

*Fostering Special Education Certification through Professional Development, Learning Communities and Mentorship*

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*Abstract*

The purpose of this article is to present mixed methodology evaluation data regarding a professional development initiative designed to offer non-certified special education teachers specialized classroom and teacher certification support. The project was grounded in evidence-based strategies that resulted in direct implications for teacher preparation, retention, and certification. To maximize benefits of participation in this project, access to instructional resources was provided. Participants benefitted from face-to-face communities of practice and a virtual learning environment designed to establish a shared culture of improvement and collaboration. Teacher participants generally felt factors such as “*encouragement, motivation, and support they received from their colleagues contributed to their decision to pursue a special education teaching career.*” The evaluation findings informed a professional development model incorporating the essential components of professional development, learning communities, and mentorship. The findings further indicated that teacher professional development should specifically address instructional strategies, understanding of special educational issues, and skill attainment.

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The purpose of this article is to present mixed methodology evaluation data regarding participants' satisfaction of the effectiveness and overall project success of a Department of Education (DOE) professional development initiative. This initiative was designed to offer specialized classroom and teacher certification support to teachers of students with disabilities who are teaching without the appropriate certification, and in some cases without any teacher certification. Teacher participants either had no special education certifications, held temporary teaching certificates, or only general education certificates. As a result, many students with disabilities were often being taught by teachers without the appropriate certification and in some cases without any teacher certification. The project was based on evidence-based strategies resulting in direct implications for practice. Evaluation questions were designed to elicit teacher perceptions of impact on teacher preparation and retention, special education certification resources, benefits of participating in a community of practice, and confidence in special education instructional strategies.

Educational research consistently shows multifaceted relationships between professional development, teacher growth, and student achievement (Yoon et. al, 2007). Annual evaluation results showed that new special education teachers often felt alone during their first days as a new teacher. To maximize benefits of participation in this project, it was deemed important to provide access to resources and instill a culture of improvement and collaboration. In identifying factors that best impact student achievement, project developers also considered the need to nurture teacher learning and instill a sense of belonging. The teacher/advisor professional learning community intentionally provided a collaborative culture of ongoing professional learning with desired outcomes for both teacher and student growth.

The successes of this initiative can be replicated through a professional development model focusing on quality programming and encouraging collaboration that captures a sense of strength in numbers. As part of the evaluation, recommendations were offered for initiation, implementation, and sustainability of a learning community that reinforces program goals as well as offers a structure to address critical issues shaping teacher education. A major goal of this initiative was to create supportive cohorts for special education teachers having limited professional development opportunities concentrating on specific needs of special education students. The notion of community is aligned to NCLB 2001 school reform initiatives and it was anticipated that collaborative and targeted assistance would increase the number of newly certified special education teachers meeting highly qualified educational standards. While this evaluation was extensive to numerous project components, findings relating to the initiation and processes within the advisor/teacher and virtual advisor learning communities will be highlighted.

### *Overview of the Professional Development Project*

The impetus for the project was to provide specific professional development and certification support for non-certified special education teachers. In the developmental stages, advisors were selected based on their expertise in the field of special education to mentor the teacher participants. The initial project expanded from 4 districts to 15 school districts over a period of three years.

Project coordinators identified factors impacting student achievement through thoughtful consideration of staff development design and conceptually focused on: (1) awareness of special education issues, (2) understanding of educational pedagogy, (3) skill attainment, and (4) coaching and team elements. Project developers also recognized the importance of aligning essential aspects and objectives to both education policy and standards for highly qualified special education teachers as defined by the Louisiana Department of Education (2009).

Since students with disabilities are expected to meet the same standards as other students, teachers who deliver instruction to special needs students are required to meet the same standards for content knowledge. Students with disabilities receive instruction in core academic subjects from a teacher who is highly qualified to teach the core academic subjects. In addition, teachers of students with disabilities must meet the state's special education certification requirements for the grade level that they are teaching in order to be identified as highly qualified (§ 2).

