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Exploring the Impact of the New CCSS on Definitions of Teacher Leadership and 1st-6th Year Teachers' Opportunities to Develop as Leaders

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Paper prepared for a symposium, Helping 1st through 6th Year Secondary Teachers Develop As
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Abstract:

Scholars have called for promoting teacher leadership as a way to improve teaching and schools. Few, however, have addressed the nature of—or means of developing—teacher leadership in teachers beginning their career. This paper and the prior one for this conference symposium emerges out of an inquiry project by 13 preservice teachers who wanted to know what 1st through teachers actually do—and what such teachers could do—to develop as teacher leaders. The second paper defined what new teachers say they are doing and think they could be doing to develop leadership skills during their first six years in the profession. This paper uses the same data set to considers the part of our data relevant to the new Common Core of State Standards, and the changes being fostered by CCSS in the four participating secondary schools we studied. This paper considers whether the definition of teacher leadership is changing at all as a result of the CCSS, and whether CCSS is creating new opportunities and/or challenges for 1st-6th year teachers developing as leaders. The results are mixed; these exploratory data suggest that the CCSS is creating opportunities for 1st-6th year teachers to lead based upon some of the qualities and training they bring to their schools, but also suggests that the CCSS simultaneously creates pressures and forces which can limit 1st-6th year teachers development of leadership skills.

Exploring the Impact of the New CCSS on Definitions of Teacher Leadership and 1st-6th year Teachers Opportunities to Develop as Leaders

This is the third of three papers in a symposium on supporting 1st-6th year teachers' development of pedagogical and leadership skills. The first paper identified conditions supporting the development of 1st to 3rd year teachers in terms of basic induction into the field. The second paper defined what new teachers say they are doing and think they could be doing to develop leadership skills during their first six years in the profession. We also included the perspective of some veteran teachers and administrators regarding these questions, and look within our data to identify some school level conditions or factors that can support the development of 1st through 6th year teacher leadership.

This paper uses the same data set and methods as we have described in the second paper; thus, we are not completely redescribing the methods and data set. [Readers who receive this paper without the others can email Thomas.levine@uconn.edu for copies of the first two papers for this symposium.] The larger study that undergirded the second and third papers of this symposium addressed this overarching question: “according to 1st – 6th year teachers, veteran teachers, and administrators, how do 1st – 6th year teachers develop as teacher leaders?” While asking this question, we sought to understand whether the new Common Core of State Standards, or CCSS, was having any impact on both a definition of leadership and the ability of 1st through 6th year teachers to exercise or develop leadership in schools. Thus, this paper addresses two research questions:

1. Are 1st-6th year Teachers, Veteran Teachers, and/or Administrators Defining Teacher Leadership Differently as a Result of CCSS, the New Common Core State Standards?

2. Is Common Core Affecting How New Teachers Develop Leadership?

Context: The Common Core of State Standards

In 2009, the United States created an initiative to set consistent academic standards for mathematics and literacy throughout the country's school systems. According to the Common Core Standards Initiative sponsored by the National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, these standards delineate what students will be able to do and know by the end of each grade level (Common Core State Standards Initiative). Common Core has received both support and criticism from the public, including teachers throughout the country. Some feel that the implementation of Common Core is rushed, and there is much to be desired in terms of the efficiency of its implementation in schools. In considering our research concerning how these new standards could be impacting new teacher leadership, we encountered a variety of responses and sentiment. In every district where we collected data, Common Core and its impact on new teacher leadership can be split up into three major categories. Essentially, Common Core has influenced [1] the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders within schools, [2] has allowed both benefits and hindrances to the development of teacher leadership, and [3] creates various challenges for teachers and administrators dependent on grade level, subject area, level of experience, and more general challenges that a school may face.

Core Interview Questions informing This Paper's Findings

The findings for this section are largely drawn from the interview portion of our data set. As a reminder, we asked newer teachers the following questions about CCSS; we retain their numbering to provide a sense where, out of our seventeen questions, these questions fell:

12.) Has Common Core had an impact on the ways in which your school supports you?

13.) Q4: How has Common Core affected a novice teacher's capacity, or agency, to be a leader within his/her school?

14.) We have heard from some teachers that the CCSS is affecting teacher morale, stress levels, and other elements of life in schools. Do you feel that CCSS is affecting the environment in which novice teachers might develop informal leadership? If so, how?

