

Pre-Service Training in Professional Learning Communities Benefits Novice Teacher

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Abstract:

As college and universities are being pushed to better prepare future teachers for the classroom, teacher preparation programs need to also consider the needs of new teachers to work collaboratively. The growth of professional learning communities (PLCs) throughout the country has created an expectation for teachers to work collectively with their peers. By training prospective teachers to work interdependently with their classmates, teachers can begin their career appreciating the needs of becoming mutually accountable in helping students learn. This article describes the process by which prospective teachers were trained in PLCs and then follows them throughout their first year as teachers. Findings reveal training in PLCs is beneficial to new teachers in helping them understand the need to collaborate. Additionally, in the absence of formal PLCs, novice teachers may be so ingrained in working collaboratively that he or she will seek opportunities to work in this manner with other teachers.

Key Words:

Professional Learning Community, Novice Teachers, Teacher Preparation, Collaboration.

Introduction

Educators across the nation strive daily to improve their schools and provide the best educational opportunities for the students they teach. For many years, researchers have touted the efforts of professional learning communities to provide teachers with the ability to improve student outcomes (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Kapadia, Coca, & Easton, 2007; Marzano, 2013; Schmoker, 2005; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Although the phrase “professional learning communities” (PLCs) has become a ubiquitous term with various meanings and functions (DuFour et al., 2008) one constant that is found throughout is the need for teachers to work collaboratively to meet the needs of all students. A pervasive notion is “when teachers work together, they become better teachers” (Many & Sparks-Many, 2015, p. 83).

The type of collaboration described by DuFour et al. (2008) requires teams to work interdependently and become mutually accountable to one another. The work of the team should directly relate to the “classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016, p. 12). By working in collaboration, teachers are empowered to achieve results that could not be achieved through working in isolation (Carroll, 2009). They are able to sharpen both their pedagogical skills and their content knowledge (Many & Sparks-Many, 2015) as they create plans and evaluate the success of these plans (Hattie, 2009).

While legislators are pushing colleges and universities to better prepare future teachers for the classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), teacher preparation programs need to also consider the needs of new teachers to collaborate with other teachers. As graduates begin searching for teaching jobs, administrators increasingly are looking to hire teachers who understand the PLC concept. It has become common for administrators to ask interviewees what they know about PLCs (Eaker & Keating, 2012). Therefore, teacher preparation programs need to question whether or not they are preparing graduates to work collaboratively in the workplace. Findings from this study provide evidence that teacher educators are able to do just that. This paper explains the process by which teacher candidates were trained in the PLC process and the subsequent research of these students’ ability to interact in a PLC during their student teaching and first year in the teaching profession.

Background Information

Extensive research had been conducted on the benefits of new teachers working with mentor teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004, NEA, 1999). These benefits were especially true when the mentor collaborated with the mentee over the content area (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). A previous study, conducted by the researcher, sought to determine if participation in a PLC would have similar effects. Findings indicated that novice teachers attributed collaboration with their PLC partners as an instrumental factor in their level of confidence increasing (Dillard, Christian, & McAtee, 2015). Additionally, the researcher discovered that participants desired training in the PLC process to better understand the goals and purposes of the meetings. It was assumed that new teachers could have greater gains from their participation in a PLC if they were more knowledgeable about PLCs (Dillard, 2012). For this reason, the researcher sought to

train future teachers on the PLC process and then study their experiences working in PLCs during their first year of teaching.

Course Description

At one southeastern university, secondary level teacher candidates in the Educational Leadership department receive a major in their field of study and a minor in education.

Beginning as sophomores, these students take the first of three courses identified as pre-residency courses. During their senior year, referred to as their residency year, the students are enrolled in Residency I and II consecutively. Residency II is in essence a traditional student teaching experience. Residency I involves an intense blend of coursework and field experience in local K- 12 schools. The school immersion process that teacher candidates undergo in Residency I blends theory and practice through a Problem-based Learning (PBL) format as they work in groups similar to the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) described by DuFour et al. (2008).

