Undergraduate Peer Mentors as Teacher Leaders: Successful Starts

Dawn Wallin
University of Saskatchewan, CANADA

Erin DeLathouwer
University of Saskatchewan, CANADA

Jordan Adilman
University of Saskatchewan, CANADA

Jessie Hoffart
University of Saskatchewan, CANADA

Kathy Prior-Hildebrandt
University of Saskatchewan, CANADA

This paper discusses the results of a qualitative study that examined the professional growth of undergraduate peer mentors as teacher leaders during an innovative Learning Community initiative designed for a teacher education program at the University of Saskatchewan. The paper describes the extent to which peer mentors exhibited characteristics of teacher leadership during the enactment of this role. Focus group and individual interview data were analyzed using a conceptual framework developed by Hunzicker (2012) that considers how teacher leadership is enacted in three areas: (a) participation in a professional community, (b) growing and developing professionally, and (c) demonstrating professionalism. The paper concludes by suggesting that the Learning Community's initiative provides an exciting opportunity to foster the development of teacher leadership for peer mentors during their undergraduate teacher education preparation.

Keywords: teacher leadership; peer mentorship; teacher preparation

Introduction

The literature on teacher leadership is replete with commentary on the characteristics of teacher leadership (Angelle & Deyhart, 2011; Frost, 2012), the spheres of emphasis for teacher leaders (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2010; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), and frameworks for understanding teacher leadership (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009; Hunzicker, 2012). However, almost all of the literature on teacher leadership focuses on in-service teachers. What is missing in this literature is a focus on how undergraduate teacher education preparation programs might better prepare teacher candidates for teacher leadership opportunities. Teacher education programs generally focus on preparing teacher candidates to lead classrooms; very few programs help prepare teacher candidates for leading peers.

The impetus for this study came out of an innovation that was added to a newly approved four-year direct entry teacher education program at the University of Saskatchewan. Learning Communities for first- and second-year education students were introduced for the first time, facilitated by peer mentors who are third- and fourth-year students. As the innovation unfolded, attention shifted to not only the impact of Learning Communities on first- and second-year students, but also the impact on peer mentors who were facilitating weekly sessions with their peers. This article presents the findings of two focus groups and individual interviews with peer mentors that examined the extent to which the enactment of the role fostered teacher leadership skills. The findings are organized through a conceptual framework developed by Hunzicker (2012) that considers how teacher leadership is enacted in three areas: (a) participation in a professional community, (b) growing and developing professionally, and (c) demonstrating professionalism. The paper concludes with final reflections on the value of embedded teacher leadership opportunities within teacher education programs.

Background

In 2015, the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan was approved to offer a four-year direct entry program. Students needed to complete the equivalent of two years of arts and science courses to complete requirements for their teaching areas, but they were registered as education students from the beginning of the four-year program. Although curricular changes were being planned to include education courses during first and second years, at the time of the study, the requirements had not yet changed. As a consequence, students completed a 2+2 model of course study, with the arts and science courses offered in the first and second year, and the upper year education courses offered in years three and four. Arts and science courses were provided in buildings separate from the College of Education building. Consequently, the College of Education wanted to ensure education students in years one and two felt that they were connected to the college, and that supports were provided to offset higher attrition rates known to occur in the first two years of undergraduate study in the College of Arts and Science. In addition, the college wanted to ensure that students in years one and two of the program were exposed to educational concepts, networks of professionals, and faculty members early in the program to be better prepared for their upper years education coursework.

To achieve these ends, the College of Education introduced Learning Communities for first and second year students. The team responsible for the design of the Learning Communities included the associate dean of the undergraduate program, the Learning Communities' coordinator, and the Learning Communities' advisor. Group members had extensive experience in K-12 schools as teachers and administrators, and in post-secondary education as faculty members, field experience supervisors, Learning Community designers, and advisors.

Learning Communities were designed to support education students as post-secondary learners, teacher educators, and public intellectuals. Operating as a series of weekly one-hour sessions, the motto of the Learning Communities is, "Be the learner you want to teach; become a teacher of learners." The sessions intentionally focused on student support and learning that moves from a more internal, campus-based orientation of self-awareness to a broader perspective of self in society. In addition, each semester focused on orienting students to different teacher education concepts and networks of professionals. During this first year of implementation, all students were encouraged to register in Learning Communities, but they were not required to do so.

