

Ready and Willing: Second-Stage Teachers and Professional Collaboration

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Introduction

As teachers encounter new challenges, whether in dealing with new curricula, meeting the needs of English Language Learners, or implementing new pedagogical practices, they often look to professional learning opportunities to support their teaching practice. Yet, there is widespread agreement that most professional development is ineffective (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Lieberman, 1996; Little, 1999). Recent reforms spurred by the *No Child Left Behind Act* have moved schools and districts towards a tighter coupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1978) of professional development activities with instructional goals and accountability measures. While much research exists on the benefits of support and professional learning for novice teachers (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004; Kardos, 2004), little research investigates how teachers in the second stage of their career (4-10 years of experience) experience professional learning opportunities.

This paper focuses on the professional learning experiences of ten second-stage teachers. In particular, it examines which of these experiences the teachers believe have helped them to improve their teaching during this stage of their career. These participants described a variety of sources for new learning. However, each participant cited as a powerful learning experience the opportunity to open up his or her practice for review by colleagues, either through work with an instructional coach or through work with a community of colleagues on a grade or subject-area team.

Literature Context

The recent introduction of standards and accountability placed new demands on schools and teachers, bringing with it the need for a new kind of learning by teachers. Professional

development, carefully crafted, can enable teachers to gain new knowledge and skills, thus increasing their capacity to meet student needs as well as the external demands of school reform (Elmore, 2004). For example, they might learn how to use student achievement data to inform instruction or how to help all students in a heterogeneous class meet a performance standard. Instructional improvement¹, thus, is central to school reform, yet discerning the right means of achieving improvement has often proven elusive.

Traditionally, teachers have encountered ineffective professional development activities that are unrelated to their needs (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Little, 1993; Smylie, 1996). University-based courses, one-day workshops, or visits from external consultants frequently prove to be “intellectually superficial, disconnected from deep issues of curriculum and learning, fragmented, and noncumulative” (Ball & Cohen, 1999, citing Cohen & Hill, 1997; see also Lieberman, 1996; Little, 1993). Research has shown that such approaches to professional development do little to improve teachers’ practice (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Little, 1993; Smylie, 1996). Unfortunately, most teachers encounter this type of disconnected professional development (Borko, 2004; Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002).

Professional Development in a New Era

Many scholars still assert the need for new approaches to professional learning that are responsive to both schools’ and teachers’ needs. Such approaches may take various forms.

Teachers may examine student work together, seeking to discern areas where further instruction

¹ In order to define instructional improvement for the purpose of this paper, I draw on the work of Elmore and Burney (1997). In writing about large-scale instructional improvement, they describe “system-wide efforts to improve curriculum, pedagogy, and student performance in basic academic content areas such as reading and mathematics” (p. 2). Since the unit of analysis in my work is individual teachers, I define their instructional improvement simply as focused efforts to improve curriculum, pedagogy, and student performance.

is needed. Coaches may provide ongoing support for teachers in their classrooms. Groups of teachers may work together on pedagogy through collaborative lesson study, or teachers may choose to conduct a targeted study based on their own goals for improvement (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Fernandez, 2002; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004; Lieberman, 1996; Little, 1999).

The multiple new models of professional development (see for example, Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002; Elmore, 2004; Hawley & Valli, 1999) all point to the need for teachers to learn in new ways so that they can meet the new demands of their work.

Researchers argue that teachers learn best when learning opportunities are “embedded in the social organization of schools” (Little, 1993, p. 147) and collaborative (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Lieberman, 1996; Rosenholtz, Bassler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 1986; Smylie, 1996), when professional development is school-based and grounded in data (Hawley & Valli, 1999), when learning is ongoing (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Lieberman, 1996), and when the learning actively engages teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002; Hawley & Valli, 1999).

One new model of professional development, peer coaching, has been widely adopted. Although the implementation of this approach varies across settings, and little empirical research exists to support its effectiveness (Neufeld & Roper, 2003), coaching is increasingly used as a means of helping teachers learn new instructional strategies in the context of their own schools and classrooms. Coaching provides teachers with the opportunity to work collaboratively with a skilled colleague about issues grounded in their daily work with students (Neufeld & Roper, 2003). A teacher’s actual practice provides the data for conversations between the coach and

teacher, enabling the teacher to learn new approaches to instruction based on the specifics of her class of students. Coaching is an ongoing, iterative process, because coaches work with teachers on new instructional strategies, which teachers then integrate into their teaching for subsequent review and feedback with the coach (Neufeld & Roper, 2003). The model actively engages both the teacher and the coach in the process of instructional improvement.

