
Betwixt & Between

Education for Young Adolescents

A Peer Reviewed Journal of Middle Level Research

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Beyond the Elevator Speech

The Pennsylvania Professors of Middle Level Education and Pennsylvania Association for Middle Level Education have partnered to support a peer reviewed journal focused on research in the field of middle level education. *Betwixt and Between* is the result of this joint venture. We are pleased to welcome you to our learning community and encourage you to submit an article in the future. In the meantime, we hope to elevate your understanding of middle level students, schools, and the issues they face in these challenging times.

—The *Betwixt and Between* Editorial Board.

This Issue

From The Editor's Desk

Examining Pre-Service Teachers' Decisions to Choose Middle Level Education Career Path

The Year-Long Middle Level Clinical Experience: Preparing Our Future Middle Level Teachers

Using Common Planning Time To Foster Professional Development

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About Our Cover Image

Joe Girard, a successful author, motivational speaker, and salesman, once said, “The elevator to success is out of order. You'll have to use the stairs... one step at a time.”

We hope that Mr. Girard is not correct. Just as elevator call buttons allow us to select a variety of locations and move between them with ease, we hope that *Betwixt and Between* will cover a variety of middle level issues and elevate our collective ability to improve middle level education for all learners. It is our hope that becoming informed about current issues, engaging in research, and learning from others will help our middle level community move from novice to expert across many areas more quickly than going it alone. So, go ahead, take the elevator with us.

Thank you for joining us in our quest to lift up all middle level learners. We hope our journal will provide something new to enhance the professional development of each of our readers.



From the Editor's Desk

Deana Mack

Welcome to the third issue of *Betwixt and Between: Education for Young Adolescents*, The Journal of the Pennsylvania Professors of Middle Level Education. I am impressed with the new layout and clickable format of this edition, and I am very happy to work with such talented and devoted individuals.

I truly believe B & B is of great value. While Pennsylvania has always been known as a teacher developing state, we also are currently the state with the most middle level preparation programs. Schools in our state as well as others are seeking our prepared middle level teachers because they are in demand. At least twice in the last month I have had schools mention that they simply cannot find middle level certified candidates to fill long-term substitute vacancies that exist. That is why I firmly believe the articles within this edition are especially inspirational and timely as professors of middle level education across our state seek to develop prepared, much-needed future teachers in the middle grades. It is with this reality that B & B seeks to provide professors of future middle level educators with the timely, relevant research to help prepare our future teachers. It is my hope that everyone will find the articles presented here of great value in the field of middle level education.

Sincerely,
Deana Mack Ph.D.

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Examining Pre-Service Teachers' Decisions to Choose Middle Level Education Career Path

Michele L. White

Abstract

Many factors influence career paths. This study investigated how pre-service teachers made the choice between becoming an Early Childhood teacher or Middle Level teacher. Data were collected from 91 pre-service teachers extracted from questionnaires, journal entries, and individual interviews to gain a deeper understanding of how pre-service teachers made this decision. Data were examined using constant comparative analysis. Findings revealed eleven factors that influenced participants' choice to become an Early Childhood or Middle Level teacher. Three themes emerged from the data that explained how participants made these decisions. Results suggested pre-service teachers make these decisions based on their perceptions of the roles of classroom teachers, making connections through a sense of self, and intrinsically motivated by the impacts a teacher can make. Conclusions provided insights into the power of observing teachers and classroom environments on making decisions to become Early Childhood and Middle level teachers.

Introduction

Choosing a particular teaching career path can be one of the most important decisions one can make. Motivations to teach have been studied over several decades (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Fox, 1961; Tudhope, 1944; Watt & Richardson, 2011; Young, 1995). Understanding why pre-service teachers choose to teach a particular group of students can reveal many important factors necessary to prepare effective teachers.

Educational literature recommends a reform in teacher preparation efforts (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Chelsey & Jordan, 2012; Council on Competitiveness, 2005; National Mathematics Advisory Panel, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2011b). A recent change in certification guidelines has continued to encourage future teachers to

reflect on which group of students they choose to teach. In 2009, Pennsylvania revised the state's elementary certification guidelines to include Early Childhood (PreK-4) and Middle Level (4-8) Education certifications. Many universities offering teacher education programs are on a journey to revise their programs to meet the expectations proposed by the new certification guidelines. Effective teacher preparation is critical (Chelsey & Jordan, 2012; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2011a).

Considering teacher motivations upon entry into the field is vital in teacher preparation efforts (Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Watt & Richardson, 2011). Much of the research pertaining to motivations to teach is focused on either elementary level or a mix of all levels of teachers.

Few studies look specifically at how individuals choose between two areas of certification. This article presents a study that addresses a gap in the related research of how individuals choose between teaching children or young adolescents.

Literature Review Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Teachers

Pre-service teachers' perceptions of classroom teachers could impact their preparation in their respective programs (Fajet, Bello, Leftwich, Mesler, & Shaver, 2005; Weinstein, 1990). The perception of pre-service teachers on their roles as classroom teachers is vital to the understanding and interpretation of their pedagogical training and content knowledge in teacher preparation programs (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). Teacher education professors are advised to become

more aware of pre-service teacher perceptions due to how pre-service teachers receive and interpret knowledge within their coursework based on these perceptions (Kagan, 1992; Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, & James, 2002; Pajares, 1992). The perceptions of pre-service teachers provide valuable insight to career motivations in education.

Motivations to Teach

Researchers continue to study the motivations behind what influences one to choose a teaching career in hopes of providing valuable information to better prepare pre-service teachers for the demands of in-service teaching in today's society (Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Marshall, 2009; Watt & Richardson, 2007, 2008; Watt, Richardson, Klusmann, Kunter, Beyer, Trautwein, & Baumert, 2012). Watt & Richardson (2011) suggest when teachers are committed and enjoy what they are doing, they are more effective with students. Understanding the influences behind the choice beyond the traditional views translates into teachers feeling more prepared and less likely to experience dissatisfaction (Watt et al., 2012).

Researchers have identified many motivational factors for why individuals chose teaching as a career. Historically, these factors included extrinsic motivations, such as job security and family time (Fox, 1961) and the influence of past teachers and people (Fox, 1961; Lortie, 1975). Intrinsic motivational factors, such as interest and desire to work with children or young adolescents, enjoyment of subject

matter, and love for learning and teaching, have been the most commonly reported reasons for pre-service teachers entering the teaching profession over the last several decades (Fox, 1961; Lortie, 1975; Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Snyder, Doerr, & Pastor, 1995; Tudhope, 1944; Watt & Richardson, 2007; Watt et al., 2012).

Motives, such as interpersonal qualities, altruistic and extrinsic factors, and influential people and experiences are among some of the most noted factors found to influence people in the choice to become teachers (Marshall, 2009; Pop & Turner, 2009; Skelton, 2009; Troman & Raggl, 2008; Watt et al., 2012). Watt et al. (2012) found "...intrinsic value, perceived teaching ability, the desire to make a social contribution, to work with children/adolescents, and having had prior teaching and learning experiences" were among the highest rated motivations for becoming teachers (p. 804). The factors rated among the lowest motivations were job security, social equity, and family responsibilities. Current research supports motivations may be shifting; however, there is a gap in related research in acquiring a deeper understanding of the process of how the choice is made, particularly in Middle Level Education.

This article presents the findings of an investigation conducted to address the gap in the existing literature. This study explored two research questions guiding this study: (1) what factors influence pre-service teachers to choose Early

Childhood or Middle Level Education certification (2) how are pre-service teachers making decisions between pursuing Early Childhood or Middle Level teaching certifications.