Peer mentors facilitated Learning Communities in third and fourth years of study. Although the extent of their education coursework and field experiences varied, they all had the common experience of successful completion of their first and second years in arts and science teaching areas. Each Learning Community was co-facilitated by two peer mentors who worked together to plan the sessions. In order to support the peer mentors who volunteered for the role, the Learning Communities team put in place a peer mentor orientation during each term. Weekly sessions for peer mentors led by the Learning Communities' coordinator and Learning Communities' advisor modeled a framework for facilitation focused on common goals for each week, but could be tailored by peer mentors based on their facilitation styles and needs of the group. The promotion of student learning was a major factor in the design of the Learning Communities' initiative, as the intent was to support students as post-secondary learners, but also as educators who could better serve the learning needs of students they will eventually teach. The coordinator and advisor played integral roles in acquiring guests for the Learning Communities, creating and conducting peer mentor orientation and training sessions, facilitating peer mentor weekly professional development (PD) sessions, and acting as college supports for student/peer mentor queries, concerns, and/or needs throughout the term. Weekly peer mentor PD sessions helped peer mentors talk through the content of the week as a facilitation team. During the sessions, the coordinator and advisor modeled ways of working with peers, possible facilitation strategies, team building strategies, ideas for shaping content, communication strategies for peers and/or guests, and open forums for peer mentors to voice any concerns or ideas about future group needs.

Peer mentors volunteered for the role through an application process sent out by the Undergraduate Programs Office. These individuals (male and female) represented a variety of teaching areas, teaching levels (early, middle and senior), and program routes, including indigenous program routes. Overall, they were a highly motivated group of students who were committed to the student experience, and to developing their own repertoire of skills and knowledge that could extend their course learning and facilitate a means of gaining teaching experience. Peer mentors were responsible for the coordination and facilitation of weekly Learning Community hours for first and second year students. They shaped the weekly curriculum of each Learning Community hour, and incorporated aspects of the K-12 Saskatchewan school curricula into each session. They learned to respond to the needs of the group such that flexible adaptations were incorporated as necessary. All peer mentors had to facilitate sessions that included professional educators, faculty members, and community members. Furthermore, they worked in co-teaching situations that created a sense of security, but also a learning environment for the co-construction of leadership and instructional skills. The creation of collegial norms was crafted overtly in each Learning Community, as well as within the weekly peer mentor sessions.

Teacher Leadership

According to Struyve, Meredith, and Gielen (2014), definitions of teacher leadership

> remain rather open with respect to the specific forms teacher leadership can take (formal vs. non-formal, full-time vs. part-time, in the school vs. exceeding the school borders), as well as to the actual responsibilities that a teacher leader embraces (from the development of a school vision or pedagogical project to the support of teachers' daily practice. (p. 206)

One of the most often cited sources on teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004) suggests that it is often focused on the following factors: coordination and management, school or district curriculum work, professional development of colleagues, participation in school change/improvement, engaging in parent and community involvement, contributing to the profession, and mentoring preservice teachers. Others have added to this list the creation of collegial norms (Harris, 2005), and student learning (Angelle & Deyhart, 2011; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012).

The literature base on teacher leadership tends to focus on the characteristics of teacher leaders who hold a variety of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The literature supports a view that teacher leaders hold expertise in some area of teaching and learning (Brondyk & Stanulis, 2014; Carver, Margolis, & Williams, 2013; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012), and demonstrate competence in teaching and learning (Crowther et al., 2009; Carver et al., 2013; Lai & Cheung, 2015). As a consequence, they gain credibility with peers (Snell & Swanson, 2000). As their successes and networks increase over time, their understanding of formal and informal paths of influence grows (Brondyk & Stanulis, 2014; Cooper et al., 2015).

Teacher leaders also tend to have developed a number of skills that support their efforts. They are often said to be planners (Bowman, 2004; Carver et al., 2013) who have good facilitation and presentation skills (Angelle & Deyhart, 2011; Frost, 2012), and know how to marshal resources to support their efforts (Angelle & Deyhart, 2011; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leaders are able to build trusting relationships with colleagues because of strong interpersonal and intrapersonal skills (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Frost, 2012; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). They can communicate effectively (Cooper et al., 2015; Little, 2006; Wood, 2007), are politically savvy (Carver et al., 2013; Nieto, 2007), and have the capacity to assess group needs (Brondyk & Stanulis, 2014). As such, they break down barriers as they build community, support, and vision (Angelle & Deyhart, 2011; Bowman, 2004; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). By doing so they take initiative (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Frost, 2012; Lai & Cheung, 2015), and translate ideas into action (Danielson, 2007; Jacobs, Beck, & Crowell, 2014; Lai & Cheung, 2015; Poekert, 2012).

Teacher leaders hold particular dispositions towards teaching, learning, and leading. They are often community-minded lifelong learners with a sense of integrity (Angelle & Deyhart, 2011; Bowman, 2004) and moral purpose (Frost, 2012; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010). They are internally driven (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012), change-oriented individuals who take risks (Angelle & Deyhart, 2011; Brondyk & Stanulis, 2014; Spillane 2006). They tend to be open-minded, and enthusiastic (Danielson, 2007; Poekert, 2012). Teacher leaders are also highly collaborative (Angelle & Deyhart, 2011; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010) and inclusive (Bolam et

al., 2005; Frost, 2012). They seek feedback on their efforts (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012), and accept responsibility (Frost, 2012).

