Professional Learning through P-16 Partnership Design: Emergent Lessons Learned toward Improving and Sustaining Partnership Development

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to explore the processes and features of one P-16 partnership developed to improve the clinical experience of teacher preparation. The development of partnerships reflects a commitment among institutions to collaborate in a purposeful manner with a keen awareness that each partner must seek to better understand and respect the culture of the other's institution, maintain a level of flexibility, and established common goals for outcomes. In particular, partnership members within this study provided their assessment of the benefit(s) of the partnership program on their professional development. With these ideals in mind, this study was designed to investigate the critical conditions of a newly developed school-university partnership that fosters professional development among its members. In turn, the relationships between member development and program quality are explored. Implications for partnership sustainability are offered as a result.

NAPDS Essentials Addressed: #3/Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need; #4/A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice of all participants; #7/A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration.

The critique of teacher preparation programs is not a new phenomenon; yet, the intensity has increased in recent years (Zeichner, 2010). Within the profession of teacher education it is widely agreed that student teaching (i.e., the clinical experience) is a critical, if not the most important, aspect of pre-service teacher preparation (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Musset, 2010; Purpel, 1967). This sentiment is also shared among pre-service and experienced teachers (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Evertson, 1990). At its best, the clinical experience is designed as a system of support occurring in tandem with "hands-on" experiences in which fledgling teachers "are provided opportunities to test out theory and practice in authentic school settings, to engage in problem solving and to develop their skills across the noted knowledge domains" (Easley & Tulowitzki, 2013, p. 756). According to Cochran-Smith (1991), "Typically, this means that student teachers are trained in research-based teaching competencies, and their school-based and university-based mentors are trained to provide systematic feedback and instruction in those same competencies" (p. 105).

Traditional Student Teaching Placements

A scan of student teaching coursework across the nation reveals several commonalities with regard to design, duration, and practice: (1) Student teaching typically occurs as a culminating experience at the end of a program, during the last 12- 15 weeks semester (Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012); (2) Most states within the U.S. (i.e., 39) have set, by regulation, a minimum length of 10 weeks for student teaching, a length largely recognized as the standard bearer within the field (Greenberg, Pomerance, & Walsh, 2011); and, (3) Despite the agreed upon importance of the role of cooperating teachers (mentors), they typically do not receive training to serve in said capacity (Gareis & Grant, 2014). This omission is not limited to the United States, but is found to be the norm in other countries as well (Clarke, Triggs, & Nelson, 2012; Mitchell, Clarke, & Nuttall, 2007). We refer to programs sharing several, if not all, of these traits as traditional clinical experiences within the U.S. context. Yet, despite the aforementioned expressed significance of the clinical experience to ensure quality among the ranks of future educators, Zeichner (2002) contends, "In this traditional model, student teaching and teacher education generally have been and continue to be low status activities in colleges and universities that are under resourced in relation to the complexity of the work to be done" (p. 60). Furthermore, research has shown that student teacher supervision has not significantly changed within the last 70 years (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hess, 2009).

The Role of Teacher Educators

It is evident that certain traditions have developed within the field of P-12 teacher preparation. As with most traditions,

certain commonly shared beliefs underlie their cultural mainstay. One such belief is that effective teachers inherently make effective teacher educators (see Korthenagen, Loughran, & Lunenberg, 2005). In other words, effective educators are instinctively attentive to the implicit decision-making they engage in and routinely examine their practices, particularly in relation to the complex and diverse learning processes and outcomes that are manifested differently and oftentimes, incongruently among learners. The assumption follows that they are also able to and readily make their practice explicit during clinical experiences. It is concomitantly assumed that they employ knowledge of adult learning theory to nurture the instructional development of pre-service teachers so that they themselves may become effective educators. Many articles have surfaced over the last decade suggesting that these inclinations lack empirical grounding (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Gareis & Grant, 2014; Goodwin et al., 2014; Martinez, 2008) and that further research is needed to better understand not only the characteristics and behaviors of effective teacher educators but also the particular skills development necessary to achieve teaching effectiveness.

The collaborative demands for effective student teaching further challenge the work of education preparation programs in a manner that is uncommon for many other university programs and majors. Teacher educators consist of both those professionals supporting teacher candidates as university supervisors and as P-12 practitioners, namely cooperating teachers. This is particularly true for traditional clinical programming and may include other professionals such as instructional coaches at the school district level, clinical researchers engaging in participatory research, etc. The variations of their stations suggest that measures of effectiveness are likely to differ across these roles, as well as the attuned mechanisms for skills development to effectuate their practice at high levels.