Methodology

This study provided insight to better understand what factors affect the career path of individuals pursuing certifications in Early Childhood and Middle Level Education. A grounded theory approach was used to address the research questions using qualitative and quantitative methods. This study was conducted at one university during the fall semester. A purposeful sampling of 134 students enrolled in a three-credit introductory education course, mostly composed of first-time, full-time freshman served as the participants. Ninety-one participants volunteered, 76 (84%) self-reported as seeking Early Childhood certifications, and 15 (16%) seeking Middle Level certifications. Data were collected across all six sections of the three-credit introductory education course required of all undergraduate students with the declared major of Early Childhood or Middle Level Education.

The introductory education course was designed to offer undergraduate students the opportunity to explore what it means to be an educator in Early Childhood and Middle Level Education. Students explore the roles of these teachers. They engage in educational discourse, complete two observation hours in PreK-8

classrooms, interview teachers, compare educational theories, maintain reflective journals, and write personal educational philosophies. These experiences are designed to provide pre-service teachers a better understanding of the similarities and differences between Early Childhood and Middle Level Education.

In this study, data was collected through a series of three questionnaires, three journal entries, and individual interviews. Using qualitative and quantitative approaches aids in obtaining a deeper more complete understanding of the issues through collecting and analyzing different types of data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Using multiple types of data helped establish a more complete picture of the issues being investigated (Patton, 2002). The researcher designed these instruments to answer the research questions and gather data throughout the semester to explore if any changes occurred in their decisions. The questionnaires included five questions to gather quantitative data describing what certifications were being chosen and how confident the participants were of their choices. The journal entries included two open-ended questions to provide a deeper understanding of what factors may be influencing the choice of one teaching certification over another and were of consistent format in order to reveal changes in responses throughout the semester. Ten participants volunteered to be interviewed. The semi-structured

interview questions were developed from initial data collected from the questionnaires and journals as they were analyzed using a constant comparative analysis. All instruments were peer reviewed by professors with expertise in the respective programs to increase the credibility. Having multiple members review the questions strengthened the credibility of the instruments (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002).

It was clearly explained that the decision to participate in the study would not impact their coursework in any way. The researcher maintained confidentiality; the course instructors had no knowledge of who was participating. The first data collection occurred the first week of class, the second data collection occurred during middle of the semester, and the last data collection occurred during the last week of classes. A constant comparative analysis was conducted after each data collection. Participants were asked to volunteer for the interviews during the second data collection. Ten individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted after the last data collection. The purpose of interviews was to provide the researcher the opportunity to confirm or refute other previously collected and gain a deeper understanding of what individuals are thinking (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

During the constant comparative analysis, data was coded and themes

emerged that assisted in answering the research questions. Data from the questionnaires, journal entries and interviews were constantly compared throughout the study with themes being compared to new data to refine the initial theories. The researcher continuously analyzed the data and conferred with another colleague in the department to increase inter-rater reliability and credibility of trends. Triangulation of sources in the analysis process yielded more credible results and decreased the opportunity for biased results (Guion et al., 2011; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002).

Threats and limitations to the study did exist, including researcher bias, Hawthorne Effect, testing, data collector bias, instrumentation, and generalization. Many efforts were used to decrease threats and limitations. Instructors were trained in data collection and code names were used for participant names. Themes were reviewed by a second person and cross-checked by interview data. Instruments were reviewed by a panel of four tenured or tenure-track professors in the department for accuracy and validity.

Results

Certification Choice

Fifteen participants choosing Middle Level Education as their career paths began the study. By mid semester, eleven participants remained in their intended majors. By the end of the semester, thirteen participants

reported they were choosing Middle Level Education to become teachers. Of the original fifteen Middle Level participants, six participants chose to change their majors by the end of the study. Three participants chose to change to Early Childhood Education and three participants chose non-education majors. Four Early Childhood participants chose to change to Middle Level Education by the end of the study. Overall, forty percent of the participants chose to change their intended majors of Middle Level Education signifying change can occur during an exploratory education course and occurred early within the first semester. Most of the participants reported the required observations in the classrooms completed during the study impacted their decision to change their majors.

Motivational Factors to Teach Middle Level Education

The Middle Level participants reported eleven motivational factors as influencing their decisions to become Middle Level educators. These eleven factors are displayed in Table 1. Of the participants who remained in Middle Level Education, all participants stated the desire to teach young adolescents, their past experiences, and the expectations of a Middle Level teacher influenced their decisions. More than three-fourths of the participants reported their observations in the classroom, altruistic-type motivations, and their self-perceptions as having qualities matching their perceptions of the role of a Middle Level educator impacted their decisions. One-third or less stated family, the introductory course, prior teachers, social persuasion, or seeing the profession as rewarding impacted their decision to pursue Middle Level Education.

Table 1. Factors Influencing Certification Choice of Middle Level Participants Who Remained in their Initial Programs

Factors	Total (N = 9)
Desire to Teach Young Adolescents	9 (100%)
Past Experiences	9 (100%)
Job Expectations	9 (100%)
Observations	8 (89%)
Altruistic-Type Motivations	7 (78%)
Self-Perception	6 (67%)
Family	3 (33%)
Introductory Education Course	3 (33%)
Prior Teachers	3 (33%)
Social Persuasion	2 (22%)
Rewarding Profession	1 (1%)

How Decisions were made to Choose Middle Level Education

Three themes emerged from the data that assist in better understanding how decisions were being made to pursue a Middle Level or Early Childhood certification. Middle Level participants reported their perceptions of the roles of Early Childhood and Middle Level classroom teachers, connections through a sense of self, and intrinsic motivations by the impacts a teacher can make all contributed to making their decisions to become Middle Level educators.

Perceptions.

The findings of this study suggest pre-service teachers utilize their perceptions of the roles of classroom teachers, which included the duties of the teacher and the preference in teaching a particular age level. These perceptions were most reported in reference to the participant's observations in classrooms and past experiences. Middle Level participants reported a different understanding of the roles of Middle Level teachers in the beginning of the study compared to the end of the study. In the beginning, participants commented on being able to teach their favorite subjects. Comments toward the end of the study demonstrated a deeper understanding of the role of a Middle Level teacher. One Middle Level participant stated, "Observing made me see what the day was like and what the teachers were responsible for." Another Middle Level participant stated, "This course has helped me realize what I need to do to become successful in a particular teaching field."

Connections.

Participants pursuing Middle Level certifications demonstrated an understanding of themselves and connecting these realizations with becoming a Middle Level teacher. The participants communicated an understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, and confidence in becoming a successful teacher in the certification area of their choice. Watt et al. (2012) found that when individuals perceive themselves as having the abilities of a successful teacher with little obstacles, they are

more likely to choose teaching. Middle Level participants began the study reporting a sense of self in being able to "relate more to the older kids" and being good at particular subject areas. At the end of the study, participants communicated an assurance and confidence that this is right for them. One participant stated, "At first in selecting this major I wasn't sure I would be able to handle all the stresses as a Middle Level teacher, but EDU 101 helped take away all of the butterflies." Yet another participant stated, "I believe I could be successful at the middle school level...Observing showed me that I have more knowledge to learn in some areas as opposed to others." Another participant explained:

"...when working with a second grade student, the material was simple. It was second grade, but it was almost too simple for me to teach. I didn't know how to present it so the student would understand it. So I needed the more difficult 4-8 material because I felt like I could teach it better."

Many of the responses included comments of being able to visualize oneself in the role of the teacher. The main source of this envisioning came from the participants observing the teacher within a classroom setting. Middle Level participants also demonstrated that being able to actually see them in this role influenced their decision to become a Middle Level teacher. One participant stated, "After the observations, I could easily see myself in front of the classroom."

Another participant stated, "I looked at teaching and it's the only thing I could see myself actually doing. I can actually visualize myself teaching."

