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Toward Successful Teacher Induction Through Communities of Practice

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Background

The issue of teacher induction continues to demand attention throughout schools on a national and provincial scale. Studies have shown that although teachers feel they are well prepared for their first year of teaching, the transition from preservice to service can be challenging and stressful (Le Maistre, 2000; McPherson, 2000; Simurda, 2004). Teacher induction appears to challenge universities as teacher candidates report they are not prepared for the transition into teaching, they are shocked by their initiation into the teaching profession, and they feel unable to cope because of feelings of isolation and the overwhelming demands of the profession (Hebert & Worthy, 2001). Much work has already been contributed to the field of mentorship. School divisions have devised various induction mentorship programs and networks, however these programs are relatively inconsistent and vary widely among regions in Saskatchewan.

Through their beginning teacher research, Hellsten, Prytula, and Ebanks (2008) discovered three main themes that contribute to the variances in teacher mentorship experiences in Saskatchewan. These are: whether the mentor is assigned or unassigned, whether the mentor is fully engaged or disengaged in the process and whether the mentorship experience exists through a single mentor or through multiple mentors. Moderating all three themes is the compatibility of the mentor and the mentee. Research indicates that there appears to be a trade-off between the formality of a mentorship program and its effectiveness, especially if the formal mentorship program's focus is not centred on student learning (Spindler & Biott, 2000). Student learning, however, is the reason schools exist; therefore, there is a need to develop mentors who provide support not only on the relationship side of things but also for the learning side: the “complex and thought-provoking conversations that surround the practice of teaching” (Stanulis, Burrill, & Ames, 2007, p. 144). Perhaps formal mentorship programs have served their purpose, and it is imperative to find a mentorship process that works to meet the needs of today's students.

It is the variances in mentorship programs that cause them to be inconsistent, to be largely ineffective, and to fail to take advantage of other learning opportunities occurring in the division (Hellsten et al., 2008). Although the terms *induction* and *mentorship* have historically been used interchangeably, this may have been in error. According to Wong (2005), “mentors are important, but they are only one component of the induction process” (p. 43). Wong claimed that mentors cannot be the only form of induction, and they are not “all a new teacher needs to become an effective teacher” (p. 43). The induction process extends far beyond supporting the mentoring of new teachers into the school system through professional development and inservice; effective induction comes from “a commitment to education, a hope for its future, and a respect for those who enter into its community” (Shadiow, 1996, p. 277). Since the compatibility of the single mentor and the beginning teacher appears to be essential to the success of the mentorship experience, attempting to develop single mentors to achieve this support seems uncertain at best. Wong (2005) stated:

In many school districts, mentoring is carried out one-on-one, in isolation, with no coherence to any district or school curriculum, plan, goals, or standards; whereas good induction programs are comprehensive, last several years, have clearly articulated goals, and provide a structured and nurturing system of professional development and support. (p. 43)

This knowledge, coupled with knowledge that the learning community is one whose “ends of importance are the growth and development of the people” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, p. 6), points to a mentorship process that is not assigned, delegated, or mandated. Rather, it points to a process of identity, relationship, and learning that develops throughout the preservice, internship, the early years of teaching, and beyond.

RATIONALE FOR USING THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY FOR TEACHER INDUCTION

At an educational conference recently, a participant asked how any new work in teacher induction was different from work done throughout the past few years. Specifically, the researcher wanted to know how this project was different and, after years of work on induction from various educational institutions across the country showing few results, how this project could make a difference. The answer to his question was undoubtedly yes, this work is different. It is exceedingly different. This project does not promise to simply deliver a series of mentorship workshops, nor is it a plan for matching mentors to mentees; rather, it is an approach that departs from traditional models, reducing the requirement for isolated neophyte induction altogether. This project works within a model that has the potential to impact all teachers, regardless of career length or experience, and that can effectively impact student learning and can transform teaching through collaborative practice. This potential exists through the professional learning community.

As groups of educators work collaboratively and learn from one another, the professional learning community has the power to create lasting impact and change in a school. This impact is not simply achieved through the adoption of the structure of the learning community, but rather through a transformation in the knowledge, growth, and practice of and among the members involved (Prytula, 2008). This is largely due to the activities that the members undertake, such as the practices of collaboration and accountability, similar to the theory of communities of practice, described by Etienne Wenger (1999). Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 2004). Figure 1 illustrates learning through conversations, reflection, and understanding, such as through the collaborative work that occurs in a professional learning community (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000).

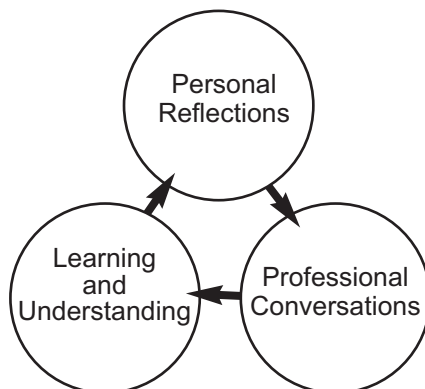


FIGURE 1.

Multiple mentors create the opportunity to learn through conversations, reflections, and learning. Copyright 2009 by M. Prytula.

Working collaboratively in a learning community includes setting goals, measuring their attainment, and monitoring and planning for further or sustained improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). A learning community is described as a group of teachers who do not work in isolation, but who share their practices, set goals, experiment with new strategies, measure outcomes, and adjust their strategies within the personal, interpersonal and organizational capacities to achieve their goals.