Furthermore, the needs and processes for the professional development of teacher educators are unique for each role, particularly given the specialized context of their institutions' cultures and job expectations. Nevertheless, the interplay of these roles during student teaching forges what some have called a "hybrid space" (Zeichner, 2010) or "Third Space" (Williams, 2014) between schools and universities. Williams (2014) explains that in this space, educators on both sides often hold to identities and perspectives from their respective organizations that directly influence ideas about supervision. It is in this third space that teacher educators need to examine their individual beliefs about teacher education, those espoused by their respective institutional cultures, and the interplay among these in support of student teacher development. Within this third space, the norms of schools and universities and the practices of their teacher educators are challenged, require mediations, and, in effect, offer up new opportunities for continuous improvement of the clinical experience.

Attempts to Enhance the Clinical Experience

In response to the growing critics of teacher education, a Blue Ribbon Panel commissioned by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2010) cited the need for an urgent overhaul of traditional teacher preparation programs in order to prepare teachers for 21st Century teaching and learning. The panel noted several key features of effective teacher preparation programs, which include high quality clinical experiences, partnerships among higher education and P-12 entities, and evidenced based practices. In 2015, the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) assembled a Clinical Practice Commission to further examine the state of and to define criteria for clinical practice based on exemplary models.

These were not the first roadmaps for improving teacher preparation, in particular the clinical experience. More than two decades prior, the Holmes Group (1986) led the charge for the promotion of coherent and long-term clinical experiences as a central component of teacher preparation, giving rise to Professional Development Schools (PDSs). The Holmes Group (1986) defined PDSs as analogues to the medical model of teaching hospitals in which practicing teachers and administrators would work collaboratively with university faculty to improve teaching and learning for their respective students. Four key principles of practice were laid out: (1) "mutual deliberation on problems with student teaching, and their possible solutions; (2) shared teaching in the university and schools; (3) collaborative research on the problems of educational practice; and (4) cooperative supervision of prospective teachers and administrators" (The Holmes Partnership, 2007, p. 47). The PDS movement has continued to grow. In 2008, the National Association of Professional Development Schools laid out 9 Essentials of PDSs to include, but not exclusive to those that focus on the professional development of practitioners such as: #3, ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need, #4, a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice of all participants, and #7, a structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration. Today more than 250 NCATE accredited institutions have PDS partnerships (Berry, Montgomery, & Snyder, 2008). The fulcrum of PDSs typically draws on the tenets of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), established as partnerships between teacher education programs and local schools.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are designed to advance collaborative learning among its members and, in turn, the organization(s) in which they work. While there is no single definition or structure for PLCs, they tend to be context specific and developed around the needs and interests of the members and ideally, those of their institutions. In educational settings, PLCs typically focus on the practices of educators and impact on student learning (Elmore 2002; Little, 1988). Like the principles espoused by the Holmes Group (1986) and the Holmes Partnership (2007) for PDS development, PLCs tend to follow

a particular design logic, typically informed by the identified needs of the members and their shared capacity.

Tim Brown (2009), CEO and president of IDEO, the internationally known design and consulting firm, explains that the heart of design thinking is to uncover problems and translate them into services and products that improve lives. Similarly, information systems apply the tents of design thinking, recognized as a general systems theory that accounts for the relationships among developers, clients, and users (Churchman, 1979). Markus, Majchzak, and Gasser (2002) contend that such design theory is normative and must be able to withstand empirical and practical tests to answer questions such as: "Does the system work? [and] Does the system do what is it is supposed to do?" (p. 181). Hatchuel and Weil (2003, p. 1) add that design is "one of the most fascinating activities of the mind" and that creative thinking and innovation lie at the core of design theory. In this regard, the concept of PLCs embodies the tenets of design thinking, aiming to improve learning within an organization and among its members. Within the context of contemporary student teaching programming, the aims of PLCs are extended to include positive learning outcomes for P-12 learners as well.

Program Design

Western University (pseudonym) sought to align its program with nationally recognized principles for effective clinical experiences. This prompted the formation of a formal partnership with a local school district to both create a professional learning community among university and P-12 faculty, and to pilot a new student teaching clinical experience. In doing so, the university fully recognized the iterative process for designing a collaborative innovation.

As participant researchers and authors, we define the operational approach attributed to the program addressed within this paper as a unique design that encompasses innovation, both in terms of practice and research. Innovation refers to the deliberate act of doing something new and novel to forge anticipated outcomes (see also Easley 2016; Miles, 1964; Scott, 2012). Yet, innovation itself does not necessarily yield learning without intentional design. Schwartz, Chang, and Martin (2005) clarify this contradiction further through the relationship between innovation and design in research, explaining that design research, or innovationists research, seeks to evaluate novel conditions of learning (p.2).