Problem-based learning is a method of active learning that involves placing the student in a scenario similar to that experienced in real life. The scenario is presented as a story, consisting of three scenes, revealing information gradually as students work to identify the problems, possible resources to solve the problems, and potential solutions.

All students in Residency I are placed in a group of 6-10 students and assigned to one professor for the semester. Each group is then assigned to a local middle, high, or K-12 school. For 15 weeks in the semester, teacher candidates work with teachers in the school two days per week. In order to gain a broader understanding of the whole culture of the school, students are placed in different settings within the same school each day. These consist of teachers in their same discipline, teachers in different disciplines, administrators, guidance counselors, librarians, secretaries, and educational assistants. Additionally, each group meets with two other Residency I groups for a seminar class one night per week. This course is team taught by the three professors assigned to the three different groups.

PLC Training

The concept of professional learning community was first introduced to the teacher candidates participating in this study during the second week of the course through a Problem-based Learning (PBL) format. At this point in the semester, students had spent an entire week working together in the schools for two days, online in discussion forums, and in seminar class. The PBL case, entitled "Alone in the Crowd," introduced teacher candidates to a first year teacher experiencing her first PLC meeting.

As teacher candidates read through the case, they identified what they knew from the reading and what they needed to know. Subsequent scenes answered some of the points the students needed to know; however, several items were still on the list when the case was completed. Individual group members were assigned these topics as tasks for research for the following week. Topics such as professional learning communities, SMART goals, data interpretation, mentor teachers, and professional development were a few examples given to one or more students to research.

Over the next five days, teacher candidates researched the topics by searching the library and online resources and in observations in a local school. Each student was assigned to view a PLC meeting and shadowed a teacher for one day. Students were encouraged to ask questions of the mentor teacher and to ascertain if the things they were researching were witnessed in the regular practice of the school. Before going back into a classroom two days later, the students met as a group with the professor to discuss the research they had conducted. Each student was given a copy of the other students' research briefs and encouraged to look for each of these concepts as they shadowed a second teacher for the day.

In seminar class that evening, the group of students and the professor met with two other groups and their professors. This allowed the students to gain another perspective as these groups had spent their week in two different schools. Members from each of the three groups shared their findings with the entire class. All students were encouraged to ask questions or make comments as to what they witnessed in observations that either supported the research or spoke in opposition to it.

The class was then divided into the three separate groups as each professor lead their own students through the process of writing norms for the group members to follow during the semester. Professors utilized the "Developing Norms" template developed by the National Staff Development Council (1994). Teacher candidates were required to create norms concerning their meeting times, how they would encourage listening and discourage interrupting one another, the confidentiality of items discussed in the meetings, how the group would make decisions, how the group would encourage participation of all group members, and the expectations of the group members. Not all teacher candidates appeared to understand the need for the norms at this time. Statements such as "that is just common sense" were made as the process was continued. The professors persisted and required all students to participate. Once all of the norms were firmly established in writing, the group was asked to create one additional norm addressing what they would do if a member of the group broke a norm. The purpose of this norm was to help the teacher candidates hold one another accountable to the norms for the duration of the semester.

From this point forward, groups were referred to as professional learning communities and meetings were dubbed PLC meetings. For the remainder of the semester, most of the assignments in the course were completed collaboratively, requiring teacher candidates to rely heavily on one another. Through this process, with their individual grades in the balance, teacher candidates learned to be mutually accountable to one another as they worked interdependently.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between a novice teacher's training in Professional Learning Communities and his/her ability to be a member of a Professional Learning Community?
2. What specific experiences in the Professional Learning Community training helped prepare novice teachers to be a member of a Professional Learning Community?

3. What specific experiences were not present in the Professional Learning Community training that could have better prepared novice teachers to be a member of a Professional Learning Community?