As learned from the study of beginning teachers by Hellsten et al. (2008), learning community collaboration is not the norm in Saskatchewan; what is needed is an environment where an inductee is surrounded by a group of mentors—an environment filled with learning, discernment, and dialogue. The relationships within this environment must be both affirming and challenging, and must result in reciprocal benefits for the mentor and the mentee. Figure 2 illustrates such a model with multiple members, interrelated strong and weak relationships (depicted by thick and thin arrows), and

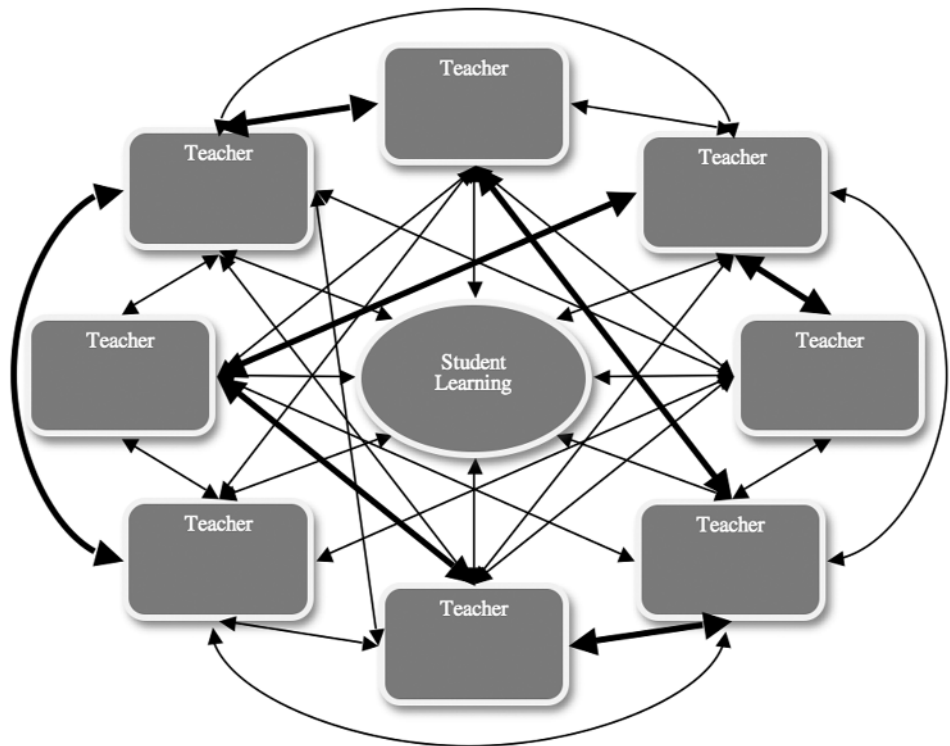


FIGURE 2.

Alternative model of mentorship for Saskatchewan. This figure illustrates that student learning is the centre of all work done in education, and that teaching and learning surround the student. All teachers are connected with either strong or weak ties, which either affirm what the teacher does, or provide dissonance for teacher learning. Copyright 2009 by M. Prytula.

opportunity for discussion and dialogue, with student learning as the central focus for all. It is the learning community model, and it is proposed that it can exist as an alternative, superior model to mentorship for schools in Saskatchewan. With the strength and capacity of the learning community in mind, this study was launched to explore the professional learning community model as an effective alternative to the current internship models and mentorship programs already in use in Saskatchewan.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The specific objectives of this study included

- to organize preservice teachers into professional learning communities focusing on a learning improvement plan goal while gaining valuable knowledge of the profession;
- to organize interning teachers into professional learning communities with at least three other teachers focusing on a learning improvement plan goal while gaining valuable knowledge of the profession;
- to organize first year teachers into a learning community with at least three other teachers focusing on a learning improvement plan goal;
- to explore the effects on induction and mentorship through membership in a professional learning community, both through the perceptions of those involved, as well as a complement to the initial data collected from the Becoming a Teacher study¹; and
- to provide feedback to the profession about the benefits of developing a mentorship model based on the professional learning community model at the preservice, internship and first year teacher levels.

¹A research study conducted by Dr. Laurie Hellsten at the University of Saskatchewan in partnership with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation to discover the transition experiences of beginning teachers in Saskatchewan (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada).

Research Methodology

The research methodology was action research at the school level. Teachers researched the ongoing learning community practice to determine the effects of the professional learning community as a mentorship model for teacher candidates, interns and first year teachers. Research took place in one school over a 10-month period and data collection occurred over nine months of the study.

Three groups of potential participants were invited to participate in the interviews. These groups were the teacher candidate cohort at the school, the interns at the school, and the beginning teachers at the school. Out of these groups, four teacher candidates, one intern, and two first year teachers volunteered to participate.

Data were collected using three semistructured interviews per participant. The interview questions are included in the Appendix. Data were also collected through one personal written response from each participant. The data were verified through member checking and analyzed for themes.

Participants

Table 1 contains a summary of the demographic information for all participants in the study. Each person from the group of teacher candidates, interns and first year teachers was invited to participate. From those groups, four teacher candidates, one intern, and two first year teachers chose to participate. In addition, since this project was situated in the realm of action research, all other staff (teachers, administrators, and support staff) were participants. Because they were members of the learning communities and of the school, they impacted the learning that took place.

TABLE 1

Participant Demographics

Teacher Candidates

4
average age: 27
1 previously worked as an Educational Assistant
2 with B.A.
3 with rural roots and 1 with urban
1 married with children

Intern

1
age: 22
rural roots
engaged to be married

Beginning Teachers

2
average age: 31
1 previously worked as an Educational Assistant
1 with ECE certificate
1 with rural and 1 with urban roots
1 married with children

SCHOOL PROFILE

The school was situated in an urban school division, and served students in Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 8. The staff's professional development stemmed from the yearly learning improvement plan (LIP). In the year of this study, the learning improvement plan focused on improving student learning outcomes in reading and writing, as well as affecting parent involvement through an authentic parent engagement initiative. The school also operated with multiple partnerships from within the city, and delivered English and Cree programming, as well as a behavioural education program.