Underscoring the tenets expressed above for PDS and PLC development, this design approach meets our aims of mutual benefit between both partners. It concomitantly heeds the processes and products of practice, within the constraints of program development, and evaluation through research. Furthermore, Schwartz et al. (2005) explain that most design methods are high in innovation, yet low in efficiency for testing hypotheses about learning. It is through the focus on instrumentation that both innovation and efficiency are attended to, in-kind, for cumulative knowledge. In this context, instrumentation refers to "both the design and calibration of apparatus to precipitate effects and the methods to measure those effects" (p. 4). The apparatuses from our perspective are mutual respect, collaboration, and problem solving to improve both teacher education preparation and institutional partners. Occurring in tandem with the systematic investigation of our practice for program development, the core enterprise of learning among individuals (e.g., faculty and future educators) *and* systems is advanced. The result is a dynamic design approach that girds both intentional instrumentation for program design (that is iterative) and investigation (that is informal and formal) for efficient learning.

The two components of this partnership between Western University and the participating school district are the pilot student teacher program and the school-university PLC. The pilot student teacher program and PLC were formalized by way of a memorandum of understanding in 2011 after a year of negotiation. Supported by the university, the 14-week student teaching assignment came at behest of the school superintendent based on teachers' concerns about prior placements, for which they felt were too terse to adequately support student teachers.

The PLC consisted of regular monthly meetings with university faculty, school faculty and the guidance counselor, the school's principal, and the district's superintendent. The university faculty were represented by the Division's chairperson and faculty with specializations in early childhood education and literacy, mathematics, and special education. Participating faculty and administrators from both institutions met to discuss norms of engagement, goals, and design. The members shared research on the status of teacher preparation within the U.S. and studied existing teacher preparations partnerships via readings and a site visit to a nationally recognized PDS within the region. During implementation, regular PLC meetings included discussions on progress, immediate lessons learned among individuals, wonderings important to individual members, and problems solving. Meeting agendas were mutually developed and coordinated by the Division's chairperson. While the partnership represented the first of its kind for both institutions, both components of the partnership functioned in concert to forge intra-institutional cohesion and educational improvement. The pilot student teaching program represented a purposeful heuristic to reform the clinical experience for early childhood teacher education. The PLC was designed to support professional development for clinical supervision.

Under the university's previous model, the Field Placement Coordinator placed student teachers (interns) with cooperating teachers; the interns independently arranged their first meeting with mentors prior to starting their placement. However, the pilot program was organized in a different manner; interns met with respective mentors prior to their placement in a large group meeting organized by and held at the university. The meeting was established as an icebreaker with the intent to begin the socialization process. Both interns and cooperating teachers discussed their philosophies of teaching and interns addressed their learning goals during the meeting. Afterwards, university

faculty and cooperating teachers (known within this program as mentor teachers) collaboratively decided on the placement of each intern.

During the pilot program, interns were assigned to two classrooms at different grade levels, remaining sensitive to the state certification band of their program. This is a sharp contrast to the traditional model. One mentor served as the primary mentor with the daily responsibility of hosting and supporting the development of the intern in his/her classroom. The second mentor served as a partner, in which interns co-designed and co-taught lessons on a weekly basis at a different grade level. Working with the partner mentor, the interns were charged with identifying a teaching and learning focus, addressing a particular need within the partner classroom to create and implement a targeted instructional project. The purpose of this design was to expand interns' knowledge and instructional repertoire beyond a single classroom in a collaborative manner; thereby expanding and bolstering their understanding of the school's culture as well as their ability for instructional problem solving.

University supervisors conducted a minimum of six formal written observations over the course of the 14-week placement; all observations were shared with the intern and mentors. When possible, supervisors made attempts to visit and participate in mentor classrooms on a weekly basis. Three, three-way conferences (i.e., analytical debriefings among intern, mentor, and supervisor) were held during the program. The first was designed to establish general ground rules and expectations among the triad of supervisor, intern, and primary mentor. The second occurred during the mid-point of the program to collaboratively assess the intern's development and to establish goals for the second half of the clinical experience. The goal of the third and final three-way conference was for mutual discussion of the intern's development and calibration of the intern's final grade. Interns and their two mentors met periodically to address programming across classrooms.

In addition to the pilot program structure, interns attended the traditional student teaching seminar with other student teachers, those not participating in the program. The seminar was periodically supplemented with regular meetings closed to the interns. The interns simultaneously completed the program portfolio to include the demonstration of positive impact on P-12 students' learning, a requirement for all teacher candidates.

Methods

The methods were directly informed by the aims for program evaluation, utilizing the descriptive case study approach. The case study (Yin, 2003) is necessary as it easily accommodates phenomenological features allowing the researcher to ascertain phenomena as well as the contextual conditions shaping these phenomena. The phenomena are bound (Miles & Huberman, 1994) by particular conditions that define the partnership. And while the global context for clinical experience of each intern-mentor pair is similar, their classroom experiences are unique.

Two research questions were posed to guide a portion of the evaluation process and this study: (1) To what extent, if any, does the program positively impact professional development among participating members? And, (2) What specific elements of the program are most effective for promoting professional development among members?

