Betwixt & Between

Education for Young Adolescents

A Peer Reviewed Journal of Middle Level Research

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This Issue

From the Editor's Desk

Best Practices for Supporting Middle School Students with ASD in the General Education Classroom

Reprint: Using Common Planning Time to Foster Professional Learning

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.

Betwixt & Between

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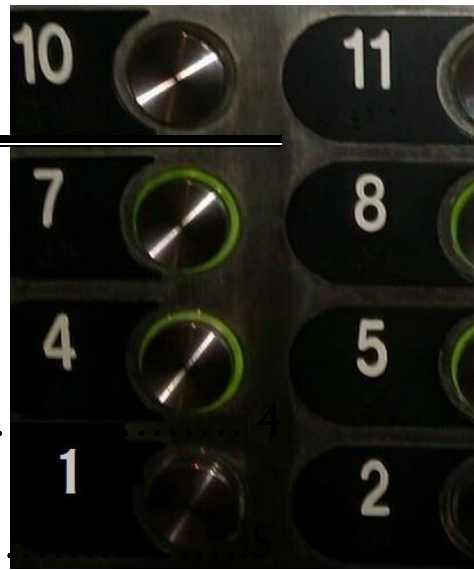

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About Our Cover Image

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

Letter from the editor:

Welcome to the fifth issue of Betwixt and Between: Education for Young Adolescents, The Journal of the Pennsylvania Professors of Middle Level Education. I am once again so very happy to work with such talented and devoted individuals.

While the option of testing and adding on a grades 5 and 6 certification has become an option here in Pennsylvania, it does not change the importance of the need for quality middle level educators. By quality, I mean prepared to understand, teach, and meet needs of the unique individuals that make up our middle level grades. Now, more than ever, we need to be fierce in the importance of middle level education.

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While we continue to prepare future middle level educators, I encourage you all to consider doing research with those practicing in the middle grades, review articles for the journal, or even collaborate with other professors of middle level education to submit articles. While "Betwixt and Between" has had a decrease in article submissions, the journal has continued to be produced with quality, useful research and hope it will inspire others to do the same.

Sincerely,
Deana Mack Ph.D.

Best Practices for Supporting Middle School Students with ASD in the General Education Classroom

About The Authors

Ashlea Rineer-Hershey, Ph.D.
a.rineer-hershey@sru.edu
Slippery Rock University
Special Education Department

Ashlea Rineer-Hershey currently teaches special education courses at the undergraduate and graduate level in the special education department at Slippery Rock University. Her research interests include inclusive practices, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Transition Services.

Eric Bieniek, Ph.D.
Eric.bieniek@sru.edu
Slippery Rock University
Special Education Department

Eric Bieniek currently teaches in the special education department at Slippery Rock University. His research interests include Autism, specifically the social needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Applied Behavior Analysis, and Transition Services.

Abstract

As the diagnosis of ASD continues to increase and with a continued emphasis on inclusive practices, the needs of school aged students with Autism continues to increase. At the middle school level, the needs of students with ASD often becomes challenging. The rigor of curriculum increases and the dynamics in the middle school schedule often become more challenging for children with this diagnosis. This paper reviews the four greatest areas of need (1) struggles with social interaction & communication, (2) repetitive behaviors, (3) difficulty with change, and (4) sensory needs for these students and provides strategies along with practical tips that can be used within the general education classroom to support these students more effectively.

Introduction

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders *(American Psychiatric Association, 2013)* Autism Spectrum Disorder is defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder that impacts the way a person perceives and communicates, which typically results in difficulty with social interactions and processing information. It is called a spectrum disorder because it affects each person differently ranging from mild to severe. There are often common characteristics between individuals with this diagnosis; however no two individuals are the same. This article will reflect on these common characteristics and give research based strategies effective in addressing these areas in the middle school setting.