Professional communities, too, have emerged in many schools to provide teachers with site-based opportunities for learning by collaborating with their colleagues (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, 2006). Within these communities, which may take the form of a grade-level or subject-area team, teachers work together on instructional improvement (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Specifically, they build collective knowledge through openly discussing their teaching practices; collaborate on the development of learning standards and instructional practice; and review student work and achievement data in order to revise their teaching to best meet students' needs (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). The work of effective professional communities results in instructional improvement and therefore improved student achievement (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986).

Professional Learning Opportunities: Novices versus Second-Stage Teachers

The novice stage of teaching has been targeted heavily with support through a variety of professional development offerings. High rates of attrition among new teachers have increased attention to the causes of this attrition and ways to retain novices (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Researchers have found that high-quality induction experiences are positively related to new teacher retention (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). Thus, many professional development efforts in

schools and districts are directed toward novices in order to improve their induction experiences and in the hopes of retaining them. However, even when novices encounter induction programs, most provide only one or two years of support, leaving teachers to seek out further professional learning on their own.

Once teachers move from the novice stage into the second stage of their career (years 4-10), the targeted support that they may have received as novices drops off and they become part of the “rest” of teachers, all receiving the same types of professional development, which is likely to be low-quality and disconnected from their day-to-day work (Borko, 2004; Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002). Little research exists on the professional learning experiences of second-stage teachers – both what they experience and what they find effective. Yet this is a group of teachers who continue to be at risk for leaving the profession. In fact, teachers with 4 and 5 years of experience are at risk for leaving the profession at rates similar to those associated with novices (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Second-stage teachers also are an important focus of research because of the greater expertise they bring to their work (Murnane & Phillips, 1981; Rockoff, 2003), thus making them an asset to their schools. Yet these teachers are not all experts, and in fact, they too need meaningful professional development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Also, they often experience waning energy and interest in their work, bringing them into a “danger zone” during which they may consider leaving the profession (Huberman, 1993). Understanding the types of learning that these teachers find most valuable will inform efforts to attend to their unique development needs, to increase their effectiveness with their students, and to retain them in the profession

This study addresses the need to attend to second-stage teachers’ experiences of professional learning. It seeks to expand what is known about the kind of learning these teachers

value and adds to the empirical literature on new approaches to professional development. The data, drawn from interviews with ten second-stage teachers, bring to light the learning experiences that these teachers found most valuable at this point in their career. They provide insight into two types of school-based, interactive professional development: peer coaching and professional communities (grade and subject-area teams).

The Study

This study was conducted with a purposive sample of ten teachers from one urban district. All teachers worked in schools serving kindergarten through 8th grade. The district has a unique profile, serving a racially heterogeneous student population, which also spans the range of socio-economic status. The district has a per-pupil expenditure of over \$15,000 and a reputation for attracting experienced teachers who have been trained to teach at selective institutions. The district is highly sought as a place of employment for teachers. With some restrictions for racial and socio-economic balance, parents choose the schools their children will attend. The schools vary in their instructional programs and effectiveness, as measured by student achievement data. Some schools take a more progressive approach to instruction, while others implement a more traditional curriculum.

The district is gradually implementing a comprehensive literacy reform, in which teachers receive site-based instruction on new literacy practices, as well as follow-up coaching. Teachers learn how to implement Reading and Writing Workshop in both classes and coaching sessions led by their school-based coaches. This approach to literacy instruction focuses on teaching students the discrete skills used by proficient readers and writers, which they then practice in self-directed, self-chosen reading and writing projects. Teachers receive ongoing

support for the implementation of this literacy model from their coaches, who observe them and provide regular feedback. Teachers in the sample experienced a wide variety of learning opportunities, but they all found themselves working within a context that urged them to learn new approaches to their craft and to continuously improve their practice.

My research was guided by the following research questions:

- What experiences, if any, do ten teachers in the second stage of their career identify when reflecting on their improvement as teachers?
 - How, specifically, do these teachers explain the usefulness of these experiences for their own instructional improvement?
 - What characteristics of professional learning are important for these teachers and why?
- What, if any, relationship exists between these teachers' professional learning and improvement and their intentions to remain in the profession?

Participants (see Table I, below) were chosen with a number of criteria in mind. All were in the second stage of teaching, having four to ten years of teaching experience. Remarkably, finding second-stage teachers was quite a challenge in this urban district. The majority of teachers at most school sites, I learned, were either novices or veterans, perhaps indicating high rates of attrition for novice teachers recently in this district. This left only a small pool of possible participants. From this pool I looked for teachers with varying years of experience as well as teachers who taught a mix of grade levels. Ten teachers agreed to be a part of the sample summarized in Table I.