With respect to the actions of teacher leaders, Hunzicker (2012) developed a conceptual framework for studying teacher leadership based on Danielson's (2007) framework for teaching. In this framework, teacher leadership is described by three components: (a) participation in a professional community, (b) professional growth over time, and (c) the demonstration of professionalism. Participating in a learning community includes developing relationships with colleagues, involvement in a culture of professional inquiry, service to the school, and participation in school and district projects. The second component, developing professionally, includes the enhancement of content knowledge and pedagogical skill, receptivity to feedback from colleagues, and service to the profession. The final component, demonstrating professionalism, includes acting with integrity and ethical conduct, providing service to students, engaging in advocacy and decision-making, and compliance with school and district regulations.

Moreover, Hunzicker (2012) suggests that "teacher leaders are best prepared through a combination of job-embedded professional development and collaborative experiences" (p. 268). He cites Lipton and Wellman (2007) who indicate that professional development for teachers should emphasize collaboration, and prepare teachers to "differentiate their leadership approach based on colleagues' knowledge, experience, readiness and needs" (p. 268). Such opportunities should include follow-up activities that promote reflection and reinforce learning in collaborative, job-embedded experiences. In his view, such professional learning opportunities prepare teacher leaders "through personalized, work-based and process-rich experiences' paired with opportunities for practice, high-quality feedback and time to reflect" (p. 269). As Poekert (2012) suggests:

> Effectively done, professional development serves as the impetus for the professionalization of teaching and the development of teachers' leadership skills toward influencing and improving the practice of their colleagues (Murphy 2005). In short, teacher leadership can result from effective professional development for teachers and principals. (p. 170)

To that end, the Learning Communities' initiative served as a job-embedded professional growth opportunity for peer mentors for the development of teacher leadership skills.

Method

Rather than focusing on an *a priori* definition of teacher leadership, this study examined the concept from the experience of third- and fourth-year teacher candidates who served as peer mentors in the teacher education program. Given their unique leadership role in the program, it was most interesting to learn how these teacher aspirants conceptualized teacher leadership. Our interest was similar to that presented by Angelle and Deyhart (2011) who suggested:

> Although many studies of the concept of teacher leadership can be found, perceptions of the components of teacher leadership in school contexts by teachers themselves have largely been lacking in the literature. Researchers have generally failed to examine differences in perceptions of teacher leadership by those who practice the concept. (p. 142)

Subsequently, in this study teacher leadership is explored from the perspectives of peer mentors who were practicing such roles in their work with Learning Communities.

The findings of this study are based on two semi-structured focus groups and interviews held with 9 of the 30 peer mentors who volunteered to support Learning Communities for first- and second-year students during the 2016-2017 academic year. Interviews provided an opportunity for peer mentors whose schedules precluded them from being available for the focus group sessions to participate. In addition, given the timing of ethics approval, the data collection took place after the academic term was over, which likely minimized the number of peer mentors who were available to be interviewed. Sample questions, among others, included the following:

- What are the characteristics of teacher leadership?
- What are the most effective leadership styles of teacher leaders?
- Based on the above information, in what ways have you been able to enact teacher leadership as a peer mentor?
- In what ways has becoming a peer mentor allowed you to participate in a professional community?
- In what ways has becoming a peer mentor helped to develop your skills, understandings, and ways of working with colleagues/peers?
- In what ways has your role as a peer mentor shaped your professional self-understanding of what it means to become an educator?

In order to avoid an ethical conflict of interest and to support the professional development of peer mentors, two peer mentors were hired as research assistants to conduct the focus groups and to gather feedback from peer mentor participants. The transcripts were anonymized by the research assistants, and were analyzed by the research team thematically based on conceptualizations found in teacher education literature (characteristics, knowledge, and skills), Hunzicker's (2012) conceptual framework (participation in a professional community, professional growth over time, and the demonstration of professionalism), and emergent themes from the data. Although many other themes developed from the data, this article presents those related to characteristics of teacher leadership and its enactment according to Hunzicker's conceptual framework.

Findings

The findings below outline peer mentor perceptions of teacher leader characteristics and how peer mentors exhibited those characteristics as facilitators of Learning Communities. The findings are then presented in terms of how teacher leadership was exhibited through professional community, developing professionally, and demonstrating professionalism. The discussion section discusses the findings in the context of the teacher leadership literature.

Characteristics of Teacher Leadership

Peer mentors were asked to provide their understanding of what constituted teacher leadership. In their view, teacher leaders were individuals who "spend the extra time to go above and beyond." Many of the provided descriptors of teacher leaders included personal characteristics that attract others to them and provide a foundation for building trusting relationships, including being supportive, encouraging, caring, inspiring, and enthusiastic. Much of the commentary focused on how teacher leaders interact with others. Most prevalent in this regard included the ability of teacher leaders to discern the needs of the group and facilitate the successful achievement of common goals through collaboration. A peer mentor alluded to this when he or she suggested that teacher leaders are adaptive in that

> you're not there to direct every single thing. You're there to step in and guide and step back and let things develop…. It's a process of engaging and disengaging at different times in order to get the goals that you want from the group.