Intrinsic Motivations. Intrinsic motivations include wanting to make a difference, giving back, and seeing the profession as rewarding. Middle Level participants referenced intrinsic motivations and the impacts a teacher can make as a part of their decisions to pursue teaching. One participant stated, "...I saw how much of a difference a good teacher can make...I would like to make that difference in students." Another participant stated, "I love kids and being able to make a difference in people's lives." Yet another participant stated, "I want to make a difference in the lives of our country's future." Middle Level participants reported seeing the profession as rewarding more towards the end of the semester. Some Middle Level participants stated their motivation to choose this career path was to emulate their middle school teachers who positively influenced them at this age and be a positive role model to future young adolescents. Some Middle Level participants stated their motivation to become Middle Level teachers to be the positive role model they never had at this age. One Middle level participant stated, "I struggled and didn't get the help I needed. I never want to let others feel like that."

Unexpected Findings

Participants changed their decisions to pursue their initial certifications by the end of the study. Three participants initially perceived themselves as working well with younger children. One Early Childhood participant stated, "I want to change to 4-8 because I want to have a focus in a subject and not just have it broad on all subjects. My observations helped me finalize my decision a lot." Findings suggest the significance of observing teachers in the classroom environment as influencing change in decisions among pre-service teachers.

By the end of the study, three participants chose to change to non-education majors and not pursue certification programs. They reported factors contributing to their initial decisions included the desire to work with young adolescents and observing or working with children in past experiences. Two out of three Middle Level participants reported their desire to work with children or follow in their parent's footsteps led them to choose teaching initially but soon realized the lack of jobs and other career interests led them to choose another major. These results concur with studies that showed a shift in societal changes that reflected a change in job security and salary as factors for choosing to become a teacher (Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Snyder et al., 1995; Watt et al., 2012). The third participant stated a strong desire to be a teacher since elementary school, realizing that teaching was "not for me" but noted a desire to

work with children in a different setting.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer considerations in Middle Level teacher preparation and how to better prepare future Middle Level teachers. The experiences prior to and in the first semester of teacher education programs may help explain the decisions pre-service teachers are making to become Middle Level educators.

Much of the decision to pursue a career in Middle Level Education occurs before entering college. The opportunities individuals acquire in high school influence decisions to become Middle Level teachers. Today, there may be more opportunities for individuals to engage in education-related experiences, such as working at camps, high school elective courses and projects, tutoring, and day care jobs. With more extra-curricular activities for young people, those individuals interested in the field of education have more opportunities to investigate this career choice before making the decision to enter a post-secondary institution.

Many participants reported having opportunities to work with children and young adolescents during these types of opportunities. Participants' comments explained a series of elective courses in child development while volunteering in a classroom, which included creating lesson plans addressing specific student needs.

The past experiences of being able to act in the role of a teacher or work with children or young adolescents also produced the internal motivations associated with the desire to work with young individuals and understand their strengths and weaknesses in working with different age levels. Further dialogue among university professors and high school advisors, faculty, and administration concerning the effects of teacher-related experiences before post-secondary education might serve as potentially strengthening the commitment, confidence, and awareness of choosing the career path most fitting for individuals.

Even though decisions to choose Middle Level Education occurred before entering a higher education institution, experiences in an introductory education course in the first semester of their programs may impact their decisions. An increased awareness of the job of a teacher learned in an introductory course could provide participants with information that results in a change in their decisions (Sinclair, Dowson, & McInerney, 2006). This study highlighted the power of observations in connection with self-reflection as influencing the decision to become a Middle Level teacher. It is recommended that when requiring observations of classrooms to take place, careful consideration to the preparation before, after and during should take place. Perceptions of the roles of teachers in Early Childhood and Middle Level are forming during these experiences.

Middle Level pre-service teachers were initially motivated to choose teaching based on being able to teach a subject rather than how to teach it. In the beginning of the study, teaching specific subjects motivated Middle Level participants, but by the end of the study, observations and possibly course content shifted their thinking. Middle Level participants reported their views including a more overall understanding of the roles of Middle Level teachers based on their observations in classrooms and being able to visually see themselves in this role.

Middle Level participants appeared to show more of a shift in their motivations moving to a better understanding that the role entailed more than just teaching a subject. It is interesting to note participants who chose to change majors reported that these decisions were made based on their perceptions and not being able to see themselves in the role of teachers. The findings of this study conducted during the participants' first semester in the teacher education program demonstrated self-perception begins early in their training and can change

as more awareness and experiences are gained.

If participants would not have been enrolled in the exploratory course, reassurance of decisions, changes in certifications, and realizing a misled decision to become a teacher might not have occurred. Participants in both certification programs shared consistently that the observations and the exploration of the two programs made them more sure or helped them change their decisions. The magnitude of confidence in these decisions could be vital to the development of pre-service teachers. Making the discovery late in the program that teaching a certain age level or teaching in general is not appropriate for an individual could produce ineffective teachers.

Based on the results of this study, further research is suggested on the impact that various early experiences in educational settings have on the perceived roles, self-perceptions, and motivations of pre-service teachers. Studies that investigate these experiences might reveal a deeper understanding of how these experiences may

influence potential educators in their thought process and readiness to pursue Middle Level Education as a career path.

Essential insights can be revealed when investigating how decisions are made to become Middle Level educators. The perceptions of the roles of Middle Level teachers founded by meaningful connections through experiences, observations, and purposeful reflection underlie the decision to pursue a career path in Middle Level Education.

About the Author

Michele L. White is an assistant professor in the Elementary Education Department at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include elementary mathematics and science teaching effectiveness and teacher education.

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The Year-Long Middle Level Clinical Experience: Preparing Our Future Middle Level Teachers

Karen J. Johnson

Abstract

Middle level teacher candidates have the option to spend a full year during their final year of teacher preparation completing their last clinical field experience and student teaching placement in the same middle level classroom or within the same team across the school year. Survey data and student teaching evaluation data confirm the many benefits of completing their field experience in one place across the school year, including spending more time building a rapport with middle level students, managing the classroom, being more involved in the life of the middle school., interacting with multiple teachers, staff, and administrators, and spending

Middle level classroom teachers have a unique position in teaching adolescents, because of the complexities and developmentally responsive strategies that this entails (AMLE, 2012). In order to prepare teacher candidates, our future middle level teachers to become effective in such a challenging situation, teacher preparation programs need to carefully consider the type and duration of clinical field experiences they design for their candidates at the middle level (Arhar & Acker, 2002; Theriot, Alcalá, & Denson, 2012).

Field Experiences and Student Teaching Background

Teacher candidates spend considerable hours in K-12 classrooms for clinical experiences throughout their four year, undergraduate education program (Woods & Weasmer, 2003). However, just spending a certain number of hours in middle level

classrooms is not enough. NCATE's Blue Ribbon report in 2010 stated that, "Teacher education programs must work in close partnership with school districts to redesign teacher preparation to better serve prospective teachers and the students they teach. Partnerships should include shared decision making and oversight on candidate selection and completion by school districts and teacher education programs" (p. ii). This report emphasizes the need for teacher education programs to collaborate with school district partners to form quality partnerships to ensure quality clinical field experiences (Newton, Kennedy, Wilther-Thomas & Cornett, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to share the details of collaboration for clinical experiences at the middle level.

The middle level field experiences for teacher candidates in Pennsylvania span four stages as

candidates progress through their undergraduate program. In each stage, the candidates increase their responsibilities with the students in their field classroom, and they spend more time in placements across a variety of grade levels and diversity of locations. In stage one, the candidates observe for twenty hours and meet basic field competencies provided by the Department of Education. In stage two, the candidates begin to work with adolescents and teach their first lesson. Then, in stage three, candidates spend roughly 150 hours across different subject areas working with middle level students, often teaching small groups on a weekly basis, and again meeting required competencies. Finally, in stage four, the middle level candidates transition to student teaching, where they spend fifteen weeks teaching daily in a grade four

through eight public school classroom.

