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BRIDGING THE GAP FROM STUDENT TEACHER TO CLASSROOM TEACHER

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Abstract

This study focuses on providing support for beginning teachers to increase retention in the career. Despite strong requirements for teacher preparation, the attrition rate for new teachers continues to show that many novice teachers leave the profession within the first four years or less. This qualitative case study of teachers who completed a Professional Development School Model for teacher preparation has shown success in teacher readiness for the classroom and in retention in the career. Interview data showed positive outcomes including confidence in the content and pedagogical skills and a strong expectation for continuation in the teaching career. However, identified gaps in the transition phase during the first year suggest that additional support is needed to assure a successful first year and ongoing retention. Key variables are identified, including adaptation to different school culture, feelings of isolation, lack of support, and uncertainty about job expectations. These negatively impact success in the first year. Interventions and strategies to prevent these gaps in a successful transition are described. The Professional Development School Model can include preparation to help beginning teachers anticipate initial challenges. Optimum support includes focused actions by the school district, the school, and particularly, the school principal. Support strategies include mentoring,

communication of clear expectations, strong instructional leadership, availability of resources, opportunities for professional development, and a focus on wellness. Future study should address the impact of the implementation of these strategies to bridge the gap in success in the first year and retention in the career.

Keywords

New Teacher Induction, Teacher Retention, Teacher Attrition, Professional Development School

1. Introduction

The recruitment, preparation, and retention of teachers is an issue of concern for the teaching profession worldwide. The numbers of qualified teachers are declining, and as current teachers retire or leave the profession, there is not an adequate pool to replace them. A report from the Economic Policy Institute documented an increasing number of teachers who are leaving the profession as well as a decrease in the overall pool of teacher candidates. The report notes an increase in the number of schools that could not fill vacant positions increased from 3.1 % in 2011 to 9.4 % in 2016. (Garcia & Weiss, 2019a. p.1). Overall attrition rates indicate that many new teachers leave the profession within their first four years (King, 2018).

Traditional models of teacher preparation in Colleges of Education focus on academic preparation. This includes coursework on educational foundations, methods of instruction, classroom management, and strong content area preparation. Teacher candidates are assessed on knowledge gained through coursework, but they experience very little clinical practice. Despite extensive academic training, these teachers face challenges that lead to leaving the profession within the first few years for the teacher. Their reasons for leaving include lack of support, demands of accountability, lack of parental involvement, inadequate resources, low salary, and a lack of respect for the profession as reasons for not remaining in the classroom. (Garcia & Weiss, 2019b).

Often, when qualified teachers are not available, schools hire teachers with “fast track” teaching credentials or create in-house models for training teachers who are already placed in the classroom. Alternate teacher preparation routes abound, but rarely prepare teachers who are “classroom-ready.” Not surprisingly, these teachers struggle to succeed and often leave the profession within the first year in the classroom (Redding, C. & Henry, G. T., 2019).

Acknowledging findings that teacher preparation does make a difference in retention, Greiner and Smith (2009) found that the decision to leave the profession is influenced by levels of administrative support, mentoring, and professional development focused on pedagogy and classroom management. These are issues that can be addressed proactively through teacher preparation partnerships between colleges of education and schools. One such partnership model is the Professional Development School (PDS). Through the PDS, teacher preparation partnerships include extensive clinical experiences and quality mentoring. This study sought to determine how teacher preparation in a Professional Development School could provide experiences that result in classroom readiness as well as retention in the career.

1.1 The Professional Development School Model

The Professional Development School model has demonstrated success in preparing teachers who enter the profession with skills for success and a strong likelihood to stay in teaching. A longitudinal study found that participation in a PDS significantly and positively influenced perseverance in the career. (Latham & Vogt, 2007), The essential elements of the PDS include a formal partnership between a P-12 school and a college of education with a focus on Improved teacher preparation, enhanced professional development for teachers, and an emphasis on a shared research focus to improve student achievement (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008).

In the PDS, teacher candidates experience a full-year internship in a P-12 school that includes participation in the school district's new teacher induction program, starting the experience when teachers begin the school year and before the students arrive, co-teaching with a cooperating teacher for a full school year, and participating in whole school experiences such as professional development and parent conferences.

Professional Development, based on the identified needs of the school, is designed to include participation by the teacher candidates as well as the experienced teachers. This allows the teacher candidates to become engaged as part of a team to improve the quality of academic programs and to develop new knowledge and skills in classroom practice. It instills the value of ongoing professional learning throughout the career.

Research in the PDS is intended to focus on practical applications of theory and best practice. It is typically considered to be action research and does not require sophisticated research experience. Thus, research is conducted and presented by teacher candidates, teachers,

administrators, and university partners. University and School faculty work together on research to improve student achievement and pedagogy.

2. Research on Teacher Readiness and Retention in the PDS

One PDS designed according to this model and in place for six years provided an opportunity to study the level of preparation of teachers who had completed a PDS experience and their retention in the early years of their career. The resulting qualitative study (Whitford & Cossa, 2020), focused on teachers who had completed a year-long internship experience and addressed the following guiding questions:

1. Does the full-year internship in a Professional Development School prepare novice teachers to be “classroom ready”?
2. Does a full-year internship in a Professional Development School improve the likelihood of retention in the teaching career?

