added pressure to the already stressful life of a 1st – 6th year teacher is why PD should be meaningful and add to each participant's knowledge base so that 1st – 6th year teachers can better serve all students. This kind of support for new teachers is essential, as it also allows for the creation of common strategies and goals amongst a team or department (Birman, Desimone, Porter and Garet, 2000).

Networking allows 1st – 6th year teachers to access the minds and resources of their seasoned colleagues. For 1st – 6th year teachers, professional development also presents itself as an opportunity to expand the professional culture of a school, and work collaboratively with more experienced teachers; it may thus create foundations for the relational qualities and work of informal leadership, and could even allow new teachers to share the insights, experience, or knowledge they have from training and initial teaching experiences in ways that influence colleagues. Lastly, effective professional development provides new teachers with an opportunity for personal reflection on strategies and goals for their classrooms (Hunt and Hunt, 2005). Such reflection opportunities are critical to developing self-efficacy and confidence in the classroom.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are “groups of individuals committed to continuous improvement through shared values and reflection” that promote “critical thinking, reflective dialogue, self-examination, and resolving issues that impede student success” (Rasberry and Mahajan, 2008, 2). These groups are often comprised of teams of varying subject teachers or a sub-group of teachers within a department. These groups are useful to both experienced and 1st – 6th year teachers, as the set times for collaboration allow individual teachers to voice their concerns, share their successes, and build rapport with colleagues. The core purpose of such communities is to improve teachers’ work with students (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth, 2001), which makes their work potentially consistent with our definition of informal leadership improving teaching. Their work may include conversations to establish common goals to be accomplished as a team, analysis of various forms of data to inform instruction, and teacher initiated inquiry and data collection to address problems of practice or the larger school (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Rasberry and Mahajan, 2008).

Online Learning Communities

Similar to PLCs, these online forums provide a safe space in which teachers can discuss pertinent issues within their school or district with other teachers who may or may not be solely from their own

school or district. An example of such an online resource could be a Wiki space. One pilot program utilized such a space online and included newer teachers, experienced teachers, university professors, central office administrators, and principals in addition to the new in-service teachers (Taranto, 2011). The incorporation of administrators and professors in the discussion allowed less experienced teachers to receive answers to questions or concerns from a variety of perspectives and subject specializations. Additionally, the type of format of these online communities allows “opportunities to scale educators’ interactions broadly and efficiently, because online PLCs place no limits on group size and afford busy educators the flexibility to participate and contribute meaningfully to the group when they can (Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Sorensen, Takle, & Moser, 2006). As Cynthia Blitz (2013) also points out, however, these online communities present many challenges. Instruction must be given to participants on how to use the web tools offered, so technological troubleshooting (especially in an integrated veteran/1st – 6th year staff) is likely to become an issue. Additionally, 1th-6th year teachers in particular may feel isolated when operating solely in an online community (Blitz, 2013). All these challenges aside, studies have shown that teachers who partake in such online communities generally feel well supported and are comfortable sharing their thoughts in the slightly less formal setting than traditional PLCs. Such sharing—and opportunities to provide as well as receive advice and work collaboratively—suggest that on-line learning communities could both provide opportunities to exercise leadership and to develop some of the skills and dispositions that allow informal leadership.

The Role of Administration

School administrators play a significant role in influencing novice teachers’ attitudes and behaviors regarding their work because they directly impact teachers’ work assignments, access to resources, and evaluations (Feiman-Nemser & Birkeland, 2012; Youngs 2007). School administrators—and especially school principals—also play a key role in effective teacher induction by supporting or inhibiting programs specifically aimed at supporting new teachers, collaboration among all professionals in a school system, and communication regarding typical new teacher developmental trajectories and needs to other stakeholders like parents and school boards (Feiman-Nemser and Birkeland, 2012). A

principal who supports a balance of autonomy and support for new teachers may foster self-reliance, self-efficacy, and self-esteem the help new teachers develop (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010); these qualities seem like important underpinnings for such teachers to develop as leaders as well as effective instructors.

Mentoring

Those concerned with supporting new teachers often call for mentorship and veteran guidance for new teachers (e.g., Feiman-Nemser & Birkland, 2012; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Mentors can affect novice teacher self-efficacy through bolstering confidence and reducing stress (LoCasale-Crouch, Davis, Wiens, Pianta, 2012). This may explain why teachers that receive mentor support state that they have more satisfaction with their first few years of teaching, and are also more likely to stay within the profession (LoCasale-Crouch et al, 2012). With an effective mentor, teachers can acclimate more quickly to the school environment (LoCasale et al, 2012), which may hasten teachers' ability to connect with others and navigate school cultures and climates in the way necessary to foster collaborative change. In considering our definition of informal leadership, mentors have the potential to provide teachers with essential tools and resources to equip them to have influence on colleagues and the school environment not only through enhancing their instructional effectiveness, but also through helping them develop confidence, connections, and insights into how schools work beyond the realm of student instruction. Since mentors are able to help with acclimation and resources, 1st – 6th year teachers are able to increase their capacity to handle responsibilities, interact with staff, and implement content, enhancing their ability to be active beyond the classroom walls.