## **Project Need**

The daily challenges for teachers of students with exceptional learning needs are overwhelming especially when the general education system offers little opportunities for services or professional development opportunities. Special education teachers often have limited opportunities to attend professional development programs that clearly concentrate on the specific needs of special education teachers and their students; more often educational workshops focus on mainstream pedagogy. This persistent lack of resources and specialized special education professional development support combines to create obstacles to successful growth of these professionals. Above all, it is essential that new special education teachers receive targeted support and guidance in effective teaching strategies which positively influence the academic development of their special need students. Without quality teaching that addresses the unique needs of special education students, student achievement will almost certainly be negatively impacted.

## **Project Goals and Objectives**

Increasing the pool of highly qualified special education teachers directly impacts the special education classroom and students with disabilities. Specific project goals were:

1. To offer mentorship, resources, and support to new un-certified special education teachers seeking special education certification.
2. To enhance preparation of new un-certified special education teachers through comprehensive educational practices and instructional strategies for special needs students.
3. To build district-level capacity by creating supportive cohorts of special education teachers, thereby, increasing the number of newly certified special education teachers, as well as establishing ongoing relationships at the state, district, and individual school level.

## **Project Components and Characteristics**

The overall objective of this project was to provide specific resources for new non-certified special education teachers on their path toward certification. The project was designed based on three main components. The first component was *mentorship* in which the state project coordinators assisted the advisors who served the teacher participants. These district advisors, along with the program coordinators, conducted face-to-face meetings, managed online professional discussion forums, and communicated special education and certification information directly to the teacher participants.

The second component was the creation of two *virtual communities*: one connecting new uncertified teachers of special education with advisors and the other establishing a link among all advisors through a *Virtual Advisor Learning Community*. Online resources were posted to a Learning Management System (LMS) and provided ongoing 24/7 teacher/advisor collaborative sharing across the geographic regions. Online discussion forums were intended to facilitate communication among state facilitators, advisors, and teachers while serving as an avenue for networking and collaboration. The *Virtual Advisor Learning Community* was implemented to foster the development of a professional learning community of advisors across the state as a

way to involve teachers in web-based professional development (Knapczyk, Frey, & Wall-Marencik, 2005).

The third component was the *professional development support sessions*. Participating non-certified teachers were exposed to skill building activities and resources uniquely designed to assist them in their certification process and overall development as special education teachers. This project created an effective avenue for open discussion as an integral part of any professional development initiative. Moving beyond the basics, many participants expressed hope that this opportunity would surpass their expectations of certification and provide the necessary tools to address future concerns and issues faced by special educators.

NCLB (2001) encourages the development of site based professional learning communities as a way to promote teacher capacity and improve student outcomes. Over the life of the project, teacher and advisor participants have consistently reported that collaboration has decreased their sense of isolation. This finding matches prior research on the benefits of collaborative professional development (Dettmer, Thurston, Knackendoffel, & Dyck, 2009; Friend & Cook, 2010; Hord, 1997, 2004). Fullan, Rolhesier, Mascall, and Edge (2001) further conceptualize that implementation and sustainability of ongoing professional development is rooted in collaboration. Fullan, et al. (2001), endorse capacity building as everyone's responsibility from all levels, individual teacher, school, district, to the larger. Essentially, this vision for increasing teacher capacity, and thus improved student achievement, is anchored in creating a systemic sense of purpose followed by strategic direction. As a result of offering supportive leadership and targeted assistance, a corresponding increase can be anticipated in the number of newly certified special education teachers.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions provided direction for evaluating the project's professional development goals and objectives:

1. How does project participation impact teacher retention by enhancing a sense of self-efficacy through the learning community infrastructure?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of training and certification on students with disabilities' academic performance and personal growth?
3. Do project participants feel more confident with instructional strategies as a result of the professional development project?

## ***Research Methodology***

Data from advisor and teacher participants were collected and analyzed to assess project compliance and success. Formative and summative evaluation reports provided stakeholders with critical findings, as well as offered additional recommendations to enhance project goals.

