Relationships, Resources, Resilience:

Professional Learning Communities to Improve Teacher Retention

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Abstract

This study used mixed methods to explore the impact of a university-hosted professional learning community (PLC) on teacher retention in public schools. Recent graduates (1-3 years) and mentor teachers were invited to participate. Via a case study approach, participants were challenged to look critically at their teaching and use data to investigate interventions that would improve outcomes for children. A web-based platform allowed for posed questions, discussion, and reflection between sessions. Project directors monitored discussions to offer further guidance and support as needed. Findings from this study provide insight into participant experience in PLCs. Relationships and practical resources shared within the PLC resulted in improved teacher performance, confidence, and feelings of well-being.

Keywords: Professional Learning Community, Mentoring, Teacher Education, In-Service/Professional Development

Purpose

Research suggests that high-quality mentors and competitive salaries are integral for addressing the challenge public education faces to retain its teachers (Gray & Taie, 2015). Novice teachers feel unprepared (Ryan, 1992; Kaff, 2004) and as time passes their insecurity continues as "feelings of isolation, interest in not abandoning university teacher preparation, and the need to learn from mentoring" (Stanulis, Fallona and Pearson, 2002, p. 79). Mentoring is seen as a cost effective way to upgrade skills, enhance recruitment and retention, and increase job satisfaction (Kerka, 1998). Literature suggests embedding sustained, professional learning is most effective in meeting new teacher needs (DuFour, 2014). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) emphasized the need for PLCs immersed in teacher inquiry to ask questions, admit uncertainties, and embrace continued learning as integral components of a mentoring program. Building on the work of DuFour (2014) which suggests PLCs are most effective in meeting new teacher needs, this study employed mixed methods to observe, analyze, and describe participant perception of a university-hosted PLC and the impact of participation on teacher retention.

Theoretical Framework

Cochran-Smith (2012) emphasized the need to create a variety of supports to ensure that teachers stay in the profession including PLCs. DuFour et al. (2006) defined the term professional learning communities as – "Educators committed to working collaborative in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 217). Inquiry as a stance and action research served as the basis for construction of the PLC and also provided a comprehensive approach to mentoring teachers. Cochran-Smith (2012) suggests the democratic nature of inquiry groups can serve to empower teachers (novice and veteran) to solve problems in their classrooms, use data to make decisions, and test the effect of evidence based practices. Within this framework,

- All problems/issues are presented in terms of "What can I do in my teaching practice to better support _____ ?"
- All member enjoy equality in terms of role, voice, opinion, and discussions.

Furthermore, Maheady, Smith, and Jabot (2013) assert that if teachers can substantiate the use of certain interventions they may be more inclined to investigate the use of other evidence-based practices. By participating in university-sponsored training on action research, teachers were encouraged to plan, implement and measure the effect of research-based strategies on their classroom practice.

Methods

This study used mixed methods to understand how novice and mentor teachers perceive their experience in a professional learning community. An initial survey was administered to seventy-two recent graduates (1-3 years), forty individuals responded, fourteen participated in at least one meeting, and four participated in a majority of meetings. Fifteen mentors were invited to participate in the PLC (based on recommendations), five participated in at least one meeting, and one participated in a majority of meetings. Attendance at monthly meetings was approximately ten participants and only five participants attended four or more meetings. Participants received a stipend for their involvement.

Participants were actively involved in determining the structure and format of meetings, which consisted of a short individual check-in, case study analysis, and announcements. Six 2-hour meetings were held monthly (Sept, Nov, Jan, Feb, April, May) throughout the academic year. Via a

case study approach, participants were challenged to look critically at their teaching and use data to investigate interventions that would improve outcomes for children. A website was created to host resources shared by members of the PLC, and a Facebook group was used to facilitate discussion and reflection between sessions. Project directors monitored discussions to offer further guidance and support as needed.

Data

Data were collected in the form of a pre- and post-survey and from PLC meetings themselves. An initial survey was administered to determine participant need in the areas of Expectations, Teaching, Classroom Management, and Relationships, and to inform the structure and format of the PLC. Throughout the analysis the researcher explored views of novice and mentor teachers regarding their involvement in the PLC. After all meetings were transcribed and checked for accuracy, the researcher systematically evaluated data collected throughout the year using thematic coding. An iterative analysis was used to identify important themes that emerged. A final survey consisting of several likert scale questions and several short answer questions was administered to further assess participant perception of the PLC and confirm preliminary study findings. All participants received an implied consent form prior to participating and assured their confidentiality would be respected and that information would be reported with anonymity.