Methodology

Design

A case study design was utilized for this research. This method is considered appropriate when the researcher is trying to understand what happened and also when an in-depth understanding is desired (Yin, 2006). The case study design focuses upon one specific group within real-life context (Yin, 2003) in order to discover shared behavior patterns (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006).

Triangulation

Within case study design, data are triangulated to reveal convergence of findings (Yin, 2003). For this study data consisted of coursework artifacts specific to professional learning communities, three interviews for each participant, and a maximum of six journal entries for each participant.

Population and Sample

During the fall semester of 2013, there were 13 teacher candidates assigned to the researcher in the Residency I program. Ten of these former students began the study in the spring semester of 2014. They consisted of five Social Studies majors, two Art majors, one English major, one Health major, and one Family and Consumer Sciences major. Eight of the ten were assigned to schools that were required to hold weekly PLC meetings during their student teaching.

After student teaching was completed, most of the participants began looking for a permanent teaching position. One participant joined the Peace Corps and left the country. Two received interim positions lasting only a portion of the school year. Another was not able to secure a job until January. One participant took a job in her field and resigned after nine weeks. Another was unable to find a full-time teaching position and was hired as an educational assistant. These six participants were only able to complete a portion of the study.

Of the four participants who completed the study, two were employed as art teachers, one as a Social Studies teacher, and the fourth was hired outside of her area of expertise as an English teacher. She could be hired into this position because she had a middle school certification allowing her to teach any subject in a middle school. Her major was Social Studies. Schools that utilized PLCs hired all four of these participants.

Data Collection Procedures

As the course ended, an email invitation to participate in research was sent out to all thirteen students. Once permission was granted, the researcher collected all coursework artifacts pertaining to PLCs. These consisted of 17 pages of double spaced reflective journal entries completed by the participants at various times throughout the semester.

At the completion of student teaching, each participant was interviewed with the same eleven questions (see Appendix A) to understand their experience working in a PLC as a student teacher and to gauge their current perception of the PLC experience.

After the 2014-2015 school year began, the researcher sent each participant a journal to maintain throughout the year. Participants were asked to describe the demographics and school requirements for their assigned PLC group and then comment a minimum of three times each semester. For each entry, participants were asked to describe their feelings about meeting with their PLC partners, the work of the group, and their acceptance level by the group. A space for additional comments was also included for each journal entry. Four of the ten participants completed the journal entries over the course of the entire year. The two interim teachers completed a portion of the journals and the late hire completed entries for the spring semester. The journal entries throughout the year amounted to 57 double spaced pages collected.

Interviews were scheduled with participants at the close of the fall and spring semester. The questions for these interviews were unique to each individual based upon the contents of the journal entries. All participants were asked to provide more detail about their feelings as PLC members, to describe specific areas in their training that was beneficial to them as PLC members, and to provide suggestions for additional training on the process of meeting collaboratively. Five of the ten participants were able to complete an interview at the close of the fall semester and four at the end of the school year. Transcripts of all interviews resulted in a total of 161 double spaced pages.

Data Analysis and Coding

Data were analyzed at three distinct points during this study; first, after students completed their semester of student teaching, second, after the first semester of teaching, and third at the close of the participants' first school year. The 235 total pages of data were inductively analyzed so that the researcher could search for patterns, relationships, and common themes within the data (Gay et al., 2006). Using the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), the researcher applied codes to data, compared them to other incidents, unified codes into categories, and reduced categories, terminology and text as categories began to grow theoretically saturated.

Initial coding of all participants revealed 894 codes. These codes were then sorted into 45 categories displayed in Figure 1. While not all participants had codes within each category, there were a few categories that were unveiled by most of the participants.