We utilized a distinct interview protocol for the supervising/mentor teacher(s) to collect a subset of data. The protocol was fashioned after the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954; Northouse, 2006) for data collection. The technique is useful for identifying the critical perspectives or behaviors of individuals (Chell, 1998) or as explained by Shipps and White (2009), "situations involving a principal [or a teacher's] decision, that, in hindsight, seemed consequential" (p. 335). Woolsey (1986) explains the two defining aspects of the technique: first is the *incident* or phenomenon that happens and is observable. Second is the *critical* nature of the incident, to the extent that outcomes are significantly affected. The technique relies on retrospective meaning making among participants, without the interference of any particular theoretical judgment (Northouse, 2006). This design was purposefully chosen to reduce the bias of interpretation. This was particularly important given that university faculty who worked closely with student teacher interns and university supervisors conducted interviews. To further control for bias, mentors were interviewed in pairs. A faculty member who did not directly provide supervision among the pair during the pilot program purposefully interviewed each pair of mentors.

Open and axial coding was used to ascertain patterns from interview data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 1998) germane to each case. First, open coding was conducted to capture general and an etic sense of participants' perspectives and was used to ascertain patterns from interview data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 1998). The researchers collaboratively negotiated consistent patterns through axial coding in order to formulate categories. To ensure emic fidelity, member checking was employed to guarantee the accurate representation of participants' perceptions and the relevancy of the codes. We observed Merriam's (1998) guidelines for determining the efficacy of categories to include:

> (1) Categories should reflect the purpose of the research. (2) Categories should be exhaustive. (3) Categories should be mutually exclusive. (4) Categories should be sensitizing. And, (5) categories should be conceptually congruent. (pp. 183-184)

Afterwards, a cross comparison of categories was conducted, using features of grounded theory. This last level of coding employed selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), establishing the central themes.

Findings

The results presented in this paper are limited to a subset of data, focusing on mentors' perspectives of growth and

development. While their reflective assessments represent individual and collective measures of professional development, mentors also reported on the development of teacher candidates completing student teaching under their tutelage. Certain aspects of the partnership were identified as critical incidents.

The findings from this descriptive case study reveal interrelated themes informed by the research questions. These include 1) mentor development and program impact, 2) candidate development and program impact, and 3) professional learning community and program impact.

Each of the themes is further developed in a descriptive manner in order to contextualize their respective critical incidents. While each is unique, they are interrelated, and highlight the complex nature in which program components interact to inform professional development among participating members. They are illustrated by the voices of mentors. The sample inserts are representative of contemplations shared among mentors, except when otherwise noted. Pseudonyms are used to maintain participants' confidentiality. The discussion section of this paper addresses the interconnectivity among these themes for the purpose of proposing implications for educational improvements and partnership sustainability.

Mentor Development and Program Impact

Overall, mentor teachers expressed a general sense of professional development as a result of participating in the pilot student teaching program and the PLC. Of the six participants, all had previously served as cooperating teachers for Western University's traditional student teaching structure for the Early Childhood and/or Elementary Education programs, consisting of two, alternating, 7-week placements in different school districts. Only one of the mentors previously supervised in and matriculated through a year-long Professional Development School program hosted by another university within the state.

Program duration. Each of the mentors cited the continuous, 14 weeks of student teaching as a key factor contributing to their professional development. Their point of comparison was their prior experience with the seven-week student teaching time span. The mentor who served in multiple program configurations also made this comparison. In general, mentors identified the 14 weeks as providing additional time to develop their skills as mentors with interns in their classrooms. In particular, mentors expressed an increased sense of ease for setting goals, developing work plans to support interns, and revising their strategies as mentors.

In contrast to the 7-week placement, mentors explained that they were able to better clarify learning goals for interns. This is particularly true when comparing the prior experience of taking on an intern during the second seven weeks of the semester from a different school versus welcoming an intern at the beginning of the semester and nurturing him/her for the duration of the clinical experience. The mentors explained that when they inherited interns from other schools in the middle of the student teaching semester (i.e., after seven weeks), they are more likely to be unfamiliar with the interns' prior performance, their accomplishments, and their areas for continuous development identified during the first placement. This lack of knowledge places mentors at a disadvantage and directly impedes their initial sense of efficacy for mentoring a particular intern, not knowing what strengths and challenges to drawn on for professional development coherence. In fact, this concern shared among mentors directly informed the district's position for redefining its role during the student teaching experience and, in part, served as the impetus for mentors' commitment to the partnership.

Yet, the benefit of this critical incident for fostering mentor development is multidimensional. First and foremost, the 14-week redesign was responsive to the professional feedback of mentors to reposition their potential for effectiveness as a departure from conditions of the traditional seven weeks of student teaching they had become accustomed. Secondly, the extended and uninterrupted duration of the 14-week placement aided in relationship building between interns and mentors, thereby fostering more secure and trusting bonds. Mr. Tristan explained,

> I remember the mid-point evaluation during the 7-week experience and not knowing what to do. The student teacher was only three weeks in and we were still getting to know each other. So over the extended period, you get to see the improvements!