Some universities offer optional programs for a select group of candidates to spend more than one semester within the same field placement classroom, often two consecutive semesters, often known as a year-long clinical experience since it often spans the entire school year. This year-long clinical experience is often a combination of their stage three and four field experiences in the same classroom. The success of the year-long experience in one area school district in our former K-6 elementary program led to the idea of expanding this year-long program to the middle level. For universities in Pennsylvania, where middle level certification is fairly new, the concept of the year-long placement may not be as common, but as this article will show, is every bit as important. The details that follow describe the process and requirements for the middle level year-long experience at one mid-sized public university in the United States.

Process for Year-Long Placements

In this university, middle level candidates spend time observing middle level students during both semesters of their freshmen year as part of their coursework and stage one field experience. In the stage two field experience course, in their sophomore year, they spend time observing in upper elementary grades (grade four or five) and in a middle school (grades six through eight), and begin the process of

working with students. They learn the details of writing a lesson plan and are able to teach their first lesson with middle level students. During their junior and senior year, our middle level candidates enroll in four methods courses of math, science, social studies, and a reading practicum, each of which requires a field experience in a grade four to eight classroom. The reading practicum is designed as a six credit class while the other three are three-credit classes. In the reading practicum, candidates spend approximately 75 hours placed in one middle-level public school classroom. Candidates may enroll in those four methods courses during semesters five, six, or seven, and thus far, have been instructed not to enroll in all of these courses at once. However, those candidates interested in participating in the year-long placement experience must plan ahead and enroll in their six credit reading practicum in the semester just before student teaching (typically semester seven), not semester five or six.

During their junior year, middle level teacher candidates who are interested in participating in the year-long program, attend an information session where they learn more about the requirements of the year-long partnership option, the partner school districts where they could be placed, and next steps. Since these candidates select to participate in a two-semester placement (practicum and student teaching) consideration of where they plan to live during student teaching becomes a factor. Those

candidates who plan to move home and live in another county more than an hour away are not able to participate since all of our year-long placements are within forty minutes of campus and are in only two counties in our local area. After the information session, candidates still interested are sent an electronic questionnaire/application to complete that provides the faculty with more information regarding their level of commitment in the year-long partnership. The application also requires the candidates to provide faculty member references. Candidates are required to become involved in the activities of the middle school throughout the year if they are selected as a participant. Demanding work schedules preclude some candidates from participating.

Requirements of the Fall-to-Spring Year-Long Placement

Most of the student teachers at this university complete their student teaching in the spring semester; thus, the majority of the year-long placements occur in the fall-to-spring cycle. Once a candidate's application has been accepted and a placement found, the requirements for the year-long partnership in a typical fall to spring placement are to: participate in an interview that the university sets up at the partner school prior to the first day (typically about three months prior); set up the classroom with the teacher in August; attend the first day of school; attend Back-to-School Night; attend fall parent-teacher

conferences; spend an additional three hours each week in the classroom or within the middle level team during the fall semester; and be involved in activities occurring in the school throughout the year. At the completion of the fall semester, a candidate and/or a classroom teacher could “opt-out”, if either did not wish to continue working together for the spring student teaching semester. Offering the opt-out option appears to make our participants; both teacher candidates and cooperating teachers, more comfortable at the start of the year-long relationship, although we have not yet had anyone exercise their right to opt-out of working together.

The requirements for a year-long participant are, of course, in addition to the candidates’ course requirements in the fall. As mentioned previously, these candidates enroll in their six credit reading practicum. All reading practicum candidates spend six hours in the field throughout the fall semester (two mornings each week). Year-long candidates spend an additional three hours each week in the school where they are placed during the fall semester and remain in that placement for spring semester of student teaching. Some candidates choose to take additional methods and field classes while taking reading practicum (math and/or social studies). The requirements for math methods is to spend two afternoons a week for approximately two hours in a field classroom, and the requirement for social studies methods is to spend one hour each week. A typical

candidate would spend six hours each week in the field for reading practicum and an additional three hours each week in various other capacities, as needed on the team or elsewhere. In addition, the middle level candidates having more than one concentration can spend some of their extra three hours each week with their same middle level students in other content area classrooms. For example, a middle level teacher candidate concentrating in mathematics and science might spend six hours a week for reading practicum in a science classroom and then the extra three hours each week in the math classroom on the same team. In this way, the candidate interacts with the adolescents in more than one subject area and gains experience prior to student teaching in more than one content area. If the candidate enrolls in math or social studies methods, he or she would add additional hours assisting and teaching in those subject areas, preferably on the same team, or at least within the same building. A principal interested in hiring a teacher the following year would have multiple opportunities to interact with and observe the candidate throughout the course of an entire school year in various content areas.

Variation on the Fall-to-Spring Year-Long Placement

Despite the majority of candidates student teaching in the spring semester, some candidates spend the spring semester completing their reading practicum and then student

teach the fall semester (completing their degree in nine semesters rather than eight). The year-long experience is also available to those candidates. For two consecutive years, the middle level candidates have participated in their year-long placement during a calendar year and not a typical school year, where they interview in December or early January and then complete the practicum placement from January to May. In August, they remain with the same teacher in a middle school building and begin the school year with a new group of students together with the teacher, for student teaching. Although this spring to fall year-long is intriguing, this is not the focus of this study.

The Study

During a two-year span, seventeen middle level teacher candidates participated in the fall-to-spring year-long experience in middle schools in three different school districts (seven in 2013-14 and ten in 2014-15). All seventeen were placed in a sixth, seventh or eighth grade classroom or team. All of the classroom teachers volunteered to participate in the year-long experience and were selected by their principal from the list of teachers who volunteered. Once the teacher candidates were selected by the university faculty, the teacher candidates interviewed with either the building principal or the teacher.

The cooperating teachers (seventeen) and the teacher candidates (seventeen) were sent

an online survey at the conclusion of the year-long experience during each of the last two years. Each survey focused on the benefits and drawbacks of the year-long experience. In addition, the teacher candidates were asked if they would recommend participation in this program to next year's student teachers. The classroom teachers were asked if they would participate by hosting another year-long teacher candidate in the future. In addition, the teacher candidates completed an evaluation of themselves at the midpoint and at the end of their spring student teaching semester. Their cooperating teacher and university supervisor also completed the same university student teaching evaluation. The data from those evaluations were compared with non-year-long middle level student teachers who were also placed in middle school classrooms (grade six, seven, or eight).

Results

Student Teacher Survey Data

Across two years, eight middle level student teachers (of seventeen) responded to a six-question online survey at the end of the student teaching semester. All eight (100%) responded favorably that they would recommend participation in the year-long program to their classmates who are not yet student teaching. When asked what they found to be the most beneficial aspect of the year-long experience, all eight responded that the student growth, rapport with the students, and/or relationships with the students was the number one benefit. This was an open-ended question, so they could have written any number of responses related to their professional growth or learning the curriculum across the year. But instead, all eight respondents spoke of the middle level students. The next question aimed to delve further into the additional benefits that the candidates observed in their year-long placement, again in an open-ended format. They spoke of a great variety of items. The most commonly listed item was the smooth transition to student teaching and spending more time teaching full-time during student teaching compared with their peers who were in weekly seminars, where discussions about their teaching took place. All eight respondents provided several benefits but all listed some variation of how seamless the transition from fall

to spring was for them, their students, and their teacher. The second most common response was that they were able to establish good working relationships with many faculty and staff members in the middle school that would have been more difficult under a one semester program. The third most common response related to familiarity with the flow of an entire school year. The fourth most common response was having a great deal to share in their interview for a teaching position.