Categories from Code Collection		
1. Acceptance	16. Goals	31. Real World vs Training
2. Accountability	17. Growth	32. Strategies
3. Administration	18. Independence	33. Student Centered
4. Attitudes	19. Interdependence	34. Support
5. Barriers to meetings	20. Lesson Planning	35. Problem-Based Learning
6. Benefits	21. Meeting Minutes	36. Professionalism of Members
7. Collaboration	22. Meeting Time	37. Teaching Style
8. Competition	23. Negative Experiences	38. Team Building
9. Conflicts	24. New Teacher Struggles	39. Time
10. Control	25. Norms	40. Training
11. Data	26. Observations	41. Unprofessional
12. Dominant Personalities	27. Personalities	42. Unsupportive
13. Fears	28. PLC Training	43. Veteran Teachers
14. Friendships	29. Positive Experiences	44. Want to work alone
15. Gender	30. Relationships	45. Want to work with others

Figure 1. The 45 categories created through the analysis of all 894 codes from the study.

For instance, the category of acceptance was mentioned in predominantly positive ways immediately after student teaching. However, after the first year of teaching, many of the participants who spoke about it, discussed it in negative terms. Some of the participants felt that as a new teacher they were not accepted at the same level as veteran teachers.

The category of attitudes was another one that had predominantly negative comments by several participants. Many discussed being unprepared to work with teachers who had bad attitudes. Many of the codes for attitudes then led to discussions that were coded in the conflicts category. Although many of these items were difficult for the participants to handle, most expressed a desire to collaborate with their peers and to continue working in a PLC. They expressed a desire for more training for their colleagues on the true purposes of PLCs as many described frustrations when the time was not used properly in their meetings.

Because not all participants were able to complete all portions of the research, Table 1 is provided to illustrate the number of codes recorded for each participant. Information about the candidates' subject area and status as a first year teacher are also provided.

Pseudonyms are used to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. The breakdowns for the number of codes for each participant are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Codes Collected Per Participant

Participant	Subject	First Year Status	# of Interviews	# of Journals	# of Codes
Ava	English	Year Long Interim	2	3	150
Sophia	Art	Full Time Position	3	6	121
Charlotte	Art	Full Time Position	3	6	134
Liam	Social Studies	Hired as Assistant	1	2	21
Noah	Social Studies	Late Hire	1	3	14
Mason	Social Studies	Full Time Position	3	6	192
Harper	Social Studies	Hired Out of Content	3	6	231
Marsha	Social Studies	Quit after 9 Weeks	1	0	10
Mia	Health	9 week Interim	1	1	15
Shannon	Family Consumer Science	Joined Peace Corps	1	0	6

Findings

After Student Teaching

Research Question 1.

What is the relationship between a novice teacher's training in PLCs and his/her ability to be a member of a PLC?

Of the ten participants in the study, all but two worked in schools that utilized the DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker (2008) method of PLCs. Although these two participants were placed in schools that did not require collaboration between teachers who teach the same subject, both expressed that they were utilizing PLC practices with their colleagues. In an interview, Ava expressed, "It is not mandatory to meet but it is good practice. We do talk when we have data." Noah wrote in one journal entry, "The economics teacher and I share all assessments so our classes are on the same page."

At the conclusion of student teaching, all ten participants expressed a level of comfort with the PLC process. Charlotte stated in her interview, "I feel very comfortable and prepared...all necessary materials and information provided for me during my Residency I program helped me to reach this level of comfort." Liam identified, "My comfort level was phenomenal. I entered the community knowing exactly what was expected of me."

Not only did the participants understand the process, they appeared to embrace opportunities to collaborate within their PLCs. "Collaboration is one of the most important factors in the world of teaching today," voiced Ava. "The more collaboration, the better the teaching." These opportunities to work with colleagues within the school caused the participants to grow extremely close to one another. Liam stated in his interview, "I honestly miss the PLC group" while Sophia wrote, "I love my PLC group as family."

Research Question 2.

What specific experiences in the PLC training helped prepare novice teachers to be a member of a PLC?