Additionally, the 14 weeks provided a sense of calm, a perspective of mentoring over the long haul that reduced previous anxieties for mentors to test out new ideas with interns and to make augmentations when needed. Ms. Austin further clarified the process for mentor development during the 14 weeks:

> It seems with previous experiences you had to go boom, boom, boom, and get it done. You did not have time to delve as deeply into things, into lessons, into methods. So it was more of a challenge in doing the 7-week program, than this 14-week program.

Lastly, and as alluded to by Mr. Tristan, mentors expressed a sense of accomplishment by being able to witness the measurable development and improvement of interns. They attested that consistency with regard to space and duration, over time, nurtured interns' sense of comfort and allowed mentors to follow through on work with them, nurturing interns from the status of student teacher to novice teacher.

Reflective practice. Mentors consistently identified reflective practice as a critical incident for professional development. They frequently spoke of reflective practice occurring via three different means: (a) lesson observation, (b) articulation of practice, and (c) through dialogues with university supervisors (both during PLC meetings and classroom visits). In addition,

the incident of reflective practice is underscored by the notion of better understanding one's role as a professional educator.

With regard to the professional development of educators, Brookfield (1998, p. 197) defines critical reflection as "a process of inquiry involving practitioners in trying to discover, and research, the assumptions that frame how they work." Critical reflection, in this light, is a deliberate process employed among practitioners. The author distinguishes uncritical reflection, that is, a self-confirming process that supports current practice without question from the enterprise of critical reflection. Critical reflection seeks to analyze practice by engaging multiple perspectives and/or counter narratives that challenge held assumptions. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) contend that the potential for professional learning expands within spaces of boundary crossing, or as identified above, third spaces, when diverse practices come face-to-face. They present four mechanisms for learning within this space: (1) identification, (2) coordination, (3) reflection, and (4) transformation.

While professional learning is a core value and an aim of the designed PLC and pilot program, interviews with mentors demonstrated that such learning through critical reflection is sparked by diverse critical incidents. Ms. Garcia, for example, explained that critical reflection occurred as a result of mentorship, through the assistance of interns in their professional development:

> [Mentorship] made me think of everything I do because they [interns] ask. They want to know why you do this and why you do that. Some things that have become routine, you have to think about. And it helped me to revisit some things and gain a stronger belief in some things that I do and to question others.

Ms. Garcia went on to explain the questions that she shared with her intern:

> Is there a better way to do this? I guess I just do that because that is the way I have been doing it for the past few years. Is there a better way that is more beneficial to the [classroom] students?

Ms. Austin, the most experienced and senior most mentor teacher, offered a telling preamble to the benefit of reflective practice fostered through the partnership. She confessed, "Self-reflection was not a part of my training as a teacher. So that has come to the forefront. . .So it was a major impact [i.e., critical incident]." Relatedly, Ms. Horne described how participation in the PLC spurred on her professional development through reflection, thereby conveying the divergence among critical incidents:

> The involvement in the PLC, especially the meetings we had as a full group, has made me more self-reflective. It brought more to the forefront [the importance] of being self-reflective. I think I have always tried to do what was best with the students, but. . .with new trends and new research, being able to discuss [during the PLC meetings] what is best for the students such as the co-teaching [has been a benefit]. So I have definitely developed self-reflection and would like to learn even more. I kind of have an appetite now.

Candidate Development and Program Impact

The central purpose of student teaching is to promote the professional development of future teachers by purposefully shaping experiences in which they test, reflect on, and refine theory and practice in a supportive environment. Moreover, quality student teaching curricula are designed for teacher candidates to articulate and defend their practice. The process is optimized when candidates' actions are informed by evidence drawn from their classroom practice and benchmarked against professional standards, thereby advancing the development of their individual voices and identities as professional educators. To this end, mentor teachers described the critical incidents from their classrooms as having a direct impact on candidates' professional growth and development.

Program duration. Similar to their assessment of program duration as a critical incident for their development as mentors, mentor teachers also identified the length of the pilot program's 14 weeks for student teaching as a direct benefit to interns' professional progression. While program duration was the primary reference, upon deeper probing, participants explained program duration as the keystone supported by two significant springers defining the benefit of the program's duration: consistency and continuity. Frequently, participants referenced both of these attributes interchangeably. However, upon further analysis, they represent two distinct, interrelated features. They are discussed independently to better contextualized the ascribed benefit of program duration on student teacher development.

Consistency. Mentor teachers perform the role of evaluating the performance of fledgling teachers; this includes measuring their development against benchmarked professional standards and program goals. From the vantage point of mentors, the design of the pilot program provided greater consistency. A comparison to prior 7-week placements remained their point of reference. Consistency refers to the conformity and quality of application. In this regard, mentors identified program duration as advancing candidates' potential to develop skills and professional acumen at higher levels by way of the frequent opportunities for practice afforded to them. They made particular reference to skills associated with professional acculturation— skills needed for new faculty to thrive within a community.