THE PLC PROCESS

Staff within the school operated within strong professional learning communities (PLCs) prior to the start of the induction project. Table 2 summarizes the activities in which members of the staff were engaged. The focus of the PLCs centred on improved student learning. In this particular year, the focus was on achieving improvements in reading (one-grade-year growth per student), and writing (also one-grade-year growth per student). Regular assessments and reporting were part of the LIP and PLC processes. The staff also focused on a parent engagement project and a social justice goal.

TABLE 2

Monthly Timeline for Our PLC Activities for 2008-2009

September	Learning Improvement Plan Goal Setting <ul style="list-style-type: none">reviewed goals, discussed targets, and determined how LIP goals would be implemented, measured, and achieved
October	Reading Data Wall <ul style="list-style-type: none">all students were assessed using the DRA and Benchmark Assessment Toolsstudent results were further interpreted, discussed and displayed on our Reading Data Wallthe Reading Data Wall led to conversations pertaining to current student achievement, what one year's growth would look like, reasonable expectations, and how 100% of our student body would achieve a minimum of one year's growth
November	Authentic Parent Engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none">as a staff we discussed what authentic parent engagement is, what it looks like in our school, and how we could further improve and grow in this area Authentic Assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none">as a staff we discussed what is authentic assessment, and why it is important that teachers, parents, and students have a true and accurate picture of student achievement
December	Social Justice <ul style="list-style-type: none">within various PLC groupings, a range of potential social justice projects were discussed

- a school-wide initiative called Brick by Brick by Brick incorporated students earning a brick for every act of social justice they did. Bricks were engraved and displayed on a social justice wall
- staff determined that any social justice act, either individual or group, would be recognized

January

Writing Assessment and Data Wall

- as a staff we discussed current student achievement in the area of writing, strategies used within the classroom, and assessment techniques
- concluded as a staff that it was essential to develop exemplars for each grade level, and a common rubric for Grades 1-8 to ensure that all students are aware of expectations as they progress through a writing task and to enhance continuity within teacher assessment
- after all of the students had an opportunity to review the grade appropriate exemplars and the rubric, they participated in a school-wide writing benchmark assessment
- the PLCs utilized the exemplars and rubric to assess and to discuss student writing and determined what individual student growth should be by the end of June
- as a group we interpreted student data, and devised a data wall format that would display student results and would generate further discussions

February

Authentic Parent Engagement

- we revisited and reaffirmed what we were already doing as a staff to facilitate authentic parent engagement
- we recorded the staff's interpretation of formal and informal parent engagement
- further discussion led to questioning whether an authentic parent engagement model was feasible
- the PLC dialogue was documented and displayed within our staffroom

March

Behaviour

- as a staff we focused on disruptive behaviours and the negative effect they had on student learning
- a dialogue occurred about strategies that would increase student engagement and would reduce disruptive behaviours, which led into the development of a plan aimed at reducing the amount of teacher time spent dealing with classroom management issues

April

Writing Data Wall

- we re-examined and updated the data wall, recorded student progress to date, acknowledged barriers, and formulated plans to ensure future growth

May

Revisited Learning Improvement Plans

- used the LIP and data walls to review student goals and progress to date, and determined a plan to assist students to achieve one year's growth during the last two months of the year

June

Revisited Learning Improvement Plans

- compiled LIP results for the year, reviewed student data and knowledge of student needs, celebrated, and planned for the next year

At the school, the staff was organized into two PLC groups based upon grades taught. The primary PLC consisted of six classroom teachers, one Learning Assistance Teacher, and two teacher candidates who worked with students in Kindergarten, or Grades 1, 2, 3, or 4. The second PLC consisted of five classroom teachers, one teacher librarian, one Learning Assistance Teacher, one intern, and two teacher candidates who worked with students in Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8. There were, however, instances when the staff of the school, in its entirety, met as one large PLC group.

DATA COLLECTION

Data for this study were collected through written responses and semistructured interviews. At the start, each participant was questioned to obtain demographic information, as well as to learn more about their basic knowledge of teaching and learning. The first semistructured interview consisted of a series of questions about participants' initial experiences in the PLCs and in the school. The second interview was designed in a similar way, and was used both to determine what participants had learned, as well as to act as a tool to compare their learning from the first interview. The last interview was also semistructured, and followed a similar pattern of collecting information about participants' learning, as well as comparing knowledge from the first and second interviews with the last. Finally, participants were invited to complete a written response, summarizing their experiences throughout the year and their understandings of their work in the school.

Data Analysis

Following the semistructured interview transcriptions, data were analyzed for themes. There were nine major themes: active involvement, confidence, developing relationships, focusing on goals, learning and mutual learning, real life, support, transitions, and working together. The data are presented below as they were discussed, according to these themes.

ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT

Regardless of their induction stage (whether participants were teacher candidates, interns, or first year teachers), all participants were included in the professional learning community (PLC) process. As the PLC worked through its goals, there was a general feeling of belonging and involvement. One of the teacher candidates expressed that she was “excited to be part of . . . our cohort. All of us are going to be part of helping these students with their reading and partnering up.” She envisioned herself as a member, helping the students. This view of involvement as an educator was echoed when another said: “I don’t feel like I am just a student when I come which is really nice.” This feeling of involvement not only extended to activities, but was internalized toward the process of learning. This participant was commenting on the nature of the work within the PLC when she said,

I think that something like that needs discussion and people need to voice their opinion because I think that if that is just mandated, then I think that people would just get frustrated without the PLC because if you are not able to voice your concerns and opinions people would be frustrated.

To her, the involvement was not just something that she would do at the table, but it included her thoughts, opinions, and concerns. In addition, there was recognition that this involvement would lead to learning:

We’re here to learn. Why don’t we try this and if it works—great. And if it doesn’t work then we’re learning so we learn that it won’t work. I think that’s maybe what the PLC has kind of helped with, too. Just taking a risk.