Table I. Participant Information

Participant Name	Grade/Subject Area	Years Teaching
Maya	2 nd Grade	10
Annie	2 nd Grade	5
Heather	Kindergarten	5
Hugh	Middle School Reading	5
Jane	3 rd /4 th Grade	5
Kira	7 th Grade Humanities	7
Colleen	5 th /6 th Grade	6
Jenna	1 st /2 nd Grade	8
Isabelle	7 th /8 th Grade Humanities	8
Liz	4 th Grade	9

Each participating teacher was interviewed for 60-90 minutes, using a protocol of open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). All interviews were transcribed and coded using codes drawn from the literature on teacher learning and professional development, as well as codes representing themes that emerged prominently from the data. Following the initial round of coding, I created matrices based on patterns that I discovered within the data. This allowed me to identify themes and to trace them across participants. Using cross-case analyses, I examined the dominant themes within the data.

Throughout the analysis, I brought my work to my study group and to other members of the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. Their insights helped me to hone my findings and argument and to attend to nuances within the data that had not been initially apparent. Through the iterative process of returning to the data at multiple points in the analytic process, as

well as receiving feedback from my colleagues, I was able to work to ensure interpretive and theoretical validity.

FINDINGS

Teachers in this study were eager to learn new instructional approaches and to improve their practice. Although much of the literature paints teachers as being reluctant to change (Achinstein, 2002; Sikes, 1992), all ten participants looked favorably on opportunities for growth and seemed to embrace the attendant changes in their practice. They described being at a stage in their career where they had mastered the fundamentals of teaching, and said they were comfortable with classroom management and organization. Having mastered what they termed the “basics,” they were looking for ways to improve their instructional practice.

Participants described various learning sources that they believed helped them improve their practice, ranging from large workshops to informal conversations with colleagues to individual, personal reflection. Notably, all of the teachers described learning experiences that required them to open up their practice for observation or critique from colleagues. Teachers reported that these learning experiences helped them to improve their practice. They believed that challenging the norm of privacy, traditionally held dear within the teaching profession (Lortie, 1975), was an approach to instructional improvement. Participants shared their practice with colleagues in two primary ways: via coaching relationships with peer coaches and through professional communities, comprised of grade-level or subject-area colleagues. Within the sample, each participant reported being in a coaching relationship, a professional community, or both.

I define coaching, based on participants' descriptions, as work with an expert peer to implement new teaching practices. Specifically, coaches conduct observations and provide follow-up feedback to teachers. They help teachers to learn and refine new, content-specific strategies and often help teachers to implement a school's reform plan (Neufeld & Roper, 2003).

I use the term "professional communities" to encompass participants' descriptions of collaborating with colleagues formally or informally, working with a grade-level or subject-area team, or working together with teachers across schools. In contrast to coaching, there is no designated expert within a professional community. Instead, teachers collectively "build and manage knowledge" in order to create shared, effective teaching practices (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, p. 5).

I begin this discussion with an analysis of the ways in which participants spoke about their readiness to work on their instruction at this point in their career. I will then describe participants' experiences with coaching and professional communities, illuminating what teachers said they experienced as a result of these interactive learning experiences. I discuss outcomes of two kinds: changes in teaching practice and changes in teacher beliefs. After describing the two types of outcomes experienced by participants, I discuss possible links between participants' professional learning experiences and their projected tenure in the profession. Following a discussion of my findings, I conclude with the implications of this research for school and district leaders.

Moving to the Second Stage of Teaching

All of the participants described their experiences in the second stage of their career as being markedly different from those of their novice years. They said they now had a sense of

their work and had begun to feel competent and confident as teachers. As Annie said, “Oh, *this* is what teaching is about!” She said her first few years in the classroom had been a time when she was “Just...trying to pull it together.” In her fourth year, though, she thought to herself, ““Oh, I get [it] – I feel like I’m in my groove.”” With this sentiment came a new confidence in her ability to “reach every student” within the “huge spectrum” represented in her class.

Many others shared a similar feeling of comfort and confidence with their teaching abilities at this point in their career. Isabelle, an eighth grade humanities teacher, spoke of how her first few years as a teacher were “focused on what the teacher’s doing,” whereas at this point in her career, “I’m focused on and look much more at what the kids are doing.” Maya, another second grade teacher, described this shift as “delightful,” noting that by year five or six of her career, “you’ve gotten so used to systems and routines and all of the craziness that can happen during the day that you don’t really have a problem dealing with it.” And Jenna, a first- and second-grade teacher, stated simply that by her fifth year, “I don’t want to say I *knew* [emphasis hers] everything, but I was feeling very confident.”

The notion of being “in my groove,” the feelings of “delight,” and the ability to relax and focus on one’s students as opposed to one’s self all depict teachers who have moved beyond the survival mode that characterizes the experiences of many novice teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). These expressions of ease with certain elements of their teaching is consistent with empirical work that notes a higher level of expertise exhibited by second-stage teachers (and other more veteran teachers) as compared to novices (Murnane & Phillips, 1981; Rockoff, 2003). These teachers, like others, realized that not only were they at a different point in their career than during their novice years, but they also had qualitatively different experiences of this career stage. They reported that they were now ready to make changes in their instructional practice.