Although each piece of induction clearly has value on an individual level, it is a multifaceted, all-encompassing approach that has consistently proven to be most effective in fostering an environment and community most suitable for teacher success (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010). Clear, effective induction plans help to retain teachers, as well as help them “build the capacity of teachers to contribute beyond the classroom from the beginning to the end of one’s career” (Watkins, 2009, p. 84).

Table 1: Possible Supports for 1st-6th Year Teachers Developing Teacher Leadership

Support	Details/Features	Contribution to Teacher Development	Possible Contribution to Teacher Leadership
Professional Development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Occurs multiple times a year within schools 2. Topics range from new technologies to reform measures and teacher accountability. 3. Allow for teachers to have meaningful facetime time and interactions with one another (Networking) 4. Often carried out by presentations or mini-workshops with collections of teachers from various subjects. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exposure to other teachers and their methods can serve to enhance approaches to teaching. 2. Teachers are informed on new strategies and technologies that can be integrated into their classrooms. 3. Teachers also can develop rapport with colleagues and feel more comfortable asking for assistance when they need it. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Skills/knowledge acquired from PD sessions can make teachers more effective, therefore becoming teaching role models for their peers. This, in turn, can lead to other leadership positions in schools. 2. Sometimes teachers can create PD training for their schools if there is a topic that needs to be addressed that is specific to their building. 1st – 6th year teachers could join such a committee and help develop sessions as a formal leader.
Professional Learning Communities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Vary in structure/timing. Some occur during school day, others after it. 2. Provide great collaboration space for groups of teachers/teams. 3. Often include an administrator or department head to facilitate meeting. 4. Meetings are largely focused on student success, progress, and areas of concern. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collaboration is essential support for the development of successful teachers. 2. Frequent interaction with administrators, department heads or even head teachers allows for participating teachers to express concerns, raise questions and solve problems they see arising in the school and classrooms. 3. PLCs view learning as an ongoing process. As such, they give teachers time to reflect, adjust, or change their approaches to better suit the needs of their students. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers in PLCs can take initiative to lead inquiry projects, research, or to tackle issues within the school. 2. Opportunities to share and demonstrate successful techniques in the classroom can push teachers towards informal leadership roles as models of good teaching. 3. With the integration of veteran teachers, 1st – 6th year teachers can be taught the ropes of the school and the resources they should be aware of.
Online Communities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use discussion boards or online forums to support teachers. 2. Include administrators, veteran teachers, professors, and 1st – 6th year teachers. 3. Provides an informal, easily accessible common space for teachers to pose questions and get answers from a variety of sources. Very similar to PLCs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers can get support from many different resources to improve their teaching or resolve classroom issues. 2. Responses can be immediate instead of waiting for a set meeting, allowing teachers to make adjustments sooner rather than later. 3. Much more responsive to the demanding schedule of 1st – 6th year 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participants in Online Communities are able to interact directly with many informal and formal leaders and learn about their roles, beliefs, and values in education. 2. The flexibility and non-formal structure of such communities makes many teachers feel more comfortable voicing significant concerns- that could then turn evolve into district policy changes or projects for

	but aren't limited to specific times/foci.	teachers.	improvement. 3. As Online communities are new, leadership potential still has not been fully explored.
Administration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Need a strong learning environment in order to encourage new teachers. 2. Requires the effective and consistent implementation of research. 3. Key player in development of community of positive learners and collaborators. 4. Give educators a sense of professional autonomy, value their judgment and input. 5. Meet both professional and personal needs by allowing teachers to forge their own identity. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is a need for professional autonomy for teachers as they enter the profession. 2. Principals and administration have a clear impact on the way in which induction is carried out and the components it involves. 3. Set the tone for a collaborative, positive environment. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Because a comprehensive, multifaceted induction plan can prove most effective and beneficial to new teachers, the role of administrator is key in encouraging the development of new teacher leaders. 2. These administrators have the task of creating an environment most conducive to collaboration, autonomy, and agency, therefore possessing a great deal of power in the ways in which a teacher may feel empowered within the school in order to pursue leadership ideals.
Mentoring	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is a great deal of variation in mentoring programs, but generally involves a veteran teacher paired with a 1st – 6th year teacher. 2. According to studies, many teachers cite mentors as significant reasons why they chose to remain in the profession. 3. Mentor's previous experience in the profession contributes to new teacher's perception of effectiveness. 4. Exchange of resources and ideas key to effective mentoring. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mentors help new teachers in developing their practice, while also providing them with information about the school and its norms. 2. Found that it could decrease teacher's stress, increase self-efficacy. 3. There are associations with new teacher's ability to reflect, and a positive impact on student-teacher interactions as a result. 4. Improvement in teacher confidence, how quickly they are able to acclimate to the job. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mentors not only provide valuable insight and resources to new teachers, but also can help reduce stress and build confidence in the school setting, allowing teachers to feel as if they have influence. 2. This increase in self-efficacy can only prove to be beneficial to teachers as they seek to create their own identity in the classroom, as they learn how to build relationships, advocate for themselves, and acclimate more quickly to the expectations of the school. 3. In having a mentor to help with the basics, 1st – 6th year teachers will have a greater capacity to deal with their responsibilities, providing a situation in which they can be active and influential beyond the classroom walls.