However, in their view, teacher leaders also ensure that movement towards the achievement of common goals is fostered:

> If you see something that needs to be done, or something, or a decision needs to be made…taking the initiative and just going out there and saying, "What about this?", and guiding decisions or taking a position that needs to be filled…. You're going to go out there and you're going to do it.

Peer mentors also suggested that teacher leaders at times have to unsettle regular patterns of interaction. Peer mentors acknowledged this when they suggested that "[t]eacher leadership also involves taking risks and acknowledging when things do not go as smoothly as planned." They also unsettled the notion of teacher leader as "expert," arguing instead that teacher leaders use "prior knowledge to make [learning] relevant," and then "facilitate a group in which everyone's contribution is respected and valued." These leaders are "able to step back and still be seen as a leader and a source of knowledge and a source of collaboration without necessarily bulldozing." Some peer mentors spoke of the benefits that complementary leadership styles offer when circumstances warrant them, noting that "we are all here to help each other, to understand what we can contribute, how we can contribute…what ways do we benefit the group as a whole." Another peer mentor suggested, "being a teacher leader is not coming up with your own agenda, and showing what you know, but serving your group…. Servant leadership." Ultimately, according to peer mentors, teacher leaders set an example for others to follow, and are "constantly reflecting on [their] practice."

Peer Mentors as Teacher Leaders

Once peer mentors had the opportunity to reflect on their understandings of teacher leadership, they were asked to comment on the extent to which their roles as peer mentors had provided them with the opportunity to enact teacher leadership. The personal characteristics alluded to in the section above were reinforced by a peer mentor who noted the following:

> I have been able to demonstrate teacher leadership as a peer mentor by sharing my experiences with other students to reassure…and help provide them with advice on how to be successful. I genuinely cared about the students in my LC…. I listened when they needed someone to talk or vent to. I was also able to inspire other students through the presentation that I did on scholarships and the impact that they have had on my life. I have also been able to share stories about the good experiences that made me want to be a teacher.

Other peer mentors acknowledged how important it was to demonstrate belief in others' ability to succeed, and "be that person that pushes them." Peer mentors reinforced the importance of building respectful, trusting relationships with others:

> It definitively has taught me the importance of the relationships, not even with your students but also with your fellow teachers because I know that my students really enjoyed their time with my partner and I because we worked so well together and because we respected each other.... Also just noticing how much they appreciated when I learnt their names and little things like that. I think it just taught me that teaching is not all about the information you're portraying onto others but how you do that and the trust you can gain from the relationships.

The value of having two peer mentors in each learning community was articulated by peer mentors who noted that the co-teaching opportunity taught them how to develop professional relationships and compromise when the needs of the group pushed them to adapt their plans. They acknowledged the primacy of the relationship between the two peer mentors and suggested that "it was really important to understand your partner teacher and that's right from the beginning" because students "model what their co-peer mentors have modeled, so if your relationship together is like butting heads all the time, then you're probably going to see that in your students as well."

Peer mentors found that taking on this role helped to unsettle their traditional socialization as teacher "experts" based on authority and "classroom control." As one student noted, "the natural inclination when you get in front of grade sixes is to be that professor and to be that, you know, 'I'm gonna teach you guys,' but when it's your peers, there's less of that." They suggested that the role had broadened their perspectives on education. One peer mentor provided an example of times when their peers asked about different levels of study (elementary, high school, etc.) that was not within their experience. Many had to "make themselves vulnerable" to peers, and acknowledge that they did not have all the answers. They learned that asking for support from colleagues or members of the Learning Community Leadership Team was not a poor reflection on their abilities as educators. As a consequence, peer mentors suggested that their overall confidence in working with colleagues and students greatly improved. One student said that "it gave me confidence for the future just knowing that I can

stand out in front of my colleagues and with my colleagues in my future as a leader." Another suggested:

> It allowed me to get comfortable...amongst people around the same age…. The one thing I was nervous about before my pre-internship was no one was going to take me seriously…. Being able to take on that role in the Learning Communities was a big confidence booster…. It allowed me to feel like I can be that leader.

Perhaps the most important demonstrations of teacher leadership came from the examples provided by peer mentors that spoke to their ability to discern the needs of their Learning Community groups, and flexibly adapt their efforts to achieve their expected outcomes. One peer mentor spoke of how she developed a strategy for discerning the needs of the group:

> If you have a theme to what the community is that day, just posing a question to see what kind of responses you get from it, and that way the students drive the conversation, which can direct their learning to things you wouldn't have even thought of with the topic which can lead to great learning experiences.