Collaboration among colleagues is recognized as a program goal for the development of candidates' sense of professionalism (i.e., the collective habits of mind, behaviors, unique skills, and sense of belonging that define the collective body of effective educators). Mentor teachers took keen note that interns in the pilot program, through routine practice, seemed to progress in

this area with greater proficiency compared to student teachers previously supervised. It was their understanding that routine and purposeful interactions with other established teachers within the school nurtured relationship building beyond the mentor-mentee triads (i.e., the configuration consisting of the primary mentor, the partner mentor, and the intern). Such professional collaborations reflect the primary vehicle for the interns' integration into the core function of teachers' interdependence within the workplace, a key ingredient of professionalism that must be nurtured through earnest and consistent collaboration. Ms. Austin explained the experience of one intern, who started her placement one week before others, by participating in school-wide professional development activities:

> She [i.e., the intern] became a member of our third grade team. We meet weekly to plan and she was an important part of that planning process. [Through other means of collaboration] . . . in the building, she made relationships with other teachers. Being here for the 15 weeks, I think gave her more of an opportunity to do that.

Continuity. Mentor teachers unanimously lauded the uninterrupted 14-week student teaching placement as a direct benefit to candidates' professional development. It was their belief that the continuation of interns' experience, compared to the university's traditional student teaching programming consisting of two, 7-week placements completed consecutively in two different schools, advanced student teachers' professional growth. More specifically, mentor teachers explained that program continuity informed persistent attention to the unique learning needs of interns. It has been their historical account that student teachers entering their classrooms at the beginning of either a first or second, 7-week placement do so without notification of any individualized goals or a professional development plan. Particularly for interns beginning their second 7-week placement, the transition has historically represented a new academic and professional start, one in which only the program goals were available to customize support.

Mentors unanimously identified growth in interns' confidence as a significant difference when compared to completers of the 7-week segments. From their vantage point, continuity and persistence of experience and support, afforded by way of program duration, directly influenced candidates' general since of teaching capacity. It was made evident that such confidence building is a process and occurs over time. A mentor pair explained this process by contrasting student teaching models:

> the consistency, and how you are able to see them grow over time. I feel that the previous student teachers over seven weeks were just starting to feel comfortable, and then they're gone. They have to go to another classroom. And as Ms. Angelou said, you don't get to see as much as you would over the 14 weeks. How much they could grow and improve. (Ms.Browing)

Ms. Angelou further elaborated,

> Well I just really thought that with my intern this time we were able to get a lot further than. . .with my prior one. I just felt like I could see her grow so much better, and things we were working on we could continue to work on. Whereas last time I felt like we were just reaching a point where I was ready to see some progress and then she left. And I have no idea what happened after.

She continued,

> Honestly, I felt like the intern, getting closer to the end, I was able to see her confidence boost way higher than the previous one. And I think, again, that it was the deeper relationship that she had built with the students, the comfort level that she probably had with me.

There is evidence to support mentor teachers' assessment of interns' increased confidence or sense of self-efficacy as a result of student teaching (Clark, Byrnes, & Sudweeks, 2015; Knoblauch & Woolfolk Hoy, 2008). Yet, Clark et al. (2015, p. 173) contend, "simply having a student teaching experience is not sufficient." They further explain that evidence on the duration of placements has produced conflicting results with regard to interns' sense of confidence. For example, Chambers and Hardy (2005) demonstrated that there was no significant difference between the self-efficacy of student teachers completing a full semester compared to a one-year experience. Rather, the overall quality of the student teaching experience supersedes placement number and length with regard to potential for positive impact on interns' professional development. This is a belief held and nurtured by the partnership members of this study.

Moreover, program quality is multidimensional. It encompasses deliberate support for each intern's individual needs. It aspires to program coherence that bridges relevancy and cohesion between academic study and clinical instruction. It upholds supervision that is guided by standards-based practices aimed at positive impact on the learning of both student teachers and P-12 students.

Professional Learning Community and Program Impact

As previously stated, there is no single definition or structure for professional learning communities (PLCs). Yet, the concept conveys intentionality for learning among members within a professional setting. Similarly, the notion of community suggests

a certain level of cohesion among members anchored by shared norms and mores.

Structurally, the PLC within Western University's partnership refers specifically to the monthly meetings among university and P-12 members. The PLC was established to sure up collaborative ties and to design the pilot, 14-week student teaching experience for mutual benefit. Culturally, however, the benefits of the PLC extend beyond its structural confines to include the general sense of synergistic support and solidarity among members. Mentor teachers identified critical incidents of developing a big picture view, collaborative support, and reflective practice as underscoring the benefit of the PLC across both the pilot student teaching program and the PLC itself.

