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## Cultivating an Online Network for Mentoring Preservice and In-Service Teachers

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### Abstract

This report details the work of two initial teacher certification programs at a major university in Kentucky that are implementing two innovative strategies for preservice teachers to network, build community, and grow in their practice. The utilization of Slack, a free online communication platform, has proven successful in getting preservice teachers to share ideas, pose and respond to professional questions, and program information dissemination. The use of a NIC (Networked Improvement Community) is a grant funded endeavor that brought together preservice teachers, their cooperating teachers, and university faculty members to create a professional learning community where a problem of practice was identified and PDSA (plan, do, study, act) cycles were utilized to improve classroom practices.

## **Cultivating an Online Network for Mentoring Preservice and In-Service Teachers**

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We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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### **Abstract**

This report details the work of two initial teacher certification programs at a major university in Kentucky that are implementing two innovative strategies for preservice and early-career teachers (those in their first two years) to network, build community, and grow in their practice. The use of a NIC (Networked Improvement Community) is a grant funded endeavor that brings together preservice teachers, their cooperating teachers, and university faculty members to create a professional learning community where a problem of practice is identified and PDSA (plan, do, study, act) cycles are utilized to improve classroom practices. The utilization of Slack, a free online communication platform, is proving successful in getting preservice teachers to share ideas, pose and respond to professional questions, and ease of program information dissemination.

### **Statement of the Issue**

The first years of teaching can be very difficult. Approximately 12% of teachers in the United States leave the profession within their initial three years of teaching (Gray & Taie, 2015), more than 44% leave in their first five years (Ingersoll, Merrill, Stuckey, Collins, 2012), the average national teacher turnover rate is approximately 8% a year (Sucher et al., 2016), and the financial costs alone for replacing one teacher are estimated at \$20,000 or more (Barnes et al., 2008). Studies over the past thirty years have routinely shown a high attrition rate among teachers in their first five years of teaching (Hafner & Owings, 1991; Ingersoll, 2003; Gray & Taie, 2015), and this high teacher turnover can be detrimental to student achievement, especially in schools with high numbers of minority students (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2012).

Teacher education programs have been asked to respond quickly and innovatively to many challenges over the last several years including the aforementioned teacher attrition issue, large scale teacher shortages, and the lack of funding for teacher support programs, all of which were exacerbated by the move to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. One current and impactful change that drove the two programmatic changes discussed in this paper was the elimination of Kentucky's state funded program to support and mentor early career teachers. Without an organized, teacher support system, program faculty feared that preservice and early career teachers would begin to feel disconnected and isolated. Research shows that early-career teachers often feel isolated and those feelings of isolation are often associated with teachers leaving the field (Carroll & Fulton, 2004; Schlichte et al., 2005). Without a statewide program of early career teacher support, program graduates were left to rely on districts to provide mentoring, which meant varying levels of quality and effectiveness, if a program existed at all.

## **Review of Literature**

A national survey of teachers found that a significant number of beginning teachers identified involvement in professional learning communities and coaching/mentoring as important support mechanisms for professional growth (Goe, L., Wylie, E. C., Bosso, D., & Olson, D., 2017), and research also shows that new teachers who do not receive mentoring and other forms of support leave at more than two times the rate of those who do (Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Bishop, J., & Darling-Hammond, L., 2016). Working from this literature, researchers on this project chose to prioritize establishing professional learning communities for support for preservice teachers in two initial certification programs with the hopes these communities would become established during the preservice years and continue to support them into the early years of their careers.

## **Methodology**

In an attempt to create these professional learning communities, two strategies were utilized across two programs at a flagship university in Kentucky.

