



Transformational Leadership Preparation in a Post-COVID World: US Perspectives

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Abstract: The term Powerful Learning Experience (PLE) is an outgrowth of a University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) project. Colleagues who were engaged in the Leaders Supporting Diverse Learners (LSDL) project, along with researchers examining exemplary educational leadership programs refined the original framework. The version described in the following article is based on Young’s (2019) presentation of the framework to the World Educational Leadership Summit (WELS). The PLE framework consists of ten key attributes that encourage active teaching and learning processes, problem-based, context-rich products, and other evidence of learning outcomes. The authors have found that leadership preparation experiences that reflect a combination of these ten attributes facilitate deeper understanding of educational leadership and the development of knowledge and skills that are both transferable to a variety of contexts and adaptable for multiple challenges.

Keywords: leadership preparation programs, clinical learning experiences, reforming leadership preparation

Without question, the single most important feature of a leadership development program is its curriculum. Several decades of accumulated research on leadership preparation provide insight into the curricular features that distinguish effective from less effective programs, including an explicit program theory of action, curricular coherence, a strong alignment to leadership standards, intentional weaving of content and skill development with field work, and a commitment to culturally responsive and inclusive leadership practice (Cunningham et al., 2019; McCarthy, 1999; Young et al., 2009; Young & Crow, 2017; Young et al., 2021). The majority of this research, however, was conducted before the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic engulfed the global community.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented, international crises, which has challenged healthcare, business, social and educational systems across the globe. In September of 2020, UNICEF predicted that more than a billion children were at risk of falling behind due to school closures aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020). This prediction was not far from the mark. As schools closed and transitioned from face-to-face to online instructional modalities, learning was disrupted, and many schools and communities struggled to provide the infrastructure (e.g., tablets, computer, internet access, training for teachers, learning management systems) necessary to support teaching and learning as well as the other social services (e.g., meal services, mental health supports) delivered through schools.

It is unlikely that that prior to 2020 any US leadership development programs seriously considered the implications of a global pandemic for the preparation of aspiring principals or superintendents. The focus of most preparation programs has been significantly influenced by national and state leadership standards and the needs of local district partners (Young et al., 2021). Although a growing number of preparation programs throughout the 2000s included units or modules focused on crises management and trauma-informed leadership practice, few programs, if any, provided knowledge and skills explicitly mapped to leading during a pandemic.

Leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic has been marked with uncertainty, ambiguity and the need for high-impact decisions in a context of limited and changing information. Leaders have had to manage these challenges, learn new skills “on the fly,” and to engage in creative problem-solving strategies to keep their students and staff members safe, while also supporting learning and development. That said, the work of leadership has always been and will continue to be an incredibly complex undertaking (Sebastian et al., 2018; VanGronigen et al., 2018). Leaders frequently find themselves facing decisions with no easy answers, responsibilities with ill-defined paths forward, expected outcomes with too few resources, and politically-charged situations with little or no guidance.

As we contemplate the implications of providing transformational leadership preparation post-COVID, it is important to look below the surface-level challenges of the pandemic and the particular information and resource needs related to COVID-19 to identify and understand the deeper knowledge and skills that enable

leaders to effectively manage both the adaptive and technical challenges of any leadership situation as well as how such knowledge and skills can be developed through leadership preparation. In this article, we present a framework for leadership development that incorporates concepts from transformational learning theory and adaptive leadership theory called Powerful Learning Experiences (PLE). It is our belief that intentional integration of the ten PLE attributes in leadership development programming, can foster the development of leadership knowledge and skills that are transferable and adaptable for a variety of leadership challenges.

Learning in Educational Leadership Preparation

In a 1996 publication, Leithwood and his colleagues documented eleven innovative graduate-level leadership preparation programs and correspondingly surveyed teachers who worked in schools led by program graduates. Their research found that a programs' curriculum was predictive of teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership effectiveness, with higher quality curriculum being associated with more positive perceptions. Similarly, Ni et al. (2019) found that graduates from programs with high levels of program rigor and relevance (i.e., programs with the following characteristics: curricular coherence; standards alignment; research-based; intellectually challenging; critical analysis of knowledge, theory and experience; and application of theory and knowledge to practice), were more likely to become principals and to demonstrate effective leadership practice. More recently, Young et al., (2021) argued that three additional qualities further distinguished high quality leadership preparation curricula: intentionality, integration, and impact.

