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## LEADERSHIP AND AGENCY AS A NOVICE TEACHER

**clara e. lin**

“Don’t worry,” many colleagues say to the first-year teacher, “next year will be better.” Other sentiments commonly shared with me during my first year were, “I know, isn’t it terrible?” or “the first year is so hard—I cried every day of mine.” Some colleagues felt the need to celebrate every time a calendar milestone had been crossed: “You made it to Thanksgiving!” they exclaimed, as if I had been ready to jump ship the week before. By spring I was frequently reminded, “It’s almost over.”

These veteran teachers mean well, as do the authors of dozens of “survival guides” published for the first-year teacher. As I started teaching, I was struck by these heavy doses of sympathy doled out at work and in my graduate classes. I appreciated that my colleagues were looking out for me; however, I could not help finding these well-meaning sentiments to be, in fact, discouraging. I wondered why, when I worked and studied with such strong, active teachers, novice teachers were expected to suffer passively. Even very progressive educators, it seemed to me, were drawing a picture of the novice teacher as an acquiescent individual rather than an active learner.

In my first years of teaching, I have certainly struggled and discovered many weaknesses. It is in the process of reacting to those difficult experiences, however, that I have found strength and learned that even a novice teacher can be a leader in her classroom and school. This is not to say that the discovery came quickly, or that my first teaching experiences were often joyous or successful. I did not regularly thrive on my mistakes, cheerfully thinking, “It’s just another learning opportunity!” At the beginning of my teaching career, I was very often overwhelmed, exhausted, frustrated, and certainly challenged by difficult problems on a daily basis. But I reminded myself that I believed in the power of the individual to shape her experiences and impact her environment. In that first year I decided that if problems were happening in my classroom, then I had the power to solve them and bring about positive change. I found that the novice teacher does have agency, and must use it if she is to do more than “survive” her first years and teach children to be responsible, active agents in their own lives.

This theme of agency has very much shaped how I feel about my first years of teaching, and guides how I teach in the classroom and engage with the school beyond the classroom walls. Here I will share my personal accounts as a new

teacher exploring leadership in the classroom in the form of problem solving, and in my school through advocating for a policy change. My experiences were uniquely shaped by the environment in which I work, a small, progressive public school in New York City with fewer than 200 students in our nine pre-K to fifth-grade classes. Sharing my experiences of finding strength and using agency in my first years, I hope to communicate my personal feeling and experience that “novice teaching” and “teacher leadership” are not mutually exclusive terms.

### **Leadership in the Classroom**

It may not sound like a stretch for a head teacher to think of herself as a leader in her own classroom. After all, the profession calls for an individual who can accept the charge of building a stimulating, community-oriented learning environment with the cooperation of young learners. On the first day of school, eager to meet my kindergarten/first-grade mixed-age class, I felt ready to launch into this role with confidence and capability. Yet after a few months, my ability to lead my students with strength and understanding was already being challenged. What little part of me had indeed felt in September like a strong leader and facilitator of learning quickly slipped away. That fall I was regularly overwhelmed by classroom management, unable to prioritize problems that needed to be addressed, and worst of all, did not seek help from colleagues. I was disappointed to think that others’ nightmare accounts of their first years of teaching were indeed a universal experience for the new teacher. Not wanting to accept that such a cliché could be true for that year—an entire year of my life and the lives of my students—I nevertheless had little evidence initially to help me believe otherwise.

Fortunately, although I did not reach out to others, someone reached out to me. That first November, a visit from my Bank Street advisor set in motion a chain of events and a change in attitude that transformed my classroom, my students, and my self-image as a strong teacher. Following her observation of a chaotic afternoon in my classroom, my advisor sat me down after dismissal in my empty classroom and asked, “Why didn’t you tell me?” The same concerns I had about my class and my teaching were also obvious to her. All I could think to reply was, “I didn’t know where to begin.”