The first strategy was the implementation of NICs used to identify and attack a problem of practice through PDSA (plan, do, study, act) cycles. The NIC work is a grant-funded, collaborative, multi-university effort, so it allows students to network nationwide with student teachers outside of their program, share ideas, and be part of a national effort aimed at supporting early career teachers and improving classroom practice. This strategy was implemented in the secondary mathematics education programs across four universities and included approximately 50 preservice teachers in their senior year, their cooperating teachers, and close to 20 university constituents. NICs were set up and established by university faculty such as methods instructors and program chairs as a way to foster professional relationships between preservice teachers and

their cooperating teachers, create space for peer to peer support, and work collaboratively to improve classroom practices during the practicum and student teaching semesters. NICs met three to four times a semester, with a large focus of those meetings being to teach preservice teachers how to collaborate in a professional setting in a way that directly improves their practice. Berry and Berry (2017) state that, “For teachers, a key aspect of the [National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)] Professionalism Principle is recognizing that their own learning is never finished and that they must build a culture of professional collaboration that is driven by a sense of interdependence and collective responsibility” (p. 155). Researchers believed that teaching preservice teachers how to collaborate and network professionally, use PDSA cycles to combat classroom issues, and rely on a variety of constituents for support would provide them with a professional development strategy that would be beneficial and supportive throughout their careers. To date, researchers are in year two of using the NICs; the preservice teachers involved last year are now benefiting from these networks as first year teachers, and a new cohort of preservice teachers began their NIC work at the start of this academic year.

The second strategy to establish a system of support was the utilization of Slack, used locally in both the elementary and secondary mathematics teacher education programs. These programs, combined, consist of approximately 140 senior year preservice teachers each year. Slack channels for distinct groups of students such as those in particular classes or graduating at the same time were created by program faculty members and students were encouraged to use the space as a way to share ideas, ask questions, and establish professional networks. University supervisors and faculty members also utilized this platform as a way to quickly and collectively disseminate information to students, post professional questions to elicit student responses, facilitate professional discussions, share ideas and support, and network among students. Slack

has been utilized in these two programs for three years now, allowing over 350 preservice and in-service teachers to network professionally in this online community.

A few examples of prompts posted by university faculty during the preservice year include:

- *What has been your biggest adjustment moving from your first eight week placement to the second one?*
- *Share one teaching practice you have learned so far from your mentor teacher?*
- *What was your biggest success during solo week? What will you change for the second solo week?*

A few examples of prompts posted by students during the preservice and first inservice years include:

- *My students are struggling with place value, any ideas for helping them visualize this?*
- *What ideas do others have for independent work during guided reading groups?*
- *I wanted to share this economy/banking system used for PBIS shared with me by a mentor teacher in my building....*

Both qualitative and quantitative data were used in this work to gauge the impact level of these two strategies. Surveys and focus groups were used in the NIC work so students could share some pre/post thoughts on their relationships with their cooperating teacher and peers. They were also given the opportunity to talk openly about the NIC meetings and their work on the problem of practice and how it impacted them directly at their particular sites. NIC meetings were recorded and the recordings were used to identify common themes, questions, and topics of discussion. Slack transcripts were also analyzed to identify common themes and the overall trends with Slack users from the two programs. The most participation came from sharing ideas after teachers sought out advice on challenging issues they were facing. Generally, a teacher posts a question or topic and an average of five to eight peers respond with feedback. Supervisors and teacher mentors are also able to provide additional research-based strategies and guidance. During program exit interviews, students reported positive feedback about the cohesiveness and community Slack provided. They also reported that they appreciated the



simplicity of its use and that it felt more like social media and less like a formal way to communicate such as email. Formal and informal feedback over the course of the year was also used to guide the use of Slack as well as guide the NIC meetings so that both efforts were customized to the needs of the students in the program. For example, if topics came up that needed to be addressed such as classroom management or applying for jobs, resources could be shared or time could be spent in discussion on the current needs of the students.

### **Initial Findings**

Initial findings show that both the NICs and the Slack communities have been beneficial at keeping cohorts of students connected after they scatter across the state or country taking their first teaching positions. The collaboration is continuing, they are sharing successes, asking for advice, and continue to use the network as a place for professional support and development. Both strategies also fostered closer professional relationships and have set up networking opportunities that have never existed before. Both have also given students the opportunity to engage as both a preservice teacher and then come back as a first-year teacher to support the next cohort of preservice teachers. Both strategies have given all the various constituents a much-needed pulse on how the year is going, especially since face-to-face contact and in-person site visits were limited or non-existent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, they have created a professional network that students feel is accessible day or night, where support is readily available without judgment or evaluation.