In the United States the current rate of autism is 1 in 66 children (Autism Speaks, 2015) and internationally 1 in 160 persons are described as having spectrum disorders (Corkum, Bryson, Smith, Giffen, Hume & Power, 2014). Additionally, an increase in recent years with inclusive education has led to many more students with ASD being

educating within the general education classroom. Currently across the United States approximately, 498,000 students are identified with ASD as their primary disability. Of these children, 61.2% are spending at least 80% of their school day included in the general education classroom setting (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Between the 2004-05 and 2012-13 school years, the percentage of children ages 3-21 across the country has risen from 0.4 to 1.0 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). With these statistics in mind, it is obvious that the needs of these students and their general education teachers are critical in today's classrooms across the county.

As the middle school setting is considered, the needs of children with ASD often become a concern. Within this context, the schedule, curriculum, social situations, and classroom setup can become triggers for students with ASD. This paper will discuss these four main areas of need: (1) struggles with social interaction & communication, (2) repetitive behaviors, (3) restrictive interest & difficulty with change, and (4) sensory needs and recommended strategies for how middle school teachers can support these students more effectively within the general education classroom in each of these areas.

Struggles with Social Interaction & Communication

One of the common areas of struggle for children with ASD is there struggle to communicate effectively with their peers. Many of these children often need assistance in developing appropriate peer relationships with their same age peers. Students with ASD, particularly at the middle school level, have difficulty with the comprehension of abstract ideas and concepts, appropriate conversation skills at the middle school level, and understanding the subtleties of language (for example, jokes and sarcasm). The practical tips provided in the next section can address those areas of needs when used by general education teachers (Wagner, 2002).

Practical Tips:

1. Learning Styles: Students with autism have unique learning styles. Teachers can support these students by incorporating their strengths and needs when planning for instruction. This thoughtful preparation will help students with autism maximize their potential and make valuable contributions to class discussions and activities (McLeskey & Waldron, 2007)

   For example, many students with ASD are visual learners, and they benefit from the opportunity to see information to accurately interpret its meaning. The use of graphic organizers and visual aids when presenting new information is very helpful to these students.

2. Literal Learners: Remember that these students are literal learners**.** They need expectations, instructions and feedback to be explicitly stated. It is often helpful to provide them with specific guidelines for assignments, behavior, etc. Also, be sure to avoid sarcasm, idioms, jokes in your discussion with the classroom. This can be a great source of confusion and frustration for students with ASD and also draw attention to their disability.

   For example, "I just put my foot in my mouth," does not mean you actually lift up your foot and insert it into your mouth. "It's a piece of cake," does not mean something is actually a slice of your favorite chocolate cake. Students with ASD need explicit instruction to understand these sayings.

3. The Hidden Curriculum: "The Hidden Curriculum" refers to the unwritten rules and codes of social interactions that most people just naturally know. It becomes increasingly important as

students get older and reach middle school. These unwritten rules and codes can be particularly challenging for students with ASD to grasp, because they are not typically explicitly taught.

For example, this could include unwritten rules such as providing enough personal space when choosing a seat on the bus.

Repetitive Behaviors

Students with ASD often engage in repetitive body movements, like hand flapping or rocking back and forth. Some less obvious behaviors exhibiting by these students could be cracking knuckles, chewing on pencils or perseveration on certain topics. The behaviors can often be distracting for the student's learning and to the learning of others in the classroom (Wagner, 2002). Additionally, this behavior often draws attention to the child's disability especially once students move to the middle and high school levels. It can be a major roadblock for the student to engage in meaningful and appropriate conversation and interaction with typical peers. The practical tips provided in the next section can address this particular area of need for students with ASD and their general education teachers (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2007).

Practical Tips:

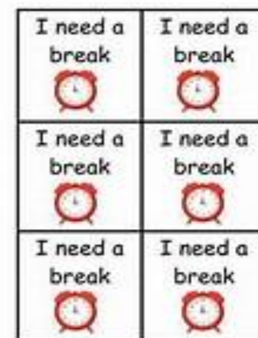
1. Grade Appropriate Alternatives: Help the student to harness their interest into something grade appropriate. Many students with ASD have a particular interest in a topic, activity, television character, or cartoon that is often no longer of interest to his/her grade level peers. It is important that these students receive guidance on how to continue to enjoy their area of interest in a way that is appropriate to their age and grade level.