## **Participants**

A critical shortage of certified special education teachers in this southern state inspired the creation of this initiative. Priority certification support issues identified in the pilot project included: (1) help with passing the Praxis exam, (2) networking opportunities that could eventually lead to certification, and (3) benefiting from the experiences of certified peer mentors.

Annual results from needs assessments consistently indicated that additional need for support included: (1) help in securing instructional materials, (2) preparation of individual education plan (IEP) and other special education documentation, and (3) understanding legal issues and responsibilities surrounding teachers of students with disabilities. In accordance with the goals and objectives of the grant, the project provided an opportunity for the target population of new uncertified special education teachers to learn new information on instructional strategies, development of individual education plans, and in-depth guidance on special education certification pathways.

***Advisor/Mentor Participants.*** To launch the program, project advisors from each school district participated in a *Train the Trainers* session designed to introduce project goals, objectives, and initiate shared vision. Although advisors maintained flexibility in support session topics to meet individual district needs, a topical listing of cogent special education issues (detailed in the professional development support sessions) was recommended to ensure consistency in *evidence-based practice* offerings. Advisors are critical to the success of the project and were chosen based on their experiences and educational qualifications. Selection criteria for these mentors included extensive knowledge of state initiatives relating to classroom instruction including grade level expectations, content standards, and the state comprehensive curriculum and assessment materials. Advisors were chosen based on having high levels of skills and abilities as behavior interventionists, special education supervisors, staff development specialists, and instructional coaches. The number of years' experience in special education related positions ranged from a minimum of seven years to 26 years. This diversity in positions greatly enriched the sharing of experiences and knowledge of their relationships between the advisors/mentors and teacher/mentees.

***Non-certified Teacher Participants.*** Students with disabilities are often taught by teachers not meeting the NCLB guidelines for highly qualified teachers. Instead, a large percentage of special education teachers hold several types of temporary, non-standard teaching certificates including: (1) Temporary Authority to Teach (TAT), (2) Out-of-Field Authority to Teach (OFAT), and (3) Temporary Employment Permit (TEP). In total, the evaluation revealed participant teachers holding TAT, OFAT, and TEP temporary certifications ranged from approximately 45% to 72% across the districts. On the other hand, 20% of teachers who identified themselves as holding multiple teaching certificates, including PK-K, elementary, middle school, or secondary school teachers. These statistics clearly illustrated the great need for professional development activities that promote special education certification. Since this trend has not yet been totally reversed, outreach efforts, such as this initiative, could stimulate further support to those teachers serving children with disabilities and exceptionalities. Approximately 800 teachers joined this initiative to address critical issues shaping the future of special education teacher training. The evaluation captured the following grade, experience levels, and special education teaching positions demographics.

***Grade level and experience diversity.*** Outreach efforts of the project were successful in recruiting a full range of teachers from different grade levels including: PK-K, 9.87%; Elementary, 35.40%, Middle, 25.83%, Secondary, 18.20%; and other participants, 10.7%. Teachers generally reported education experience levels of one year or less ranging from 64% to 74% confirming the great need for increasing the pool of certified teachers.

***Special education teaching positions.*** Teachers of students with Mild/Moderate disabilities (62%) represented the largest category participating in this professional development followed by teaching positions in self-contained classrooms (19%). Other teacher participants (19%) included representatives from Early Intervention and Severe/Profound.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Methods**

A mixed methodology research design using a variety of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods was developed to assess each of the primary goals of the project. Paper and pencil surveys were initially used to collect data. The questionnaire items were primarily Likert scales; however, open-ended structured interview questions were also included to provide qualitative data. As the program grew across the state, data collection shifted to the online professional learning community LMS created to capture advisors' perceptions of the program. *Survey Monkey* was also used to collect data over the expanded geographical regions.