The NICs specifically have provided undergraduate students with a teacher research opportunity that they would not have gotten otherwise and fostered a much tighter and more meaningful professional relationship with their cooperating teacher and university faculty. They have taught pre-service teachers how to identify a problem of practice in their classroom and use

collaboration and networking in conjunction with a process of iterative design to make classroom improvements. They have allowed preservice and in-service teachers to network outside of their local programs, and have given them access to a wealth of knowledge and resources across multiple universities. The NICs helped students bring research to practice and work through classroom challenges in a structured and collaborative way that allows mistakes to be learning opportunities.

Researchers have seen Slack grow from a place to ask for resume tips, to a place to share lesson plan ideas, followed by the showcasing of first day of teaching photos, and when used by in-service teachers as a place to share professional development opportunities, daily tips, and a way to encourage and motivate one another through the often challenging first years of teaching. Slack has given university constituents an easy way to contact practicing teachers to ask them to come back to serve on program level panels, or as program faculty, to work with current student teachers on the next round of NICs, or serve as an embed partner starting to support pre-service teachers as a beginning career teacher. Many of our courses are embedded in local schools where our graduates are teaching. These partnerships allow continued collaboration as we provide PD to schools and they also begin to phase into the role of mentors to our teacher candidates.

### **Relevance**

These efforts are relevant because they are in response to timely and critical issues that early career teachers are facing, and support from university partners during this time has proven to be essential. University faculty are often the students' teachers, advisors, role models, and student teaching supervisors and are one of the closest means of support that early career teachers have. That being said, another issue that has been caused by budget cuts is that faculty plates are becoming increasingly full. Any efforts to streamline processes and delegate tasks to

other important constituents (such as cooperating teachers) while still being able to maintain the integrity of the programs are welcomed. In the broader picture, finding new and innovative ways to support early career teachers that are cost effective, technologically based, and can be easily replicated across the country could really make an impact on the effectiveness of teacher education programs, early career teacher support, and teacher retention.

Both efforts are aligned with successful (exemplary) practices for supporting early career teachers. There are many programs across the nation that support new teachers such as state funded programs, district level mentoring programs, and NOYCE programs and are all based on the idea of professional communities of practice. Our work with Slack and NICs has the same goal in mind, to create a professional community during the preservice years that will serve as a meaningful support system into the early years of a teacher's career, making a positive impact on their longevity in the field.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

These responses to challenges may turn into the reshaping of teacher education programs, such as putting more responsibilities on the students and their cooperating teachers. For example, students can be tasked with creating and maintaining their professional networks, and cooperating teachers can help student teachers with selecting a problem of practice and conducting teacher research in a systematic way to improve their practice. This would not only build self-efficacy within the program and support the social/emotional needs of the students, it will also help with the decreased capacity of university faculty to support students. During the pandemic, policies that were thought to be ironclad changed and became flexible. For example, student teaching was able to be done online, student teachers were able to be paid to be substitute teachers, certification tests were offered virtually, deadlines were extended, entrance exams were

waived, and state testing was canceled. One outcome of this work is that teacher educators must be able to think innovatively and quickly, be open to new strategies and ideas, be responsive to current events, and welcome change. Additionally, this work has implications for policy makers because the world has seen firsthand that teachers have been able to be flexible and adaptable to fast changing times and conditions. Policies should also have flexibility for unforeseen circumstances and should include a layer of professional trust within our teachers to do what is best for students. Funding and support programs should be available for early career teachers to show that their success is of utmost importance. The public perception of teachers is arguably at a peak after their flexibility to manage various modalities of learning, and this can be leveraged to create policies that are flexible, adaptable, and that put some professional trust back into teachers themselves.

Other programs may want to replicate these efforts, and both models are easily transferable to other locations whether they are teaching and learning in person or remotely. Establishing professional networks via Slack, creating and fostering NICs and teacher research within their programs, and being more intentional about early career teacher support are concrete outcomes that can be shared from this work that are easily replicable and transferable. Not only did this work provide stronger professional connections for preservice and early career teachers, it has enabled university partners to keep closer ties with recent graduates, and provides a promising outlook on how meaningful teacher support can lead to positive changes in teacher retention.

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