What exactly is meant by the term curriculum? According to curriculum theorists, it may include a variety of elements from what is written in a curriculum document to what is taught, supported, assessed, and learned; It can also include design, content, andragogy, and delivery in their definitions (e.g., Glatthorn , 2000: Gwele, 2005; Young et al., 2021). For the purpose of this article, we define curriculum as inclusive of program goals, learning objectives, content, and andragogy. If intentionally designed, curriculum can foster powerful learning for educational leaders.

Adults learn differently than children and adolescents (Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 1997). Although there are similarities, such as the desire to "understand to understand and order the meaning of our experience, to integrate it with what we know" (Mezirow, 1997; p. 3), how humans construct meaning evolves over their lifetime. It involves the "complexification of the mind. . . not the mere addition of new capacities..., nor the substitution of a new capacity for an old one..., but the subordination of once-ruling capacities to the dominion of more complex capacities" (2000, p. 60). Consider for a moment the contested beliefs that emerged amidst the COVID-19 pandemic concerning whether or not schools should reopen, students and staff members should be required to wear masks, and districts or state governments could mandate vaccines for school employees. It is essential that leaders have the capacity to critically examine their own and others' assumptions, in order to effectively communicate, cut through the clutter of conflicting information, focus on the core mission of their organizations, and arrive at a "tentative best judgment regarding contested beliefs" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 9).

A number of scholars have offered insight into the competencies essential to effective leadership during the pandemic. Kaul and colleagues (2020), for example, identified eight practices that effective leaders need to be able to engage in during a time of crisis and discussed them in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These include: (1) Communicating, (2) conveying realistic optimism about the future, (3) focusing on mission and core values, (4) making decisions amidst ambiguity, (5) planning for the short- and long-term, (6) engaging with purpose and humility, (7) flattening the leadership structure, and (8) looking outward.

Prior research suggests authentic and meaningful learning experiences can enhance and enrich a curriculum to be more impactful for the development of school leaders (Young et al., 2009). In the next section, we discuss our Powerful Learning Experiences (PLEs) framework, a framework culled from research on effective leadership preparation that appears to develop deep understandings of educational leadership and shift the ways in which program candidates think about themselves, education, and the world (Cunningham et al., 2019; O’Doherty & Generett, n.d.; Young, 2015; 2019). As part of this discussion, we consider the leadership practices identified by Kaul et al. (2020) as essential during a pandemic.

What are Powerful Learning Experiences?

The term Powerful Learning Experience (PLE) is an outgrowth of a University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) project: The Collaborative Urban Leadership Curriculum Development Initiative (Young, 2015). Subsequently, colleagues engaged in the Leaders Supporting Diverse Learners (LSDL) project (O’Doherty & Generett, n.d.; Young, 2015; Young et al., 2015) and researchers examining exemplary educational leadership programs (Cunningham et al., 2019; Young, 2019) refined the original framework. The version we shared in Table 1 is based on Young’s (2019) presentation of the framework to the World Educational Leadership Summit (WELS).

Table 1. Powerful Learning Experiences

	Attribute	Attribute Description
Attribute 1	Authentic	The learning experience reflects an authentic, meaningful, and relevant aspect of leadership practice.
Attribute 2	Active Engagement	The learning experience requires active engagement (e.g., examining, diagnosing, and addressing problems of leadership practice, linking theory and practice).
Attribute 3	Sense-making	The learning experience fosters sense-making around critical problems of leadership practice.
Attribute 4	Centers Equity	The learning experience requires that candidates explore, critique, and deconstruct problems, beliefs, practices, and policies from an equity perspective.
Attribute 5	Reflection	The learning experience requires reflection.

	Attribute	Attribute Description
Attribute 6	Collaboration and Interdependence	The learning experience requires collaboration and interdependence.
Attribute 7	Responsibility for Learning	The learning experience empowers learners to take responsibility for their own learning.
Attribute 8	Learner and Knower	The learning experience positions both professor and students as both knowers and learners.
Attribute 9	Broadens Perspective	The learning experience broadens and shifts perspective from the classroom to school, district, or state level.
Attribute 10	Confidence Building	The learning experience develops confidence in leadership.