### ***Study Results***

The primary goal of this project was to provide learning and sharing opportunities for the participants focusing on resources and skills needed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. According to the goal set forth, survey questions were designed to elicit participant opinions regarding the project's impact on teacher retention (Research Question 1); special education certification efforts (Research Question 2); and confidence in instructional strategies and documentation procedures (Research Question 3). The findings were analyzed according to the major components of the initiative and focused on enhanced professional development and support for new uncertified special education teachers, collaborative practices supported by mentorship, and enhancement of ongoing learning through virtual learning communities. The project coordinators hoped to make a difference in helping new teachers to meet the standards of highly qualified and certified special education teachers by embedding research based practices into the professional development instruction. Ultimately, it is believed that as new uncertified special education teachers become more proficient, a corresponding increase in student achievement outcomes will be evident. The study analyses resulted in identification of three major findings.

### **Major Finding 1: Enhanced Professional Development and Support Addressing the Needs of New Uncertified Special Education Teachers**

Interactive support sessions were facilitated during the project year and addressed special education key issues including classroom management and behavior modification (behavior intervention plans, maintaining student discipline and motivation); inclusive practices (differentiation of instruction, curriculum accommodations and modifications); exceptionalities (individualizing the educational program to meet individual needs); intervention and assessment (reading, mathematics, and writing strategies, individual and group assessment/measurement); and technology integration (within curriculum and instruction, software application, assistive technology supports). Participants were provided activities and resources expressly designed to assist in their certification process and overall development as special education teachers. Participants also engaged in skill building exercises and encouraged to reach beyond their normal daily activities.

In total, each school district dedicated four support sessions throughout the program. In addition to the central topics above, other areas needing attention were determined by a Needs Assessment Questionnaire designed to understand what teachers needed most. This instrument allowed districts to individualize participants' needs and target professional development and specific levels of assistance in selected areas such as instructional needs, organization and classroom management, and communication with families and colleagues. Three primary themes surfaced in relation to enhancing professional development and support: motivation, support sessions, and special education documentation.

**Motivation.** A review of the average scores, open-ended responses, indicated teachers consistently reported needing motivation strategies. Teachers also expressed concern they were lacking in resources and information on accommodations and/or modifications to prepare their students for standardized tests even though they were generally satisfied with their school districts level of support in the provision of study and test taking workbook tools. Several teachers approached motivation from a behavioral perspective asking for information about rules and consequences. Teachers asked for samples of effective and detailed age-appropriate behavior management plans; some were looking for more positive ways to establish consequences and *“how to handle different behaviors from different students.”* The greatest area of need was Motivating the Unmotivated Learner. Respondents were concerned they did not have *“workable and novel approaches to try!”* Overall, teachers recognized the challenge of motivation and showed a willingness to understand the critical dynamics of teacher and student interaction. In addition, a need for more training, classroom strategies, and instructional materials was expressed for reading, writing and math strategies. Conflict resolution and time management strategies were other types of interventions most requested.

**Support sessions.** As part of the summative evaluation, participants responded to questionnaire items regarding professional development. Although most comments were favorable, the support session topics and networking opportunities had the highest average mean ( $m = 4.30$  to  $4.45$  on a 5 point scale). Teachers generally felt the topics presented at the support sessions were exceptionally informative and a successful aspect of professional development. Participants appreciated certification resources and IEP information, *“from start to finish, it gave and provided helpful information and the need for more in-depth information on IEPs and certification.”* Participants felt the presenters were responsive to questions and comments. Respondents enjoyed and valued the experience and the information presented throughout the life of the project. Similarly, teacher participants gave numerous examples of how their advisors helped them to better understand the specific needs of their students. They believed their advisors offered important suggestions and clarification of special education topics.