Together, we started by generating a list of what needed to be addressed and changed in my classroom. I was brimming with examples of classroom management problems, including students who behaved unsafely and defiantly, and class work times and meetings that were noisy and disorganized. Looking at my

notebook page quickly filling up, I primarily saw challenging students. Why, I wanted to know, did one child climb on bookshelves, another hide in a corner during class meetings, and yet another constantly knock over his classmates' block building projects? My advisor asked me to stop looking at my page of notes, and look around the classroom. "They do those things," she explained, "because they feel they are invited to. They can and so they *will*." She challenged me to consider what would happen with the boy who had an inclination to scale any furniture over 12 inches high if the tops of bookshelves were not empty. Where would the girl with a knack for hiding go if furniture was rearranged so the room had no nooks, and more open spaces? Similarly, what could be done so that children were not encouraged to pass through the block area? And so I began the reorganization of my physical classroom: baskets of books were secured with Velcro to the top of each low bookshelf; furniture was moved so that from my chair in the meeting area I could see every inch of the classroom and so that children moving about the classroom did not have to go through the block area. With the transformation of my physical classroom came the first positive transformations of the year, in my students and myself. The children responded well to the added structure, using the extra limits the physical space imposed to guide their behavior and movement through our busy school day.

Identifying each problem area in that first year was easy; finding creative solutions to common problems was the challenge, but one I became ever more equipped to handle. The support offered by my advisor that day inspired me to use more of the resources in my school and from my teacher training. I consulted veteran teachers on how to create behavior modification programs for a couple of children, designing programs and goals that helped these students identify their own challenges and set goals for themselves. Communicating those goals to families and other teachers who worked with these students was crucial to helping the students understand that all of the adults in their life had similar expectations of them and all wanted to offer support. I gave students the daily opportunity to reflect on their goals, judging success or struggles for themselves, and they eagerly accepted the responsibility.

It was not only my struggling students who required great attention and received such support that first year. Taking my newfound focus on agency, I started a routine with my class which helped support the class community as a whole, offering a structure within which we shared struggles and celebrated successes. Every day after recess my class came together to hold a "community talk," a meet-

ing which offered a time for children—and me—to share an observation or obstacle from the day. From anxiety over the death of a pet goldfish to a situation of bullying in the schoolyard, students listened to the troubles of their peers and supported each other. With some guidance, role playing, and modeling, students learned and used the problem-solving process we developed together: share observations, identify a problem, brainstorm possible solutions that are appropriate to the problem at hand, and form an action plan. Going beyond the motto “you break it, you fix it,” my class and I together discovered how powerful it can be for all of us to work collaboratively to address and act upon the challenges in our school day. I have continued to hold daily community talks in my second and third year, and plan on keeping the routine alive for many years to come.

Collaboration with students, parents, and other teachers was very often at the root of the small and large successes of that first year. Initially, perhaps, I feared that if I put my struggles into words and asked for help, I would be admitting my weaknesses. I am thankful that with the support from others and finally with my own increased confidence, I learned to take responsibility for those weaknesses and act on the challenges that faced me in that first year. Like my students who set their own goals for their behavior plans and met them, like the child who learned how to express his emotions and select a strategy to calm down, I learned that I had agency as a new teacher and could use it to take action. In so doing, we shaped our experiences and made a positive impact on our classroom environment.

### **Leadership in the School**

As I began my second year, this time teaching a first/second-grade class, I felt that I better understood how to be a confident leader in my own classroom and how to teach my students to be responsible leaders as well. I was no longer so baffled about how to set priorities or address challenges. With so much yet to learn, I was now more comfortable asking for needed support and collaboration. My concentration on agency and action did not wane, but my breadth of view did change. While in my first year I focused on my own students and classroom, my attention was drawn in my second year to the school at large. I found it impossible to make an observation about my individual students without making connections to questions I had about our school philosophy and practice: Is the anxiety over reading I see in some of my students caused by the pressure of sharing a table with their older classmates? Why are there few close friendships that bridge the grades in my class? Are the two boys who most often misbehave bored by our first/second-grade bridged curricula?

Had I been working in a school with a strict top-down administration, I likely would have kept these questions to myself, or shared them to little effect. I am fortunate, however, that my school encourages teachers to voice their interest in school affairs, not just their own classrooms. During weekly meetings, teachers and other staff are asked to convey their concerns honestly and encouraged to share in school decision making. In my second year, my colleagues became quite familiar with my voice during meetings and staff retreats, as I persisted in questioning a school policy I was becoming increasingly less comfortable with: our mixed-grade classrooms.