The PLE framework consists of ten key attributes that encourage active teaching and learning processes, problem-based, context-rich products, and other evidence of learning outcomes. In our prior research, we have found that leadership preparation experiences that reflect a combination of these ten attributes facilitate deeper understanding of educational leadership and the development of knowledge and skills that are both transferable to a variety of contexts and adaptable for multiple challenges. (Cunningham et al., 2019; Young, 2015, 2019).

Attribute 1-Authentic

The first attribute focuses on authenticity because authentic problems of practice are central to most professional work. Professionals, from leaders to lawyers, face problems of practice each day that require the application of professional expertise. This has been especially the case for leaders during the pandemic. Especially in the early days of the pandemic, they encountered multiple opportunities and challenges that required them to navigate conflicting information (e.g., information about disease transmission, face-to-face instruction, social distancing, mask wearing, vaccinations, etc.) and apply their expertise to decision making (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995). Leaders need to be able to respond quickly, based on the best available information in developing a sense of direction, while also being flexible as new information is made available.

Organizing aspiring leaders’ learning around authentic problems of leadership practice provides a means to develop the thought processes of aspiring leaders in an authentic way and makes theoretical understandings and related research more salient to the task of making decisions and responding. Doing so also requires that consideration be given to the context of learning. Adults learn in a variety of settings, both formal and informal (Caffarella, 2002). Yet, some learning contexts are more conducive than others for achieving specific learning outcomes. For example, if you want a learner to have an opportunity to observe and replicate expert practice, learning may need to take place in the school setting through

observation and/or shadowing. Alternatively, one could demonstrate expert practice captured on video and then followed by the use of role play or simulation.

Attribute 2 – Active Engagement

The second attribute focuses on active engagement. Leadership programs, like other professional preparation programs, have the multi-faceted challenge of simultaneously teaching both about leadership and how to do the work of leadership in many different contexts. Thus, adult learning theory suggests that when “given the choice between two techniques, choose the one involving the learners in the most active participation” (Knowles, 1980, p. 240). There are a variety of teaching strategies that can be used to foster learning, some of which encourage content knowledge expertise (e.g., lectures, panel discussions, group discussions, dyad discussions, etc.), while others foster application of knowledge and skill development (Berger et al., 2003; Young, 2019).

Authentic problems that arise within field-based contexts offer an opportunity to actively engage with the problem and apply theory and content knowledge in the service of improved decision making and outcomes (Slegers et al., 2009). In their research on exemplary leadership preparation, Cunningham and her colleagues (2019) observed that exemplary leadership programs prioritize opportunities for candidates to engage with problems of practice in cycles of continuous improvement. The iterative nature of continuous improvement cycles encourages the kind of flexible and adaptive leadership needed during times of crises.

There are, of course, other issues to be mindful of when planning for active engagement. For example, certain students (e.g., White, male, able bodied, middle or upper class) may have less experience and predisposition to engage around topics like leading for diversity, particularly with peers belonging to diverse groups (Hall et al., 2011). Thus, faculty must be intentional about structuring classroom interactions that foster engagement around issues of race and equity.

Attribute 3 – Sensemaking

The third attribute focuses on sensemaking. Sensemaking is an iterative process of working to interpret, understand, identify options and make decisions, when facing a problem or change—and then managing the steps to address the problem or change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Developing sensemaking skills, is best done in the context of authentic problems of practice, and the pandemic has provided plenty of options. In fostering sensemaking, faculty can use strategies like the five whys, fishbone diagrams, problem-based learning, fishbowls, the Socratic method, simulations and reflection to analyze the problem and identify the various factors driving, impacting, complicating or resulting from the original problem. According to Portin and colleagues (2014) “school leaders have to be master diagnosticians. How they diagnose, interpret, and dissect what are necessarily complex systems is, in some ways, a key measure of their success as a principal” (p. 11).