Other peer mentors discussed times when they had adapted their plans based on the needs of the group. A powerful example is provided in the following comment:

> [My partner and I]…took the leadership role and the practice of being reflective and adapting to their needs, so for us to talk about the K-12 curriculum isn't so relevant to them, but for us to talk about the university curriculum, university outcomes, university assessment, was really, really, something that they were able to talk about and theorize about because they were living it, and for us that was really good practice and something that as a student leader that required collaboration, required reflection.

A second peer mentor suggested that their group switched the weekly activities so when "students were stressed about exams, we had a study session rather than a presentation on time management or something like that." Moving away from controlling the information/classroom to focusing on flexible strategies based on the needs of the group had significant value for student engagement and learning:

> [My partner and I] were amazed at how much information [first- and second-year students] actually knew, and the depth and the breadth of what they were actually saying to each other was extremely rewarding because here you have students who aren't necessarily comfortable with this material really fleshing it out and growing…. Let's start with you guys, what do you know? And then just build on what they've done, and then they took much more ownership over what they were doing.

These findings suggest that the first forays into teacher leadership for these peer mentors were generally positive, and that this job-embedded professional development was teaching them skills about how to work with adult learners and colleagues. As a consequence, they came to a stronger understanding of themselves as professional educators.

Professional Community

Though the professional community of this study appears to be most appropriately tied to the Learning Communities, the responses from peer mentors demonstrate that the professional community included a number of layered communities that interacted with Learning Communities. The web of networked teachings/learnings from these professional communities helped to solidify peer mentors' understandings of teacher leadership. These communities included the Learning Communities, the peer mentor professional community, the professional community of the College of Education, and the larger educational professional community. In the first instance, peer mentors appreciated the goals of the Learning Communities, and the developing sense of professional community that Learning Communities provided for first- and second-year students:

> I noticed that a lot of my students who were in my group were getting to know each other through the semester and I could tell they were feeling more comfortable and feeling more connected. And then second semester…I saw them in groups from that group I was a mentor for…. They are going to come into their third year knowing so many people and feeling connected to people…because of this.

A second professional community mentioned was the peer mentor group that met each week. This gathering helped peer mentors get to know their peers in the college, and created connections between them when they saw each other in classes:

> Being in the peer community, you're meeting up with all the peer mentors who are facilitating peer communities, which creates another community in itself where you get to collaborate with each other, you get to ask questions, or if you're struggling with getting your group to participate, you can bounce ideas off each other, and I think that in itself is participating in a professional community.

Peer mentors noted that this group acted as a means for discussing their developing sense of professionalism. The meeting time facilitated sharing ideas and respect for each other's contributions, and provided them with a sense of community in service to the college.

A third professional community was the College of Education. Peer mentors acknowledged the professional benefits of working with the Learning Communities Leadership Team, program advisors, the associate dean, and a number of faculty members. Their role as peer mentors provided them with opportunities to learn more about the vision of the teacher education program in the college. In addition, they became more connected to individuals whose roles in the college would further support their learning and completion of their programs:

> [Learning Team Member] is an advisor as well it's easier to ask her for certain class problems you know. Getting to know [the associate dean], like getting to know outside of her role of associate dean and as well when she came into the different sessions with the peer mentors. Getting to know profs you are going to have the following year because they came into one of your sessions. A lot of connections which are always good and they are all positive. That was really helpful, like getting you immersed into the college more so than just a student...

The last professional community mentioned was the general profession of education. Peer mentors appreciated the network of connections that were made with the incorporation of guest speakers, practicing teachers, and the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation (STF) whose presentations benefited both the first- and second-year students, and also the peer mentors. In their estimation, these links to the field were incredibly important, as they supported learning and networking.

Peer mentors spoke of the benefits of community in a number of ways. They saw the benefit of the creation of the Learning Communities for students who were transitioning into post-secondary education. As one peer mentor noted:

> You all kind of want the same thing, to grow up and be a teacher, to be a great teacher, and so just to have that community feel was really important to me. And helping those students in first and second year because…that social support was so key to my transition as a poor student to a good student. I needed that. I needed help and I needed friends and I needed time to be social….

Second, they discussed the value of the professional community for those transitioning into the education program given that:

> Students that are taking classes in arts and science…are still connected with the College of Education. When they come the third year, there will be a stronger sense of community in their classes and they have connections to our faculty members prior [to] going into the college full time.