Student teachers were asked to share the disadvantages of the year-long program. Of the eight respondents, four (50%) responded that there were no disadvantages. The other four (50% percent) shared that they wished they had had more time or experience with another grade level or content area. Their peers had been placed in two unrelated places (one for reading practicum in stage three and one for student teaching). However, even some of the year-long candidates were able to overcome that issue and spend time on a middle level team, seeing multiple subject areas, as evidenced by the following comment:

I also feel as if my relationships with faculty were much stronger because of my extended time in the school. The teachers knew by name rather than simply "Mr. K's student teacher". My interactions with them allowed for us to grow strong relationships and gave me opportunities to work outside of my own classroom with these teachers. I would often observe the other 7th grade science teacher to get ideas. I was able to interview the mathematics teacher on my team for a research project. I was also able to work with the 7th grade communications teacher to create a music video starring the faculty at the school. (TC survey respondent 2)

Others were not, or did not feel that they had spent enough time in other content areas or grade levels.

Cooperating Teacher Survey

Seven cooperating teachers responded of the seventeen who participated. Three of the seven teachers (43%) responded that the greatest benefit was that the

teaching time. Two of the teachers (29%) responded that the candidate had a smoother transition into the student teaching semester because their candidates had already been part of the classroom for the fall semester. One teacher responded that the greatest benefit was getting to know the teacher candidate and his or her strengths and weaknesses before the student teaching semester. Finally, one teacher shared that the greatest benefit that the year-long experience allowed was, “determining if she possessed the qualities necessary to handle the rigors of student teaching” (CT survey respondent 7).

Cooperating teachers responded regarding the disadvantages of the year-long program. Four of the seven (57%) had no disadvantages to share. One teacher had no disadvantage to share from personal experience but raised the issue that if the student teacher was not strong, there could potentially be issues. One cooperating teacher shared that the university put too many requirements on the candidates in the fall semester (the extra three hours a week, attending parent conferences, etc.). The final respondent shared that a disadvantage was having to share the teaching for a longer period of time.

When asked if the cooperating teachers would agree to host another year-long middle level candidate next year, all seven (100%) agreed to do so in the anonymous online survey. This is reassuring that despite the thirty week commitment, they are willing to share the classroom with a future teacher.

Student Teaching Evaluation Data

At the mid-point and conclusion of the spring semester of student teaching, the candidates rated themselves on twenty-two items related to all aspects of student teaching. The evaluation, which is used by all teacher preparation programs at this university, included areas such as pedagogical content knowledge, ability to manage student behavior, demonstrating professional dispositions, integrating technology to promote student learning, etc. The cooperating teacher and university supervisors also rated the student teacher on those same 22 items. The rating scale options were from 0 to

3, where 3=Exemplary, 2=Superior, 1=Satisfactory, 0=Unsatisfactory, and NA=Not applicable.

This evaluation data was only available for the latest cohort from spring 2015 (ten of the original seventeen participants across two years). There were ten candidates participating in the spring 2015 semester year-long, in middle school classrooms (grades 6, 7, and 8). There were eleven middle level candidates placed in traditional middle school classrooms for the spring 2015 semester who were not in a year-long partnership. Comparisons of the mean scores of each of those two groups (year-long vs. traditional student teachers in middle schools) indicated that in twenty of the twenty-two items on the student teaching evaluation, the year-long partnership student teachers' scores were statistically significantly higher at the .01 level (see appendix A).

Discussion

“In my opinion, based on my experiences, I believe that the student teachers who had experienced a full year placement were much more prepared to immediately take on teaching responsibilities and had a better potential to be successful in their first year of teaching” (supervisor 1). Frequent comments from classroom teachers, student teachers, and university supervisors all supported the data listed in the results section above. There was overwhelming support from all participants that the year-long concept at the middle level was mutually beneficial. The middle school students were well-served by teacher candidates and classroom teachers who had spent considerable time together from August through May, which will be described below.

Within the Middle Level Classroom

At the classroom level, where middle level candidates spent the most time, multiple benefits of the year-long program were evident to multiple stakeholders. The survey data from the student teachers indicated that the greatest benefit they saw was their ability to spend more time with and develop a rapport with their middle level students. As middle school student teachers, it is encouraging to see that they realize, as do their

elementary colleagues, the importance of connecting with each one of their students even if there are many. As one university supervisor noted:

The student teachers demonstrated confidence and poise that was rare for the beginning of a placement due to the fact that they had established rapport with their students and cooperating teachers. They were familiar with routines, the school operations and staff members. They showed more initiative, and asked to assume teaching responsibilities during the first week of the placements, mainly due to the fact that there was no need for transition time. They demonstrated more background knowledge of their subject matter and they also were able to discuss specific ways they addressed students' needs in their lessons. (supervisor 2)

Supervisors were not the only professionals who noticed the benefits of the year-long placements. Classroom teachers indicated that the greatest benefit was that their teacher candidate had more time to teach and that is supported by data from cooperating teachers in other research studies (Kahn, 2001). This is an important factor since student teachers will soon be first-year teachers, who we hope will transfer what they learned in their teacher preparation program into their first classroom (Giebelhaus, 1998). Similarly, one teacher listed the ways that her year-long candidate differed from a traditional student teacher in years past and it included many of the issues mentioned by our student teachers, "Earlier transitions to full time teaching experience for the student teacher; rapport with more faculty members than just the cooperating teacher; rapport with students, familiarity with the curriculum, pacing, and pedagogy expectations" (CT survey respondent 5). Those benefits are important for middle level educators to consider. According to this middle school teacher, there appear to be multiple ways that candidates who spend thirty weeks are better prepared as compared with teacher candidates who spend fifteen weeks in one classroom. This is further supported by the comparison of the student teaching evaluation data.

Further corroboration of the student teacher survey data about the greatest benefit is shared by a university supervisor talking about the student teachers, "Their discussions in seminar and their reflections on lessons in our post conferences were more student-centered than teacher-centered, with the focus on what they could do differently to enhance the lesson or better address students who needed more challenge or re-teaching in a different way" (supervisor 2).

Within the Middle School Building: Year-Long Candidates

Thinking outside the middle school classroom and more broadly about the interactions of the year-long candidates within the middle school building where they were placed is also important. The survey data from both teacher candidates and classroom teachers indicate that student teachers in year-long placements had opportunities to grow in more than just their assigned classroom. They were able to become a well-known professional in the building as they involved themselves in the life of the school (Castle, Fox, & Fuhrman, 2009). They attended faculty meetings for the year, volunteered at weekend and evening events when they did not conflict with their other classes, and were present for two full semesters. As the student teacher survey data indicated, the second most commonly chosen benefit of the year-long experience were the relationships the candidates made with other teachers, staff, and administrators; in other words, relationships outside of their particular classroom, as shared by a participant below:

I had many opportunities to see aspects of the school I may not have seen had I only been there for 15 weeks. During student teaching I was able to support my students by attending student musicals and athletic events. I also was able to participate in parent-teacher conferences and help chaperone the 7th grade field trip to Philadelphia (even though student teaching ended the week prior!). I also planned and filmed a faculty "music video" to the song "Stuck in the Middle with You" with another teacher on my team. The video was filmed after school during a faculty

meeting and involved all faculty members in the school from administration to classroom teachers to secretaries to nurses and janitors! (TC survey respondent 2)

Outside the Student Teaching Placement

Although the middle school classroom and building are the most important focus for our year-long candidates, they are preparing for their own future middle level classroom. Other benefits of participation existed that extended beyond just the year of student teaching and the building where the placement occurred. Although surveying and interviewing principals and other administrators who hire middle level candidates was not part of this particular study, student teacher participants revealed that the middle level year-long partnership positively influenced their interviews and job offers, and has been found by others (Holen & Yunk, 2014). One teacher candidate said:

Because of my experience with the year-long, I was able to assure potential employers that I was ready to have my own classroom. Unlike some other candidates, I was able to share my experiences about setting up the classroom and seeing the growth of students over a full school year. I also talked about how I was able to completely "take over" in my classroom the first week of the full-time student teaching experience. This not only gave me more time and practice in the front of the classroom and preparing lessons, but gave me much more experience with classroom management—one of the biggest concerns employers have when hiring a brand new teacher. In my job interview, I also shared how this experience allowed me to have much more contact with parents. I was able to explain how I communicated with parents on multiple occasions. (TC respondent 2)

The same sentiment was expressed by multiple university supervisors who were former administrators.