We asked similar questions to experienced teachers in the study and complimentary questions to administrators participating in the study, giving them up to three interview questions related to CCSS:

3.) Has Common Core had an impact on the way the school can support informal leadership among 1st-6th year teachers?

4.) How has Common Core affected a 1st-6th year teacher's agency, or capacity to be a leader, within his/her school?

5.) (*Optional: If felt as though not answered*) Do you feel that CCSS is affecting the environment in which 1st-6th year teachers might develop informal leadership? If so, how?

We engaged in multiple readings, coding, and memoing about our findings. At least two teacher researchers were at the core of the analysis leading to these findings, and various others of our group of thirteen teacher researchers read memos or drafts of the final report at various times, providing feedback, questions, and suggestions that led us to refine findings. Dr. Tom Levine, the teacher of the seminar for which we did the underlying research project, has also provided feedback and requests for revision. He was involved with writing the opening section of this paper, up to this point, but all of the findings from this point on emerged from data analysis and articulation of findings that we—the authors of this paper—did as a pair of teacher researchers.

Findings

New Roles and Responsibilities.

Although Common Core impacted individuals from various content areas, grade levels, experience levels, and positions within the school in different ways, it is clear that it has had an impact on the implementation of instruction within individual classrooms, as well as the role that administrators play in the academic setting. Five individuals ranging across three different DRGs indicated that Common Core has made an impact to some degree on how new teachers develop leadership skills. For example, DRG A 4-6¹ says, “There are expectations that you’re not only teaching your content, at least for history, not only teaching your content, but also this other component of writing. And it was a lot. It was a beast this year.” Beyond this, DRG A Administrator stated, “For first through sixth year teachers, Common Core is huge. The curriculum is what teachers should be focused on. What are you teaching? What should you be

¹ The district reference group, or DRG, is explained in the 2nd paper; the 4-6 indicates a range of years, i.e., a 4th-6th teacher from DRG A school is DRGA4-6.

doing? And then from the curriculum you build your instructional strategies. It's your bible. You know, your blueprint for the course."

New teachers have been impacted differently by the new Common Core State Standards. While some say that it has very much impacted their instructional capacity and agency in the school, others have argued that Common Core has not dramatically impacted their practice. However, while there is an impact on instruction, some teachers who we interviewed that have most recently entered the profession feel as if there is little impact on their instructional practices. DRG C 1-3 says, "Being such a new teacher, I mean all I've ever known is Common Core. You know? So, I can't say it's affected me all that much. Because I don't know how I would be a different teacher." Despite this lack of explicit impact, DRG C 1-3 goes on to comment that, "I see how it's affecting other teachers, and I see how they need to be more responsible and more credible with what they're doing, more justification maybe? Gone are the days doing this activity because it's something you would like to do. You need a rationale, you need to have standards that go along with it." DRG H Administrator further said, "Our first year teachers are so above the curve right now it's unbelievable. You guys are coming in trained at such a high level...And it is an advantage coming in at the cusp of all the things that are happening in education." DRG G 4-6 echoes the thoughts of both DRG C 1-3 and DRG H Administrator and says, "I don't actually remember a time teaching before these Common Core." Our data suggests that new teachers are experiencing the implementation of Common Core differently than more experienced teachers, and in some cases, they seem to hold an advantage in regard to comfort level and preparedness.

Beyond level of experience, in considering the data of our interview pool, it seems that certain content areas have seen no impact with Common Core, as one science teacher at DRG C

4-6 claimed that Common Core has not impacted his very specific discipline within science at this point in time. “Common Core hasn’t affected me because I’m working in a specific field of science, so it hasn’t made its way to changing what I do yet. DRG G 4-6 also made a similar statement, and further referenced the particular group of students one works with to be an indicator of impact.

“Well, the thing is that Common Core doesn’t really apply to my students...I’m still hitting the Common Core, but not the same way...when you teach I feel most people hit the standards, but now they’re numbered and written in a way that tracked by grade level, which my students mostly can’t work with yet.”

One special education teacher in DRG G 1-3 argued that the Common Core Standards have impacted the manner in which she exhibits leadership. This individual claimed that Common Core does a disservice to special education students, as credit recovery levels of math, designed to help students who have previously failed a course, have been removed from the curriculum, putting a great deal of pressure upon students to perform in more rigid categories.