Description of Participants

For the purpose of this study, participants were defined as those participating in a majority (4/6) of PLC meetings. Of the nine individuals meeting this criteria, two served as mentors and seven were mentees. 11% were School Psychology, 22% were Early Childhood Education, and 67% were Special Education. 75% of participants had 0-3 years experience, 12.5% had 4-6 years experience, and 12.5% had 15 or more years experience. 56% of participants had employer-sponsored mentoring. Doug has three years experience and is a Title 1 teacher at a public school. He felt the PLC helped him gain professional knowledge and the opportunity to connect with other teachers. Doug values action research but cited time as the reason for not participating in this aspect of the PLC. Kim is in her first year of teaching special education at a private agency. Kim felt the PLC met her goal to connect with professionals of varying backgrounds, gain feedback on her classroom and students, as well as new strategies, ideas, resources, and a safe space to vent. Samantha is also in her first year of teaching special education at the same private agency as Kim. She felt the PLC helped her to meet the goal of obtaining a mentor and strategies to help children in her classroom. Kim and Samantha participated in action research training offered by the university but felt unconfident implementing it in their classroom. Hannah is in her second year of teaching kindergarten at a public school. She participated in and values action research, and felt the PLC helped her establish a network of professionals and support for classroom issues. Danielle is in her fifth year teaching special education at a public school. She participated in action research, and felt the PLC provided a place to share successes and failures with others going through the same thing. Catherine is in her second year teaching elementary school at a private school. Catherine participated in action research and felt the PLC contributed a variety of activities for her teaching toolbox. Thomas has been teaching a charter school for four months. He did not participate in the university-sponsored action research, but felt the PLC allowed him to share ideas and discuss problems in the classroom. Combined Linda received her graduate certificate in school psychology and has 34 years experience. Diane, a registered nurse, has over 30 years experience in education. Linda and Diane felt the PLC met their goal of supporting others.

Results

This study used mixed methods to explore the impact of a university-hosted PLC on teacher retention. A pre-survey was used to inform the structure and format of the PLC. This initial survey was sent to recent (1-3 year) graduates to determine perceptions regarding their undergraduate preparation, likelihood to stay in the teaching profession, and action research. These findings are summarized in table 1. A post-survey was administered to the 9 study participants to confirm preliminary findings concerning the benefits of PLCs as well as attitudes concerning teaching as a profession and action research. These findings are summarized in table 2. 100% of participants felt the PLC met (22%) or highly met (78%) their goals, and 100% of participants would continue their involvement in the PLC. A summary of participant need in the areas of relationships, expectations, teaching, and behavior management obtained from the pre-survey and ability of the PLC to meet these needs obtained from the post-survey can be found in table 3. Data from this initial analysis suggest that participating in PLC increased perceived value of and intent to participate in action research. Furthermore, the ability of the PLC to meet participation goals was a reflection of participation. A thematic analysis was used to glean insight into participant experience of the PLC and to deepen understanding of these preliminary findings, particularly the impact of PLCs on teacher retention.

Stansbury and Zimmerman (2000) suggest that teacher support can be understood as occurring across a continuum starting with personal and emotional support, expanding to task-specific support, and ultimately helping teachers develop critical self-reflection on their own practice. To constitute the second level of analysis, an iterative line by line coding process was used to develop a thick description of participation PLC experience. Data were organized into the categories of emotional support, task-specific support, and self-reflection, and these categories were used as the beginning coding scheme for meeting transcripts.
Teaching imposes significant emotional challenges that contribute to low retention rates. Collegial relationships afforded through PLCs can help alleviate demands related to planning and preparation, unfamiliar curriculum, and feelings of isolation. According to Sam, a first year special education teacher, "it is very refreshing to be in a professional group of people who are transparent and honest with their experiences." In contrast to school or district-based mentoring programs in which teachers are under constant scrutiny, the university-hosted PLC allowed participants to share freely in a judgment free atmosphere. Veteran teacher and former principal Linda explains, "it gives In addition to personal and emotional support, beginning teachers need help in knowing how to approach new tasks and problem-solving classroom issues. These tangible resources were cited by participants as a primary reason for entering the PLC. Regarding her expectations of the PLC, first-year special educator, Kim described her desire to "walk away with something concrete, something that they know how to do now that they didn't know how to do before." New teachers need help dealing with teaching challenges specific to their own students. As veteran teacher Diane explains, "it was especially impressive to hear the positive sharing out of strategies employed by the teachers to address classroom challenges." PLCs enable teachers to draw from a larger repertoire of instructional strategies to envision a larger range of potential solutions. Doug, a third year special education teacher exclaimed, "the professional knowledge that can be gained through these is awesome." The tangible strategies and resources gained in PLCs can result in improved teaching, and as a consequence reduce the emotional stress associated with the first years of the profession.