It was not the philosophy behind this policy, but rather the practical implications it had for our very small school that so concerned me. In theory—and in practice in many larger schools—multiage classes provide an environment that is exceptionally inclusive and supportive of students' social and academic growth. A commonly cited rationale for multiage classrooms is the value in implementing developmentally appropriate curricula that nurture children's continuous improvement rather than judging children rigidly on grade-specific criteria that may not match their developmental profiles (Chase & Doan, 1994; Rathbone, 1993). Teachers of multiage classrooms often report great social strengths of their classrooms, as children quickly become adept at mentoring peers of different ages or abilities and seeking support from their peer role models. While I saw great possibility in the philosophy behind multiage classrooms, I did not always see the practical benefits or solid teacher support and school structure needed for this educational model in our school.

I became concerned that our school was in fact providing students and teachers with challenges that caused frustration and feelings of defeat rather than nourishing a strong, diverse community. In my first/second-grade class, a five-year-old first grader who struggled with learning and language differences was asked to be the peer of an academically advanced second grader who was nearly eight years old. Because of the small size of our school, there was not an option for students who lay on extreme ends of the age or development spectrum to be in a differently configured class; such students either struggled or became bored, often acting out and jeopardizing their position as role model for others. Also due to our small school size, parents did not have the option of being involved in decision making about which class their child would attend each year and what grade configuration that class would use. I questioned whether I was appropriately trained and prepared to teach a class with such diverse needs, and parents that year began to voice their concerns to me about the true benefits of mixed-age grouping. Furthermore, par-

ents—and I—saw instability for their children, with grade configurations changing year to year due to uneven enrollment in each grade. For years running, some children were forced to remain in the younger range of their classrooms while others would always stay in the older range, never receiving the promised benefits of alternating between the important roles of apprentice and experienced role model. On the subject of class grouping in multiage settings, Rathbone (1993) writes that “the key is reaching an intentional balance in the student groupings on several dimensions, achievement being only one of them” (p. 170). In researching multiage education and reflecting on my own school’s practices, I began questioning how intentional our class groupings were, given enrollment constraints, and what effect this poor planning was having on our students.

Questions about this practice came to me in the fall of my second year, with hardly 12 months of teaching experience behind me. To some colleagues who had been teaching mixed-grade classes for a dozen years or more, I feared that my concerns would seem judgmental and immature. I worried that these veteran teachers, whom I so respect for their exceptional attention to student needs, might believe that my concerns came from a place of complaint over the added challenge of teaching a mixed-grade class rather than my sincere concern that our school was not meeting students’ needs.

I knew that, however unpopular my questions about our school might have been, I could not put them on hold. To more thoroughly develop my professional evaluation of the mixed-grade class policy in a small school, I needed to hear from teachers with more experience and differing perspectives. I thought then of the problem-solving process my students went through every day at our afternoon “community talk.” We shared an observation and why it impacted our life at school, asked others to offer ideas, collaboratively developed an action plan, and always checked in with each other later to assess how the plan had worked. This, I thought, is how I expect my students to show their responsibility to their community of peers; it is also a format I can use to start sharing my concerns with my professional community.

After approaching a couple of classroom teachers and specialists with my observations and questions, I was surprised to hear that teachers in our school had regularly been raising similar questions for years. Often, they related to me, issues around our mixed-grade classes were raised at the annual June staff retreat, too late to change plans for the next school year. I learned I was not off base; the struggles I observed in my students had also long been true for many others. Certainly, colleagues began sharing with me, many students benefited from our mixed-grade

approach, and our school's teachers have always been strong enough to take on the task of teaching to a wide range of student needs. Yet, they added, many others suffered frustration for years under a structure which did not provide the support or consistency they needed. Teachers reflected that we receive professional development in specific curriculum areas, but never spend time better learning how to effectively implement multiage curricula and classroom management approaches. Some veterans added that they used to be more comfortable with their mixed-age classes when they had more freedom to develop their own curriculum; now that they were being asked to teach math separately and students are given standardized tests based on their grade, they wondered if some of the community-building goals of the multiage classroom were being lost. The experiences and observations of my colleagues gave me the confidence to approach my principal with the request that the whole staff review and analyze the success of this policy at our unique school before further plans were made for the following school year.

