

RESEARCH REPORT

Peer Support: A Collaborative Approach to Teacher Improvement

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Many teachers today struggle to meet the differentiated needs in their classrooms. Mentorship programs are often available to teachers in the first five years of teaching, but after the initial induction process there is little support for teachers. In the past, when teachers were identified as struggling in the classroom, they were evaluated through the supervisory process by their administrators. With a collaborative mentor to guide and support them, would teachers have the ability to improve and sustain that growth? This study of the Peer Support Program in elementary and high schools in Surrey, British Columbia, had 31 participants: 19 female and 12 male teachers between the ages of 26 and 50, with 1-25 years of teaching experience. This mixed methods research incorporated an online survey with all participants and five one-on-one interviews to answer the following research question: "In what ways do teachers, identified as struggling, experience professional growth as a result of participating in a Peer Support Program?" Of the teachers who participated in the study, 85% rated the Peer Support Program as above average for effectiveness, and would recommend the program to colleagues. Teachers reported sustainable improvement to their teaching practice after participating in the Peer Support Program. Providing a collaborative program such as the Peer Support Program is one viable option to support teachers in improving their teaching practice and reducing teacher stress and burnout.

Discussion of the Main Findings

Required Supports

Many respondents made reference to high needs classrooms with multiple behaviour concerns and a lack of resources and strategies to address those needs. Classroom management was the area that they required the most support from the Peer Support Program. Curriculum and instructional planning was also a common concern due to the need for extensive differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all classroom learners. The peer support teachers worked closely with participants to determine the areas of struggle before working collaboratively to form a plan, develop strategies, and decide what resources were needed to support the teachers.

As the demands increase in classrooms, with class sizes rising, inclusion of students who until the 1970s were not included in regular classrooms, and resources and supports diminishing, it is no wonder that many teachers struggle to meet the high needs of their classrooms. It is also understandable that what might begin with classroom management issues may quickly escalate to issues with curriculum and instructional planning as teachers become more and more frustrated, and tired. Their own ability to access the necessary resources to help them will diminish as they become overwhelmed.

Survey respondents reported that they received support for a period of time ranging from one week to more than two years, with an average length of support being three to six months. The support occurred once or twice a week, with more intensive support taking place in the first month, and supports diminishing to a follow-up by the peer support teacher every few weeks, or on an as-needed basis. The supports provided were very individualized for each participant and put in place after meetings took place with the teacher and the peer support teacher, in order to ensure that the needs of each participant were met. This method of support helped to deepen

understanding of how students learn by facilitating self-reflection, bringing about changes in classroom instruction, and leading to increased student engagement.

The most common supports were meetings with the peer support teachers, with 86.2% of participants accessing this type of support. E-mails and telephone calls were often reported to occur on a daily basis as follow-up. Teachers reported that they “always felt like the peer support teacher was only an e-mail or telephone call away to provide support as needed, and that just knowing that they could ask for help when needed was a great assistance.” Teachers also reported that they were given time to reflect on their own practice, and time to observe in other classrooms. The list of strategies consisted of e-mails, telephone calls, meetings with consultants, three-way meetings, demonstration lessons, team teaching, and observation in other classrooms. Improvement in teaching practice occurred by incorporating more high level thinking questions, encouraging active engagement, and increasing the ability to differentiate and adapt instructional materials. The researcher believes that this speaks to the high level of training provided to the peer support teachers in order for them to offer the necessary supports to the teachers involved in the Peer Support Program.

Perceived Effectiveness of the Peer Support Program

Survey participants were asked to rank the effectiveness of the Peer Support Program on a 5-point Likert Scale. The majority of respondents ranked the program's effectiveness as above average to excellent. Only five of the respondents ranked the program from poor to average. This is in keeping with the positive comments shared in the open-ended questions of the survey about the positive outcomes that participants felt were the direct result of the supports they received from the peer support teachers. Those teachers who gave the program a poor to average ranking cited the need for more observations of their classrooms, more opportunities to observe other classrooms, more time to reflect and receive feedback, and better clarification of the goals of the Peer Support Program in the initial meetings. It should be noted here that participants who ranked the program as above average to excellent noted that these features were present in their experiences.

The effectiveness of the program is also illustrated by the fact that the majority of participants accessed the Peer Support Program only one time. There was acknowledgement by participants that part of the success of the program was the ability to continue to remain in contact with the peer support teachers via email or telephone, even after they were finished participating in the program. The participants reported that the peer support teachers consistently checked back with them to follow up and ensure that all continued to go well.

Those teachers who accessed the program more than once reported that their willingness to become involved with the Peer Support Program again was due to the positive experience they had the first time. These teachers explained that they often reconnected with the Peer Support Program due to a different issue or a change in position, not because they continued to experience issues in the same teaching areas they had the first time. The researcher was pleasantly surprised by the fact that participants were comfortable accessing the Peer Support Program more than one time if they felt it was necessary. The researcher's assumption prior to this study was that if teachers had to participate in the Peer Support Program more than once, it would be because they continued to struggle and they had not experienced sustainable growth and improvement in their teaching practice. The opposite was reported by the research participants. They perceived that the Peer Support Program brought about sustainable change and altered their view of receiving support from the program, making them more willing to ask for and receive further assistance moving forward.