From feeling like an active member of a group to recognizing active learning, the professional learning community provided members with the opportunity to become involved in their students’ learning, as well as their own.

CONFIDENCE

Throughout the interview sets, it became apparent that the participants moved from a lower level of confidence to a higher one, but they did not base all of this confidence on activities and time spent in the classroom; rather, much of it came from the dialogue and discussion in the PLC meetings. One of the first year teachers noted that, “for me that was a conversation that happened at one of our last ones [meetings] that meant a lot to me just to make sure that I was on the right page and I found out that I was, and that meant a lot.” It appeared that the student-centred content of the meetings gave the mentees knowledge that they were doing what they thought they needed to do to meet their students’ needs, as explained by this first year teacher:

After each PLC meeting, I feel a lot more confident with what I'm doing and the assessments I'm doing. A lot more comfortable being able to go to other people in the group, so every time after a meeting I just feel like these people are a lot more [like a] mentor and I keep going to them and I see them showing me the right path, instead of them just telling me what to do.

This confidence also grew through the activities that were completed in the PLC through the actual learning and understandings that took place. For example, this intern recognized that she benefitted through the discussions, and commented on the advantages of the process of PLC dialogue. She said, "I think that it was beneficial to compare your beliefs and thoughts about what grade a paper should get in comparison to others. I enjoyed that activity and thought that it was beneficial to my learning."

Some participants also expressed that the meetings not only gave them confidence with their tasks as educators, but confidence and comfort to share their thoughts and feelings, saying that being involved in the PLC has allowed them to "be able to feel comfortable to talk in the meetings and always having someone there that will listen and not always there to judge." Following such a process, one participant added, "it puts you on a completely different comfort level." The intern recognized this type of discussion as an opportunity to learn, saying, that "it is a way for us getting together and a chance for me to ask questions that I may be afraid to ask otherwise. I think that the group helps me that way." As the year progressed, this level of confidence and comfort bloomed, and one participant commented:

I don't want to know what I did well; I want to hear what I did bad. We have that level of comfort with each other so that I am not going to be sad if you tell me what I did bad because that is what I am going to learn.

Clearly, the format of the PLC provided the participants in this study with an opportunity to grow in confidence through affirmation that they were moving in the right direction, an opportunity to be confident with what they were learning, as well as an opportunity to be confident and comfortable with asking questions of any member of the PLC.

DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

The learning community arrangement provided the opportunity for teacher candidates, interns and first year teachers to interact with each other, as well as the entire staff, including teachers and support staff. One intern recognized that, "if I wasn't in this program I would feel as though I was not as involved and that I wouldn't have much of a relationship with any other teacher other than the one I was working with." Rather than to just develop a close relationship with her cooperating teacher, she was able to learn from and to relate to others as well.

Although the focus of the learning communities was student learning, as relationships developed, mentees were able to stray from the focus and to talk about other concerns. One teacher candidate commented that, "having the communities and meeting every second Tuesday and talking about different things, it's so easy to get off topic and talk about other things because we are so comfortable with each other and are able to talk." This was also echoed by an intern when she said that "it's affected how I'm teaching, and makes me happy that even as a whole, at recess I can go to the staffroom and I'm excited to see people, and talk to people." Furthermore, mentees began to recognize that it was because of the PLCs that their learning was affected.

I think the PLC is a big part of that because we get together as a group with the like interests of our students and I think that creates a community of learners and teachers. We're all learning together and so that's the basis for creating relationships among staff.

This one mentee realized that the structure and the focus created the space for that learning and relationship building.

FOCUSED ON GOALS

A large part of the learning community structure is its focus on goal setting, planning, monitoring, and measuring success. The goals for this year were to improve student learning by at least one year's growth in reading and writing for 100% of the students by the end of June. Since the goals were set, the meetings and conversations centred on those goals and on the strategies planned to achieve the goals. This affected mentee learning, and an appreciation for the direction that comes with that learning. "I found out the goals that they were working on, and so now I know where it's coming from. I know it's heading towards working with the guided reading or interventions, and what is coming in the next few weeks." The intern recognized that it provided direction for her teaching, and she commented that:

It gives me more responsibility in what exactly my assessment is for the kids. I find when we're meeting in the groups going over our goals and looking at what I need to do to make those goals a success it gives me more of a concrete idea of how I'm teaching and what I'm teaching.

Knowing where the starting point is and what the end goals are also provided not only direction, but energy for the process in itself, as if it was new or undiscovered.

I'm really excited to see the beginning point and the end point. I'm really interested to see where we're going to be in June and the process that happens in between all the things with our different goals throughout the year.

Being armed with the knowledge of the beginning and end point, and understanding that the learning in between is a process that has to be experienced has the potential to provide a high level of learning for the mentees in the professional learning community.

MUTUAL LEARNING

The process of learning together was central in the operation of the school's professional learning communities. The staff had set goals, and although some were relatively straightforward, others were more complex and required problem solving. The mentees recognized this, and one commented that:

With writing, no one had any idea what they were doing and how they were going to get there and what they were going to do. And I think that initially, since no one really knew, no one really wanted to start it and it was just talked about and never acted upon. So . . . they made the exemplars and they found a base. Now I think that writing has really kicked off in the classroom. They didn't know where they were going, but they have an idea now. They're going to implement it, and revisit. This is what happened, what changed, what didn't, what can we do better.

There was also reciprocity in the learning, as the dialogue not only generated ideas, but the ideas came from all people in the group, not just the experienced teachers. One teacher candidate said that, “the conversation, because it was all going so fast and we were all talking and ideas were flying, was really interesting, and we came up with something that was beneficial to them, and beneficial for the other classes.” This point of reciprocity was also exemplified as the intern noticed that

I found it beneficial when all of the teachers would look at a piece, then mark it, and look at the discussions that went on there. I think that it was beneficial to compare your beliefs and thoughts about what grade a paper should get in comparison to others.