Big picture view. Mentor teachers consistently reported on the benefits of their participation in the PLC. They frequently referenced their expanded commitment to the partnership as a result of these benefits. In particular, mentors explained that the regular meetings among members helped to refine their clarity of purpose and helped to more concretely ground their work as supervisors within the larger context of educator preparation. They directly attributed the exchange of ideas and collaborative cogitation on local and national issues within the profession to their big picture view. Mr. Tristan, for example, shared one point of reference to exemplify his value of what it meant to better understand the culture and expectations of the university partner. From his perspective, a newly formed "big picture view" helped to more fully shape his role as a mentor. When asked about the benefits of the PLC, Mr. Tristan clarified the process and benefit of his discovery:

> I think the PLC meetings were a huge benefit to me professionally to see the other side of it, beyond the four walls of my classroom, the bigger picture, the goals and the ideals behind the university's program. I go back to when we first started [meeting as a PLC] and we were putting ideas [about goals and norms for collaborative engagement] on the flip chart. That was a huge benefit to me to see through a supervisor's eyes, the things the university is looking for. I think [being] in the classroom, you become more focused on the details, the day to day and not the big picture ideas.

Dismantled isolation. Teacher isolation is a common phenomenon experienced among teachers, forged by a closed-door ethic (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Easley, Henning, and Bradley (2003) explain that such ethic is sustained by "traditional boundaries of where one's work stops before infringing upon the space of others" (p. 59). Chan and Pang (2006) contend that internationally, there is an emerging paradigm shift of learning, one that focuses on social and collaborative learning among teachers. They explain that the idea of working together in Asia is not uncommon and that learning communities in this context often engage in "Lesson Study." Moreover, these authors posit, "Nevertheless, how teacher collaboration addresses issues of changing conceptions of learning, teaching, and schooling in light of educational changes is not well understood" (p. 3).

Mentor teachers explained how the PLC fostered a culture of collaboration, one that dismantled norms of isolation. Seeded within the structure of the monthly meetings among the partner institutions, the fruits of a collaborative culture flourished beyond those meetings to include member interactions during the pilot student teaching program. Mentors commonly shared the sentiment that these newly formed collaborative ties were further defined by a sense of trust. It was made apparent that due to the structured PLC, trusting relationships among faculty of both institutions quickened.

In kind with the aims of PLCs, mentor teachers further explained the benefits of collaboration as related to their core role as mentors, chief among them expanded learning and insights into their supervisory practices. Ms. Austin, for example, shared how dismantled isolation functioned in her classroom:

> The interactions I had with the university supervisor this student teaching experience were so much more beneficial than ones I have had in the past. I do not know if it was [solely] a result of the PLC that we all feel more comfortable with one another. But with the meetings we were able to have either those just between the university supervisor and me, or university supervisor, my mentee, and me, we were able to discuss so many things. In the past I have worked with some supervisors that would come and observe and then leave, so we did not have any interactions. So just taking the time, we probably took 40 minutes after the observation for the three of us sit down and discuss what went well, and what did not. It was so beneficial to my intern and me to have that feedback from the university supervisor. It is such an important part.

Mr. Tristan affirmed how dismantled isolation through collaboration advanced his confidence as a mentor and his big picture view:

> I echo Ms. Garcia's sentiments. Prior to doing this, you almost feel like you are on an island giving feedback to individual student teachers and your evaluations are your evaluations. You are not really sure how other people are evaluating their student teachers and the type of feedback they are giving. The thing that I think was unique about this experience is that we got to discuss that with other co-workers, and other teachers in other school districts. I felt there was a better connection with the university as well, what your side [i.e., the university] is expecting. I think it was a great back and forth that made me more confident. I am on the right track evaluating the way I should. I just feel more confident in my ability to provide the experience needed for a student teacher.

The mentor teachers' assessment conveys the phenomenon of the classroom becoming an open space whereby mutual learning among teacher educators and teacher interns occurs by way of dismantled isolation. The advent of ballooning discussions among primary and partner mentors and other teachers in the school, as referenced by Mr. Tristan, directly shaped content of PLC meetings. In fact, during design discussions, mentor teachers proposed ways to advance interns' professional develop by expanding the goal setting meetings with interns to include feedback from both members of the mentor pair as well as the university supervisor.

Self-reflection. While the partnership globally spurred on a culture of critical reflection, mentor teachers identified self-reflection as a critical incident occurring as result of the PLC. Though both big picture view and dismantled isolation functioned to advance mentor's professional development in a collaborative manner, they each, in some way, shaped mentor teachers' engagement in self-reflection. It was evident that the structure and the content of the PLC supported mentor teachers' self-reflection. Ms. Horne, the second most veteran P-12 teacher of the partnership, described the critical incident with clarion distinction:

> The involvement in the PLC, especially the meetings we had as a full group, has made me more self-reflective. It brought it more to the forefront of being self-reflective. I think I have always tried to do what was best with the students, but as Ms. Austin was saying, with new trends and new research and being able to discuss what is best for the students such as the co-teaching. So I have definitely developed self-reflection and would like to learn even more. I kind of have an appetite now.