Research Questions and Methods

In pursuit of the answer to our research question—“according to 1st – 6th year teachers, veteran teachers, and administrators, how do 1st – 6th year teachers develop as teacher leaders?”—we created sub-questions targeting different aspect of 1st – 6th year teacher leadership:

1. What actions do 1st – 6th year teachers take to be a leader?
2. What could 1st – 6th year teachers do to become better leaders?
3. What type of school environment is conducive to fostering leadership?
4. Are 1st – 6th teachers, veteran teachers, and/or administrators defining teacher leadership differently as a result of CCSS, the new Common Core of State Standards?

This paper shares findings relevant to the first two questions; a separate paper addresses the fourth question. To address these questions, we developed a survey and an interview protocol to create the potential for different data sources to corroborate and complicate findings.

Participants and Sampling

We hoped to gain data from multiple participants in a limited number of specific schools so that we could use multiple participants and forms of data from each school to speak to our third question regarding factors of school environments that foster 1st-6th year teacher leadership. To insure that we were getting experiences that reflect diverse schools, we intentionally sampled for schools: We asked Principals from 8 schools, representing each of the top and both four District Reference Groups out of the nine groups identified by our state. Our state groups schools into these District Reference Groups, or DRGs, to identify levels of support and need for districts. Schools are assigned to DRGs based upon median family income, parental education, parental occupation, percentage of children living in families with a single parent, the percentage of public school children eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals, percentage of children whose families speak a language other than English at home, and total school enrollment. Schools in DRG A are in least need of resources, while DRG I is considered to need the most resources. Though some schools did not accept our invitation, we wound up with one middle

school and one high school that came from the first three DRG categories, and one middle and one high school assigned to the last three DRG categories. In each of the categories we sought, we had a total of two 1st-3rd year teachers, three 4th-6th year teachers, three teacher leaders with 10+ years of experience, and two administrators; we had at least one from each group in the first three DRG categories, i.e., schools with less needs, and at least one in the last three DRG groups.

Schools in the different c groups we invited were based upon geographic proximity to our preservice teachers' current homes or the homes where they could return on weekends to stay with families and upon other kinds of connections the preservice teachers had with schools that facilitated gaining permission to conduct the study; in other words, after intentionally sampling for diversity of DRG, we did use elements of convenience sampling which hastened our ability to gain permission from principals, but may in some way make the results less representative; our analysis of demographic profiles for the participating schools make clear that they have diverse make-up in terms of students' race, first language, and socio-economic status.

In order to seek diverse perspectives, we sought help within each district to identify 1st-3rd year teachers and 4th-6th year teachers. We then randomly selected and invited one of each group to participate in the study, believing that teaches who had moved just past their novice years might shed additional light on the process of teaching growing into being leaders. For all 1st through 6th year teachers at these four schools whom did not do an interview with us, we sent a link to an on-line survey, described below.

We also hoped that talking with experienced teacher leaders and administrators at each school would enrich answers to our research questions. Where schools had more than one principal, we randomly selected and invited one. We asked pre-existing contacts we had at the school, and whose judgment we had reason to trust, to nominate respected educators within each school to solicit three possible "veteran teacher leaders" with 10+ years of teaching experience whom we might interview; we then randomly selected one to invite and interview. For every interview, we insured that the interviewers

did not interview a teacher(s) that they were already familiar with from past experiences to reduce sources of complication in collecting and interpreting data.

Survey Instrument and Data

Our survey, designed for and distributed to 1st – 6th year teachers, was conducted online via SurveyMonkey; a link was emailed to each of the 1st – 6th year teachers in the schools participating in the study except for those who did interviews. In all, 101 teachers were invited to the survey. The total number of responses was 27. Teachers from all subject areas were invited, but professionals in other roles—guidance counselor, nurse, paraprofessional—were not included.

The survey itself consisted of 16 multiple choice or short-answer questions followed by 3 more open-ended questions. The first question asked teachers whether they were 1st-3rd year teachers or 4th-6th year teachers; an option for more experienced teachers or others was provided, and exited participants from the survey in case we incorrectly invited teachers. 16 questions focused on the five types of activities our literature review identified as potentially supportive of new teachers developing leadership. For each of the five activities, we asked teachers for: an estimate of time per month that they spent on that activity; a rating of the degree to which the activity allowed them to *exhibit* informal leadership after providing our definition of that concept; and the degree to which the activity helped the teacher develop skills for informal leadership. The survey closed by asking three open-ended questions:

1. How does your school foster 1st-6th year teacher leadership?
2. What steps could a 1st-6th year teacher take to become a teacher leader?
3. Most 1st through 6th year teachers are fully occupied with teaching. Beyond this core work, however, is there anything you're doing that might influence other professionals within your school?