Third, the broader professional community was highlighted by peer mentors who noted that they were exposed to people and ideas they otherwise would not have been exposed to through coursework: "We never had exposure to STF and other professionals in the community and getting to meet principals and STF members was beneficial to us as well." Perhaps the most nuanced perspective made by a peer mentor acknowledged that all of these professional communities merged into a microcosm of the education profession that helps students make concrete their abstract notions of what it means to be a professional educator:

> All of a sudden, it's not just a faceless thing. You see people. You see professors. You see people who are here. You see how it operates. It's a microcosm of what we're trying to do, and through the use of guest facilitators, all of sudden you're like, "Okay, there is somebody who teaches this; this is a real thing." We don't all just go into a building and become teachers. There's professors who teach us how to do this properly. So it puts a face on something which maybe has anonymity, right?

A fourth benefit accrued because peer mentors were learning how to build community, a skill that they would be able to take with them as they progressed through their careers:

> Building that community is great because that is what you are going to be doing as a teacher within your school and other schools. You are going to have the aspiration to go out into the education field with a community already built and want more.

These teacher candidates have reflected on a variety of professional communities that influence the development of their professional identities. They have recognized the nuanced and multi-layered opportunities for professional growth that their role as peer mentors provided.

Developing Professionally

The intent of teacher education programs is to support the professional growth of preservice teacher candidates. Although one of the goals of the Learning Communities initiative was to support the professional growth of first- and second-year students, an underestimated outcome was the professional growth of peer mentors as they worked with their peers to lead Learning Communities. When asked about the ways in which peer mentors had grown professionally over the course of the year, one peer mentor laughed and said, "I don't even think you can quantify that." Another noted, "I can't even come up with enough good things to say about all of the growth that occurred for myself and all of the skills." A third spoke of the nature of the job-embedded learning that is very different from coursework, given its deliberate focus on student interactions, professional practice, and collaboration:

> I think I learned more from being a peer mentor than I have, actually, in some ways, from the other portions of school. You know, when I look at from the beginning of the year to now, and I'm not saying that I am not learning anything from the university, or from being in schools, but because it's much more of a…they're similar to you. They're students at the university and in that way, you don't have that whole "oh I'm the teacher and you're the students" perspective and it's much more of a collaborative environment. You learn so much more in that.

The role of peer mentor facilitated self-reflection and self-awareness, the development of instructional/leadership skills, and professional identity. Many noted that being a peer mentor enhanced their ability to plan for instruction, but also to become more flexible during instruction given the needs of the group. Peer mentors suggested that the experience offered

> insight into what it is like to try new things and respond each time to try and make the next LC even better…. I have had a lot of experience reflecting and thinking of ways to make a lesson or LC better.

Others noted that their skills in the use of technology and facilitation improved as they worked to co-create their Learning Community sessions. As one peer mentor noted,

> You learn what to do when you have no lesson plan, or you have a lesson plan and the tech comes apart or you have a facilitator not show up, so that's high stress, but you get a lot of growth from that experience.

Peer mentors appreciated the fact that the Learning Communities provided them with a non-evaluative "safety net" for risk-taking as they developed their instructional styles prior to practice or employment. For example, they suggested that the practice they received through peer mentoring was significantly different from that in their field experiences because it minimized the power relationships inherent in the teacher candidate/collaborating teacher relationship:

> When you're in the classroom, you have your teacher supervising you. Being a peer facilitator shows you what it's going to be like without having someone else supervising you, someone who is kind of, like, above you in the classroom so that students' kind of see that difference in power or whatever…. It kind of models to you what is coming.

However, they also noted that they had to work through the stress of working with peers, rather than students, even as they learned the value of letting go of "classroom control" in order to be more facilitative:

> Initially, I found it more stressful because I'm going to facilitate a group of students who are older in age and that are more on my level. You don't have so much of an authority figure there so much as a facilitating figure. That and you don't know anybody…but once you get to know your learning community, and you get to build that atmosphere and the relationships with them, I feel like that stress just goes out the window.

> Co-teaching responsibilities provided the opportunity for peer mentors to learn from each other's teaching styles and prior work experiences in order to co-create an effective learning environment:

> It was a learning process to be with my partner and she has been an [educational assistant] in schools before so she had a more experienced way of teaching and I learned a lot from her. And it helped experiment with my way of teaching before going into internship. So being able to figure out how being most comfortable teaching and getting into that vibe was most helpful.

In addition, the co-teaching environment taught peer mentors how to work with other colleagues in a collaborative manner:

> Just even getting that respect for collaboration, and how great it is to work with someone towards something was something that I didn't necessarily have a vision of teachers doing in the first place because you sit in front of one teacher all your life so I never really understood how key collaboration was until I got involved in this.

One peer mentor summed up the professional growth opportunity in the following manner:

> The whole process is one of growth, and so starting from the beginning, and moving through this whole year has done nothing but make me grow, and it made me grow with understanding about how to teach better, about how to communicate better, about how to deal better with colleagues and differences, about how to take what I have learned in university, and actually use it in the classroom….you know, taking that theory, and applying it in a real-world situation.

Upon reflection of their experiences, peer mentors acknowledged that the time commitment of becoming a peer mentor was worth the professional growth benefits received.