This candidate also realized the potential of working together, as the experiences in this professional learning community environment would benefit her teaching in the future.

By working as a team, the staff has gone from the unknown, to having their own rubric, and to having exemplars to help guide them. The data walls created during this PLC help the staff see where all of their students are at in reading and writing and develop strategies together to meet the needs of all students. Having the opportunity to experience first hand the struggles of assessing writing and helping to develop a way to assess is a huge asset for me as a beginning teacher. I will now begin my internship with some knowledge of how to assess writing. For me, as a teacher candidate, the progress from the beginning of the year is extremely encouraging.

This knowledge acquired does not simply pertain to having a program or resource, but rather to understanding a process of learning. Rather than learning how to work a program, “I felt as though I was included in a real grassroots formation of knowledge constructed by a community of professionals.” This is a much required element in schools as educational institutions shift from the transmission of knowledge to the creation of knowledge. From this experience, mentees are realizing that learning is central to the success of a teacher. Acknowledging that “as a teacher you are always learning, everyone's always listening but you also have to have a passion about learning, and always want to learn to improve yourself . . . you can always be learning new ways to teach” at such an early stage in the induction process or in one’s teaching career speaks much to the potential of the learning community model as a vehicle for teacher learning.

After experiencing the learning community process for two terms, a first year teacher was asked what she thought teaching would be like without the PLC. She said that without it,

I'd feel isolated, just that I have students that need help and I'm the only one that can help them because I'm their teacher; whereas with the PLC, here's the support, here's the ideas and the people. I'd have to go to a lot of outside research just to solve my problems.

It appears that the mutual learning component provides an access to information for all involved that is reciprocal, experiential, and effective in assisting educators in finding and in practicing solutions.

REAL LIFE

As the mentees experienced the first few sessions of the professional learning community, initial reactions to the experience were that it had a real life component that the participants were eager to experience following their years of training. They wanted to apply the theory and see it in practice. One participant noted that

it's not straight out of the book, a lot of the things that they're talking about . . . It's more real life things that you don't talk about at university. There are so many different situations that can happen, but when you have real teachers and real interns talking about it and discussing what to do, you get a feel for the understanding and how they approach the problems or the things that are going well.

This early application to the real world was important to other participants as well. A teacher candidate noted that, "I think that it is valuable to see not only what a teacher does but what a teacher is like, to see them as professionals . . . as opposed to just hearing lectures from professors about what it is like." This connection was even deeper at times when mentees realized that experienced teachers did not always know how they were going to arrive at solutions. One participant noted that with the writing goal, "it seemed like there was nowhere to begin and nowhere to start and I had no idea either. I just thought that you guys would know because [if] I don't know, you'd know." The participant then got to experience the entire solution from its creation to its implementation, and its assessment. She added that "if more [people] could have this experience, I think the art of teaching would change dramatically."

SUPPORT

Working together and support are integral to the professional learning community experience. As newcomers to the school, the teacher candidates, intern, and first year teachers longed to feel that support and they felt encouraged by their involvement. "Everybody's ideas are important, and I really enjoy it," added a teacher candidate as she had just finished a PLC meeting. This feeling of importance brought about feelings of trust, as one of the first year teachers noted that, "Together, just being able to trust—trustworthiness . . . is a big thing. Having people to talk to and people you can rely on and depend on and go to for anything, advice, comfort, work related or not." She also added that she used this support network beyond the PLC, and said, "I usually will go to someone else to talk and then kind of see what they think about it, whether I should make any changes—any ideas they may have." She would then apply this support and advice to her work.

Mentorship through the PLC was also effectively supportive at the internship stage as "it's like having five different cooperating teachers instead of just one." Increasing the numbers of mentors for newcomers increases the likelihood that they will receive the help that they need when it is needed. This was affirmed as one participant stated that, "in the staffroom, you can have that conversation about the data wall, it is really easy to have conversation." These conversations helped newcomers to find solutions that they needed: "My problems were never really problems because I could always find someone to come and solve it."

One of the first year teachers at the school experienced the very supportive nature of the PLC. She summarized her experience:

I think it's been such a great opportunity for me to develop, having the mentors there and willing to be there if I need anything. You know

always “if you need anything, come ask”. And it’s really the PLCs that have created that mentorship and it has improved my teaching because it has forced me to take more ownership for my assessments, for what I’m doing and exactly how I’m doing it.

Not only did this teacher feel support, but she extended the experience as a base for accountability as well.

As mentees, the teacher candidates also had the opportunity to compare their experiences with other teacher candidates in other schools. They quickly noticed a difference between their experiences. One teacher candidate revealed:

I know more about what is going on at this school and what the whole staff is working towards as a goal for the school. And my other peers or colleagues don’t have that inside kind of information and even if I’m to tell them, it’s not the same as getting it first hand.

Noticeably, this experience differed from what other teacher candidates were experiencing in other cohorts.

TRANSITIONS

Of primary concern to the mentees as they began their year was how well they would transition from the university setting to employment in the classroom. The Beginning Teacher study (Hellsten et al., 2008) identified that transitions were awkward, and that their university experience had done little to prepare them for the classroom. One participant noted that, “it was a huge connection between the practical and the theoretical.” Another one of her peers said that she had learned things in her university classes that she saw not working in the classroom, and had “always kind of had that skepticism but I’m also learning that some of the things that we are being taught that I didn’t think would work, will work if you put in that effort to do it.”