Interview Instrument and Data

Our survey instrument was designed to open with more open-ended questions about what young teachers do—and what they could do—to develop as teachers. Where our survey opened with questions that focused participants on particular activities that we thought could make a difference, we hoped to

surface—and analyzed data looking for—our interviewee’s own ideas about 1st-6th year teacher leadership. After approaching such questions in broad and open-ended ways, the surveys invite participants to discuss some of the topics our literature raised, to discuss the impact of the CCSS on 1st-6th year teacher leadership, and finally gave one last chance name any additional elements of school environment and any additional approaches that could help 1st-6th year teachers develop leadership. The interview protocols for experienced teachers and administrators get at all of the same elements with minor variations in order or length; the principal protocol was designed to take no more than 30 minutes, while the other protocols were designed to take no more than 45 minutes.

Pairs of researchers conducted all interviews, with one asking as the primary interviewer and one taking notes and providing support, clarification, or follow-up questions at their discretion. We also gained permission to audio-record all interviews, and then transcribed them. Qualitative data from surveys and interviews were read and coded by multiple readers (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) first to identify which data were relevant to which questions, with some data being assigned to multiple questions. Researchers then paired up to develop codes and code data that had been designated as relevant to a specific research question; we used memos and matrices (Huberman & Miles, 1994) to articulate tentative findings and then seek confirming and disconfirming evidence for emergent findings.

Limitations

For many of us taking part in this study, it was our first major research project that we conducted. We participated in modules designed to help us develop and conduct instruments and to work with qualitative data, and had the guidance of Dr. Thomas Levine while conducting all facets of data collection and analysis. While there were thirteen students and one professor taking part in this research, it was limited by both time and access.

We chose to conduct our research in both middle and high schools, which could be limiting considering the different school norms and possibility of different leadership opportunities in these two types of secondary education. Finally, our own subjectivity inevitably enters into our interpretations. While we did not conduct interviews in the schools we have worked in or with teachers we know, we

come from a program that promotes notions of leadership and other values and approaches that may color how we conducted and interpreted our interviews, for instance. We also note that we were mostly interpreting data from teachers outside our own subject area, which might lead us to misinterpret something. As preservice teachers, we also have less knowledge about or experience with the CCCSS and PLCs than our participants. Lastly, all 14 of us conducting this study favor collaboration between teachers. So when the educators we interviewed talked about collaboration, we may have been tempted to ask further questions or interpret that data more favorably in our analysis. We identified such biases during the design and conduct of the study, and made an effort to recognize them in our analyses. All researchers come from a specific position (Haraway, 1991); we hope this depiction of the researchers and their potential limits helps others interpret our work, and also believe that our own subjectivity enhances the potential for us to say something unique (Peshkin, 1991), given our perspective as preservice teachers hoping to develop our own future teacher leadership and one instructor supporting us in this work.

Findings

Participants Spend Significant Time in PLCs and See Them Fostering Leadership

The strongest finding across both our forms of data and our multiple schools and participants was the promise of PLCs as a site for developing 1st-6th year teacher leadership. We first share survey data that suggests the promise of PLCs. Again, our surveys asked 1st-6th year teachers to indicate the following for each of five activities identified in our literature review as potential supports for 1st-6th year teacher leadership: 1) how many hours were spent on a certain activity/theme (per month), 2) the effectiveness* of activities/themes on exerting leadership, and 3) effectiveness* of activities/themes on developing informal leadership qualities. The results of the survey are presented in the table 3 below.

Surveys show new teachers spend much time in—and value—PLCs. In terms of time, on average 1-6 year teachers spent many more hours on collaboration (12.77 hours/month) than any other activity or theme. In fact, the number of hours spent on collaboration with peers was calculated as three times more prevalent than the next most time consuming activity/theme, professional development (4.0 hours/month).

Along with time, effectiveness of activities and themes was the other major topic of interest in the survey. Effectiveness was measured on a scale between 0-3, with 0 representing “none” and 3 demonstrating “a great deal.” Collaboration with peers was the highest ranked activity/theme with a score of 2.1 out of a possible 3. Professional development, mentorship and administrative interaction were all scored very similarly, each ranked between 1.2 and 1.87 out of a possible 3. Online professional communities were the only activity/theme that was scored below 1.0 with a score of 0.85 out of a possible 3.

We similarly converted survey results for the effectiveness of an activity/theme *developing* informal leadership qualities; we used the same numerical values as we just described for survey responses about *exerting* leadership. As shown in table 3, the results were quite similar to the results for question about exerting leadership for each activity; again, collaboration was ranked highest.

While teacher collaboration led the way in terms of time spent in the activity and teachers’ assessment of its capacity to develop leadership, online communities were consistently scored as least important, with very little time per month dedicated to this activity.

