# Perspectives of National University Alumni County Teachers of the Year About Experiences and Supports That Influenced Their Development

**Ron W. Germaine**
*National University*
**& Halyna M. Kornuta**
*Kornuta Consulting*

## Introduction

California began recognizing outstanding teachers in 1972. Today, the process recognizes outstanding teachers at the school, district, county, and state levels. While it is important to bring attention to successful teachers and to the teaching profession more broadly, it would be helpful to all teachers and to teacher preparation institutions to learn what contributed to the success of those recognized as teachers of the year. The purpose of this study is to discover the experiences and supports that influenced the development of teaching effectiveness at different career stages of National University alumni who were identified as County Teachers of the Year in California. National University is the second largest private, nonprofit institution of higher learning in California. Since 2000, the University has prepared more teachers for credentialing on an annual basis than any other single institution of higher education in California. The University is geographically dispersed, with its academic and administrative centers located in La Jolla, California.

The origins of the study, conducted in early 2016, go back to 2006.

*Ron W. Germaine is professor emeritus with the Sanford College of Education at National University, La Jolla, California. Halyna M. Kornuta works at Kornuta Consulting. Their email addresses are germaine@nu.edu & halynakornuta@gmail.com*

At that time, a National University survey of County Superintendents was carried out to learn which counties in California had a Teacher of the Year program, and which teachers had been selected. The Alumni Office at National University then began a process of identifying which of the County Teachers of the Year were graduates of National University programs. In reflecting about County Teachers of the Year, the question arose: What experiences and supports influenced these teachers throughout their career so that peers and administrators recognized them as outstanding teachers? While the study focuses on National University alumni, our alignment of survey questions with InTASC Standards and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) core propositions makes the findings broadly generalizable to other geographic settings.

To provide a foundation for the purpose and methodology of the study, a brief review of literature about effective teaching and stages of a teaching career, follows. Effective teaching develops over time, and therefore a review of stages of a teaching is included. Additionally, findings from the study showed that virtually all respondents were in a formal or informal role of leadership, and therefore a brief review of teacher leadership is also provided.

## Effective Teaching

Much has been written about effective teaching. In broad terms, effective teaching occurs when teachers have mastery of content and pedagogical knowledge, expertise in applying pedagogical skills, and proficiency in employing principles from the affective domain including the living out of dispositions needed to build and sustain relationships in ways that engage all students in learning (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2006; Souers & Hall, 2016).

Studies indicate that teacher effectiveness is a far more important indicator of students' academic growth than levels of their achievement, prior levels of achievement, or the size of classes (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Ferguson 1998; Haycock & Hanushek, 2010; Marshall, 2016; Taylor, 2008; Tucker & Stronge, 2005), yet teacher effectiveness is not easy to measure. As Archer, Kerr, and Pianta (2014) point out, "Teaching is a complex interaction among teachers, students, and content that no single measurement is likely to capture" (p. 1). The difficulty in measuring teaching effectiveness has not stopped efforts at gauging it, however.

Danielson (1996, 2014) created a framework for evaluating teacher

effectiveness using four domains, each with multiple components: planning and preparation; the classroom environment; instruction; and professional responsibilities. Marshall, Smart, and Alston (2016) developed the Teacher Intentionality of Practice scale (TIPs), which provides a self-assessment of seven clusters of skills and practices that contribute to effective teaching:

1. Teaching and learning that is coherent and in a connected progression
2. Specific strategies, resources, and technologies that enhance learning
3. A safe, respectful, well-organized learning environment
4. Challenging, rigorous learning experiences
5. Learning that is interactive and thoughtful
6. A creative, problem-solving culture
7. Assessment and feedback that guide and inform teaching and learning.

The Danielson (1996, 2014) and the Marshal et al. (2016) frameworks for measuring effective teaching are conceptually similar, and can be aligned to InTASC standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013), National Board for Professional Teaching (NBPTS, 1989) core propositions, and recommendations from the California Department of Education (2016) for evaluating California Teacher of the Year applications.