Throughout all the interviews, participants were asked to identify specific aspects of their PLC training that were the most helpful to preparing them for collaborating in a Professional Learning Community. The sentiments of Liam summarize well what several participants explained,

I believe that the training in PLCs allowed us all to rely on each other...to offer support in any and all aspects that we may as educators face. This training and realization was accomplished by absolute immersion into a PLC community...and, therefore, one of the greatest and most effective learning tools was implemented into my PLC training. By actually experiencing a real, working PLC community every week for an entire semester, I was able to fully comprehend the benefits of PLC's both academically to educators, students, and to society as a whole.

Research Question 3.

What specific experiences were not present in the PLC training that could have better prepared novice teachers to be a member of a PLC?

Although the participants overwhelmingly conveyed positive experiences within the PLC groups for their student teaching, they did voice a few concerns with the PLC process. One elective teacher wrote in her journal that her PLC members had an attitude of feeling overlooked by the administration. She felt that this contributed to a poor work ethic within her PLC group. Other participants noticed the possibility of problems when PLC was not implemented properly by administration. One voiced that too much oversight could cause PLC to be something that was dreaded rather than enjoyed, while another expressed fear of losing individual teaching freedom.

Another concern discussed by the participants was for the veteran teachers. One teacher candidate noticed that some teachers brought drama to the meetings or did not choose to share information with the other teachers. This individual was skeptical of how seriously the veteran teachers take PLC meetings. Additionally, the fear that one teacher could try to dominate the group was voiced by a few of the participants. Mia stated, "When new teachers are in the group, older teachers often want to not accept the new teacher's advice." Several of these fears were realized once the participants began working as full time teachers.

After First Year of Teaching**Research Question 1.**

What is the relationship between a novice teacher's training in PLCs and his/her ability to be a member of a PLC?

A common expression of the participants during and after the first year of teaching was that they knew more about PLCs than the veteran teachers. The fact that they understood the process that should be occurring and desired to meet with their colleagues in this manner was frustrating for all of the participants at some point during the school year. All expressed a desire for norms to be set and followed. It was believed that setting and following norms would eliminate most of the frustrations of the PLC meetings. Mason voiced, I believe it would be very beneficial at the beginning of every PLC to state your group norms, to make sure people understand this is what we should be following but at the same time we need to hold each other accountable, because if we don't hold each other accountable nothing is going to change.

Some of the participants expressed a desire to be in charge of their PLC meetings just one time. Charlotte expressed, "I am not trying to brag but I think people could learn from me, from us, how a PLC could run. I think that some people who have really been in there for a while don't really understand it like we do." The participants felt that if veteran teachers could experience a PLC meeting that was focused upon the students then they would want to do it more. Harper stated, "They would see how beneficial it could be and then it might start going that way from now on."

Research Question 2.

What specific experiences in the PLC training helped prepare novice teachers to be a member of a PLC?

All of the participants felt extremely comfortable with their training on professional learning community procedures. It was explained that the immersion process during Residency I was very beneficial. In so doing, PLCs became a natural part of the teaching experience. By allowing students to go in "hands on witnessing and being a part of one over a period of time" the program encouraged the growth of a professional learning community mindset.

One favorable aspect of the PLC training was in the problem-based learning process used to introduce the topic. Charlotte explained in one interview that her initial feelings from the PBL process were that of confusion, as she did not really comprehend what was going on. In regards to solving the problem she stated, "Once we really had to dig deep and try to figure it out on our own" to solve the problem, "I liked having to solve it because I think that made me understand it better." She went on to state how beneficial it was to observe an actual PLC the next week in a school setting. "I liked the PBL, not having any idea, finding out the answers, and then going to see [a PLC meeting] literally the next week. I think that was helpful," she stated.