The population for the study was drawn from a pool of elementary school teachers who had completed a formal teacher education program including a full-year internship in a PDS. The participants were all employed in a large urban school district characterized by poverty and high teacher turnover. This is the same school district where they had completed their PDS internship experience. Two participants were employed in the same school as their internship. The other participants were employed in schools in the same school district. One participant transferred to a different school district due to a family need. All participants were currently employed, held full teacher certification, and had completed at least one year of teaching after graduation. Participation had been approved by the university Institutional Review Board. Of the possible pool of 20 participants, 11 agreed to participate.

The qualitative methodology for the study utilized semi-structured, one-on-one interviews that were audio-recorded and transcribed by a research assistant. Participants were interviewed at the end of the academic year. Key questions focused on experiences in the first year of teaching. Participants were asked to describe:

- 1) Experiences in the PDS that prepared them for the first year of teaching,
- 2) Ways that the PDS did not prepare them for the classroom,
- 3) Challenges they faced during the first year of teaching,
- 4) Situations when they realized they were real teachers, and

5) Their likelihood of staying in the teaching career.

Data were reviewed, categorized, coded, and validated through the analysis of narrative statements.

2.1 Findings

Findings indicated that participants had gained positive outcomes from the PDS experience, including confidence in their knowledge, skills, and readiness to be classroom teachers, awareness of school-wide policies and practices, the experience of being part of a professional learning community, and a strong expectation of staying in teaching as a career.

Conversely, gaps existed in their preparation to make the transition from being an intern to being employed as a classroom teacher. Findings indicated challenges and difficulties in adapting to the first year of teaching. The issues ranged from adapting to different school culture to feelings of isolation, lack of support, and uncertainty job expectations. Issues such as these can impact the retention of novice teachers and can often cause teachers to leave the classroom during the first year. Representative comments about difficulties participants experienced included:

It was difficult getting used to all the work. Being able to prioritize everything and being able to get the hang of all the paperwork and when everything's due and being able to understand what resources to use for a certain lesson or where to go when you need certain things.

We didn't have stability. The principal who was new to the school system, as well as everyone in the building, was either new or new to the district, so we were all just trying to learn to deal with the district way. The school was already a failing school when we opened it so we were just trying to get out of that the best we could. We had two principals come in and out and two interims, so we were changing a lot. We had a lot of vacancies as well a lot of teachers decided to leave during the school year.

When I got my class, my class was a lot of the worst kids. For all of the other classes, I feel like the kids were placed perfectly and my class was all the leftovers. Umm, and it was a rough group. I never had to deal with the confrontations or the disagreements between students while I was interning.

When I interviewed, I felt like I had an immediate connection with the lead teacher and her, I thought it was going to be great. So, coming in within a couple of days I noticed it wasn't

what it was going to be and it's just been a struggle, you're a new teacher and you don't know anything, you have not a lot of say, this is this school's way.

In my internship, the teachers all got along together they worked well they planned together. There was never animosity about opinions. Unfortunately, when I was hired as a teacher, I was like OMG why can't it be like my PDS because even as an intern I felt included, my opinion mattered, I had other teachers who were asking me for my opinion but here, I was told I shouldn't be saying anything because I was a first-year teacher.

I don't think anyone can tell you how different it is. You can't know until you do it and you graduate, and you know, and you're done, and you're thrown into this mess of a world with children and then you understand.

Every school is so different, so it kind of made me realize like, these are kind of like situations and challenges you don't know what people face until you're facing them.

This year kind of made me question all my life decisions. I honestly think it was because of the struggles I faced this year. I feel like this is definitely where I am supposed to be, I just had a rough start into it. But I'm ready for next year, to get it on track.

2.2. Analysis of Data

Analysis of findings indicated that they fell into two categories. First was classroom management, described within the context of challenges in prioritizing tasks, behavior issues, and demographic differences. The second category included socialization, adaptation and transition to the teaching career and the realities of teaching as a profession. This category encompassed a larger set of challenges including socialization, school climate, the leadership style of the principal, team interaction, acceptance by others, job expectations, and resources and support.

Socialization into the teaching profession begins during the internship phase of teacher preparation and continues through student teaching. Within the PDS, teacher candidates may experience socialization to the career in an ideal setting. Being a co-teacher with a supportive mentor in a school that focuses on professional development is not the same as being an actual first-year teacher. These candidates are reflecting this in describing and analyzing their experiences as first-year teachers. The realities of a career change when the teacher is employed. Teacher candidates probably do have preparation in classroom management, handling of behavior issues, and dealing with diversity/demographic differences; however, when they find

themselves in a new setting that they must adjust to. These are the issues that stand out as their biggest challenges. Preparation for these changes should be considered as part of the preparation of teacher candidates in the PDS. Both the universities who prepare teacher candidates and the schools that hire them should provide a shared focus on issues of socialization to allow for support and coaching as part of novice teacher induction.