For the purposes of comparison, we mapped survey prompts from our study to the two frameworks and three standards, thus providing internal validity to the survey instrument. Appendix A shows alignment of InTASC Standards (2011), NBPTS Core Propositions (1989), and CDE criteria for effective teachers (2016). Specifically:

• InTASC standards reflect a view of effective teaching that goes well beyond the use of students' scores on standardized tests as a measure of effective teaching. While standardized tests can be useful 'snapshots in time' of student learning, there is much about effective teaching that such tests cannot capture. The Council of Chief State School Officers (2013) identified 10 standards that articulate what effective teaching and learning look like. The standards are known as the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards and Learning Progressions for teachers. Each standard details a specific area of knowledge and skill that together embody excellence in teaching (see Appendix A).

• The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) list five core propositions that define what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do in all areas of teaching (NBPTS, 1989). The NBPTS Core Propositions are also listed in Appendix A.

• The California Department of Education (CDE) provides criteria for a CDE selection committee to score applications of teachers nominated in the California Teachers of the Year Program (California Department of E, 2016). Interestingly, some county school districts within California,

including the San Diego Unified School District, use the NBPTS core propositions as the criteria for selecting county teachers of the year. Other school districts use criteria suggested by the CDE. The CDE's criteria for distinguished teaching is summarized in Appendix A.

A close look at the characteristics of effective teachers as noted in Appendix A shows that they are interdependent. In a sense, the characteristics have an ecological relationship. They are seen in different combinations within different teachers in different settings—but are always in harmony.

## Stages of a Teaching Career

Theories of human development are well established in the work of Freud, Erikson, Piaget, Bandura, and others. It is also helpful to think of teaching careers as a developmental process because of the real life differences experienced by pre-service, beginning, and veteran teachers. Identifying stages of teaching contributes to identifying professional development needs of teachers at specific times during their teaching careers. Literature about the stages of teaching includes the notion of time and development; however, it is important to note that the amount of time taught may not directly equate to a particular developmental stage.

White (2008) noted that all descriptions of life cycles of teaching include stages of beginning, growth, and maturity. The general pattern of stages of teaching begins with the theme of a novice stage followed by one or more growth stages, and ending with either a teacher leader stage or stagnation. The teacher leader stage is one in which teachers enhance their own skills while simultaneously helping others to do the same. If progress toward maturity is not continued, then withdrawal from teaching, or stagnation, is likely. White noted that while expertise and experience can be closely related, teacher experience does not equate with teacher expertise.

Fuller and Bown (1975) and Ryan (1986) identified four stages of teaching including a fantasy stage which occurs in the pre-service period; a survival stage that takes place during the first years of teaching, and at times in which teachers just want to make it through the day; a mastery stage in which teachers have developed effective practices, high expectations for self and students, and where true enjoyment of teaching begins; and an impact stage in which teachers become teacher leaders who live out the dreams of the fantasy stage and focus on making a positive impact on both colleagues and student learning, or they may stagnate, become resistant to change, and lose overall interest in development. Similarly, Katz (2002) and Kelly (2008) identified four

stages of teaching. Both noted that competence in teaching usually comes with experience.

Behrstock-Sherrat, Bassett, Olson, and Jacques (2014), in a national study of State Teachers of the Year, used developmental stages of a teaching career linked to particular periods of time in the survey design. The link to time periods was helpful so that study participants clearly knew which stages the prompts referred to in the study. The authors of the study gave permission to use their survey questions for our County Teacher of the Year study. While we did not use all their survey questions and adapted others, their model proved practical because their prompts were directly related to specific teaching stages. A comparison of the various perspectives of teaching stages is located in Appendix B, Comparison of Models of Stages of Teaching.