The learning community experience also allowed a place for the mentees to bring their own knowledge to the table:

A big goal for me is feeling comfortable to be able to speak up within the meetings because I am new. I want my opinion to matter and be worthwhile so I try and go talk to other teachers who are more experienced and also others who are new like me so we get more of an idea of where we’re at in that situation.

Along with feeling comfortable, it helped accelerate the transition from the mentee’s teacher identity to becoming an effective teacher. “It helped me progress from thinking solely about myself and how my performance is looking to superiors to taking the time to consider the situations and feelings of students and parents/guardians.” This progression is key in effective education, as an educator becomes effective once they can identify and meet students’ needs.

WORKING TOGETHER

The collaborative aspect of the professional learning community was quickly identified as one of the key elements in the mentees’ experience. Early on, one mentee noticed that there is support throughout the structure. She recalled:

There's that support. For example Peter didn't know how to, at the beginning of the year, (set up) guided reading . . . so Janet said, "I'll grab a few kids and I'll show you how to do it," and so it made me realize that if you have that kind of united idea or goal that it's a lot easier to achieve, because then if you don't know what you're doing, somebody else will know how to do it.

Comments regarding this level of support continued throughout the year, as “everyone brainstormed their ideas and it all came together. So everyone knew all of these different ideas. Some people never thought of things and other people did. So it was nice.” Participants in the professional learning community also benefitted from the collaborative nature of the group, deriving solutions to problems together. “It has helped me understand the value of teamwork within the school and how that teamwork can affect your teaching.” Further to that,

Having us all there together and everyone's input there together and everyone listening instead of just me approaching one person about a question I had and having all the members there to listen and everyone give their suggestions and ideas was just a huge benefit.

Concluding the year, one teacher candidate noticed that the distance covered through working together not only benefitted her work, but others' as well. She said that, “by working as a team, the staff has gone from the unknown, to having their own rubric, and to having exemplars to help guide them.” She understood that this work would not have been achieved alone. Another added “when teachers take the time to talk with one another and with administration, they begin to notice changes that need to be made and most importantly support each other in making these changes.” Having this level of support was recognized, and it occurred through the learning community experience.

Discussion

Following the data analysis, it was recognized that the professional learning community presented an effective model for successful teacher induction for three main reasons: 1) the professional learning community brought about factors identified in previous research (Salinitri, 2005) that lead to successful mentorship through formal mentorship models, 2) the professional learning community may have accelerated participants through the induction stages identified with teacher induction, and 3) the professional learning community may have brought about a mutually beneficial mentor-mentee relationship.

FACTORS LEADING TO EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP

Although the qualitative data collected indicates, on its own, that mentees experienced a positive learning experience, when taken further, the themes identified through the data analysis correlate to factors identified in previous mentorship model research that indicate effective mentorship potential. Through her research, Salinitri (2005) identified that there are nine contributing factors leading to effective mentorship: increasing self-concept, networking, building collaboration, strengthening goals, increasing involvement, an advisement component, appropriate colloquium, creating meaningful relationships, and mutual learning.

In this study of the mentorship model within PLCs, the predominant themes were: active involvement, confidence, developing relationships, focusing on goals, learning/mutual learning, real life, support, transition, and working together. There is a strong correlation between the themes identified in Salinitri's work and the themes uncovered in this study, as indicated in Figure 3. Although there are other necessary requirements of an effective mentorship program, this correlation indicates that the potential to use the PLC model as an effective mentorship model definitely exists.

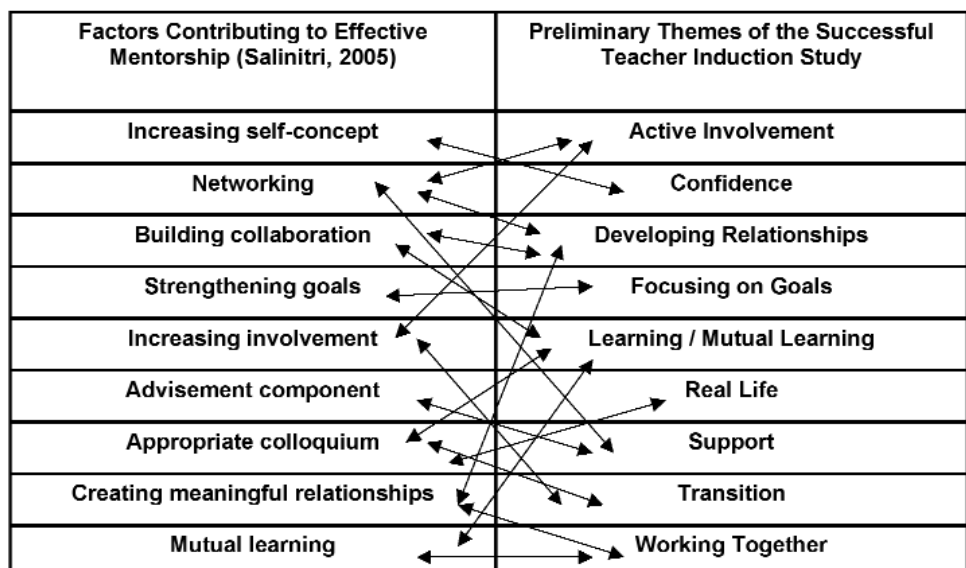


FIGURE 3.

The visual correlation between Salinitri's (2005) factors of successful mentorship and the themes identified in this study. Copyright 2009 by M. Prytula, C. Makahonuk, N. Syrota, and M. Pesenti.