By the end of their placements, these student teachers had developed more creative and

engaging units based on given curriculum and standards, and they clearly began to develop their own teaching style. Since they had taken on full teaching responsibilities for the entire semester, they were more readily able to discuss specific examples when we rehearsed for interviews, which would give them an "edge" over other candidates as they began their job search. (supervisor 1)

Limitations

Some important limitations apply to this study. The participants over the two year period numbered seventeen, and only about half of those teachers and student teachers responded to the surveys. Larger cohorts of middle level teacher candidates might yield different results. Although we have a solid middle level enrollment, numbers of middle level candidates enrolled in the year-long program has been small for several reasons. First, dual majors (middle grades and special education) were not initially involved in the program since they would need to spend half of their spring semester of student teaching in a special education placement and would not therefore be with the teacher and class for the "year". We have since found a solution to that hurdle to allow middle level dual majors to participate. Second, approximately half our of middle level students chose to live at home during student teaching, which left them too far away to commute to one of our local partner schools for student teaching. Third, if the candidates had not planned early on, they may have enrolled in the six-credit reading practicum class prior to semester seven, eliminating them from participation. As this is a new program, it took some time for communication to spread to all middle level majors. Fourth, if middle level candidates had too many other responsibilities to devote the additional time in the fall semester that was required, they chose not to participate. In addition to small numbers, another limitation is that data from principals who hire middle level candidates has not been collected. Anecdotally, many year-long candidates report being hired quickly for full-time positions, but this has not yet been corroborated by survey or interview data.

Future Plans

During this upcoming year, middle level candidates participating in the year-long experience will have the option of spending their year in a fourth or fifth grade classroom, or a middle school classroom. The fourth and fifth grade year-long placements are in districts where the K-4 teachers in a K-5 building have already participated in the year-long experience with the elementary teacher candidates. At the completion of the next year-long experience, principals will be surveyed and interviewed about their view of the year-long candidates and whether that influences their hiring practices. In addition, the author has planned to follow-up with the current group of graduates as they begin their first year of teaching.

Conclusion

One university supervisor summed up the year-long experience with the following description:

The university/school district yearlong partnerships have advanced the belief that we are "all in this together". Teacher candidates demonstrate a deeper understanding of their middle school students, enjoy the increased time to learn and practice instructional strategies in a familiar setting, and their cooperating teachers entrust them with a greater range

of instructional responsibilities and teacher duties far sooner. Small group instruction, differentiation, and infused technology are on the increase. Teacher candidates report to me that their contributions are encouraged at team and professional learning community meetings. As their university supervisor and seminar professor, I am welcomed warmly by their teachers and principals. The experience is an authentic one, a true connection. (supervisor 2)

Having more year-long partnership experiences for middle level teacher candidates is an opportunity for middle level teachers, administrators, teacher candidates, and middle level university faculty to work together ultimately to benefit middle level students.

About the Author

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Appendix A

TIPR Scores Comparison of Year-Long MGP Student Teachers to a Random Sample of MGP Undergraduate Student Teachers (n=21)			
Independent Sample t Test			
TIPR Items	Year-Long Mean	Control Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
1. Displays knowledge of scope and sequence of curriculum.	2.24	1.88	0.003
2. Displays knowledge of the characteristic of learners.	2.45	2	<0
3. Evidences solid base of pedagogical content knowledge.	2.42	1.77	<0
4. Incorporates a variety of research-based instructional/educational strategies.	2.33	1.91	<0
5. Promotes problem solving, critical thinking, and creative thinking.	2.5	2.05	<0
6. Promotes constructive, collaborative, and cooperative learning opportunities.	2.61	2.09	<0
7. Integrates technology appropriately to promote learning.	2.64	2.14	<0
8. Employs authentic assessment appropriately.	2.27	1.86	0.001
9. Monitors and reports student progress effectively.	2.44	1.89	<0
10. Uses assessment data to design instruction and improve student learning.	2.32	1.82	<0
11. Aligns assessments to local, state, or national standards.	2.68	2.06	<0
12. Promotes understanding of diverse perspectives and circumstances.	2.48	2	<0
13. Communicates high expectations.	2.71	2.03	<0
14. Manages student behavior to enhance the learning climate.	2.24	1.85	0.004
15. Demonstrates professional dispositions (e.g., ethical, engaged, enthusiastic, focused, and responsible).	2.88	2.26	<0
16. Exhibits understanding of the organization of schools within the context of the larger community.	2.47	1.98	0.001
17. Collaborates with school personnel, parents, or community members.	2.35	2.12	0.117
18. Participates in activities and services for students or families.	2.09	1.72	0.06
19. Shows initiative within the school or community.	2.36	1.8	0.001
20. Adheres to professional codes of ethics and school laws.	2.88	2.45	<0
21. Strives for self-improvement related to learner achievement.	2.7	2.09	<0
22. Displays efforts to improve one's own practices.	2.77	2.11	<0

Significant at the .01 level

Using common planning time to foster professional learning

Researchers examine how a team of middle school teachers use common planning time to cultivate professional learning opportunities.

Robin Dever & Martha J. Lash

An example of what happens at a typical professional development session involves a group of teachers sitting together at a workshop convened by an administrator who chose a new skill or technique they will be learning. The session occurs after school, and some teachers can think of a million other places they would rather be, including their classrooms. At the front of the conference room stands the “renowned expert” (often unknown to the teachers), lecturing while failing to capture their attention. Some teachers covertly grade papers; others write notes back and forth, whisper to one another, or discreetly text and play games on their phones. The figure conspicuously absent is the administrator, who, after making the obligatory introductions and motivational comments, left to attend to more pressing matters. At the end of the session, the teachers take their handouts and packets, return to their classrooms, close the doors, and resume the many roles they must play as teachers, never to discuss the day’s topic again.

Increased emphasis on meeting state standards, more stringent requirements for designation as highly qualified, and intensified accountability for student performance have foisted new expectations upon teachers and stimulated changes in professional development models in which the greater urgency is clearly to attend to the teacher’s role as learner. Consequently, professional development must become more meaningful, effective, and applicable to daily practice; it must address the specific needs of each school, classroom, and teacher. A promising reform model, the professional learning community (PLC)

is a means to change the paradigm of professional development. Implement PLCs in middle grades schools, using common planning time (CPT) during both interdisciplinary and content area team meetings has been proposed. Incorporating professional development into an already-established domain of a middle grades school allows teacher learning to take on a new form in an established framework and points to our primary research question: What does an embedded professional development model look like for both interdisciplinary and content teams using professional learning communities in one middle grades school?

The literature of professional development

Many factors have influenced the quality of professional development programs. Although researchers have tried to find the “missing link” in identifying which elements of professional development are most important in teacher learning and student outcomes, they have deemed no single identifier most significant (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2003; Guskey, 2003; Hord, 1997; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). Instead, researchers have agreed that many factors must be in place for professional growth to occur and for that growth to have an impact on student learning. Many agencies and organizations have listed characteristics of effective professional development; however, they vary, and most of the supporting evidence is inconsistent and contradictory (Guskey, 2003). Key components of

successful professional development include type of activity, content of the activity, role of administration, environment in which the activity occurs, and collaboration during the activity. Thus, the literature shows that school administrators are moving away from professional development in which teachers passively receive knowledge to models in which they actively participate in job-embedded, collaborative learning. The latter type of professional development links teacher learning to immediate, real-world problems and allows for direct application, experimentation, and adaptation to each teacher's situation (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997).