## Teacher Leadership

A brief overview of teacher leadership is included in the review of literature for two reasons: Most models of stages of teaching have a teacher-leader component; and findings from our study identified teacher leadership as an experience important to respondents. For example, 80 per cent of study respondents began teacher leadership within their first five years of teaching; all respondents were in a position of leadership at the time they responded to the survey; and respondents said their most valuable professional development was prepared and delivered by other teachers. The following reports cast light on the meaning of teacher leadership.

Katzenmeyer and Moller (1996) define teacher leadership as "Teachers who lead within and beyond the classroom, influence others toward improved educational practice, and who identify with and contribute to a community of teachers" (p. 6). Goleman, Boyatzix and McKee (2002) emphasize the emotional importance of leadership, stating that effective leaders in every circumstance "drive the collective emotions [of others] in a positive direction, and clear the smog created by toxic emotion" (p. 5). Bolman and Deal (1995) note that teacher leadership requires initiative, but not a need to control.

A report by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, 2015) underscores the importance of distinguishing between the skills needed by teacher leaders and those needed by administrators. For example, while administrators need skills to recognize and leverage teachers' strengths within the school community, teacher leaders require skills in mentoring colleagues in effective teaching practices. The ASCD report also recommends that the skills of teacher leadership be taught

at the outset of teacher preparation, throughout teacher preparation, and in ongoing professional development.

A helpful framework for teacher leadership is articulated in Leading Educators (2015). Their Teacher Leader Competency Framework includes core values of equity, service, community, growth, and results, which together provide a foundation for four pillars that compose teacher leadership: developing self, coaching others, leading teams, and driving initiatives (pp. 1-2). The framework is particularly helpful because it includes specific, observable behaviors and skills to describe what each value and pillar looks like.

## Limitations of the Study

One of the assumptions often made about Teachers of the Year is that they are effective teachers. After all, colleagues and administrators have recognized them as outstanding among peers. However, as one respondent pointed out, sometimes recognition as a School or County Teacher of the Year has less to do with being an effective teacher than how well one speaks publicly, how well one writes a letter of application, or how popular a teacher may be. Recognition can sometimes be the outcome of politicking at the school or district level, or of a teacher who is particularly well liked by administrators. Thus, it is possible that not all survey respondents have fully developed all the qualities of effective teachers.

Another limitation is that each developmental stage is linked directly to a particular time period. For example, the novice stage is defined as years one to five. However, time in teaching may not necessarily equate directly to a particular developmental stage of teaching for all study participants.

The study was also limited by the accuracy of contact information available, to those who could participate in the time frame allotted, and by the response rate as discussed in the following section on "Margin of Error."

## Survey Methodology

We prepared a web-based survey using the same general pattern of prompts as in the Behrstock-Sherrat et al. (2015) study. In addition, we aligned each survey prompt with InTASC standards, NBPTS core propositions, and the CDE criteria for evaluating California Teacher of the Year applications (see Appendix A). Doing so strengthened internal validity of the survey. A sample of the survey structure of prompts is found in Appendix C.

One hundred graduates of Sanford College of Education at National

University were identified by the Alumni Office as County Teachers of the Year in California from 1987 through March 2016. (From March 2016 through December 2016, the number grew to over 126 graduates.) Of the 100 graduates, 77 email addresses were active. The Office of Educational Effectiveness and Assessment (OEEA) emailed a link to a web-based survey, and the OEEA also sent three email reminders over a two-week period. Nineteen graduates responded for a response rate of 25 per cent. Each County Teacher of the Year participant responded to prompts about their current stage of teacher leadership, and also reflected back to their pre-service, novice, and career stages.

### *Margin of Error*

The margin of error (or confidence interval) is one way of assessing whether or not the results are reliable. Margin of error depends on population size and sample size, and works best with large populations, such as those available in national political polls. The margin of error for our survey is 13% with a confidence level of 80%. While it is a larger margin of error than any researcher would like, we are able to compare the findings with findings from a previous national study of state teachers of the year (Behrstock-Sherrat et al., 2015), and with the literature to find evidence for the reliability of the findings.