STAGES OF TEACHER INDUCTION

The comments that the mentees shared about their experiences clearly indicate that their knowledge changed significantly from their first interviews to their last ones. One could assume that this is no great feat; of course, people learn as they progress through an experience. This is true, but in understanding the typical stages of teacher induction in literature (Frid et al., 1998), a different picture emerges. Frid et al. illustrated that there are four stages to teacher induction, and that beginning teachers must be proficient at the first stage before moving to the next. Specifically, beginning teachers start with the simple task of internalizing classroom rules and routines. Once proficient at that, they move to the second stage, where they focus on themselves and on their teacher competencies. Following that, they progress to becoming proficient at focusing on the student, and at understanding student learning. Following proficiency at that stage, they then progress to the last stage, where they become an autonomous teacher, and investigate the foundations of teaching. The data collected from this study, however, indicates that there is evidence that beginning teachers in the learning community project moved in and out of each of the stages of teaching. It was observed that, at times, the beginning teachers showed the characteristics of focusing on student learning and that of the autonomous teacher. That is, rather than acting in accordance with the typical induction stages of the beginning teacher, the results of this study indicate that the stages may appear more like those in Figure 4, where the progression is not linear, and learning is more free-flowing, and it occurs within each individual as he or she becomes conceptually ready.

Visualizing the stages this way also implies that induction through the learning community model allows learners to move in and out of each stage, building each almost simultaneously as members were exposed to the thinking and understanding of others, at whatever stage they may have been. Although we did not intend to have a test group in our study, we did have one teacher candidate who was not actively involved in the PLC due to personal reasons. As a result, the teacher learning was not as evident as with the other participants. In the beginning, her comments were centred around a perceived lack of knowledge, a level of anxiety, and at the beginning teacher stage, “I am brand new. . . . I have never had to lead a class before, so I’m nervous.” In the final write up, the statements remained at the beginning teacher stage. “I need to become more adept at writing lessons because I know that having solid lesson plans makes for a less stressed teacher and a more comfortable learning environment for the students.” Without the support of the PLCs, her professional development appeared to have progressed at a slower pace than her peers during the project.

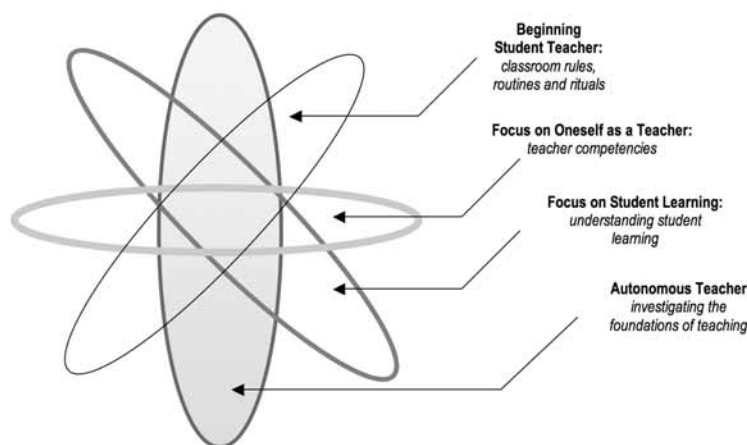


FIGURE 4.

The stages of teacher growth in a professional learning community, where each stage is developed simultaneously. Copyright 2009 by M. Prytula.

CHANGE IN KNOWLEDGE

During this study, there was a noticeable change in knowledge among the participants from the first interview to the final interview, depending upon their level of active involvement in the PLC. Active involvement in the professional learning community directly affected the amount of teacher learning that occurred. In the first interviews, comments about active involvement and learning were more general, and somewhat vague, including, “I have been actively learning for these past few weeks. I am very excited to become a teacher.” Another commented that she was excited “to see points of view and how people do things. It is interesting to see that and to be constantly learning.” Although candidates commented on their learning, one indicated that the experience was somewhat daunting. She said that “agreeing to be part of the PLC was originally a bit intimidating.” Following this collection of data, participants were involved in professional learning community dialogue and activities. In subsequent interviews, perceptions of the participants started to shift. By the end of the year, comments were more focused on the learning and the experiences that they had gained by their involvement. One teacher candidate commented that,

Becoming part of a staff and learning from each other was extremely influential. This experience has helped me develop my teacher identity, values, and beliefs of what being a teacher is. I am excited to share the knowledge I have gained as well as the practice with other teacher candidates and teachers. I am encouraged to promote this type of a learning community in schools I will work at in the future.

Another participant remarked that, “I would highly suggest that third year teacher candidates be active members in PLCs because of the wealth of knowledge that is shared, and the professional relationships that are made.” Another teacher candidate commented that, “if every staff member, every intern, and every TC [teacher candidate] across the province could have this experience, I think the art of teaching would change dramatically.”

A first year teacher stated that,

I had not realized the growth I would experience professionally after one year. I can honestly say that if I had not been at this school, I would not have grown as much as I did. . . .What I learned from the PLC this year can only make me stronger in the future.

From this study, active involvement in the professional learning community seems to be one of the keys to teacher learning.

Findings

FINDINGS

In this study, teacher induction through the professional learning community model has shown to be an effective mentorship model in this Saskatchewan school. The PLC model addressed many of the issues plaguing mentorship programs in Saskatchewan. It eliminated the need to match mentors and mentees, it provided a natural opportunity for mentees to be exposed to a variety of experiences instead of scheduling them into those experiences, and it reduced the potential for mentor disengagement as there was a long term focus on the student learning goal at hand. Along with those benefits, the PLC created a place where all members of the staff focused on student learning as the common goal, thus affecting teacher accountability. By taking advantage of strong and weak ties, mentees had the opportunity to learn from multiple teachers with different teaching styles, maximizing the benefits of cognitive dissonance. Last, it created an environment where learning was reciprocal, reducing the notion that there is an expert teacher to educate a novice learner. All teachers were learners at the table.

MUTUAL BENEFITS OF INDUCTION THROUGH THE PLC

In 2008, Howe declared that “what is needed is a system that supports mentorship, collaboration and peer consultation among teachers” (p. 343). The learning community is such a system. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) proposed the PLC creates a more equal mentee-mentor relationship, where mentees feel they are free to share their ideas and opinions, creating learning opportunities for mentors and mentees alike, while also providing emotional and professional support for all members in an environment where all are accountable for their students’ learning.