*Effectiveness was calculated by assigning numerical values to scale responses, e.g. "a great deal" is represented by 3 while "none" is represented by 0. These numbers are then averaged.

Table 3: Time Spent on and Effectiveness of Leadership Activities

Activities / Themes	Hours Spent on Activity (per month)	Effectiveness of Activities on Exerting Leadership	Effectiveness on Developing Informal Leadership Qualities
Collaborative professional activities with peers.	12.77	2.1	2
Professional development organized by your school.	4	1.2	1.2
Working with a mentor at your school.	3.11	1.87	1.73

Work, communication, and/or meetings directly with administrators.	2.79*	1.22	1.17
On-line professional communities.	0.29	0.85	0.85

Note: Effectiveness was calculated by assigning numerical values to scale responses, e.g. "a great deal" is represented by 3 while "none" is represented by 0. These numbers are then averaged.

*One response from the interviews reported 20 hours per month working with administrators.

Interviewees Discuss Promise and Potential Problems of Professional Learning

Communities. In terms of determining the type of school environment that was best for fostering teacher leadership, none of the teachers talked about the physical space of a school or how that could possibly affect new teacher leadership. A high number of teachers in the interviews discussed how collaborative groups such as PLCs were organized in terms of who ran them and how much power they had in their PLCs. In fact, the term PLC was used more than any other term in the data we were coding for this section. In total, the term PLC was used 35 times across all of the interviews within the data found for this question. The data for this section was coded across all interviews for responses specific to this question. Please refer to the appendix for a more detailed explanation of the process.

While our participants supported PLCs, some had ideas about how they could be improved. “Last year I was on a PLC that just really worked great. You know we all had motivation to kind of get stuff done, use the time wisely, where as sometimes you might be in a PLC with other people who just don’t want to do anything, or their minds might be elsewhere.” This sentiment from the 1st -3rd year teacher was widespread among the other interviewees. In fact, the other six educators interviewed between these two schools also found PLCs to be “helpful” or “useful” because they allowed for “lesson sharing” and collaboration, but also felt improvements could be made. Focusing on these positive reviews of PLCs first, one experienced teacher explained that PLCs let teachers “step outside of [their] comfort zone and find a way to become a leader in small areas such as practice chairing one of the meetings.” Having such an informal rule is a “non-threatening way where new teacher can experience and practice

leadership skills with peers without needing to be in a formal leadership role” (Experienced teacher)

These types of experiences allow 1st – 6th year teachers to feel more valued in their collaborative efforts and give them a voice in talking about the school’s issues.

While positive outlooks on PLCs were echoed throughout both schools, there were also several suggestions for improvements made for them. Just as seven of seven educators agreed PLCs were positive, all seven also had recommendations for improvement. One 1st-3rd year teacher offered advice on how to perhaps improve the quality of the PLCs in his school. Contrary to the survey data, this teacher explains, “I’ve also found that when the PLCs are smaller they’re much better. Some of our PLCs have upwards of 7 people on it, and its just too much. Not everybody gets their voices heard, some people get lost in the mix, some people take advantage of that situation so, it’s much better working in groups of three four um everybody is held more accountable.” Along with the number of people in a PLC, personality types can impact the success or productivity of a PLC. As one veteran teacher stated, “most of the other PLCs are pretty collaborative, equal weighting, equal discussion, equal voice, there are some which are run by one or two of the people who are very adamant about what they believe, and that becomes a little more difficult.” Lastly, teachers from the two schools expressed an additional challenge of PLCs regarding administrative tasks. A different veteran teacher said, “The PLCs are where we formally do [collaboration]... but that’s where we get bogged down in administrative and evaluation stuff.” This suggests the need to attend to the number of participants, the blend of personality types or styles of participants, and

One intriguing possibility emerged from our two special education teachers: their experience raises the possibility that special educators have an advantage when it comes to developing informal leadership skills. One 1st-3rd year teacher explained,

“I think that the PLCs are a big part of [informal leadership], especially as a special ed teacher, a lot of times, general education teachers are in charge of modifying curriculum for the students but they have a lot of questions. [The PLC] has also allowed me to advocate on students’ behalves more strongly than I would have been able to.”

The other special education teacher, a 4th-6th year teacher, confirmed this informal leadership sentiment by adding that “We have that one period where we do nothing but collaborate during the week, meeting with the co-teachers, meeting after school...that allows me to see and hear what other people are doing, learn what people are doing, and then take it back here and modify it further.” It can perhaps be said, from the observations of these two teachers, that special education teachers may have an edge over regular classroom teachers in terms of developing informal leadership within a school.

Actions 1st – 6th Year Teachers Take to be Leaders

In interviews, we asked open-ended questions to understand what actions 1st – 6th year teachers take to be leaders; we found that teachers’ responses often supported themes of collaboration, involvement, and attitude. We explain these themes below.