**Special education documentation.** A recurring theme directly related to the project's objective of providing assistance was guidance in completing special education documentation. Teacher comments demonstrated the importance of this aspect, *“She has been extremely helpful in helping to keep me organized and on track with IEPs and I feel more knowledgeable as well as somewhat comfortable with completing the IEP plans and identifying students' needs.”* Another teacher commented, *“I have gained a better understanding of the needs of SPED children and*

*the importance of the IEPs that we write.*” A majority of new uncertified teachers surveyed consistently felt strongly that their advisors offered important suggestions and clarification regarding a variety of special education topics. However, these new uncertified teachers of exceptional children especially gave high praise to their advisors in explaining specialized curriculum strategies, understanding special education students’ needs, classroom management strategies, ways to motivate and challenge their students, and in the preparation of special education documentation.

### **Major Finding 2: Mentorship Enhanced Collaborative Practices**

The establishment of a sustainable learning community is critical to continued success and consistency of any professional development project (Aber, Kelly, & Mallory, 2009). Comments such as these describe the significance of a professional learning community, *“I think some of the most important values that must be incorporated into a professional learning community are teamwork and working toward a common goal. Collaboration between members of a group ensures that all participants have input into the groups’ shared vision. Participants feel valued in a program if their ideas and concerns are heard and addressed. All members of the program are valued and the program facilitates the exchange of ideas in a nonthreatening environment.”*

The majority of new uncertified special education teachers enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to learn from experienced mentors in the field of special education. Learning from each other and the opportunity to establish working relationships with their peers was probably the most cited source of satisfaction for both teachers and advisors with over 86% of all participants during all time frames, rating the aspect, *Networking Opportunities*, as *Good to Excellent*. While the data generated from the Needs Assessment focused on professional development topics, it became evident that over the life of the project teachers had a desire for a greater sense of independence and efficacy. An integral aspect of mentorship is collaborative practices (Ali, 2008); as such, teachers and advisors were asked to respond to questionnaire items regarding the collaborative relationships established as part of the project. The advisor/teacher collaborative experience helped to remind the advisors of the difficulties new special education teachers faced.

**Advisor perceptions.** One advisor stated that the greatest benefit of being an advisor was becoming aware of *“the level of support and encouragement new teachers needed to remain motivated.”* An understanding of teacher needs was reflected in the comment, *“I have gained a deeper understanding of the thought processes of those new teachers and why they make the certain decisions that significantly impact the educational outcomes of students. The teachers have helped me to understand that you can’t assume that they come in knowing something about teaching students with special needs.”* The advisors generally realized the teachers simply, *“have questions but are not sure how and what to ask.”* These insights were enlightening and helped advisors to more effectively meet their teacher’s needs. One recommendation for choosing future session offerings was to involve all advisors in collective planning in the virtual learning community. Research consistently shows when schools address instructional needs and concerns of their faculty through collaborative learning experiences, and in an effort to build professional efficacy among faculty members, they also are effective in increasing student achievement (Bray-Clark, 2005; Goddard, LoGerfp, & Hoy, 2004).

**Teacher perceptions.** Teachers gave numerous examples of how their advisors helped them to better understand the specific needs of their students, “*I have learned so much about special children [not person first] I could have never imagined loving this type of work. The teachers are amazing.*” A short list of benefits cited by the teachers included understanding of students with exceptional learning needs, helpful classroom materials, knowledge of how to better reach their students, perspectives of collaborative teaching, behavior management strategies, documentation instruction, student and parent motivation, and information on certification requirements. As a result of the mentorship relationships, lower levels of stress were reported at year end and seemed to be linked to greater efficiency in the classroom. Another theme that evolved from the feedback was a feeling of support, encouragement, validation, and understanding. Learning from each other and the opportunity to establish working relationships with their peers was a major source of satisfaction. Participants reflected positively on their networking experiences which allowed for sharing of ideas and classroom techniques, face-to-face time with each other, and even friendship building. The teachers felt comfortable asking questions and appreciated the opportunity to see they were not alone.

In summary, the mentorship project component provided special education teachers and advisors a feeling of connectiveness and increased confidence in their teaching abilities. It seemed clear these new uncertified teachers in special education were genuinely grateful for these collaborative opportunities and that the community component successfully strengthened certification efforts.