2.3. A Proactive Role for Teacher Education Programs

While the PDS model has demonstrated success in the preparation of classroom-ready teachers, there is room for improvement. An intentional, proactive focus on the challenges of adapting to the teaching career can offer support that can increase the likelihood of new teacher retention. This should be included in university teacher preparation as well as in school district policies and plans for new teacher hiring and induction.

The university teacher education programs give strong to students, especially to those in the PDS experience. There is great emphasis on their starting early in the school year and working as a co-teacher throughout the academic year. However, as the experience comes to a close, the emphasis turns to the job search. The transition is not addressed. Modifications of the curriculum to include seminars that address issues about the demands of the first year of teaching, discussions led by teachers who have completed their first year of teaching, and mentoring by university supervisors to support transition challenges have the potential to make the move from teacher candidate to teacher a smoother process. This can be particularly effective if paired with new teacher induction activities offered by the school district.

In an analysis of the teacher shortage, Sutchter, L., Darling-Hammond, L., and Carver-Thomas, D. (2019) addressed the issue of attrition among novice teachers. Findings indicated that the likelihood of retention increases when beginning teachers are provided with mentoring, administrative support, professional opportunities to work with colleagues, and a voice in shared decision making. These types of support have the potential to offset the factors of poor working conditions and low salaries.

A report by the Economic Policy Institute considered the impact of early-career support for novice teachers it offered an additional examination of how collaborative work among school leaders, teachers and colleagues can establish a climate of professionalism that can support novice teachers as well as teachers who are progressing through their career. Such support can

increase professional knowledge and skills and has a direct influence on teacher retention in the career (Garcia et al., 2019).

A proposed series of four modules to support novice teachers through the teacher candidate to novice teacher transition combines professional and personal elements (Wozniak, 2020). The first module offers strategies for finding and working with an experienced mentor who will provide support for meeting emotional, professional, and instructional needs. Module Two focuses on knowledge of the school culture. This includes learning about key leadership roles and expectations as well as getting to know about protocols, procedures, and people in key roles in the school. Modules Three and Four focus on teacher wellness. These are intended to address the new teacher's tendency to try to meet every demand at the expense of time for personal well-being. Module Three, Create Balance, help new teachers carefully select the activities they will be engaged in and encourages a work-life and personal life balance. Module Four focuses on Self Care and encourages teachers to find ways to assure physical health, mental health, mindfulness, socialization, and proper nutrition and exercise.

2.4. The Role of the Principal

One key source of support for novice teachers is the school principal. It is the principal who interviews and hires the novice teacher and offering a continuing role in supporting the teacher will contribute to retention in the school and the profession. Best practice shows that principals who function as instructional leaders focus on supporting those aspects of teaching that encourage strong productivity. For example, the principal who does not give the most difficult students to the novice teacher allows that teacher to develop skills in pedagogy. The principal who gives the novice teacher a single classroom, rather than asking him/her to switch rooms and carry materials from class to class, will support organizational skills and good classroom management. The principal's communication of clear messages regarding grading discipline, school safety, and communication with parents helps to support the novice teacher's socialization into the climate and culture of the school.

Focusing on the role of the principal as a school leader and instructional leader should be part of teacher education from the internship through the transition into the first year of teaching. When principals interact in a positive, collaborative role with novice teachers, induction into the career is easier (Zhang, et al., 2019). A study by Cherian and Daniel (2008) found that new teachers benefit from precise and ongoing support from their principals. Teachers require

instructional leadership, clear job expectations, guidelines for meeting school policies, and direct feedback from their principal. This support can be enhanced when the principal is visible in professional development and makes frequent, informal visits to the classroom.

2.5. The Role of the School and the School District

The school and the school district can also establish policies and support systems to provide support for novice teachers. Models for new teacher induction are frequently adopted to allow new teachers to become familiar with district policies and procedures. School districts offer a range of supports for new teachers starting with district-wide meetings on opening day for teachers. Some induction models include mentoring, professional development communities, peer observations, and workshops on issues such as grading, classroom management, and interactions with parents. These induction models offer support that increases new teacher retention (Ronfeldt, and McQueen, 2017). The PDS model that is described in this study allowed teacher candidates to participate in the district's new teacher induction experience and once employed in the district they continued participation. Participants indicated that this contributed to their continuing retention in the school.

3. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the PDS experience does strengthen the readiness for teachers to enter the classroom and increases their likelihood of retention in the career. However, the barriers to success in the career persist regardless of the type of teacher preparation and they should not be overlooked. Beginning teachers are accountable for increased student achievement, positive communication with parents, and ongoing improvement of instruction. Yet they also encounter challenges such as adapting to different school culture, feelings of isolation, lack of support, and uncertainty about job expectations. Those who prepare teachers and supervise novice teachers can provide interventions to help teachers adjust to the full range of realities of the profession. The collaborative structure of the PDS increases the likelihood that transition and induction will become a shared effort. The role of the principal as a strong instructional leader is most important. Mentoring and opportunities for professional development and collaboration can strengthen the necessary connections among colleagues. And, although it is often overlooked, a focus on wellness and mindfulness are important to consider. Future research

should focus on these variables, particularly through the incorporation of these strategies for support as a component and extension of the PDS partnership with P-12 schools.

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