### *Focus Group*

Respondents were also invited to participate in an online focus group. Just over half of respondents indicated they would participate; at the time of the online focus group, two respondents joined. Their comments supported survey findings and takeaways identified in each stage.

## Findings

### *Preservice Stage*

Figure 1 shows that 15 of 19 respondents received their teacher preparation prior to the year 2000. Since the time when those respondents finished their programs and began teaching, most programs have been revised at least twice. Figure 2 shows respondents indicated that the most important experiences in the preservice stage were early opportunities to observe and interact with practicing teachers. Over time, respondents continued to learn, develop, and become more effective teachers.

**Takeaway from findings in the Preservice stage**. While approximately half of the respondents saw preservice coursework as important,

they identified early opportunities to observe in classrooms and interact with teachers as the most important preservice experience.
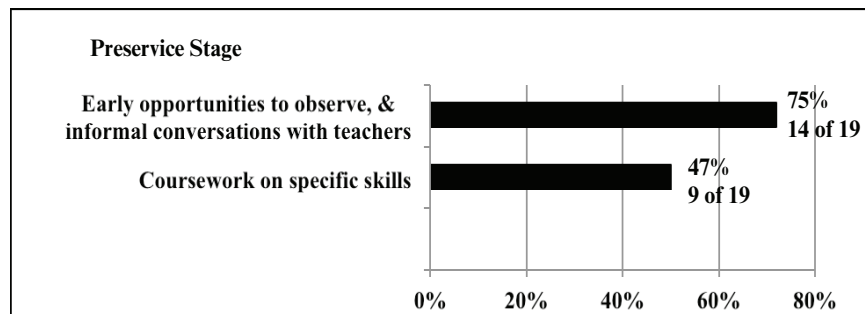
### *Novice Stage*

Figure 3 shows the beginning of a theme common to the novice, career, and teacher-leader stages: A supportive school culture was the most important factor contributing to teachers' development. While other factors also contributed to development, respondents' comments indicated that trust and empathy, combined with mentors' modeling of effective teaching practices, were key factors in their development.

Interestingly in the Novice stage, respondents indicated that a mentor did not necessarily have to be in the same subject or grade area. Trust and close proximity to the mentor were more important. This finding reflects Eckert's (2016) assertion that, "The only way to build better learning environments is through trust…We know that safe learning environments are essential for students, but they must [also] exist for teachers" (p. 20).

**Figure 1**
*Number of respondents who completed
their teacher preparation program by year*
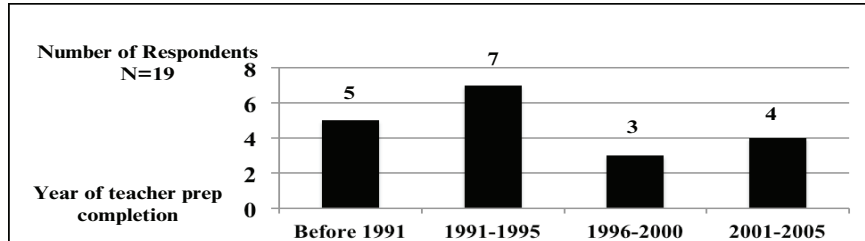


**Figure 2**
*Respondents' perceptions of important experiences
in preservice preparation*

Further evidence of the need for a supportive culture is shown in Figures 4 and 5. The first response in Figure 4 indicates the importance respondents placed on a supportive culture during their Novice Stage (years 1-5 of their teaching career).

**Takeaway from findings in the Novice stage**. Respondents identified the most important support in the Novice stage as a supportive school culture.

### Career Stage

The first response shown in Figure 5 underscores the importance of a supportive culture in the Career Stage.

Responses shown in each career stage underscore a foundational life principle: We operate best in an environment where trust exists, and where we feel safe to learn and grow, as Maslow (1943) and others have found. The principle is true for students in P-12 classrooms, and it is true for classroom teachers—as in virtually all areas of life.