Finally, respondents were asked how they thought the Peer Support Program could improve. One suggestion made by 6 of the 31 participants was to advertise the program in a more positive light in the school district so that it would not be perceived by teachers as punitive or negative. Participants reported feeling anxiety at the onset of their participation and did not

want colleagues to know they were participating in the program. However, after experiencing the positive nature of the program, 21 participants said they would recommend the program to colleagues. Four respondents recommended the formation of a support group with participating members of the Peer Support Program so that teachers would know they are not alone and that struggles and ideas can be shared.

Another suggestion was to have peer support teachers who specialized in different areas – such as elementary school, high school, resource, library, and music – so that the peer support teachers would share expertise in specific areas of teaching that are more specialized.

Three respondents suggested a counselling component be available for those teachers who may have experienced a traumatic event while teaching or who are having personal difficulties outside of the school environment. These teachers shared that peer support in conjunction with counselling would be extremely beneficial to a struggling teacher's mental well-being.

Positive Aspects of the Peer Support Program

Time for reflection. The participants gained insight into their own teaching practice, and the root causes of their difficulties. As a result, they experienced an increase in their level of confidence, and a change in their attitude about accessing assistance from the Peer Support Program, due to their positive experiences with the peer support teachers. Those teachers who were unable to continue in their original teaching roles expressed gratitude for the ability to find different teaching positions that better suited their needs. The teachers who decided to take a leave from teaching all came back to the profession, some in different teaching roles and different schools, in a better frame of mind, ready to demonstrate the strategies learned through the Peer Support Program to manage their classroom environments and relationships in a healthier way.

Time for planning. The participants reported feeling that their teaching practice improved due to the support they received from the peer support teachers. Teachers reported that they had the opportunity to meet with their support teachers to identify their individual needs and to make plans for improvement and change. They had the opportunity to observe in other classrooms, have alternative classroom practices modelled for them, and receive support and resources as they attempted new strategies in their own classrooms. Given the necessary time to identify, plan and implement changes, the participants then reflected on those changes with their support teachers.

Ongoing support. The aspect of the program that participants found the most beneficial was the ongoing contact they had with the peer support teachers. Many of the teachers reported feeling like their peer support teacher was always just a phone call or an email away. The support was received well, and was not thought of as intrusive or evaluative in nature. Participants reported that the support was given collaboratively and without judgement.

Changing perspectives. The majority of the participants found the program highly effective, even if they did not start out feeling this way in the initial stages. Teachers were very complimentary of the peer support teachers and the supports that they accessed throughout their involvement. The perspective of many of the participants evolved from being nervous and embarrassed of their need to access the supports, to feelings of confidence and empowerment once they had established the necessary skill sets to manage their different teaching roles. Even those teachers who initially thought that their involvement with the program was negative and punitive changed their thinking and reported that they now considered the program a positive resource to assist teachers with their teaching practice.

Sustainable improvement. Participants reported feeling that the improvement to their teaching practice was permanent and sustainable. The changes to each participant's practice were implemented by giving each the necessary time, resources, and support to ensure that the growth was sustainable. The sustainability can also be attributed to the fact that each participant maintained an ongoing, collegial relationship with the peer support teachers. Some teachers reported that if they had a question or an issue came up with respect to their teaching practice or classroom, they knew that the peer support teacher was only a phone call or email away. There was never any negative connotation to maintaining this relationship, and support was available before the teacher felt that the situation was out of control.

Negative Aspects of the Peer Support Program

Misunderstanding of the program. One aspect of the program that participants consistently reported to be the least helpful was the general lack of understanding of the purpose of the program. Many of the participants reported being nervous when they first became involved with the program, because it held negative connotations for the participants and their colleagues in the district.

Inconsistency between administrators. There was also inconsistency between the different administrators and their understanding and reception of the program, which led to discomfort on the part of the participants. Fortunately for most, these negative feelings dissipated as the teachers had more contact and developed an understanding of the supports that were available to them and were given the necessary time to access those supports.

Summary

This Canadian-based study investigated Surrey, B.C.'s Peer Support Program designed to support teachers who identify as struggling to meet the differentiated needs of their classrooms. It is a collaborative, non-evaluative model that is perceived by the participants to assist teachers in improving their teaching practice without the stress of administrative pressure and punitive measures. This Peer Support Program model would benefit other Canadian school districts to assist teachers and reduce teacher attrition. The costs of operating a Peer Support Program are minimal in comparison to the costs of teachers accessing medical leave due to high levels of stress and the costs of professional development to train new teachers when more experienced teachers choose to leave the profession.

With the ever-increasing demands that schools place on teachers, and dwindling resources to meet those demands, teachers require supports like the ones offered by Surrey's Peer Support Program to assist them when school situations present challenges. The demands of the teaching profession are not going to decrease. Supports such as the Peer Support Program ensure that the needs of teaching staff are met and that classrooms are environments where the best student learning can take place.

About the Researcher

Lynn White has recently completed her second M.Ed. at Brandon University. Currently a grade two teacher in the Central Okanagan School District, Lynn has a passion for mentorship and strives to support teachers collaboratively and collegially. Her goal is to create classroom environments where innovative, engaging learning takes place.