### **Major Finding 3: Enhanced Learning through Virtual Learning Communities (VLC)**

The special education community can only benefit from a common understanding of standards, student needs, best practices, and individual commitment. As the project grew statewide, it naturally became more difficult to coordinate face-to-face meetings and collaboration efforts. Research continues to provide evidence that online is comparable to face-to-face interaction in a number of ways (Kuo, Song, Smith, & Franklin, 2007). Web conferencing and other synchronous and asynchronous distance platforms deserve consideration for both communication and support (Bonk, Ehman, Hixon, & Yamagata-Lynch, 2002; Rodes, Knapczyk, Chapman, & Chung, 2000). Advisors strengthened their roles as mentors by modeling shared and collective learning strategies. Using the VLC online platform and online discussion questions, advisors collegially discussed multiple program issues and were able to enhance their sense of community via cyberspace.

**Teacher/Advisor Learning Community.** An online learning management system offered an infrastructure in which high levels of collaboration could occur through sharing of resources and collective learning. Evaluation data indicated that levels of capacity building were enhanced through the online resources provided. Further, an indirect result of the interaction within the online community was increased self and collective efficacy of both the teachers and advisors which should ultimately benefit education at the individual, school, district, and state levels.

**Virtual Advisor Learning Community.** A Virtual Advisor Learning Community (VALC) was initiated to promote collaborative relationships for sharing of best practices and innovations grounded in applied research and practice. This ongoing 24/7 asynchronous community served to stimulate critical discussion through guiding questions relating specifically to professional

learning community theory and practice. The groundwork for community naturally includes collective learning and shared planning, leadership, support, and structure. In this approach, it is important to solicit ownership by encouraging members to readily share common topics and issues.

### *Conclusion and Implications*

At the end-of-the project surveys, participants were asked to consider how selected student performance measures have been impacted. New uncertified special education teachers responded to a variety of perceptual questionnaire items addressing how test performance, motivation and interest in learning, and increased parental involvement were impacted as a result of their participation. Teachers were able to identify the link between professional development, increased teaching skills, and the impact on student achievement. Approximately 83% to 98% of the teachers overwhelmingly agreed that student outcomes would be improved in direct relationship to professional development. Participants also reported an increase in confidence about their abilities to better assess their students' needs and to understand the unique challenges of this population. They began to appreciate how working as a team with general education teachers was critical to achieving a holistic approach to student success.

Linking professional development to teacher growth and student achievement has long been recognized as educational best practice. The highest level of impact can be achieved by specifying the knowledge, skills, and/or behavioral outcomes to be addressed. The results from this project demonstrate an effective structure initiated through identification of desired student results. This initial identification resulted in designing elements for staff development linked to learning within a culture of improvement, provision of adequate access to resources, and promotion of shared and collegial communication. The project offered an effective learning environment for mentorship, capacity building, and certification support. These findings inform all responsible stakeholders educating children with special needs about critical issues of "*leadership, competence, caring, and commitment*". Participants recognized that teachers, who have a deep commitment to their profession and clarity relating to the purpose of their roles, tend to study, reflect, and dialogue at higher levels.

This professional development initiative was implemented in response to a critical need for better trained, more informed, more qualified, and more knowledgeable special education teachers who will increase the chances of success for children with special needs. The project offered participants access to an extensive and comprehensive source of professional development instruction throughout the course of the pilot and subsequent years. Not only did each participant benefit from the training and growth, it is also anticipated student achievement will be directly impacted as a result. The initiative also established a learning environment designed to expose new uncertified special education teachers to classroom activities and a variety of educational resources. Ultimately, the goal was to positively impact students as a result of enhanced teacher professional development. Professional development is often fueled by accountability. The absence of a clearly defined and organized professional development initiative that is not based on effective best practices can hamper the development of a common vision of improvement for all involved. According to Buysse, Winton, and Rous (2009), "the role of learners in professional development is to actively engage in learning experiences that

lead to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions and the application of this knowledge in practice" (p. 238).

