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Teacher Leadership Network: Promoting Professional Collaboration

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The teaching profession is paying attention to the retention of teachers. Due to the current speculation of a looming teacher shortage (Burnette II, 2016) and the national annual cost to replace teachers, the profession cannot be complacent in regard to teacher retention. The attrition cost was estimated to be close to $5 billion eight years ago (Barnes, Crowe, & Schafer, 2007), and the cost could be even more now. With this in mind, we sought to investigate the effectiveness of an innovative strategy that could assist current candidates and completers to feel supported, so that they would remain in the teaching profession.

Professional collaboration is essential for beginning teachers to feel supported during their first years of teaching. Teachers need to feel a sense of belonging to each other and to their profession to help form a supportive community of lifelong learners that will be there when times get tough, and when individuals may think they are the only teachers who are struggling with such things as classroom management or differentiated instruction (Wong, 2001).

The Teacher Leadership Network (TLN) was created to promote professional growth and development, mentorship, leadership, and networking among our candidates, completers, and the greater educational professional community. It has been successful in promoting professional collaboration among emerging teachers and experienced educators, and it also has created leadership opportunities for participants. The program structure and results of this study will follow.

Theoretical Framework

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) states that people are motivated to achieve certain personal needs; as one need is fulfilled, they seek to move to the next level. Maslow's hierarchy contains five levels: physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization. When a basic need is unmet, people are motivated to fulfill that need as quickly as possible in order to progress to the higher-level needs, ultimately reaching self-actualization. This hierarchy can be applied to teaching (Benson, Crosier, & Parker, 2016). At each level of the hierarchy, issues related to classroom management and instruction are included, with self-actualization at the top. The levels for education are:

1. Expect students to do their best

2. Give students freedom to explore & discover on their own

3. Make learning meaningful--connect to "real" life

4. Plan lessons involving metacognitive activities

5. Get students involved in self-expressive projects

6. Allow students to be involved in creative activities & projects. (Benson, Crosier, & Parker, 2016, para. 9)

Applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to education helps operationalize the concept of teaching and teacher needs as individuals move through their careers. The TLN has provided the venue to explore the work of Benson et al., and it allows teachers with different levels of experience to share their struggles and receive assistance without the individuals feeling like they are ill-equipped for the profession. Moreover, the TLN has helped pre-service teachers understand that even seasoned teachers struggle with classroom problems similar to theirs. The more experienced teachers have discovered

strategies over time to address these issues, and they are able to share this knowledge with those beginning their careers.

Literature Review

According to Goldrick (2009), there are three phases to new teacher development: 1) pre-service education; 2) new teacher induction; and 3) career-long professional development (p. 2). Teacher candidates shift from thinking about and studying the art of teaching to planning instruction, implementing lessons, and addressing various daily classroom tasks and obstacles. The Teacher Leadership Network was created to provide professional networking opportunities for new and experienced educators. It was part of one Educator Preparation Provider's (EPP) continued effort to help promote professional growth and development as well as to address the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions that make an exceptional professional educator (NCATE, 2005). According to Garet, Michael, Porter, Desmoine, Birman, and Yoon (2001) "teachers learned more in teacher networks and study groups than with mentoring, [and] longer, sustained, and intensive professional development programs make a greater impact than shorter ones" (p. 925). New teacher and completer development should be a responsibility of both the Educator Preparation Provider (EPP) as well as school districts, and the TLN was an effort to be involved in that development process.

Methods

Data gathered for this study originated from multiple sources: notes gathered at TLN board meetings, which included whole group discussions as well as small group working sessions during TLN planning meetings; notes gathered at TLN events; and surveys that were administered at the conclusion of each TLN event. After the first TLN

meeting was documented, the analysis began (Maxwell, 1996). The multiple data sources were analyzed using a constant comparative qualitative assessment of dominant themes that emerged during the process. Constant comparison was used in order to chunk the data into meaning units (Peck, 1991). The chunks were coded according to overarching commonalities illustrated in the data. Analysis of the data reported in this study was done using an iterative process of pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding was done individually by four faculty members who then met and adjusted coding categories before coding a second time. Emergent themes and exemplars were then agreed upon by all four researchers in consultation. Results of the analysis were reported to board members of TLN and Kappa Delta Pi, which is an international honor society in the field of education that worked with the TLN to provide professional experiences for preservice teachers. The results of the analysis of the data reported to the board members were used as source data in working groups at the University to suggest improvements to the educator preparation experience.