Collaboration. Collaboration, as an action taken towards leadership, was mentioned sixteen times across our 10 interviews. Participants had different ideas about just how actively or quickly new teachers should become vocal participants in collaboration. One administrator described the potential benefits of 1st – 6th year teachers being heard early and often as they collaborated with colleagues, praising 1st – 6th year teachers’ ability to “seek out and share new learning experiences with their peers. Often times, these newer teachers, 1st through 6th year teachers come with a new energy and a sense of purpose that helps reinvigorate those around them.” On the other end of the spectrum, another administrator recommended more listening, saying, “from my opinion first and second year teachers need to do a lot of listening. They need to listen to their administrators, listen to their students, listen to their parents, they need to listen to any type of instructional strategies that come their way. Listening is a skill that, in my opinion, is diminishing.” One veteran teacher similarly said that:

“Your first year, don’t say anything, just sit there and be quiet. Cause nobody wants to hear it from you and I think that’s fairly true. You’re new and you’re here learning still, and we’ll help you, but because you’re new you don’t really know your way around yet and you might say something that doesn’t sound all that intelligent. So I think there is just a general practice across the board that a brand new teacher, your first year or two, should be seen, but not heard.”

After taking time to learn from others, collaboration became easier for one 1st-3rd year teacher.

“Because then you see those people that are in leadership roles hey maybe I can do that. You learn. It’s all a learning process, so that’s why I’m probably so comfortable kind of throwing things out now. Because I’ve been here sitting in the passenger seat understanding what takes the time and energy...”

It appeared to us that collaboration gave 1st – 6th year teachers the chance to prove themselves to their peers in the early years, whether they worked in schools that valued their voices emerging more quickly or more slowly; this might explain why teachers rated collaboration so highly on the survey (see Table 3).

Involvement and attitude. Involvement and attitude were mentioned nine and thirteen times, respectively. Involvement included things like volunteering, coaching, and attending school events. Five of the nine mentions of involvement came from 1st – 6th year teachers, referring to their personal experience. One 1st-3rd year teacher said, “...but first year teachers I can’t stress enough, just getting involved.” Coaching and volunteering was more common for teachers that were farther into the 1st – 6th year timeframe. One veteran teacher's suggestion was,

“And then 3rd, 4th, 5th year as I said if there’s something that interests you, if there’s a club out there, that you would love to be involved in, maybe approaching the advisors ‘hey I’d love to help out.’ I’m sure almost any club could use some help. Or if you’re more into sports, or even connecting with administration or the different committees within the school.”

One administrator acknowledge the conflict between getting involved in the larger work of the school and the lack of time which 1st – 6th year teachers face. One administrator recommended that despite the lack of time, it is imperative for 1st – 6th year teachers to get involved with school activities and organizations, stating “you have to invest the time... committees – when you’re asked to be on them, are they time consuming? Yes. Do you have time to do them really? No, but do them anyway.”

Carrying a positive attitude emerged as another way 1st – 6th year teachers sought to position themselves for future leadership roles and that others recommended they take step towards becoming leadership. One 1st-3rd year teacher said, “You want to show the school that you are in it for the long

haul, and that you're willing to go extra lengths and do more than what's expected even if you are in the first year. Just to help out, you don't have to lead in your first year." One administrator even believed attitude alone was enough to make one a leader. "So, just by their very nature and the way in which they approach their work, they can come to be seen as leaders within their building or within their grade levels." One administrator also believed that a positive attitude was the key to growth and moving towards leadership, stating, "I think initially you're hesitant but you build confidence and the more they work their way through the process they will work their way through it." While there was not always directly an opportunity to take action within the first few years of teaching, showing a positive attitude towards leadership was important to becoming a leader in future years.

What 1st – 6th Year Teachers Could do to Become Better Leaders

After exploring responses related to what 1st – 6th year teachers actually do in order to exert or develop informal leadership, we separately looked at what all of our interviewees thought new teachers could do to develop and exert informal leadership. Four key actions were identified by more than one participant as useful towards this end, including: (1) getting involved in school activities such as Professional Learning Communities, clubs, and/or other extracurricular activities (2) learning to work with different kinds of people (3) learning to navigate the internal workings of the school (4) socialize with colleagues both within and beyond the school setting.

Getting involved in school activities. The first recommended way for a 1st – 6th year teacher to develop informal leadership in a school is to get involved in school activities including Professional Learning Communities, clubs, and extracurricular activities. This is the most common answer found throughout the interviews from all teachers and administrators; it was mentioned nine times in extensive detail throughout the interviews. According to the teachers and administrators interviewed, PLCs seem to be the most effective way to actively carry out informal leadership qualities. One veteran teacher explained that,

Yes, without a doubt, that is one of the things I was going to suggest, that new teachers have the ability or at least an experience to do is to get into a PLC, because there is a non-

threatening way where new teachers can experience and practice leadership skills with peers without needing to be in a formal leadership role. Also allows you to take charge a little bit of other adults, which is great but in college they don't really teach you to take care of adults" (veteran).