Attribute 4 – Centers Equity

The fourth attribute focuses on centering equity. Crises provide leaders and their organizations with opportunities to focus on and recommit to their core mission and

values. For educational organizations, equity must be central to their mission. Research finds that effective leaders embrace transformative ways of thinking and leading to interrupt the current systems and practices that underserve low-income students and students of color (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). Thus, it is essential that leadership preparation programs foster an equity mindset.

Centering equity in learning experiences involves both supporting learning with course content and active learning activities. With regard to the former research demonstrates that students' equity orientation and understanding post-graduation is associated with the degree to which instructors included diverse content and perspectives in their courses (Shim & Perez, 2018). In addition to including the diverse perspectives, an equity approach to course content incorporates asset-based depictions of students and communities (Diem & Welton, 2020; Martinez-Cola, 2018). A good example is Green's (2017) community-based equity audit approach designed to "disrupt deficit views about community, conduct initial community inquiry and shared community experiences, establish a community leadership team, and collect equity, asset-based community data for action" (p. 4).

Exploration, critique, and deconstruction can be fostered through a variety of activities that explicitly require these skills, including collegial inquiry (Drago-Severson, 2009), equity audits (e.g., Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015; Skrla et al., 2004), neighborhood walks, targeted observations, (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004), and community-based equity audits (Green, 2017). The University of Texas-San Antonio (UTSA) provides an excellent example of how this can be done. UTSA candidates learn to explore, critique, and deconstruct policies, systems, and individual practices, and then consider and design more equitable alternatives (Cunningham et al., 2019; Young, 2019). In their work on culturally responsive teaching, Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2009) suggest that course content be used to bridge candidates' knowledge from what they understand as reality to what they need to know in a way that opens candidates to the limitations of their original perspectives. Through signature assignments like their autobiography project, UTSA faculty have worked to foster a deep awareness of experience and assumptions, a willingness to examine them critically in light of disconfirming information, and a willingness to adjust one's frames of reference (Merchant & Garza, 2015).

Attribute 5 – Reflection

The fifth attribute focuses on reflection. If we want to transform our current system of education, our preparation programs need to intentionally build aspiring leaders' capacities to do just that. Reflection is the tool that enables professionals to consider, adapt, and respond to the ever-changing landscapes in which they work (Schön, 1983).

Two forms of reflection are particularly important for adult learners: (1) critical reflection, which involves looking inward, and (2) reflective discourse, which involves looking outward (Cunningham et al., 2019; Young, 2019). Critical reflection requires reflecting upon one's actions and can be helpful to educational

leaders whose work is often characterized by “uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and conflict” (p. 345). It can be activated with a variety of activities, such as “writing, dialogue, conflict resolution, and decision making” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 153). The second form, reflective discourse, is described by Mezirow (2000) as a specialized use of dialogue devoted to looking outward to colleagues to gather their insight and tap their thinking and experience to make better decisions. It also involves critically assessing assumptions, searching for a common understanding of interpretations or beliefs, and examining alternative perspectives. Although professional knowledge, previous experience, theories and research will inform a leaders’ actions, leaders must also have the capacity to engage in a reflective process that enables them to gather collective wisdom and analyze contexts, problems, and strategies and to determine next steps.

Attribute 6 – Collaboration and Interdependence

The sixth attribute focuses on collaboration and interdependence. Leadership is not a solo-act; it is both interactive and interdependent. As alluded to in the above section, leaders need to utilize and leverage the talents of those around them, particularly in times of crises. Senge (1990) refers to this as collective intelligence. It is important that leadership development programs build opportunities for candidates to work in interdependent, connected, and collaborative ways, mimicking the reality of leadership practice (Drago-Severson, 2009; Young, 2019). Team-based projects and leaderless group exercises are two ways to provide such opportunities, where in the success of an individual is dependent on the success of the team. It is also important to complement such learning opportunities with an occasion to independently reflect on and collaboratively debrief about how they both contributed to and were shaped by collaboration and interdependence with colleagues.

An excellent example of fostering collaboration and interdependence is provided by the University of Washington’s (UW) Leadership for Learning (L4L) program that regularly requires candidates to work in teams both within their cohort and in field-based settings. Candidates use a cycle-of-inquiry approach to examine and problem solve a pressing problem of practice that matters for achieving equity in their system.