At the time of this writing, the PLC was one of the most widely discussed topics in professional development and education (Thompson et al., 2004); a clarion call has been raised for its implementation (InPraxis, 2006). Definitions of the PLC feature a great number of interpretations, descriptions, and elements and, because none of these are exactly the same, misuse of the term has occurred (Bredeson, 2003; Bloom & Vitcov, 2010). One inconsistency is in the nomenclature: PLCs are called learning communities, communities of practice, professional communities of learners, or communities of continuous inquiry and improvement (InPraxis, 2006). In addition, PLCs comprise a range of participants, including individuals on grade-level teams, high school departments, school committees, professional organizations, and entire school districts (DuFour, 2004). Regardless of these inconsistencies, PLCs are generally thought to encourage participants to take on—as part of their jobs—a wide range of professional development activities, which could include linking performance standards, strategies for assessment, and the consequences of those assessments (Bredeson, 2003; Bloom & Vitcov, 2010).

When successfully created and practiced, PLCs engender many benefits. First, they increase support for school improvement efforts (Protheroe, 2004). PLCs provide time for staff members to work together to solve problems in their schools, encourage a collaborative culture among teachers, and reduce isolation (Bloom & Vitcov, 2010; Caskey & Carpenter, 2012; InPraxis, 2006). Teacher collaboration entails a shared responsibility for student success and development (Hord, 1997). PLCs also provide support for teacher development (Protheroe, 2004) by increasing (a) content knowledge, (b) the ability to adapt instructions, and (c) the likelihood to remain committed to professional change and adaptation

(Hord, 1997). Professionally renewed teachers are more likely to inspire students; in fact, PLCs and student achievement are positively related (Protheroe, 2004). Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1995) discovered many benefits to both students and staff in secondary schools after implementing PLCs, including a reduction in the achievement gap, higher satisfaction among staff members, and lower student dropout rates.

One of the common issues in implementing professional development is the availability of time; in middle grades schools, the most viable solution to this dilemma is the use of common planning time (CPT) for professional development. The CPT team is defined as “a group of teachers from different subject areas who plan and work together and who share the same students for a significant portion of the school day” (Flowers et al., 2003, p. 58). Teachers need time to plan lessons, develop assessments, create and refine instructional strategies, and collaborate with other professionals (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010). Studies on middle grades schools have shown that (a) even when common planning time is available for teams to work together, few middle schools actually provide enough time for focused, ongoing professional conversations that result in higher performance standards and (b) simply having time set aside for CPT does not make a difference in the way teams function (Mertens, Flowers, Anfara, & Caskey, 2010).

Despite an ongoing national study into the effectiveness of CPT teams (Mertens et al., 2010), the role of the CPT team in PLCs has yet to be determined. Both structures—the CPT team and the PLC—involve a community of educators working together to better meet the needs of their students; however, research is lacking regarding whether or not CPT teams and PLCs are linked. To close the gap in the literature, we observed middle school teachers with common planning time working together in a professional learning community and discovered how collaboration and the formation of a community affect teacher and student learning. This research sheds light on both CPT teams and PLCs as well as their relationship to one another.

Methodology

To study the role of CPT and PLCs in professional development, an in-depth, observational case study of one middle school, purposefully chosen in light of its

professional development initiative, was the focus of this study. Topper City School District (pseudonym) is located in a suburban residential community in the Midwest near a major city. The district includes one middle school. The ethnic composition of the district is 94% Caucasian and 6% minority. Data collection tools included initial and final questionnaires; field notes and personal memos written during and after observations; interviews with the teachers, principal, and curriculum director; and a collection of artifacts related to the professional development model in place in this school system. Observations of teachers in collaborative meetings served as the primary data source; 16 observations of the CPT team (interdisciplinary team) and 27 observations of PLCs (content area teams) as well as one inservice were documented.

This study focused on one eighth grade interdisciplinary team (CPT team); its five members had been together three years, meeting twice per week during their common planning time for the purpose of designing interdisciplinary units, discussing student affairs, engaging in professional development, and discussing any day-to-day issues. Observations then extended to the content-specific PLC meetings of each member of the interdisciplinary team. The content area PLCs met twice per week during their common planning time.

Findings

Observation of interdisciplinary CPT teams showed that their focus veered from academic issues to the social and behavioral issues associated with the students. During interdisciplinary common planning time over the course of the year, teachers typically discussed the following topics: students' academic issues, assessments, behavioral issues, parent issues, school events, team events, nonacademic issues, organizing working lunches, and other concerns.

In contrast to the CPT teams, themes emerging from the PLCs related to their productivity. The common themes emerging from each PLC team were as follows: an understanding that their purpose was to benefit their students; a cohesive desire that their teaching should impact student learning; sustained engagement in unit planning, resource sharing, content-related discussions; minimization of student-specific discussions; and avoidance of nonacademic talk.

The original intent of this study was to focus on the interdisciplinary team and its professional growth, in particular, its common planning time, by observing

teachers in their content area professional learning communities (PLCs). Early in the study, however, the anticipated professional learning taking place during CPT team meetings proved to be less than the strong professional growth observed in the CPT team members' content-specific PLCs. These findings are substantiated and shared along with themes of collaboration, resistance, and teacher-led initiatives.

CPT team: Student behavior, teacher socialization, school connections

The events that took place during CPT team meetings centered around serving students' needs. Even though the structure of a CPT team met the definition of a PLC in that it was a group of teachers from different subject areas who shared a group of students and planned together, they were still working together through professional collaboration with the intent of improving student learning. This goal was accomplished through activities such as organizing working lunches, planning team field trips, choosing the Student of the Week, and aligning test schedules. Teachers, thereby, worked to improve student learning; however, the greatest amount of time was spent discussing student issues. Two of the greatest concerns continually raised were student behavior and student work. These types of discussions were common and, generally, did not lead to any specific plans of actions to deal with the behavior.

During CPT, discussions were centered on "housekeeping" activities such as scheduling and completing paperwork. It became clear that CPT revolved around students and their actions, not around teachers' actions. These interdisciplinary teams tended to be reactive in nature toward students' negative social behaviors and academic issues (e.g., late work). Although these topics were relevant to their students' learning, they were often general in nature, making teachers reactive onlookers instead of proactive leaders; knowledge helpful to the team did not increase. Although these topics presented a professional learning opportunity, the interdisciplinary team did not adopt a proactive stance toward students' social behaviors. During CPT, the interdisciplinary team did not collaborate to create interdisciplinary units or share any specifics about academic lessons occurring in their classrooms. Furthermore, the conversations among the interdisciplinary team members during CPT often devolved into nonacademic talk.

PLC: Content focused translates to professional development

Although the PLCs clearly had a direct link to student learning, teachers gained new knowledge about their teaching from others in this venue. Overall, conversations centered on what teachers were doing, not on negative behaviors of students and teachers' subsequent reactions, a common subject at CPT team meetings. In the PLCs, the teachers created lessons and common assessments, shared resources, and discussed teaching strategies. Conversations were proactive in a way that allowed them to focus on improving their teaching. During these meetings, teachers collaborated with one another about their specific subjects and teaching methods. They referenced their teaching specifically, unlike teachers meeting during CPT, who rarely spoke of the teacher behaviors but focused more on students. Observations and interviews of members of both CPT teams and PLCs yielded the following finding: At Topper Middle School, the CPT team is actually a kind of PLC. Despite their having different names, their overall purposes at the school appeared to be the same; however, when teachers were asked whether or not they saw their CPT team as a form of a PLC, they stated that they did not. They described the two as having two different and distinct functions, and the overlap of the two structures was not apparent to the teachers. Evident in the observations, reasons for this may include teachers' lack of training in the definition and purpose of the PLC, the name by which each is called, and thus how definitions for each may intersect. They might come to realize that, in each, they are indeed working together, collaborating professionally with the intention of increasing student achievement.