When we separately looked at interview responses to our questions about the kind of school environment that is best for fostering teacher leadership, many teachers discussed collaborative groups such as PLCs, and talked about how they were organized in terms of who ran them and how much power individuals had in their PLCs. The term PLC was used more than any other term in the data we were coding for that question, showing up 35 times across 10 interviews.

While our participants supported PLCs, some had ideas about how they could be improved. "Last year I was on a PLC that just really worked great. You know we all had motivation to kind of get stuff done, use the time wisely, where as sometimes you might be in a PLC with other people who just don't want to do anything, or their minds might be elsewhere." This sentiment from a 1st-3rd year teacher was widespread among the other interviewees. In fact, the other six educators interviewed between these two schools also found PLCs to be "helpful" or "useful" because they allowed for "lesson sharing" and collaboration, but also felt improvements could be made. Focusing on these positive reviews of PLCs first, one veteran teacher explained that PLCs let teachers "step outside of [their] comfort zone and find a way to become a leader in small areas such as practice chairing one of the meetings." Having such an informal rule is a "non-threatening way where new teacher can experience and practice leadership skills with peers without needing to be in a formal leadership role" (Veteran) These types of experiences allow 1st – 6th year teachers to feel more valued in their collaborative efforts and give them a voice in talking about the school's issues.

While positive outlooks on PLCs were widely shared, there were also several suggestions for improvements. A 1st-3rd year teacher offered advice on how to perhaps improve the quality of the PLCs in his school. Contrary to the survey data, this teacher explains, "I've also found that when the PLCs are smaller they're much better. Some of our PLCs have upwards of 7 people on it, and its just too much. Not

everybody gets their voices heard, some people get lost in the mix, some people take advantage of that situation so, it's much better working in groups of three four um everybody is held more accountable.” This trend was seen across schools. Along with the number of people in a PLC, personality types can impact the success or productivity of a PLC. A veteran teacher told us, “most of the other PLCs are pretty collaborative, equal weighting, equal discussion, equal voice, there are some which are run by one or two of the people who are very adamant about what they believe, and that becomes a little more difficult.”

While PLCs were mentioned the most in the responses, other ways for 1st – 6th year teachers to get involved include acting as club advisors, coaches, and supervisors of other after-school activities. Being a part of these activities can help teachers gain vital skills as well as build rapport amongst other students and staff members.

Learning to work with diverse personalities. In addition to becoming involved in school activities and groups, learning to work with the diverse styles of colleagues is another step that some recommend to help 1st-6th year teachers develop as leaders. Mentioned five times in the interviews, it is vital for new teacher leaders to work with differing personalities and collaborate with their peers in a positive manner. Some described a lack of cooperation between teachers. For instance, a 1st-3rd year teacher said, “there was a lot of division in the department. Some of it based off of Common Core, some of it based off of just teaching practices, things that feel more important, less important. And it feels like there was some clear divisions.” This same teacher then explained how the situation was addressed: “And I told them, it's like, there's no reason to choose a side. Everything you guys are arguing is important, you know? So basically I felt like almost like a mediator, it's kind of like I'm the middle man. I'm friends with everybody. And I feel like as a department we've gotten closer a bit, because you know, we're not as divided anymore.”

Learn to navigate the internal workings of the school. The third step a 1st – 6th year teacher can take to becoming an effective informal teacher leader is learning to navigate the internal workings of the school. This can be done by learning what roles the different leaders in the school play. A 1st - 3rd year teacher discussed an approach to this through a personal experience, “Because I've been here sitting

in the passenger seat understanding what takes the time and energy. And I feel comfortable doing it, because I can handle a pretty full plate.” Having the ability to navigate the workings of the school shows the initiative a teacher must take to become a leader.

Socialize with colleagues both within and beyond the school setting. Another way in which new teachers can develop informal leadership is to socialize with peers both within and beyond the school setting and to lead groups that foster community building. One teacher noted that some teachers led jogging groups for other teachers within the school community. These groups allowed teachers to partake in activities that relieved stress, as well as allowed the teacher who led the group to socialize with their peers and develop leadership skills.

Implications

As a result of the interviews we have conducted, these five key action steps are commonly believed to be some of the most effective ways for 1-6 year teachers to develop informal teacher leadership. Taking the initiative to volunteer in extra-curricular activities and beginning to participate—or even play leadership role—within professional learning communities were the most common suggestions made across the interviews, and exhibiting a positive attitude, learning to work with diverse colleagues, and learning to navigate a new school setting also emerged as important methods of exerting leadership or developing as a leader. Although teachers may be overwhelmed in these first few years as they become acclimated to the school and new responsibilities, taking on new, even minor, roles within a school community could facilitate involvement and provide educators with a voice beyond their own classroom.