   For example, an individual who perseverates on his/her interest in computer games could be encouraged to join gaming clubs, and even create games of his/her own. This would allow the student to continue to enjoy playing video games while also engaging in age and grade appropriate activities, like a club.

2. Self-Calming Techniques: Research suggests that repetitive behaviors are a self-calming behavior used to block out too much sensory input for students with ASD. Using appropriate self-calming techniques allow the students to self-calm and regain control when their bodies are receiving too much sensory input (Inmaculada Fernandez-Andres, Pastor-Cerezuela, Sanz-Cervera, & Tarraga-Minguez, n.d). As students enter the middle school level, disruptive behaviors become more distracting to other students and draw negative attention to the students exhibiting these behaviors. Using self-calming techniques help students with ASD take control of their own behavior and give them a better opportunity to develop appropriate relationship with their typical peers.

   For example, when a student begins to feel over stimulated in their environment, teach them to use a break card to request a break from the environment or the activity. A break card allows students to take a break when they are beginning to feel upset.

   A sample break card:



3. Replacement Behavior: Providing students with some type of replacement to use in place of the repetitive behaviors that is distracting to others and drawing negative attention to the student with ASD is very helpful. There are a variety of replacement behaviors that can address specific behaviors of concern. Stress balls and fidgets have become an appropriate alternative to help students focus, absorb information, and self-regulative (Hundert, 2009).

   For example, providing a student with a stress ball or fidget to use in place of a behavior like some self-injurious behaviors - scratching their skin or hair pulling, etc is an appropriate alternative.

   Where to find these: The National Autism Resources websites provides a variety that is available directly from their website: https://www.nationalautismresources.com/toys-gifts/fidget-toys-stress-balls/

Difficulty with Change

Some students have very specific or fixated interests and often display anxiety when routines are disrupted. This area of struggle tends to be amplified as students enter the middle school. Students often encounter a schedule that requires students to move from classroom to classroom and work with a variety of teachers (*Ganz, 2007)*. Additionally, middle school schedules often include special classes that may occur only one time per week and include special events and activities unique to the middle school, like assemblies, field trips, club meetings, study halls and large group instructional time. All of these events can be new and stressful for students with ASD. Preparing these students for a new schedule and changes in the typical daily schedule can help to alleviate stressful situation for these students and prevent serious behavioral issues that can be disruptive to the learning of that particular students as well as his/her peers.

Practical Tips:

1. Homeroom Check-In Time: For students with ASD, creating a location the students can go every morning is critical to the rest of the school day. By providing the student with a consistent place and adult to help them mentally prepare for the day is essential.

   For example, each day when the student gets off the school bus, he/she heads to the learning support teacher's classroom. A paraprofessional spends 10 minutes meeting with the student before he/she goes to their regularly assigned homeroom. She goes over the schedule for the day and reminds the student of any special activities, like an assembly or an early dismissal that is coming up for that school day.

2. Visual Schedule: An additional way to support students with ASD in the general education classroom is to make sure they have access to a visual schedule that outlines the daily or weekly agenda. By displaying this schedule in an area of the classroom that is highly visible, the student is able to remind themselves of the plan for the school day. The student can also carry a copy of his/her schedule in their binder throughout the school day. There is no stress or anxiety about what is coming next because at any time that student can check the visual schedule. The

schedule can include pictures as well as words depending on the needs of that particular student Banda, D. R., Grimmett, E., & Hart, S. L. (2009).

For example, each of the general education classrooms that the student attends regularly has a laminated copy of the students schedule posted on the wall near the student's seat. The student is then able to glance over at that schedule any time throughout or before/after the class period.