“For me, the math department they are trying to preserve the integrity of what geometry or algebra is and I get that, but also we are not servicing our students because now that the CC is here the curriculum is much harder and the students are just falling more and more behind and the credit recovery is disappearing. So there’s no support from the math end despite their good intentions, but (we struggle to keep kids in general ed classes and try not to pull them out into a special ed math class because that makes them feel not great about themselves, but that’s the only option we are kind of leaving ourselves. So it does kind of put tension on whether or not we get support from the leadership.”

Essentially, the Common Core Standards have impacted the various stakeholders in the field of education in different ways. However, as stated before, these factors vary based on discipline, grade level, range of experience, and public perceptions towards Common Core and the effect it is having on the field of education.

Developing Leadership

Although our research focuses on the ways in which new teachers develop leadership, we have established that different teachers are impacted by the Common Core Standards in different ways. Responses in interviews ranged from little to no effect, to a more significant impact on the manner in which 1st-6th year teachers develop leadership skills. Although many teachers did not comment explicitly on how CCSS impacts how new teachers develop leadership skills, many talked about the impact that the standards have had on their use of time as well as teacher morale. For example, DRG A 4-6 says,

“There is a lot more accountability, like it’s high stakes...so if I’m a new teacher then I don’t want to be at this committee and run this organization or student council or whatever it may be; I want to make sure I get evaluated as a 3 or a 4 so I have a job next year. That’s probably true, when I was a new teacher and there was a bunch of new other teachers, like we are like ‘psh’ (laughs) I’m drowning here in Common Core.”

However, this quote does not consistently represent the sentiment of all individuals interviewed throughout the various districts. Instead, it illustrates a unique perspective regarding the impact on the roles new teachers are willing to take on as a result of the implementation of Common Core, as well as the way in which one feels about their agency. In considering the more beneficial aspects of Common Core in relation to teacher leadership, DRG G 4-6 says, “I would

be in math and sit in front of the projector and just sit and flip page to page and I think now it's much more all over the place, in a good way. So I think there is more room for collaboration as there are bumps in the road or hiccups that you need to address. Probably because everyone is a little terrified."

While both these two previous views are either distinctly positive or distinctly negative in regard to impact on instruction and leadership, yet another viewpoint concludes that there is no impact at all due to Common Core. Instead, three teachers from two different DRGs speculated that leadership should be credited to other variables. DRG H Administrator says, "I don't think knowing the Common Core and having a sense of that increases your capacity to be a leader. I would say being trained at a high level, being professional, and also timing your natural attributes in having opportunities to display and learn give you an opportunity to be a leader. So I don't think that knowing the Common Core impacts leadership." DRG G Veteran speculates that new teachers may have an advantage, but that it is not explicit. "The correlation between Common Core and leadership to me is thin. I can see where it's possible, now that we're all talking about at least the same general types of structure in the classroom and within curricula that it might be easier for beginning teachers to lead groups because it's more structure in what we're doing and how we're doing it, but I don't see a direct tie."

Challenges

Similar to the impact on instruction that has been seen with the emergence of new roles and responsibilities, various challenges have developed with the implementation of Common Core in regard to grade level, content area, and experience levels. For example, as stated before, DRG G 1-3 discussed the impact of Common Core on special education, and the way in which it creates difficulties in terms of curriculum for special education students.

“I’m very familiar with the Common Core, but I hate it. I hate it for Special Ed. Maybe not for general ed. students. But I dislike it greatly for special ed...So for a typical student Common Core is good, but for a special education student, it creates a whole new set of issues that requires fighting for. It puts tension on leadership roles. Pressure comes from above and below and it makes things really hard for these kids.”

Essentially, there are new pressures put on Special Education students and teachers to adapt rather than truly advocate for what is best for their students.

However, for those in the social studies content area, there has been little impact in terms of challenges in implementation and change in instruction. Two teachers, both within DRG C, claimed that their department had already been working with the expectations outlined within Common Core, and that there was little change within the actual implementation of instruction throughout the document. As discussed in reference to new roles and responsibilities, DRG C Veteran said, “Because when Common Core first came out at the high school level we sat down with it, and our basic reaction was we do just about all this already.” However, the same individual also acknowledged that this might be different across grade levels, especially the elementary levels. “But from what we hear, the effect on the lower levels has been significant. And much more difficult. So for us, it didn’t affect us much.”

The level of experience of a teacher also impacts how they view challenges that Common Core presents. As stated earlier, newer teachers within particular content areas, such as social studies, feel as if Common Core is all they have known, and it has not affected much in terms of their teaching. However, they still acknowledge the impact on other grade levels and subjects.