Discussion

It is evident that each of the three themes: mentor development and program impact, candidate development and program impact, and PLC and program impact represents a unique aspect of partnership development. They independently reflect factors that directly shape members' professional development, a key essential of PDSs and school-university partnerships. Even still, there is little question that they are interrelated. For example, few would argue with the notion that mentor development is intricately linked to the notion of chain learning throughout the system—professional development among teacher educators that ultimately impacts learning outcomes for teacher candidates and P-12 students alike.

Collectively, these themes also speak to the relationship among members' professional learning, program design, and program development. Given the iterative nature of the design instrumentation for innovation in partnership development and efficient learning among members, the critical incidents comprise themes. Their associated outcomes directly influence members' collaborative learning, their investment in and contributions to partnership programming.

Collaborative supervision was identified a catalyst for reflective practice. Mentors cited a deeper understanding of their instructional decision-making as a result of collaboration, and conveyed that this enhanced their interns' reflective practice as well. The mentors specifically identified the PLC as a source of professional development that helped them to feel more comfortable with their supervisory roles along with a deeper appreciation of university expectations and protocols for the clinical experience. Mentors also demonstrated growing input and influence over partnership design, based mainly on lessons learned during implementation. Moreover, mentors described specific examples of positive impact on the learning, growth and/or development of individual and groups of students in their classrooms as a result of the newly designed clinical experience. These and other outcomes were further revealed and explored through the critical incident technique.

Limitations

Mentors' input into program development is not fully addressed in this paper, due to the research design and the subset of data addressed. However, glimpses of their leadership for program design can be seen via the role of the partner mentor for guiding the intern's instructional project and the modification of collaborative goal setting to include both mentors. Similarly, the challenges of partnership development ascertained during Western University's broader program evaluation are not readily reported on in this paper, again, due in part to the research design. Herein lie certain limitations of this descriptive case study. Moreover, while the benefits toward mentor's professional development are readily apparent, those described for interns are indirect.

Implications

Partnership development for the improvement of educator preparation is admirable and holds particular merits. Yet, effective partnerships are unlikely to occur without intentional design. As is demonstrated by the findings of this study, purposefully designed collaboration fosters the potential for professional learning among partnership members. Nevertheless, the work of partnership development within the "third space" is not without its challenges. For one, relationship development requires time. Respect among members and a meaningful design that is mutually constructed reflect other needed ingredients that can bear their own challenges. One point is clear. Partnership development is a process, one that is iterative.

Effective partnership development within the "third space" requires negotiation among members along with an intentional feedback loop by which members can readily examine practice, shifts in institutional cultures, and share lessons learned to inform continuous improvement. This feedback loop is part and parcel of engineered and purposeful learning.

Whereas mentors engaged new techniques and engaged in reflective-practice, whereas mentors collaboratively discussed their new insights during the structured PLC meetings and school-based supervisory practices, and whereas mentors demonstrated a continued commitment to learning and the partnership itself, there are clear implications that can be drawn for sustainability of the Western University-school district partnership. Each is underscored by the importance of mutuality within the "third space." Each underscores the PDS principles laid out by the Holmes Group, the Holmes Partnership, and the National Association of Professional Development Schools.

First, members must discern a direct benefit to their professional learning and of their partnership work. Typically, this entails an impact on one's sense of effectiveness regarding one's core roles and responsibilities within the workplace, as is exemplified by mentors' increased supervisory acumen. Second, partnering organizations must continually convey, discuss, and negotiate and plan for the mutual benefits of their individual needs. Often fiscal, political, leadership, and social factors deeply embedded within their unique cultures shape these needs. Within this Western University partnership, the non-negotiable factors regarding positive impact on individual classrooms' and the school's cultures (representing P-12 core interests) and meeting university accreditation demands were examples of starting points for negotiating benefits. Lastly, the partners need to mutually construct goals for continuous improvement, as when the PLC members collaboratively decided on the initial roles and outcomes for the partner mentor placement. These have to be negotiated and remain at the fore to inform discussion of sustainability. Yet, these goals are likely to change, given the vicissitudes occurring among the first two implications. While collectively these may represent a level of common sense, they concomitantly highlight the complexities of partnership development and sustainability within the third space.

One promising outcome of the reported partnership toward sustainability is manifested via the implications shared. Commitment among members for continuous improvement and sustainability has taken hold. Other district teachers have voluntarily sought to join the PLC and to serve as mentors. The same holds true for university faculty. The newly hired clinical coordinator has invested in the partnership. The "third space" accurately defines the initial conditions for which the partnership is mounted. Yet, as the partnership continues to produce positive outcomes that benefit both institutions, it is likely that the "third space" will evolve into a relationship akin to what one university supervisor has called a "blended family." SUP

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