Investment in teacher education and professional development generally yields the greatest increase in student achievement. The learning community as well as the professional development support sessions allowed for increased learning opportunities and sharing of ideas with other special education peers. The topics offered in the support sessions provided information on teacher education, recent changes and requirements in special education, and up-to-date research in the field of special education. Support sessions should be designed to integrate best practices in special education and instructional design with practical knowledge and skills to assist teachers in becoming more effective in promoting student learning.

The overriding intent of this project was to integrate best practices in special education and instructional design with practical knowledge and skills to assist uncertified teachers to become highly effective certified teachers. It was also intended that educators would consider the research evidence from this initiative in planning future professional development. This initiative can be used to inform the creation of a professional development model focused on knowledge, skills, mentorship, and community to promote teacher capacity and personal growth. In this project, new uncertified special education teachers were offered specialized support to promote certification efforts. The evaluation findings have informed a professional development model incorporating the essential components of mentorship, learning communities, and ongoing support through professional development. The findings further indicated that professional development should address instructional strategies, awareness of special education issues, understanding of educational pedagogy and skill attainment.

Given the focus on increasing special education certification, teachers were asked to comment on how their participation affected their efforts toward this overall goal. Awareness of necessary certification prerequisites was a major theme that resounded in the comments. Teacher participants generally felt factors such as "*encouragement, motivation, and support they received from their colleagues contributed to their decision to pursue a special education teaching career.*" Working with others was believed to help "*ease some of the frustrations, fears, and stress in their beginning years as new SPED teachers.*"

Teachers reported they were able to link increased teaching skills directly to student instructional needs and perceived student achievement would eventually be positively impacted. They began to appreciate how working as a collaborating team with general education teachers is critical to achieving a holistic approach to student success. As an additional benefit, the participants gained confidence in their abilities to better assess the exceptional learning needs of their students, as well as understanding their unique challenges. The results of this evaluation study reaffirmed how professional development, mentorship, learning communities, and collaboration have the potential to positively impact student achievement. The authors recommend extending this study to further examine correlations between related study variables and constructs to specific student achievement scores; these statistical analyses would enhance the validity of the perceptual from this study.

Finally, the authors propose the Professional Development Model presented as Figure 1 to illustrate the relationships between critical aspects of the program found to support special education teachers' efforts toward certification. The theoretical model is conceptualized from the major findings of this study and illustrates the 3 major components of the program (interactive support sessions, mentorship, and virtual online communities) on the arrows followed by each of the major findings (enhanced professional development and support addressed teacher needs, enhanced collaborative practices, and enhanced learning through learning communities) resulting from the implementation of the component. Thus, the model illustrates major findings as successful outcomes of the program components in overall efforts to foster special education certification.