The content of a professional development activity can greatly impact teacher learning, as was the case with the proceedings of the PLCs at Topper Middle School, which included implementation selection by the teachers (grade specific, teacher led, and subject specific). In addition to the PLC committee leading the school-wide initiative to implement PLCs, the teachers themselves had the autonomy within their PLCs to make decisions relevant to their individual group or grade level. With no set agenda mandated by the administration, teachers dealt with areas their teams deemed important. We observed teams meeting in their content area PLCs and found that autonomy in the content areas fostered the drive and motivation needed to improve teaching and student learning.

The main focus of each PLC throughout the year was to create common assessments and to align the units on which they worked. Each PLC had its own procedure for creating common assessments. Other activities included unit planning and resource sharing. In PLCs teachers also discussed the teaching of their content areas and relevant issues and struggles. Discussion of this nature would have been difficult if teams were not content specific.

Collaboration, resistance, and teacher-led initiatives

How teachers collaborated with one another and with their administrators became a critical factor in the success of the CPT teams and PLCs at Topper Middle School. The essence of a PLC is teachers working together, creating an atmosphere in which learning occurs; however, a team does not simply materialize because a group of people are placed in a room and told to work together, as was the case at Topper Middle School. The lack of initial training in the nature of the PLC and how it functions resulted in some PLCs with members who had little motivation to work together. They were sometimes placed with teachers with whom they had little previous connection, which produced mixed results. Generally, teachers shared professional knowledge, respect for one another, and openness to one another's suggestions; however, not all PLCs enjoyed open collaboration because some teachers, for varying and sometimes unknown reasons, resisted the notion of the PLC. The "resisters" were members of various PLCs, and their negativity affected their own PLCs as well as others. This situation was most clear in the language arts and science PLCs, for which teachers self-reported lack of trust in one another. Lack of trust could explain teachers' reluctance to contribute ideas or to acknowledge one another's contributions for fear of ridicule or exclusion.

Administrators were aware of teachers resistant to the PLCs and described them as having taught in their own niches for a long time. One administrator noted:

We have to begin to break down those self-induced barriers that they've put up. And not that they're not good teachers in their own right—they are. They just have a tendency to be independent contractors, and that is not what this is about. This is about collaborative instruction.

The members of the school-wide PLC committee, unable to explain the nature of the PLC and thoroughly train the staff at the beginning of the year, also noted resisters to the concept of the PLC. They discussed those resisters and how they could address concerns. One strategy was to send a team of teachers regarded as resisters to a neighboring school district for the day to observe how that school's PLCs functioned, with the hope that they would see the positive student benefits. After their visit, those teachers then reported back during their PLC inservice. One PLC committee member stated, "I think that really helped because it got more people involved, and it showed that we weren't asking them to do something else on top of what they're already doing. [Instead, it's] something that's going to help them do what they're doing." Indeed, at this point, some of the resisters changed their view of the PLCs and worked more purposefully in their PLCs.

At Topper Middle School, the teachers looked to their building principal for guidance and support of the PLCs. When asked about his role, he replied, "I want this to be a teacher-driven enterprise. We know by the history of teachers and administration that, oftentimes, top-down implementation is not very successful or at least not very long term." The teachers agreed with their administrator; however, the notion of an administrator allowing this model to be teacher-led caused mixed emotions. Although teachers delighted in having the power to make changes within their own PLCs, they often longed for stronger guidance and support from their administrator. During the course of our observations, the administrator attended only two PLC meetings.

On several occasions, PLC members discussed the role of the administration in handling resisters. When asked about the administrator's role in PLCs, one teacher replied, "It's frustrating because you know there are people that are, like, outwardly resisting against this [PLCs], and ... I don't feel like we're getting a whole lot of support from administration." However, the teachers' desire to have more guidance and support from their administration never reached the administrator's agenda.

In addition to intervening with resisters and providing resources, teachers continually discussed their desire for an administrator to address the need for an assessment of the PLC model, but one was never conducted. The school-wide PLC committee had no formal plans for assessing the model within the school and, although supportive of the idea, did not want the

added responsibility of a self-assessment. At the end of the school year and of this study, no formal evaluation was conducted or planned. For the following year, the district, the building, the interdisciplinary team, and the individual PLCs established goals, recognizing that moving to a job-embedded professional development model is a process that requires time. The teachers agreed that PLCs were their primary professional development tool and could see them as the anchor for all their future professional development.

Discussion and implications

The findings of this study of an embedded professional development model at one middle school and its interdisciplinary and content teams' implementation of PLCs bring to the foreground three main discussion points: collaboration between administrators and faculty; the substance of PLCs, regardless of whether they were CPT interdisciplinary teams or content area PLCs; and the value of teacher-led professional development. Implications for further consideration and research include how PLCs function in a middle grades school, new outcomes expected from professional development, the critical elements of PLCs, the role of administrators, and the role of teachers resistant to professional development.

Collaboration between teachers and administrators is critical, in the PLC literature as well as at Topper Middle School where this research was conducted, in determining whether or not professional development outcomes are met. Collaboration at Topper comprised both positive and negative elements. When the collaboration was positive, it yielded strong outcomes such as resource sharing, assessment creation, and unit planning. When the collaboration was negative or absent, however, it resulted in poor attendance at or minimal participation in the CPT team or PLC, complaints about workload distribution, and concern that the professional development model might not work because of distractions and a lack of guidance. The negatives clearly limited the faculty's ability to reap the benefits of the PLCs.

A pattern of discussion topics emerged from both CPT teams and PLCs. These topics ranged from student learning to nonacademic talk. The patterns revealed what types of conversations were held in each type of meeting and what type of professional learning occurred. The discussions that occurred in CPT team meetings

centered on school events and student behavior, without specific follow-through. In the PLCs, the discussions typically focused on academic issues, and teachers were able to stay on task as well as follow through on ideas.

Finally, because the PLC model was teacher led, it effectively gave teachers the power to lead their own professional development; yet, at the same time, members of PLCs and CPT teams yearned for more guidance and support from their administration. The content of the professional development model, which included subject-specific topics, was a major factor in its effectiveness. It allowed team members to gain support from others who taught the same subject and relate their professional learning directly to their classrooms. As a result, according to observations and interviews, they became more interested in professional learning and showed more enthusiasm and passion for what they did.

During the course of the study, several implications surfaced, including the way this model fits into the context of a middle grades school and the overlap of a PLC and CPT team. Although professional development in middle grades schools has been researched (Flowers & Mertens, 2003), the specific context in which PLCs can be successfully created in middle grades schools has not. Advocated for quite some time, professional learning communities in middle schools can take the form of small teams of teachers using common planning time to discuss meeting the needs of the students (Jackson & Davis, 2000); however, the overlap of PLCs and CPT teams has not been explored. The overlap seems an important element for administrators and teachers as they turn their attention to student outcomes.

Interestingly, what seems to be an obvious connection between CPT teams and PLCs was not so obvious to the teachers at Topper Middle School. They struggled with the idea that CPT teams may also be PLCs, perhaps fixating on the different names, the years of being told that attention to content is professional development, and a hesitancy to accept attention to students' social needs as a legitimate concern of professional development. The philosophy underlying the design of the PLC model matches foundational beliefs supported by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE, formerly National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010) that professional

development should be a part of the daily routine of the school (i.e., job embedded) and closely aligned to goals for both student and teacher success and growth. Because the CPT team is job embedded, as recommended by AMLE, and its structure resembles a PLC, the CPT team is a logical tool for professional development.

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This peer-reviewed journal is an open access journal promoting research in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania regarding theories and best practices in the education and development of young adolescents. One of our goals is promote the sharing of formal and informal research related to the improvement of middle level education. Some issues may be thematic as determined by the editors in response to topics of timely interest. Submitted manuscripts should be responsive to this purpose and reflect research or analyses that inform practices in these areas. Submissions are accepted from any source but submissions from teachers/professors/researchers working in Pennsylvania will be given priority in the acceptance and publication process.

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