Furthermore, as Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) called for mentorship programs that serve to reculture schools, there is potential for teacher induction through the PLC model to serve as a catalyst for change and accountability. The incorporation of an effective induction program should “transform teaching into a true learning profession” (p. 23). If student learning goals are set through the PLC, and all teachers (experienced or not) work together to achieve those goals, then support, collaboration, and mutual learning are bound to occur. If such induction is incorporated into the heart of the school, true school reculturing and transformation have the potential to occur.

WHY THE PLC MODEL IS SO EFFECTIVE

According to Carroll (2005), the “model of one to one mentoring supports the traditional model of solo-teaching in isolated classrooms” (p. 200). Finding appropriate mentors is, at least, uncertain and at times, almost impossible when teachers are already very busy, and when effective mentor training and budgetary constraints put a squeeze on the process (Glassford & Salinitri, 2007). Induction models using PLCs involve more teachers and promote more learning to take place for both the mentees and the mentors. The result is improved student learning. Effective induction programs must incorporate new teachers into a professional learning community, emphasizing from the start all relationships with colleagues and establishing support for continued learning and growth (Carroll, 2005). In a time when concerns are centred on teacher

retention and student learning, the PLC model is an effective tool for promoting a community of teacher learners.

Effective professional learning communities provide the environment for a commitment to regular, sustained, ongoing collaboration. This model of using PLCs to improve student achievement requires, however, a leadership committed to change the culture within a school to support regular and ongoing collaboration among teachers, principals and students (Carroll, 2005).

Implications

The implications of the Toward Successful Teacher Induction through Communities of Practice study are three-fold, existing in theory, research, and practice. First, this study informs theory in that the linear, progressive models of teacher induction stages may no longer be suitable for today's schools. Teacher induction through a PLC is much less linear, is less predictable, and has the potential to access different types of learning all at the same time. Along with this, it is not only the beginning teacher who is subject to this learning; the experienced teacher has a lot to gain from this mutual relationship as well. Further research needs to be done in this area to illustrate a model that exists through a PLC for a clearer understanding for all members involved in the induction process.

More research must be conducted to ensure that this model is sustainable in multiple elementary school environments, as well as in high schools. Along with this, research must be done to determine the success of this model, regardless of the stage of learning community development. Last, more research must be conducted to explore the reculturing and accountability potential that such an induction model has on schools in Saskatchewan.

There are also several implications for this model in practice. This study suggests that rather than investing in, creating, and implementing a province-wide, government-mandated mentorship or induction program, the mentorship of teachers could be developed through an adaptation of the existing professional learning community model. It is imperative, however, that professional learning communities be developed and supported, as they are the backbone to the success of this model. If PLCs don't exist in a school, it is impossible for this type of mentorship to be established, thus mentees would be defaulted to the traditional inconsistent mentorship programs in the province. As PLCs are supported, it is also necessary that administrators realize the benefits, and buy into the potential success of this type of teacher induction. Long term commitment to this process is necessary in order for it to succeed. Because this type of induction has strong potential to affect student learning, teacher learning, and school culture, if such a buy-in occurs, it has the potential to transform the face of education in Saskatchewan.

Appendix: Data Collection Materials

TOWARD SUCCESSFUL TEACHER INDUCTION THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- A. What is your identity as a teacher?
- B. What are your strengths? What do you contribute to the PLC?
- C. What do you consider to be your areas of weakness? What do you ask of the PLC?
- D. What do you know about teaching?
- E. What do you want to know?
- F. Where/how will you learn that?
- G. What will you be like as a teacher in the classroom? What does that look like?
- H. What will you be like as a teacher outside of the classroom? What does that look like?

Considering the term PLC:

- I. What does it mean to be Professional?
- J. What does Learning mean?
- K. What does Community mean?

TOWARD SUCCESSFUL TEACHER INDUCTION THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

SECONDARY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How is the PLC relevant to your teaching?
2. What would your teaching be like without the PLC?
3. What is the goal for your PLC?
4. How does the PLC affect relationships with staff?
5. How has the team progressed through that goal?
6. Describe a discussion that you had at your PLC meeting this month that was beneficial to you.
7. Would the discussion have happened without the PLC?
8. How did the PLC help with the discussion (if it did)?
9. How do you interact with the members of the PLC outside of the regular meetings?
10. To whom do you go for help with problems you may have?
11. How have you contributed to the PLC this month?
12. What have you not learned that you want to learn?
13. How will you learn that?
14. How has this PLC contributed to mentorship this month?
15. What other needs do you have that the PLC is not meeting?
16. What needs do you anticipate that the PLC will not meet in the future?
17. How has the PLC affected your teaching?
18. How has the PLC benefitted your work as a whole?
19. Has the PLC affected you or your teaching in other ways besides just the focused goal?

TOWARD SUCCESSFUL TEACHER INDUCTION THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

FINAL REFLECTION

Please write a reflection regarding your experience as a teacher at St. Frances School. Please include experiences that you felt were enlightening, those that you felt were difficult, as well as your thoughts about these experiences. What have you learned? What will you use from this experience in the future? What else would have been beneficial? Please feel free to add any other thoughts that you may have.

TOWARD SUCCESSFUL TEACHER INDUCTION THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

This information will NOT be used to identify participants; rather it will only be used to describe the pool of applicants in general and to add depth to the study. Please feel free to omit any questions that you prefer not to answer.

Participant Name:

Age:

Hometown:

Education Summary: (elementary and high school, university degree(s), additional certificates)

Work Experience:

Interests:

Professional Goals:

Marital Status and Dependents:

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