Continuity and consistency were also expressed as valuable components of the PLC training. The fact that the term was used repeatedly throughout the Residency I semester reinforced the work the students were doing. This was especially true with the PLC norms. Sophia admitted "when we had to make our own norms as a group that was

so hard [but] it was good for us to do it.” Equally important to the participants was in the enforcement of the norms. Charlotte expressed, “I remember sitting in the lunch room and you pulled out the norms and I thought ‘we are really doing this.’ When someone didn’t follow the norms it was hard.” Although it was difficult for the students to enforce the norms, they stated that it was beneficial.

Research Question 3.

What specific experiences were not present in the PLC training that could have better prepared novice teachers to be a member of a PLC?

Throughout the school year, certain questions frequently surfaced. These novice teachers wanted to know how to get teachers to be more student focused in their PLC meetings. They wanted to know how to avoid drama with teachers, how to approach personality conflicts, and what to do when a dominant teacher took over the PLC meetings. They did not have an understanding of how to approach teachers with different types of personalities and how to have difficult conversations in a professional way.

Some of the first year teachers felt that they were not able to have an equal voice in the PLC meetings. Mason explained, “you should not be afraid to voice your opinions and think it is going to hurt someone’s feelings, because it is about the students, it isn’t about you.” These novice teachers felt that they should have an equal voice, asserting, “Just because I am new does not mean that what I have to say is not important or viable.”

Several of the participants struggled with personality conflicts at different times in the school year. One new teacher felt that the other members of her team were actually bullying her at times. Not knowing that this could be a factor in the PLC group was a shocking revelation for her. Although we had completed an activity to recognize the different personalities of the PLC group members while in Residency I, we did not discuss how to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of different personalities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Providing training on Professional Learning Communities is very beneficial to new teachers (DuFour et al., 2016; Mattos, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2016). It provides them with the skills needed to collaborate with their colleagues from the onset of the school year. They are able to understand the need for working interdependently to help further the learning of all students and they recognize the necessity for group members to be mutually accountable to one another. Additionally, in the absence of formal PLCs, trained novice teachers may utilize PLC practices with coworkers. The process of working collaboratively can become so ingrained in the novice teacher that he or she may seek opportunities to work in this manner with teachers who teach the same subject.

It is recommended that teacher-training programs require teacher candidates to work collaboratively utilizing PLC characteristics when possible. When working in groups, teacher candidates should create norms for their collaborative groups and hold one another accountable to the norms. Additionally, instructors should take a minimal role in the creation of norms and oversight for holding students accountable to those norms

(DuFour et al., 2016; Mattos et al., 2016). While students should not be allowed to break the agreed upon norms, professors need to empower the teacher candidates to handle the struggles of interpersonal relationship problems themselves. This, in addition to training in interpersonal relations with coworkers, would prove beneficial for new teachers.

Furthermore, working in a PLC group requires group members to be vulnerable to one another as they form an interdependent relationship, making trust an essential component (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). In a PLC, it is not important for each member to like one another, they do however need to have a level of respect and trust for one another (Mattos et al., 2016). For this reason, teacher candidates may benefit from team building strategies. If professors would conduct various team-building exercises with their collaborative groups, participants would better understand how to build trust with their colleagues and may then utilize those skills once they begin teaching. Future study on building trust through team building is recommended.

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Appendix A

Interview 1

1. Describe your training on Professional Learning Communities.
2. When you began as a student teacher, describe your comfort level at becoming a member of a Professional Learning Community in your assigned school.
3. Were you assigned to a school that provided time for PLC members to meet during the school day?
4. Describe your interpretation of the school's PLC groups.
5. Describe things you noticed about teachers (either positive or negative) as they interacted in their PLC group.
6. Were you welcomed into your PLC group as an equal participant?
7. How did your PLC group utilize their time to plan collectively for upcoming lessons?
8. How did your PLC group utilize their time to analyze student data?
9. After completing your student teaching, describe how your feelings about PLCs changed throughout your experiences.
10. What types of additional training could have aided you in become a more effective PLC member?
11. What do you think about Professional Learning Communities?