3. Special Event Reminders: At the middle school level, students are reaching a point of advanced maturity from the elementary level and as a result gain the opportunity to participate in various special activities. After school events, sports activities, clubs, assemblies, etc. all make the middle school experience new and exciting for students. It is particularly important for all teachers to remember that for students with ASD, these special events can cause a great deal of anxiety if they are not properly prepared. This is why it is helpful to begin to prepare the student in advance of a special event. Sending reminders home with the student to make sure their parents are aware and also making sure the special education teacher is aware, so they can all work together to make sure the student is comfortable with this upcoming change and can then enjoy the event just like his/her typical peers.

   For example, all of the 6th graders will be attending the Scholastic Book Fair during Language Arts class next Friday. The students will attend the fair and have approximately 20 minutes to browse and purchase books if they would like. The 6th grade Language Arts teachers send a letter home to parents to let them know about this event one week prior. They also inform the special education teacher who is able to remind the student with ASD about the upcoming event each day.

Sensory Needs

Students with autism can be hyposensitive (under) or hypersensitive (over) to a variety of classroom environmental variables. This type of unique sensory system is common for students with ASD and should be considered as organic differences as opposed to learned aversions or pre-occupations (Donkers, Schipul, Baranek, Cleary,Willoughby, Evans, A. M., & Belger, 2015). Educators should keep in mind that, due to the internal nature, sensory differences create struggles that can often adversely affect the most basic levels of daily functioning and these differences will persist throughout their school day. Therefore, it is important for teachers in the general education classroom to have an ongoing awareness of the individual sensory needs of their students as they work with these learners and their peers. Some typical examples of sensitivities to sensory input are the student with ASD who cannot tolerate sounds (auditory hypersensitivity) or hugs (tactile hypersensitivity). While another is oblivious to sounds (auditory hyposensitivity) and craves hugs or physical contact (tactile hyposensitivity) so they roughhouse in class or invade others space regularly. It is critical to remember that all students having ASD are idiosyncratic in this regard and what works for one student may produce different results for another. One child with ASD may have an explosive reaction to loud noises, while another may not react at all. Moreover, teachers need to remember that students with sensory issues often have difficulty filtering the sensory input, especially in settings where they are required to attend to multiple sensory inputs. In the school setting this can include attending the teacher's lesson, tolerating physical proximity to their peers or the smell of lunches on the bookcase, etc. Evaluations of the nervous systems of these students have shown specific difficulty with processing, filtering and finally prioritizing the sensory input they receive. (Inmaculada Fernandez-Andres, Pastor-Cerezuela, Sanz-Cervera, & Tarraga-Minguez, n.d) Included below are a few suggestions for how to help students regulate their sensory needs to be more successful within the general education middle school classroom. Establishing

a learning environment that is sensory friendly can alleviate these organic distractions and more effectively prepare students to receive instruction.

Practical Tips:

1. Alternative Seating and Movement Breaks: Allow students to access other means of sitting, instead of typical chairs and desks. Allow students to stand if they prefer, provide fitness balls to sit on, pillows for seats and even elastic banding on bottoms of chairs or desks for students to manipulate with their feet while learning. These alternatives been shown to increase attention to lessons (Schilling & Schwartz, 2004). Teachers can also integrate movement breaks between or even within lessons to allow students to access breaks to stretch, change position or take a short walk to wake up or calm down their bodies.

   For example, simply collect some alternative furniture items and materials from any thrift store or even dollar store. Set these materials up and allow students to try the items out and then asked them if these were comfortable, helped them relax etc. Based on the results, assign materials or activities (like short walks) to students who prefer them and observe if this is a variable that positively affects learning. If so, continue as the student desires and if not explore other items until students are finding positive results.