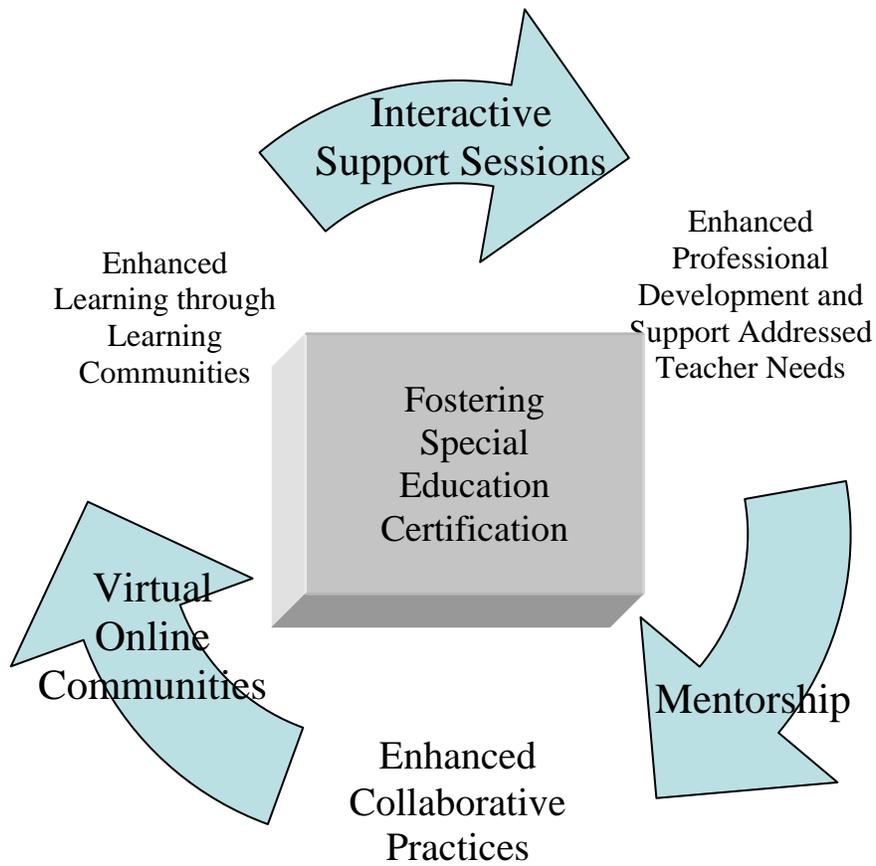


Figure 1. Professional Development Model of Mentorship, Learning Communities, and Support Sessions

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### *About the Authors*

**Mitzi P. Trahan, Ph.D., LPC** is employed as an Associate Professor in the Educational Foundation and Leadership department at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (UL) for the approximately 8 years. She received her doctorate in Educational Leadership and Research from Louisiana State University. Prior to coming to higher education as a professor, Mitzi had 2 distinct careers. First, she has 15 years of experience in the business and finance sector as a CPA and bank comptroller. She also worked as a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) in mental health arenas and higher education student services. Mitzi has several publications focusing on educational technology, research and evaluation, and a variety of educational topics such as leadership, teacher evaluation, and accountability. Her teaching experience primarily centers on research methodology, statistics, evaluation, and classroom assessment. Additionally, Mitzi has taught courses in a variety of the social sciences, counseling and psychology.

**Dianne F. Olivier, Ph. D.**, is an Associate Professor in Educational Foundations and Leadership at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She teaches doctoral educational leadership and research courses, serves as the Facilitator for the Ed. D. program. She currently holds the Joan D. and Alexander S. Haig/BORSF Endowed Professorship in Education. Prior to the university level, Dianne served thirty-four years in public education with twenty-six of those years as a district administrator. Dianne uses her former K-12 administrative experiences to work throughout the U. S. with principals, central office personnel, and teacher leaders in her role as an educational consultant with the Learning-Centered Leadership Program for the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). Dianne's research focuses on professional learning communities, educational leadership, change process, school culture, and teacher self- and collective efficacy. She has developed several assessment measures relating to these research interests which are used on both a national and international level. Dianne has authored and coauthored several chapters and articles on professional learning communities and school leadership. Her work in the area of professional learning communities has transitioned from the domestic or national level to participation as a member of a Global PLC Network researching the PLC process from a global perspective.

**Donna E. Wadsworth, Ph.D.**, is a professor and Special Education Coordinator at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Donna teaches graduate courses in both the special education mild/moderate and early intervention programs. She holds the Kathy Authement Prouet/BORSF Endowed Professorship in Special Education. Her primary areas of research are inclusion and collaborative teacher training and professional development practices. These areas of research have been supported by grants for development of special education professional development sites, new inclusive teacher training programs, and state transition projects. Donna has authored and co-authored several book chapters, books, and articles focusing on special education teacher training and inclusive practices for students with disabilities. She was also

higher education's representative to the Louisiana's Special Education Advisory Council for over 15 years. Donna has also served in numerous leadership positions for the Louisiana Council for Exceptional Children Executive Board and national Council for Exceptional Children committees.