**Figure 3**
*Most important supports during Novice Stage (Yrs. 1-5)*
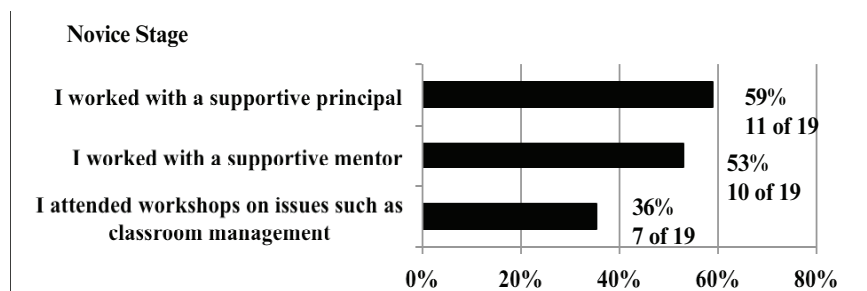


**Figure 4**
*Most important experiences during Novice Stage (Yrs. 1-5)*
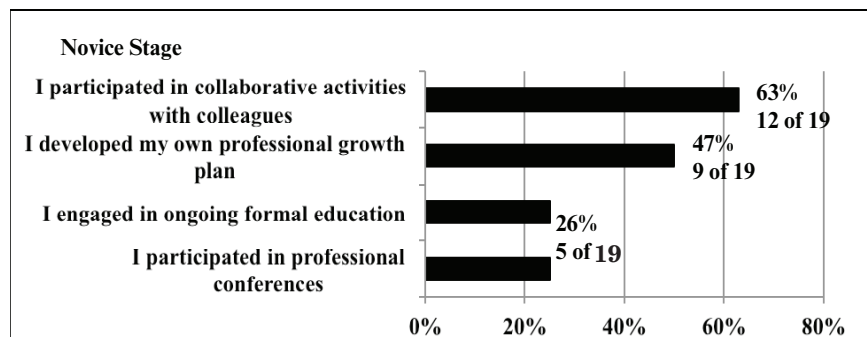
The second response shown in Figure 5 indicates the importance to respondents of encouragement to take a leadership role. The response aligns with what Portner (2016) found about teacher leadership: It can be a direct path to self-actualization, but only if the tasks of leadership and the culture of the school do not add to a teacher's stress. Teacher leadership thus holds the potential to add to teachers' job satisfaction through self-actualization, thereby reducing the number who leave the profession due to frustration or burnout. For better or worse, leaders shape their organization's culture (Edmonds, 2016).

A comment from a focus group participant provided a stark contrast to what happens when a culture of trust does not exist between teachers and administrators. "Teachers have been supportive and good to interact with: not so much administrators. Collaboration with administrators is forced. As a result of my experience with administrators, I have no desire to be one. I am driven to support teachers through the union" (personal communication). It is important for administrators to build positive relationships with teachers by knowing and meeting their needs, and thereby strengthening relationships and the learning community within the school.

Support for the finding about the importance teachers place on supportive school leadership comes from a study by Boyd et al. (2009) who found that the role of school leadership has a strong influence on teacher retention, and from Burkhauser (2016) who found that the strongest single influence on school culture is the principal.

**Takeaway from findings in the Career stage**. Respondents identified a supportive culture and encouragement to lead as primary factors for growth.

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**Figure 5**
*Responses to prompts about school culture*
*and personal leadership during Career Stage*
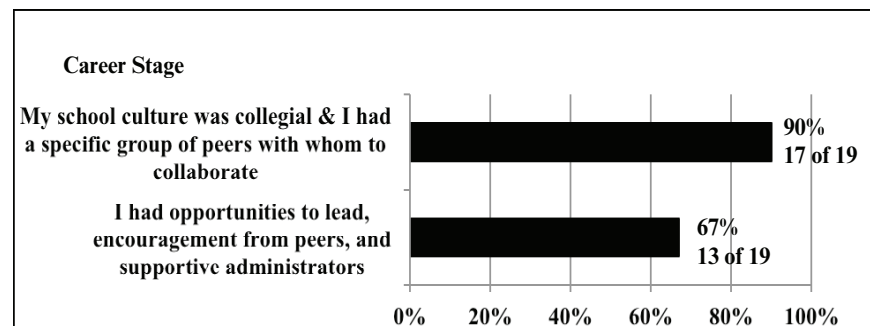
*Teacher Leader Stage*