2. Sensory Friendly Classroom: Teachers are encouraged to consciously look at their current classrooms and consider the following. How does the lighting affect students, too bright, too dark, could this be adjusted based on the activity? What is the overall set up of the room? Are there areas where students can go to relax if needing a sensory break or conversely access needed sensory input through a bean bag or squish balls? Are students respectful and aware of each other's sensory needs? Do students accurately understand why the student having ASD needs to where sunglasses or noise cancelling headphones from time to time? Brandenburg (2014) recommends utilizing these and other similar variables to positively effect the learning environment

   How to implement this, simply observe your classroom as best as you can through the eyes of your students. Sit in their desks, access relaxing and instructional areas and try to transition about the room in a manner that is authentic as possible. Then take notes. What was distracting? What items were essential for learning versus what is cluttering your classroom? Were there areas that felt cut off from the rest of the room or conversely, too close or even confining? Teachers are encouraged to even switch rooms with another peer and allow them to observe one another's rooms and discuss the positives and negatives of their rooms.

3. Sensory Diets: While most students, both having ASD as well as neuro-typical, can process and tolerate the majority of environmental stimuli and still attend to learning, others simply cannot. This often results in student's having outbursts, aversions to school or simply shutting down and refusing to interact. These types of students may require an individualized plan of sensory exposure and intervention throughout their school day. These plans are designed to create an environment to proactively accommodate a student's hypo or hyper- sensitivities, while systematically and therapeutically working on developing skills and tolerances to overcome individual sensory deficits. These inteventions have shown initially promising results (Hazen, Stornelli, O'Rourke, Koesterer, & McDougle, 2014).

   To implement this approach, teachers are encouraged to reach out to occupational therapists within their school settings and participate in the assessment and development of these

interventions. After this assessment is completed, teachers are then able to include this sensory diet as part of the school day and monitor for positive results.

Conclusion

As the rate of ASD in our country continues to rise along with an emphasis on inclusive education, it is imperative for all teachers to be prepared to meet the unique needs of these students. It is particularly important to consider to uniqueness of the middle school setting in regards to social context, academic focus, changes in the schedule of activities and opportunities to be involved in different activities. The global recommendations presented here are intended to accommodate organic differences and limit the development of maladaptive behaviors, while simultaneously assimilating students having ASD in a supported and meaningful manner. Areas addressed included: (1) struggles with social interaction & communication, (2) repetitive behaviors, (3) difficulty with change, and (4) sensory needs. These interventions are targeted for middle school teachers so that they can support these students more effectively and inclusively within the general education classroom. The authors posit that the ideas presented within each area of need are essential skills and knowledge to possess as an inclusive educator. Furthermore, the authors agree with ideas of Morrier, Hess, & Heflin, (2011)**,** that the ideas presented are to serve as a foundation for more refined professional development so that teachers are able to better support their students proactively and positively within included settings.

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for all faculty members within a middle level teacher preparation program. Please take a moment and investigate about our association online.

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Using common planning time to foster professional learning

Dever, R., & Lash, M. J. (2013). Using Common Planning Time to Foster Professional Learning. Middle School Journal (J3), 45(1), 12-17. "Used with permission from the Association for Middle Level Education, www.amle.org<http://www.amle.org>."

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

Robin Dever is an assistant professor at Kent State University-Geauga. E-mail: rdever2@kent.edu

Martha J. Lash is an associate professor at Kent State University. E-mail: mlash@kent.edu

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: 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 theirjobs-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 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 in-service were documented.

This study focused on one eighth grade interdisciplinary team (CPT team); its five members had been together three years, meeting twice pe1- 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 finding s 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 in-service. 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 Jong 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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All submissions must be prepared using word processing software and saved in Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx) or rich text format (RTF). Manuscripts must comply with the guidelines in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, current edition. Double space all text, including quotations and references, use 1 inch margins for top and bottom, and use 1.25 inch right and left margins. All text should be Times New Roman 11-point font. Complete references should be placed at the end of the manuscript, using the "hanging indent" function. Additional article publication formatting details are listed on the PA-POMLE and PAMLE web sites.

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   Submission:
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     - Do not include the author(s) name(s).
     - Manuscripts should be no more than 15 pages of narrative (excluding references, tables, and appendices), using the latest APA style, and double-spaced on one side of 8-1/2 by 11-inch paper with justified margins.
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