Attribute 7 – Responsibility for Learning

The seventh attribute focuses on taking responsibility for learning. Simply put, leadership candidates need to see themselves as responsible for their own learning and development (Young, 2015). After years of being socialized in the banking model of education (Freire, 1970), many adult learners view faculty members as both the source of knowledge and primary driver of learning. However, this simply is not the case. Growing empirical evidence points to the primacy of active and deliberate agency in one’s learning (Myran & Sutherland, 2019).

Leadership preparation programs can encourage candidates to take responsibility for their own learning in two ways: (1) building an understanding of this responsibility and (2) making this responsibility central to program learning experiences (Young, 2015). This process can begin early in a leadership preparation program by helping candidates assess their learning needs and formulate learning

objectives (Knowles, 1980; Berger et al., 2003). The scope of such an assessment can vary in focus, from “what I need to gain from this program” to “what I want to learn from this activity.” For example, in preparation for a simulated courageous conversation, candidates would articulate not just what they hoped to learn about courageous conversations, but what they hope to gain as a result of participating in the activity; how they plan to apply the skills, knowledge, or values they developed in their leadership approach; and how they will know they are successfully using the new knowledge or skills.

When programs involve candidates in planning their learning experiences, candidates are more likely to view themselves as valued participants in their own education, increasing feelings of empowerment (Grow, 1991). Additionally, creating concrete individualized learning plans and communicating candidate responsibility for monitoring and achieving the specific learning outcomes is not only a powerful stage-setter for taking responsibility (Young, 2019), it also promotes self-knowledge, a necessary ingredient for engaging in self-directed learning (Mezirow, 1997).

Attribute 8 – Learner and Knower

The eighth PLE attribute focuses on the solidarity between being a learner and a knower as well as that between the act of educating and being educated (Berger et al., 2003; Galbraith, 1998; Taylor et al., 2000). When fostering adult learning, it is important that everyone involved in the learning environment, regardless of their formal role, understand themselves and others as contributing to teaching and participating in learning. This is especially true today; educators are juggling, confronting, educating, advocating and leading in both known and unknown territory. The cumulative learning opportunities made available through experience, research and theory is significant and should be intentionally tapped.

Caffarella (2002) reminds us that faculty have a responsibility to design instruction that not just takes into consideration, but actually leverages the differences learners bring with them to enhance learning experiences. A number of scholars, including Merchant and Garcia (2015), Young and colleagues (2015), Hayes and Colin (1994), Diem and Welton (2020), Wlodkowski (1998), and Young and Laible (2000), provide helpful resources for designing learning techniques that create inclusive learning environments. Importantly, because there is a power differential between faculty and leadership candidates, faculty must take responsibility for establishing norms and classroom conditions that engender trust and respect when using this practice (Edmondson, 1999).

Life experiences, both personal and professional, offer ample opportunities for candidates to participate as knowers and learners with their peers and faculty, as they create meaning systems, or frames of reference, that shape their interpretations of events and information and bring coherence to their lived experiences (Cunningham et al., 2019; Young, 2019). UTSA’s autobiography assignment, for example, provides both candidates and faculty an opportunity to share, learn, and engage in sensemaking around their life experiences and building

mutual respect for each other as people and leaders (Caffarella, 2002; Merchant & Garza, 2015).

Attribute 9 – Broadens Perspective

The ninth attribute focuses on broadening one's perspective. The discussion of adult learning principles provided earlier in this article focused on reframing assumptions and broadening perspectives. Doing so is essential for leaders who are transitioning to roles with much wider scopes of influence than their classroom. To illustrate, as teachers transition from their position in the classroom to the school-wide position of principal or assistant principal, they must expand on their understanding of the school and district as part of a larger system and the implications of decisions made at various levels on others (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2005). Classrooms, for example, are nested within schools, schools within communities, communities within districts, and so on. Aspiring leaders must also be able to navigate up and down within that system, such as making sense of and interpret new information and communicating their interpretations to others, often to those they supervise.