Figure 6 shows that about one-quarter of respondents became school site administrators after they were selected as county teacher of the year. Figure 6 also shows that virtually all respondents were in an active leadership role in some capacity within their school or district. Responses show that about three-quarters of the respondents have chosen leadership roles that allow them to remain in the classroom.

**Takeaway from findings in the Teacher Leader stage**. Many respondents are involved in a leadership role within the school or district, and continue to be life-long learners.
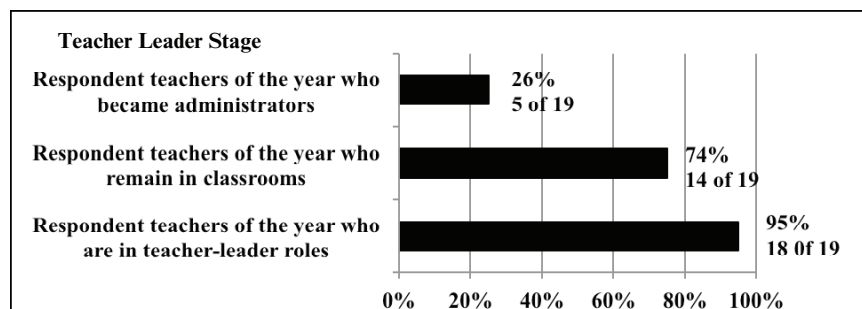
## Discussion of Findings and Recommendations

*At the Preservice Stage*

While about half of the respondents saw preservice coursework as important, they identified early opportunities to observe in classrooms and interact with teachers as the most important preservice experience. Teacher preparation units should review initial teacher preparation programs with a view toward maximizing the time possible for teacher candidates to observe in classrooms, and experience dynamic clinical practice. This echoes best-practices literature in teacher education (Hickey & Clark, 2013; Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002).

Based on overall findings from the study and findings by ASCD (2015), we recommend that the skills of teacher leadership be taught at the outset of teacher preparation, throughout teacher preparation, and in ongoing professional development.

**Figure 6**
*Respondents' leadership roles after they
became County Teacher of the Year*



| Teacher Leader Stage | |
| Respondent teachers of the year who became administrators | 26% 5 of 19 |
| Respondent teachers of the year who remain in classrooms | 74% 14 of 19 |
| Respondent teachers of the year who are in teacher-leader roles | 95% 18 0f 19 |

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

*At Multiple Stages*

All respondents indicated that at the teacher leader stage they are involved in a leadership role within the school or district, and continue to be life-long learners. Teachers who are aware of their growth stages and who purposefully enhance their own skills and the skills of others have the potential to end their career in the teacher leader stage versus withdrawal from teaching, or stagnation. Relevant and meaningful leadership opportunities contribute to educators' continuing professional development, which Danielson (2007) noted is a way to attain and remain "at the top of their profession… [and be] in a position to exercise leadership among colleagues" (p. 102). Leadership opportunities must be relevant and meaningful, and have sufficient support so that new responsibilities are not seen as making the overall workload burdensome. We recommend that school district leaders and site-based school administrators should review opportunities for teacher leadership for the purpose of engaging effective teachers in school and district leadership, which in turn contributes to the continuation of teachers as life-long learners.

Comments by participants in novice, career, and teacher leader stages showed that trust and empathy were important components of their professional growth within a supportive culture. We recommend that school site administrators build a supportive culture within their school because it is a primary factor for teachers' growth in all stages of development. Doing so initiates a reciprocal process, which has the potential of contributing to an administrator's own professional growth and the development of a community of leaders (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Lambert et al., 1995).