Given these findings, several things could be done to help facilitate these conditions of support. For example, we suggest that allowing more preparation time for new teachers could be beneficial to creating conditions that will provide teachers with more time and encouragement to take on new roles. This preparation time may allow them to better manage their classroom responsibilities, opening up room for taking initiative in leadership roles in extracurricular activities, committees, and other opportunities beyond the classroom. Similar to this preparation time, it could also be valuable to provide teachers with explicit, built in opportunities throughout the school day and year for time with professional learning

communities, mentor teachers, and other forms of support. Through our data, it is clear that this time with mentor teachers and professional learning communities offer the most efficient and productive means of collaboration and support. In ensuring that this time is facilitated throughout the school, it may be more likely that teachers feel supported and valued enough to develop their voices in an informal setting, while also establishing more confidence and opportunities for leadership actions and roles.

Beyond methods of fostering support, it could be advantageous for the administration within schools to create an accessible system for teachers in a school community to identify and volunteer for different events, extracurricular opportunities, and leadership roles. While veteran teachers may be familiar with the opportunities available within a school, new teachers may need more assistance in identifying these possibilities. Rather than having to spend time and effort consistently seeking out these possibilities, teachers could have access to a database or common system that describes the opportunities available, creating a more structured system of support and potential opportunities.

Funding could also be extremely valuable to districts as they move forward in creating opportunities for developing leadership in their new teachers. In creating state and local funding initiatives that emphasize the creation of time for teachers to participate in activities outside of the classroom and within the school community, schools may be more willing and able to take these steps to enhance self-efficacy, participation, and collaboration in new teachers. Schools may take this funding to provide professional development opportunities for teachers, allowing individuals to attend conferences and other professional opportunities that work to enhance instructional practices, collaborative tendencies, and structured time to foster leadership roles and actions. By taking these steps, 1st-6th year teachers will be able to build the rapport and relationships as well as the skills to act as leaders within their school environment.

Conclusions

Looking at the data as a whole, some common themes run between the questions we have asked. One theme that resonated most prominently throughout many sections of this study was the idea of collaboration. Across the questions that were asked in this study, ideas such as involvement in one's

school, participating openly in learning communities and socializing with colleagues are just some of the many ideas that were stated as important for 1st-6th year teachers development of leadership skills. While these ideas should not be considered synonyms for collaboration, ideas such as involvement, learning communities and socializing often have large overlaps with this concept. With collaboration being a theme that was discussed across data points, the study seems to suggest that the more 1st-6th year teachers are brought into contact with their colleagues and have a floor to have their voices heard and respected, the more successful these teachers will be in developing as leaders. Comparing the statements from staff members who are assigned to a designated PLC to those of staff members who were not, the study appears to suggest that when 1st-6th year teachers are made a central part of the school environment or learning community, they appear have a higher opinion of their school as a whole. The results from the study suggests that this is possible because in the interviews we conducted, classroom teachers who had a predetermined PLC, appeared to have a higher opinion of the PLCs they were taking part in than their peers who were merely attached onto other PLCs (i.e. Special Education Teachers).

This difference of opinion between these two groups of teachers suggests that while collaboration does have benefits for 1st-6th year teachers developing leadership, there are areas for improvement. One of the areas that the data appeared to state needs improvement is in the continuity of collaboration efforts across a school. Teachers who were not assigned to a specific PLC or other form of learning community said that there is a discontinuity in the structure of PLCs and learning communities in some of their schools. This lack of a homogenous structure for learning communities within a school could hurt both non-classrooms and classroom teachers alike. Staff members who do not have their own classroom could be attached to a variety of learning communities throughout a school year. Therefore, if these teachers attend multiple PLCs or other learning communities throughout the school year, the way they operate in terms of who leads and what gets done in this professional settings could vary greatly. This variance could cause teachers who are not designated to a specific PLC or learning community to form more negative feelings on these professional cultures as they could appear disconnected to them. Additionally, classroom teachers who are assigned to a specific PLC or learning community might also not be

benefiting as much as they could be from PLCs because there is a discontinuity among PLC structure at their schools. If there is such a discontinuity among PLC structure then teachers may not have opportunities for things such as interdisciplinary opportunities because PLCs in a school differ between subject areas and or grade levels.

The data from this study appears to say that 1st-6th year teachers develop leadership as they are given the opportunity to learn about their school environment and have a platform to have their voices heard. While the data implies that skills under the realm of collaboration help foster leadership, the data also puts forth suggestions as to why 1st-6th year teachers fail to develop as leaders. One reason suggested from the data as to why teachers fail to develop leadership is that there is a discontinuity within schools in terms of how PLCs and other learning communities are structured between grade levels and teams. When there is discontinuity in structures among PLCs and learning communities within a school, it will not only isolate teachers into a smaller communities but it also hurts opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. Overall, developing leadership has to come from ones' desire to be a leader. However, a teacher must also be supported in their endeavor or they will surely fail. Thus, 1st-6th year teachers must not only take up opportunities for collaboration on their own but the schools they work in must also be willing and able to provide teachers with opportunities for involvement and structure their school in a way that promotes collaboration across subject areas and grade levels.

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