Given that learning is more than embodied cognition, shifts in perspective must be intentionally developed (Cunningham et al., 2019; Young, 2019). UW's L4L program uses learning situations that require candidates to "zoom out" and "see the system" in order to refine their systems thinking skills. Senge (1990), perhaps one of the most well-known authors on the systems approach to leadership, argues that the real challenge with the systems approach is honing one's ability to think deeply about and hypothesize how issues and actions in one sphere might affect issues and actions in other spheres. Understanding how one decision influences various parts of the system is paramount for taking a systems approach to educational leadership (Fullan, 2005).

Attribute 10 – Confidence Building

The tenth and final attribute of powerful learning experiences focuses on building candidates' confidence in their ability to lead (Young, 2015, p. 401). According to Norman and Hyland (2003), confidence consists of three dimensions: (a) cognitive, (b) affective, and (c) performance. The cognitive dimension addresses candidates' self-knowledge and understanding and poses questions like "What are my strengths and weaknesses?" The affective dimension addresses candidates' emotions, and the performance dimension addresses candidates' abilities.

Building confidence across these dimensions can be supported early on by addressing hypothetical problems included in published cases and then progressively engaging in activities that are more authentic, including issues uncovered in fieldwork. Moving candidates through such progressively realistic activities creates the necessary pathways to scaffold learning (James & Nightingale, 2005; Young et al., 2009). Furthermore, group-based learning situations that include defined mechanisms for giving and receiving feedback help candidates process their performance, promoting feelings of competency and self-worth, and help candidates overcome a lack of confidence (Thornton et al., 2000). Importantly, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) report that as candidates increase their confidence,

they are more likely to persist—and persistence is a key ingredient for lifelong learning.

Supporting Transformational Leadership Preparation

We know it is critical that leaders be able to respond to routine problems with value-based and research-informed practices, that they have the capacity to construct their approaches to leadership, based on their unique situation and circumstances, and that they be able to draw together and sift through complexity in making decisions. These beliefs, however, evolved over time along with the field of education. As schools moved from the one-room school house to massive districts and as knowledge and technologies have advanced so too have our understandings about and practices of leadership.

Disruptive events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, similarly impact our thinking about leaders and how they are developed. The pandemic has called many of our common sense practices into question, from questions like “how important is it for our students to meet face-to-face?” to “how might technology be further leveraged to provide authentic leadership simulations?” It also incites us to ask: “how prepared were our graduates to lead through the pandemic?” “How effectively did they support the transition from face-to-face to online?” “What challenges did they face?” “What resources and learnings did they depend on most?” The most important question for us, however, is “What have we learned from them that can inform our preparation programs?” This is the time for educational leadership preparation providers to seriously reconsider the content, pedagogy and delivery of their programs to ensure we are both better prepared for the next big crises and that we learn from the current crises how to improve the way we do our work.

Heretofore, professional learning for education leaders has often taken a one-size fits all design, wherein, programs claim their efforts are promoting constructivist, or even transformational, approaches, but “appear to be disguised forms of didactic and behaviorist teaching” (Steward & Wolodko, 2016, p. 247). However, when learning experiences are designed using attributes from the PLE framework, they provide opportunities for aspiring leaders to actively engage in authentic problems of leadership practice. They enable aspirants to essentially experience the work of in-service leaders, to critically reflect on and make sense of that experience both individually and in community with others, and they help to transform the ways candidates understand leadership and themselves as leaders. Each of these benefits are highlighted as critical to effective adult learning programming (Caffarella, 2002; Knowleds, 2000; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Mezirow, 1997).

At this time, it is unclear how many leadership development programs in the U.S. have built PLEs into their curriculum. We are able to point to at least eleven or twelve leadership preparation programs that have, as these programs have been documented as part of their identification as exemplary by one or more organizations (e.g., UCEA, The Wallace Foundation) (Cunningham et al., 2019; Young et al., 2021). The impact of these programs on the learning and practice of

their graduates is impressive, and indicates that more attention should be paid to the quality of leadership preparation.

We highly recommend the PLE framework for preparation providers, particularly those who are opening new programs, redesigning their programs, or giving their programs an androgological tuning. Each of the PLE attributes described in the above section contributes to the power of adult learning experiences, and they are especially important for the preparation of future leaders (Young et al., 2021).

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