Respondents were given a survey to complete at TLN event. It was a half-sheet of paper with three-questions. TLN board members collected the surveys at the door in order to achieve a response rate of 100% of attendees.

Program Structure

The TLN advisory board members include representation from the faculty, alumni, educators at large, and education students. Advisory board members guide the focus, activities, and outreach of the TLN, advise on the themes and formats of professional development events that occur three times a year, broaden the network of participating leaders, and mentor the next generation of educational leaders. Board

members meet monthly to gather information regarding current educational topics of interest and to plan upcoming and future events. Local activities coordinated by the TLN board provide access to national expertise, discussion and problem solving of timely and relevant issues in the field of education, and presentation of best practices in education.

Participants in the TLN activities include local school and school system educators, classroom teachers, teaching and curriculum coaches, community educators, current students in education programs, and completers. The TLN partnered with our national honor society in education, Kappa Delta Pi (KDP), to plan events that would be of interest to pre-service teachers as well. KDP is made up of education majors and minors who demonstrate excellence in education as well as leadership qualities. KDP members earn credits for attending professional development events, such as the ones co-hosted by TLN. This partnership between leadership boards allows for educators with varied classroom experience to collaborate and learn from each other's experiences.

Results

The data from the surveys administered at the TLN events were entered into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Comparisons were conducted to determine whether there were any statistically significant differences among the pre-license educators, educators with one to three years of experience, and educators with four or more years of experience. Respondents were asked to rank how the TLN could be helpful professionally. The choices were: promotes professional growth, provides opportunities for networking, improves collaboration on specific topics of interest for educators, provides a forum for more experienced teachers to "mentor" newer teachers, and provides leadership opportunities.

Lastly, respondents were asked to prioritize in what areas they believed new teachers needed continued support in the beginning years after being hired. The categories were differentiated instruction, classroom management, integration of the common core, integration of technology, and issues related to equity and social justice.

Data were compared from among the field notes taken in the TLN board meetings, planning meetings, the notes from the formal TLN events, and from the surveys that were administered at the conclusion of each TLN event. For instance, central themes emerged across each of the TLN planning meetings and formal events. New teachers needed continued support in differentiated instruction, common core integration, dealing with issues of equity and social justice, classroom management, general strategies to engage students in various learning activities, and assessment strategies.

Common Core State Standards and Differentiated Instruction

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were created to provide common language to explain what educators should be working toward in P-12 classrooms. Specially, the standards were designed to include rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher order skills (Marrongelle, Sztajn, & Smith, 2013). The CCSS language has shifted the focus of instruction away from the teacher and directed it toward the students as co-creators of content (Allyn, 2013). This new shift has caused some frustration with educators, as many students are not ready, or do not have the skills to take ownership over their learning. Teachers on the TLN board emphasized that students may not have the ability to create effective questions and seek answers, as their role in the classroom shifts from being the passive recipient of knowledge to an active

participant in knowledge gathering. Therefore, the question was raised at TLN board meetings as to how to encourage student ownership over their learning. This emerged as a pressing issue for both new and seasoned teachers. Moreover, because of the increased diversity in classrooms, teachers in this study talked about the urgent need to assess the skills of each student and develop multiple entry points and instruction strategies to meet the varied needs of these diverse learners.

Classroom management and Social Justice

Both pre-service and practicing teachers attending the TLN events continued to rank classroom management as a top concern. Members discussed that establishing and supporting positive student and teacher interactions in order to foster a meaningful learning community should be the foundation to any classroom management philosophy. In addition, they shared that although teacher-student relationships are crucial in the classroom, holding all students to high academic and behavioral expectations and making learning meaningful to every student were essential teaching methods that they believed leads to an equitable classroom environment. To achieve this essential goal, it was identified that organization, structure, and behavior expectations are needed in all classrooms in order for students to engage in learning; members did much sharing at board meetings and TLN events of strategies to reach this goal. However, classroom management remained to be the largest concern for educators attending TLN events and likely will be a topic for future meetings.

Many teachers furthered these classroom management discussions by adding that the increased diversity in their classrooms has led to misunderstandings and occasional classroom conflict. Research indicates that classroom management incidents may arise

more frequently in classroom where teachers and students do not share similar backgrounds, such as languages, ethnicities, and experiences (Milner & Tenore, 2010). Thus, the teachers in this study mentioned the importance of gaining an understanding of context and their students who make up the learning environment. This included a need for teachers to reflect on their own background and the role that it plays in their classroom management decisions.