Demonstrating Professionalism

Peer mentors suggested that by taking on the role, "the opportunity to take initiative helps us to display professionalism. We are engaged." They enjoyed being able to share their experiences and knowledge with first- and second-year students, and believed that this increased their advocacy for the college. Their roles also presented them with the opportunity to talk overtly about what it meant to be a professional:

> You know, as a first-year student, your expectations of professionalism and being a professional student are really different….you get a chance to talk about their expectations of you, what is going to be expected of them in the future, how they see these things as purposeful, and in what context—talking about dress, how we conduct ourselves outside, social media. Getting a chance to talk about why it's important to professionalism.

Peer mentors also talked about developing their ability to present professionally. They became "more aware of my actions and words and how they appear to others." They were able to "practice more professional language in an academic setting" and develop their skills in written professional communication. Peer mentors communicated regularly with their Learning Communities via email, and they learned through experience how to craft a professional communication; they practiced professional etiquette as modeled by the Learning Communities Team. One peer mentor spoke about the weekly peer mentor meetings, indicating that peer mentors were "showing the same respect for our facilitators as we expected [students] to show us, so like, not talking when [Learning Community Team Member] is talking, and not texting and really being present." They also learned how to disagree with others without rancor. As one peer mentor suggested, "I have had to demonstrate respect when ideas and arguments were made that I did not agree with. I developed professionalism by responding in a respectful way when my facilitating partner had differing perspectives and views from myself." Furthermore, they reflected how to create trusting relationships that respected boundaries between themselves and the first and second year students:

> Relationships, number one knowing how to create limits in relationships. Because often we are told…you have to create a relationship that distinguishes a teacher from a student. Although as a peer mentor it may be different as the age gap is smaller and it's not as much as a teacher student relationship but it still taught me a lot about…having a professional relationship with the mentees.

Peer mentorship placed students in situations where they had to work with practicing professionals and faculty members. This fostered self-confidence, and an ability to create professional relationships that could translate into other settings as "getting exposed to people like that and working with them on a professional level made me more comfortable in other situations." Becoming a peer mentor also helped these students develop their teaching philosophies as they became more aware of their own values:

> It took…what I thought education was and what a teacher would be and put it into practice and gave me a real-life picture of what I thought. But at the same time, it helped me solidify why I was doing this or why I chose this profession…. Feeling this is where I belong and this is what I believe and so it also helped me build my teaching philosophy…. This experience…gives you a good place to start building that and creating a foundation of your teaching philosophy.

A second peer mentor acknowledged, "Getting to practice that facilitation and that collaboration really changed how I identify myself and what my values are as a teacher." Their discussions with each other in weekly peer mentor sessions provided opportunities for conversations about their developing identities as teachers. Furthermore, peer mentors suggested that their enactment of this role enabled them to model professional relationships with others:

> I think for me being a peer facilitator really helps to model the different kind of relationships that you will have which you can then transfer to your school setting. Like collaborating with other peer mentors shows that when you get into your internship, you can collaborate with other teachers, or when you're in the staff meeting bouncing ideas off of each other, and just building the relationships with the students in your learning community, they may be a different age, but the same practice of building those relationships will still be the same as when you get into the classroom.

The role of peer mentor provided teacher candidates with opportunities for demonstrating professionalism that will transfer into their future roles as educators.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that peer mentors were able to develop, and demonstrate, teacher leadership in the three areas conceptualized by Hunzicker (2012) through job-embedded practice focused on professional growth. Their experiences reflect the findings of Nelson and Slavit (2008) who suggest that experiences that support teacher growth "should involve the creation of opportunities for teachers to engage as learners, build pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge, and co-construct and enact new visions of practice in context" (p. 100). For many peer mentors, this experience was their first exposure to teacher leadership. Accordingly, many were nervous about the experience at first, particularly because their prior field experiences had established authoritarian modes of teaching, learning, and relating to children and youth. These conceptions became unsettled as peer mentors worked with adult learners who were unafraid to demonstrate resistance to the notion of peers as authority figures. Peer mentors engaged with each other, and first- and second-year students, as learners and facilitators. They built upon the disciplinary knowledge of teacher education about which they were learning in their own courses and the disciplinary knowledge regarding supporting post-secondary student learning. As a consequence, with the support of the Learning Communities team, they were able to co-construct practice in this exciting new peer learning context that was free from the power dynamics that existed in their field experience courses in schools.

The self-confidence of peer mentors as teachers and as leaders grew as they learned to facilitate and work with a variety of professionals. The growing sense of self-efficacy was expressed best by a peer mentor who noted,

> This helped me to feel like I was still going to be a teacher who changed lives because that was something that I was kind of missing, and this kind of brought that feeling back, so hopefully I can take that feeling and hold onto that feeling when I do return to the classroom.