What began as conversations with individual teachers turned into the first agenda item at our winter staff retreat, when my principal granted me an hour to launch what would be the first of many conversations about our policy of having mixed-grade classes. Over the course of this first session and other discussions at staff meetings, staff members shared observations, listed pros and cons of the practice, and posed questions for the group which honored the history of our school but challenged us to revisit the rationale and assess the policy's success for our current student body. Even with my principal's encouragement of this dialogue, I was often the one who later reminded her to add a follow-up conversation to our weekly meeting agendas, and challenged the staff to consider our questions not only with next year in mind, but with the goal of developing a long-term plan for the growth of our school.

True to the mission of our democratically run school, our principal honored the observations and vision of our school's teachers by planning a vote. Classroom teachers were asked to consider their own observations and those shared by other teachers and parents in voting either to continue and improve mixed-grade classes, or to begin rolling out single-grade classes the following school year. The results were very nearly unanimous, in favor of dismantling mixed-grade classes with the goal of providing only single-grade classes within 3 to 5 years. In a snap it was announced that our school was to begin the change next year. My students, I thought, might recognize this process. It was a "community talk" on a larger level, as we came together to share observations, identify why these caused concern, ask our peers for input and advice, and form an action plan.



## An Oversight

What may sound like a quick and easy process—and one that may be impossible in many traditional schools—had its snags and disappointments. It quickly became evident that the staff had missed an opportunity to include parents in an important decision-making process, and now stumbled over how to discuss this decision with families. Although many staff members shared parent feedback during our discussions about the mixed-age policy, we had indeed decided that the policy would be changed based on the vote of teachers and administrators exclusively. Without further discussion as a staff, a quick announcement was made at a parent association meeting, an imprudently worded letter was sent to parents without the review of our principal, and tension quickly grew. Parents had been misinformed about why this change was happening, and had been told that testing and city standards were to blame. They were rightly upset about being removed from the process, and they had plenty of questions.

After such initially thoughtful dialogue about our mixed-grade policy with staff members, I was beyond disappointed that we had neglected such an important group of our school community. Upset by the letter that had been sent to parents, I addressed my principal with my newest concerns and wrote the staff an email expressing my worries about the consequences of the poor communication with parents and lack of a unified message about our policy change. The following day, our principal sent a thoughtfully worded letter to families and planned with our parent coordinator to hold the largest-to-date parent-teacher association meeting, with this policy change at the center of the agenda. The meeting was well attended and a variety of voices were heard. Questions were cleared up, mistakes were admitted, and parents had the opportunity to share how they hoped our school could hold on to many of the benefits of multiage education in alternative ways in the coming years. Plans were made to strengthen other multiage activities already in place in our school, such as clubs, student government, and reading buddies between older and younger grades. By June, staff and parents together decided to organize quarterly all-staff parent-teacher association meetings for the following year, offering a venue to discuss school-wide successes and concerns.

I am learning all the time how leadership is—and should be—shared in a community. Throughout this process I was struck by what a strong and collaborative environment can be created when individuals are encouraged to share their observations, concerns, and vision. In my school and many others, it is the mutual respect community members have for each other's experience and opinions, and the open-minded

approach they have about change, that encourages educators, students, and parents alike to take on leadership roles in schools.

### **Leadership, Continued**

Now, completing my third year, I remain thankful to work in an environment that encourages teachers to be so active. Looking back, I can see how the lessons from my first year helped give me the confidence to embrace agency and problem solving, the comfort to take on my role as a leader in my own classroom, the eagerness to become involved in school-wide concerns, and the great appreciation for collaboration with colleagues and families. I still often find myself thinking about that simple question asked by my advisor after my first months of struggling as a new teacher: “Why didn’t you tell me?” It is a question I will always hold on to as a reminder to be honest with myself and my colleagues, to reach out when I need help, and to offer help to others, even when they may be too proud—or simply too exhausted—to ask.

Leadership, I have learned, is not only for veterans. Novice teachers, too, can change what must be changed in the interests of supporting their students, improving their practice, and strengthening their schools. In schools where the administration is less receptive to teachers’ concerns and suggestions than in mine and where colleagues stay isolated and closed to collaboration, change will be harder. But it can happen, beginning first with one’s own classroom and in a proactive approach toward teaching, learning, and leading. The traditional story of the passive, tortured new teacher can be taken back and rewritten. As teachers we are role models for our students. If we want them to grow into active, responsive, and responsible citizens who will work for change in their lives and the world, we must do the same in our schools.