Learning activities and assessment strategies

Well-structured, authentic, and collaborative lessons are essential for students to engage in the content; a well-managed learning environment permits this engagement to occur. Creating a classroom learning environment where instruction decisions are student driven is essential for student success. For example, TLN presenters shared it was essential to take into account formative assessments, learning styles, and language needs when planning instructional structures for lessons. In fact, it is crucial to create authentic lessons that take factor in personal interests and diverse backgrounds when helping every child meet grade-level standards. Teachers' use of formative assessment is exactly what determines the entry points and instructional strategies for students to be successful. TLN members emphasized that through multiple assessment measures (performance-based, formative, and summative) teachers will create an educational plan that will enhance student learning gains.

The surveys were administered in an effort to gain data directly from those who attended the TLN meetings versus from those on the board or in the planning sessions. There were 81 survey respondents. In an effort to determine if the responses differed based upon the educators' level of experience, individuals were asked to indicate if they

were a pre-license educator, educator with one to three years of experience, or an educator with four or more years of experience. Completer data were of special interest in order to guide future TLN topics and to evaluate the training priorities of our completers. Table 1 indicates the distribution of the 81 individuals who completed surveys at the TLN events.

Table 1

Respondents

Pre-license Educator	46
Educator with 1 to 3 Years of Experience	9
Educator with 4 or More Years of Experience	26
Total	81

A chi-square test of independence indicated there were no statistically significant differences in the survey responses based upon the identified years of experience ($p =$ .382, $df = 8$).

When examining the identified priorities of the 81 respondents for the areas of continued support that beginning teachers need after being hired, the top two responses were differentiated instruction (n = 58) and classroom management (n = 55). This was consistent with what emerged from the TLN board and planning meetings (See Table 2).

Table 2

In What Areas Do You Believe New Teachers Need Continued Support in the Beginning Years After Being Hired

	Selected as First Priority	Selected as First or Second Priority
Differentiated instruction	22	58
Classroom management	39	55
Integration of the Common Core	10	21
Integration of technology	5	17
Issues related to equity and social justice	5	10

The majority of the TLN attendees (50.6%) identified that promoting their professional growth was the first priority with which TLN meetings can assist. The other half of the responses were almost evenly divided among the other categories of "improves collaboration on specific topics of interest for educators" (14.8%), "provides opportunities for networking" (12.3%), "provides a forum for more experienced teachers to 'mentor' newer teachers," (11.1%). However, "provides leadership opportunities" was prioritized first by only 7.4% of respondents. This could be because the majority of participants (32.1%) had under four or more years of experience in the field of education and were not yet thinking about assuming leadership roles in their schools (See Table 3).

Table 3

This Meeting Can Be Helpful in the Following Ways

	Selected as First Priority	Selected as First or Second Priority
Promotes professional growth	41	57
Provides opportunities for networking	10	23
Improves collaboration on specific topics of interest for educators	12	35
Provides a forum for more experienced teachers to "mentor" newer teachers	9	29
Provides leadership opportunities	6	10

Discussion

The TLN is an example of one professional network that aims to promote professional growth and development, mentorship, and networking among educators. The TLN has been successful in many ways; not only improving teacher performance and professional collaboration but also in helping new and experienced teachers develop best practices in working with an ever increasing diverse population of students. In addition, data gathered from the TLN planning meetings are shared to enhance others' success and to inform educator preparation.

New teachers need continued support in differentiated instruction, a more of restorative justice approach classroom management, common core integration, working with an ever-increasing diverse population of students, general strategies to engage students in various learning activities, and assessment. There are few times in a teacher's career that are as formational as the first three years in the classroom (Goldrick, 2009).

Beginning teachers are fully responsible for the classroom and the student learning that takes place in it. They are learning how to make the theory they learned in their educator preparation program become implemented into real daily practice. Collaboration and non-judgmental discussions with other professionals during this time allows new teachers to acquire practices that have been effective in other classrooms. For both pre-service and practicing teachers, areas of concern, such as classroom management and differentiation, were normalized throughout discussions at TLN events. Many felt validated that others were also sharing these concerns; they were not alone. By blending groups of different levels of experience, members were able to learn about and normalize the teaching continuum. At any point in a teacher's career, classroom challenges continue to arise.

The focus on professional development, networking, and mentorship provides for immediate relevance and support to current and emerging educational leaders, and the TLN is an example of how to create successful professional collaboration opportunities among educators of varied experience.

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