The current accountability climate within schools leaves many new teachers feeling weak or incapable while seeking advice in traditional school and district sanctioned mentoring programs. Doug describes the self-doubt experienced in his first year teaching, "you have to rely on the principal a lot and the other teachers. I have ideas but they're not being listened to." In order to improve retention, new teacher support programs must ultimately help teachers engage in the critical self-reflective practice necessary to independently identify and address problems related to teaching and learning without such supports in place. Veteran teacher Linda continually urged new teachers in

the PLC "to talk to other colleagues and get survival skills." PLCs, which break down hierarchical relationships between veteran and novice teachers result in a shift of power in which all participants benefit from improved confidence and feelings of well-being. As a result of participating in the PLC, Kim describes "getting the confidence to design a project...you empowered yourself because you did something." By removing the stigma of asking for help, PLCs foster action-oriented discussion which transcends individual classrooms to see what is going on at the school or district level.

Scholarly Significance

There is a wealth of research supporting the use of mentoring to address teacher retention in U.S. public schools (Anderson, & Shannon, 1998; Boyer, 1999; Bronwell, & Smith, 1992; Ganzer, Bainer, Bendixem-Noe, Brock, Stinson, Giebelhaus, & Runyon, 1998; Griffin, 1985; Odell, & Ferraro, 1992; White, & Mason, 2001, Cochran-Smith 2012). However, mentoring programs vary significantly in structure and quality which dramatically changes the intended impact on teacher retention (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Findings from this study suggest PLCs have positive effect teachers knowledge and skills, particularly in the areas of expectations, teaching, management, and relationships. Second, this study provides insight on how to structure PLCs to incorporate both inquiry as a stance and action research into new teacher development. The inquiry as a stance framework facilitated a deeper understanding of teacher practice while action research enabled participants to address a problem within their teaching, seek feedback, and analyze results to improve student learning. The PLC facilitated relationships among participants resulting in improved self-confidence, increased professionalism, and empowerment needed to persist within the teaching field.

Table 1 Pre-survey results

	Usefulness of teacher prep	Likelihood to stay in field	Likelihood to use action research	Perceived value of action research	Time as a barrier to participating
Not at all	0%	0%	11%	0%	22%
Moderate	44%	44%	33%	22%	33%
Highly	56%	56%	56%	78%	44%

Table 2 Post-survey results

	Usefulness of teacher prep	Likelihood to stay in field	Likelihood to use action research	Perceived value of action research	PLC met goals
Not at all	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Moderate	22%	11%	0%	0%	22%
Highly	78%	89%	100%	100%	78%

Table 3 Impact of PLC on knowledge and skills
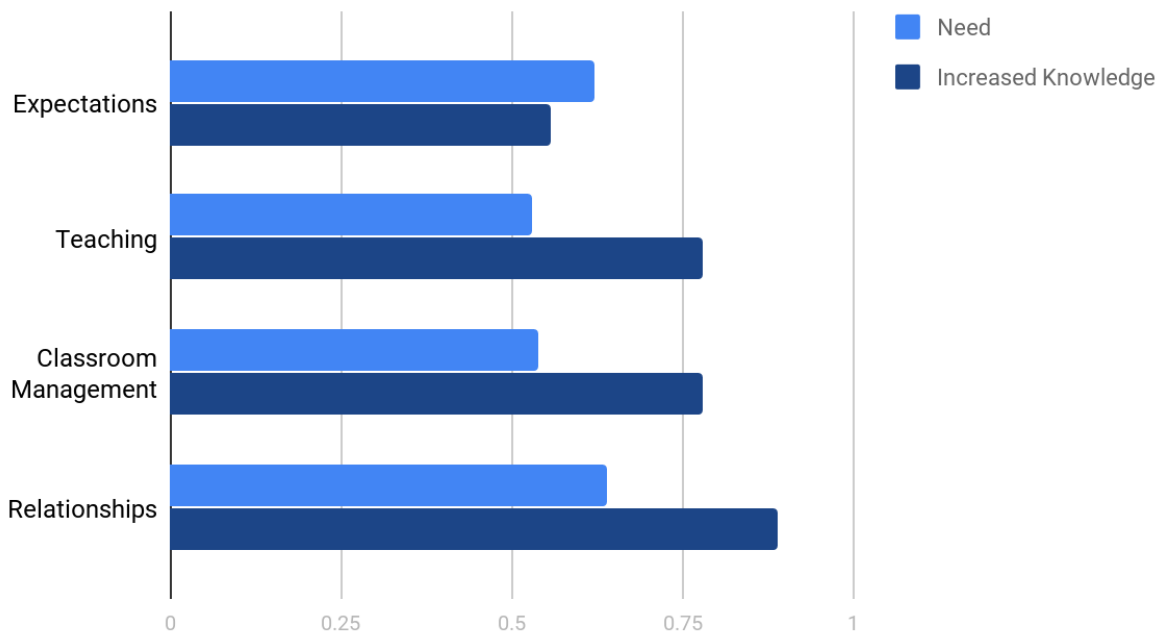
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