Although data concerning Common Core and its impact upon new teachers and the development of leadership did not draw many responses from participating teachers across DRGs, the data collected shows a broad range of sentiment and perspective regarding the implementation of Common Core standards. Eight teachers responded to questions regarding Common Core, and five indicated that there is some degree of impact on instruction, time, and curriculum within the school. Three others saw no direct correlation to teacher leadership, but speculated that Common Core may provide opportunities for development. Two of these three individuals commented on collaboration, and one stated that new teachers are coming in with this new knowledge, and are able to remain “ahead of the curve.” The most consistent answers were drawn from the new teacher perspectives in regard to how Common Core has impacted instruction based on content area, grade level, and the range of experience in the classroom. Based on discussion with the DRG –C Veteran, Common Core offers a chance for new teachers to practice teacher leadership. With the majority of new teachers having recently graduated from teacher prep programs they may have more familiarity with the Common Core Standards. This allows these teachers a certain degree of expertise that more experienced teachers may not have in understanding the requirements of the Common Core.

Implications

With these challenges in mind, there are several things that administrators and policy makers could try, that may improve the integration of the Common Core in schools. Based on the pushback from the DRG 1-3 teacher, policy makers could differentiate aspects of the Common Core for special education classrooms and teachers. While veteran teachers generally have more developed pedagogy and knowledge of school routines, Common Core may be new to them.

This is an excellent opportunity for some beginning teachers to get involved with other teachers in work related to infusing Common Core in the curriculum.

In sum, as we explored the impact of the CCSS on teacher leadership in general, and the possibility of 1st-6th year teachers developing such leadership in particular, the results are mixed. These exploratory data suggest that the CCSS is creating opportunities for 1st-6th year teachers to lead based upon some of the qualities and training they bring to their schools, but also suggests that the CCSS simultaneously creates pressures and forces which can limit 1st-6th year teachers development of leadership skills. Figure 1 summarizes the key factors resulting from CCSS that we identified, at least in our four participating schools, which promote and hinder 1st-6th year teachers developing as leaders.

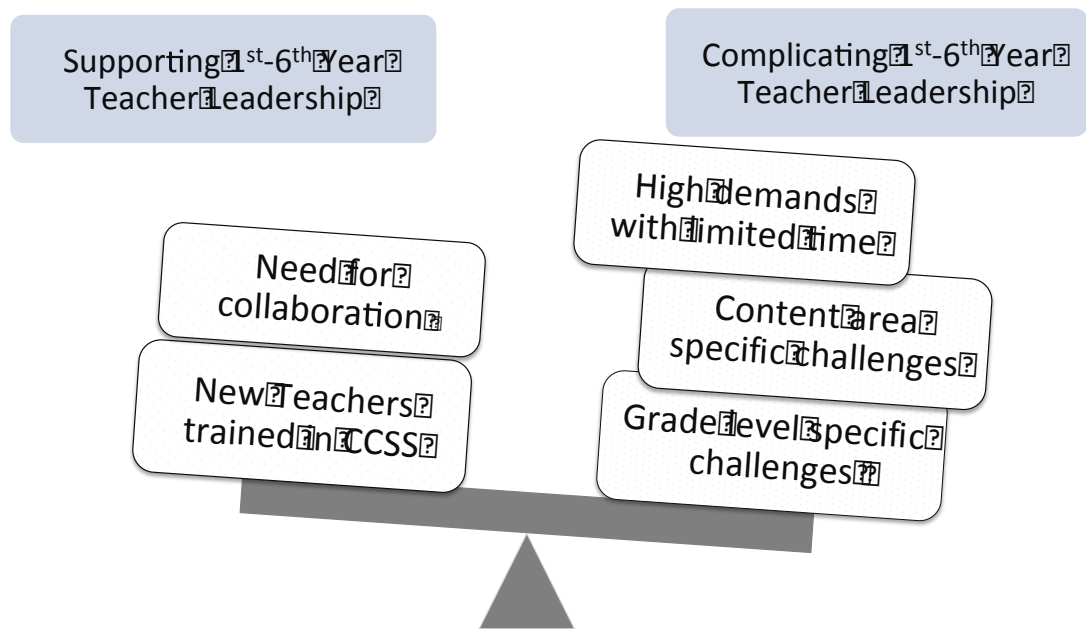


Figure 1: How CCSS can both support and complicate 1st-6th year teachers developing as teacher leaders