## Conclusion

Three conclusions follow from the findings of the study. Each conclusion has the potential to impact teachers' effectiveness throughout their careers, and each invites the involvement of school district leaders, site-based school administrators, and teacher preparation units:

1. Opportunities are needed for pre-service teachers to observe and interact with practicing teachers in classrooms, early and often.

2. A supportive culture is essential for developing and honing teaching skills and teacher leader skills.

3. The findings have implications for teacher preparation units as well as site-based and school district leaders.

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## Appendix A
### *Alignment of Standards for Effective Teachers*

| | InTASC Standards[1] | National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) Core Propositions[2] (CDE | California Department of Education Teacher of the Year, criteria for evaluators[3] |
|---|---|---|---|
| The Learner and Learning | 1-3. Teachers personalize learning for a broad range of diverse learners, and create an environment to support individual and collaborative learning. | 1. Teachers are committed to students and their learning.<br><br>4. Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience | 5. Teacher is student centered.<br><br>7. Builds relationships<br><br>3. Believes all children can achieve. |
| Content Knowledge | 4-5. Teachers understand the big picture of their content area, how the parts relate, how to make learning meaningful, and incorporate higher order thinking in teaching. | 2. Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students. | 2. Shows depth of content knowledge.<br><br>3. Creative, engaging delivery of content.<br><br>8. Reflects on practice. |
| Instructional Practice | 6-8. Have assessment literacy. | 3. Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning. | 3. Measures students' learning. |

| Professional Responsibility | 9-10. Teachers participate in a collaborative professional culture to improve practice, and take a leadership role to improve student learning and strengthen teacher professionalism. | 5. Teachers are members of learning communities. | 1. Teacher is an instructional leader.<br><br>4. Influences beyond the classroom to the school community.<br><br>6. Inspires through commitment to lifelong learning. |

[1] http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2011/InTASC_Model_Core_Teaching_Standards_2011.pdf

[2] http://www.nbpts.org/sites/default/files/what_teachers_should_know.pdf

[3] http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/sr/ct/eligibility.asp

## Appendix B
### *Comparison of Models of Stages of Teaching*

Stages of teaching identified by:

| Fuller and Brown (1975) | Ryan (1986) | Katz (2002) | Behrstock-Sherrat, et al. (2014) | Kelly (2016) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Preservice | Fantasy | No preservice stage identified | Preservice | Learning the Basics |
| Early stage | Survival | Survival | Novice | Creating Systems That Work |
| Mid stage | Mastery | Consolidation | Career | Refining Lessons. Educational philosophy moves from theory to practice and growing in confidence |
| Late stage | Impact | Renewal/ maturity | Teacher Leader | Avoiding Autopilot |

## Appendix C
### *Sample Survey Prompts*

The following three examples provide the survey text and illustrate the types of prompts used in the study. As the survey developed, the prompts that appeared were dependent upon the responses and the stage of career.

1. A number of supports have been cited as contributing to the development of effective teaching at the Preservice Stage. Think back to the *Preservice Stage of your career*. Please *indicate whether you received the following supports* by clicking in the appropriate box.

A list of supports was shown, and respondents were asked to check one of the responses.

> *Yes*                     *No*                     *Don't know*

2. You indicated that you received the following supports or experiences in the Preservice stage of your career. Please *rate the importance of each* in developing your effectiveness as a teacher.

A list of 'Yes' responses from prompt 1 were provided, and respondents were asked to check one of the responses listed below.

> *Very Important*
> *Somewhat Important*
> *Neither Important nor Unimportant*
> *Not very Important*
> *Not at all Important*
> *Don't Know*

3. Of the supports that you rated "very important," *please rank up to the top 3* in order of importance (1 = Most important, 2 = Second most important, 3 = Third most important). *If you rated only one support "very important," choose 1 for that support in the drop down menu. If you rated more than three supports "very important," rank only top three of them, leaving the others unranked.*

The same list of supports as in prompt 2 appeared in this prompt. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of their three most important supports.

> *1*                     *2*                     *3*