They began to appreciate the need for community to connect them to each other as learners and to the professional knowledge base of teaching. As their networks of professional connections grew, some were able to more fully appreciate the whole education system as represented within the levels of professional communities of which they were a part. As a consequence of their engagement in these communities of practice, their professional growth was fostered in settings that were premised upon factors acknowledged in the literature to be facilitative for teacher learning. Nelson and Slavit (2008) cite Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) who note that effective professional development should be

> grounded in the work teachers do in support of student learning goals, engage teachers in inquiry and reflection, be collaborative, supported, and ongoing, and be meaningfully connected to other school and district initiatives. Also important for realizing the potential for teacher learning through collaborative processes is the establishment of norms and dispositions that allow for trust building and risk-taking. (p. 102)

The professional growth of peer mentors as teacher leaders is perhaps one of the largest benefits of the Learning Communities' initiative. Peer mentors were able to "practice" their instructional and leadership skills in a non-evaluative, safe forum where experimentation and risk taking were encouraged. They learned to appreciate, and practice, different instructional styles while having to plan towards common goals. They learned to discern, and access, the prior knowledge and experiences of their peers, and work with that knowledge to co-create engaging learning environments. They learned the value of accepting and providing feedback from first- and second-year students, their co-peer mentors, and the Learning Communities' team members as they experimented with instructional styles. As one peer mentor noted,

> I have a habit of…being at the front of the classroom and I really appreciate and work well with a style that is different from that and that helps me to reflect and helps me to facilitate a little more and allow things to go a little more.

Their work with partner peer mentors taught them valuable skills in collaboration and communication. A peer mentor acknowledged these skills when they suggested,

> You really have to coordinate together, and so if that's where we're going is that facilitating instead of lecturing, what that allows you to do is go, "okay we're all together here"…and practicing in that environment then facilitates going out into the real world…and it's much easier to do that.

The final component of Hunzicker's (2012) conceptual framework in which peer mentors enacted teacher leadership was that of demonstrating professionalism. Peer mentors served as advocates for the college and enjoyed the opportunity to participate as teacher leaders in the Learning Community initiative. They openly discussed the concept of professionalism and how that was demonstrated in the teaching profession. They demonstrated professionalism in their growing sophistication of verbal and written communication. They developed and modeled professional relationships and became aware of how to create boundaries in those relationships. They learned to professionally engage with and respond to others whose views were contrary to their own. Furthermore, peer mentors developed a stronger sense of their values, which helped them to articulate their teaching philosophies.

Fairman and Mackenzie (2012) suggest, "Professional development providers also need to take into account where teachers are in their professional careers and their readiness to assume different levels of leadership, providing encouragement for teachers" (p. 243). Our Learning Communities' initiative has provided peer mentors in the College of Education with job-embedded professional development that takes into account their stage as upper year post-secondary students. Their knowledge and experience as senior students provide unique opportunities for teacher leadership that are often unacknowledged in the realm of teacher education literature, research, and practice. This is particularly important given that many teacher education programs are now after-degree two-year preparation programs that do not provide for this kind of innovation for teacher candidate growth. In part, it is the unique environment of the four-year program that is creating this kind of learning and leadership opportunity for peer mentors. The nature of the program itself offers peer mentors the opportunity for senior students to provide leadership to other students, to develop their own professional growth, and to become a leader at an early career stage in the teaching profession. Encouraging teacher leadership at the undergraduate level of study can foster a solid foundation for future efforts in in-service environments.

Poekert (2012) has critiqued the teacher leadership literature by suggesting that studies tend to "focus heavily on the foundational components of teacher leadership rather than the means by which it is developed, the means by which it is practiced in schools, the targets of its influence, and its impact on teaching and learning" (p. 185). We would concur with this premise. Indeed, we have been motivated in this paper to offer a number of means by which teacher leadership is being practiced within Learning Communities and in peer mentor engagement with co-facilitators, with others in the college, and with colleagues in the profession. We have yet to inquire further into how first- and second-year students are responding to the leadership of peer mentors, though we have collected some data to this end. We are confident, however, in our evidence that suggests how peer mentors have developed their teaching skills, and that they have learned transferable skills from each other and from their Learning Communities about how best to serve the needs of learners. We look ahead to inquire into the extent to which the peer mentor experience influences students' post-secondary learning success.

Struyve et al. (2014) suggest that "making the development of teacher leaders a priority in education systems concerned with reform will result in those systems achieving in school improvement, better student learning outcomes, enhanced teacher learning and increased staff retention" (p. 205). Although post-secondary teacher education environments appear to be neglected in this statement, we advocate that such contexts have a vital role to play in fostering the development of teacher leaders. Our work with peer mentors suggests that the Learning Community initiative has fostered the development of teacher leadership characteristics with its focus on engagement in safe, learning-focused, job-embedded professional communities in which teacher candidates develop and demonstrate their professional leadership capacities.

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