Colleen exemplified this desire to focus on improving instructional practice, explaining that after her novice years, “I was ready to hear and see and take in other things that would help my teaching.” She described how the first few years of her career were spent learning how to “deal with kids,” which made “the academic stuff” a secondary focus. However, after gaining facility with managing her students, not only did Colleen feel the confidence and competence characteristic of others’ experiences of the second stage, but also she was ready to focus explicitly on improving her instructional practice.

Jenna, a first- and second-grade teacher, described a similar dynamic. Now that she “had [her] classroom management down,” she was able to focus her energies on the curriculum – something she was able to do in collaboration with a supportive grade-level team. She described the ways that work with her grade team allowed her to think carefully about curriculum and how best to shape it to meet the diverse needs of her first- and second-grade students. For Jenna, this intensive curricular work was only possible because managing her classroom no longer required so much energy.

Participants’ newly-gained sense of ease at this point in their career gave rise to a desire to look at and improve their practice in new ways. They were ready to work on their instruction and to figure out ways to most effectively meet their students’ academic needs. Remarkably, all ten participants described adopting strategies for instructional improvement that involved opening up their practice to colleagues, either through observations or conversations about their practice, and engaging in collective efforts to improve their instruction.

Learning in Service of Instructional Improvement

In charting a continuum of learning to teach, Sharon Feiman-Nemser (2001) notes that quality teaching is dependent on teachers' having the opportunity to learn "in and from their practice" and that, in order to enhance students' learning, schools must offer "powerful learning opportunities to teachers" (p. 1013). In what seems to be an exception to the norm, participants in this study were afforded such learning opportunities. By and large, they described such learning as a result of working with instructional coaches and working in professional communities, two opportunities provided by their schools and district. Importantly, these learning experiences met what these teachers said they needed at this career stage: learning opportunities focused on what Colleen called "the academic stuff." Remarkably, all of the participants found "powerful learning opportunities," as called for by Feiman-Nemser, within their work settings.

Participants' learning produced outcomes in two distinct domains. First, they reported various ways in which their professional learning experiences led to instructional improvement. These included learning new teaching practices and revising or tuning current teaching practices. Participants also described how their professional learning experiences affected their beliefs. Some teachers experienced a fundamental shift in their beliefs catalyzed by their learning experiences. They saw the work of teaching or their students' capacities in new ways. Other teachers discovered that their new professional learning experiences fit the ideal they had long held for working with colleagues. For these teachers, working with a coach or professional community was a realization of their hope that collaborative learning would be an essential part of their professional experiences. The learning that participants described, both in the domains of

practice and beliefs, may ultimately affect the retention of these teachers and others who are in the second stage of their career.

Learning with Colleagues

All of the participants in this study described opportunities for professional learning that were deeply satisfying to them. Both peer coaching and professional communities, the most frequently cited learning sources by those in the sample, required participants to open their once-private classroom practice to scrutiny and consideration by others. Participants described their experiences learning from coaches and professional communities that were embedded in their work settings (Elmore, 2004; Hawley & Valli, 1999). They had time set aside during the official workday to work with coaches and, for the majority of participants, to work with grade-level or subject-area teams. Moreover, these learning experiences were collaborative – a characteristic that many believe is essential to teachers’ ongoing learning (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Lieberman, 1996; Rosenholtz, Bassler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 1986; Smylie, 1996) yet is rarely found within school settings (Borko, 2004). Importantly, as participants in these experiences, the teachers placed a high level of trust in their colleagues, which they said was a key factor in their professional learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In what follows, I explore participants’ descriptions of how their professional learning led to changes in their teaching practice.

Outcomes Related to Teaching Practice

The second-stage teachers in this study had reached a point in their career when they wanted to focus on improving, as one teacher said, “the academic stuff.” They used professional

learning as an opportunity to build a repertoire of what they believed to be effective teaching practices. Having already mastered “the basics” of classroom management, they were now building the academic components of this repertoire. Coaching and professional communities played a role in the development of their teaching practice in two specific ways. First, some participants learned and adopted new practices to add to their repertoire, based on their professional learning experiences. Others tuned, refined, or dropped practices that they had relied on heavily in the past when they found that those practices were no longer effective based on what they learned from collegial exchanges with coaches or professional communities.

Learning New Teaching Practices

Working with coaches and professional communities helped some participants to learn entirely new ways to teach particular parts of their curriculum. This might mean learning how to teach social studies using overarching, guiding questions as opposed to teaching only discrete facts in a chronological fashion. Or, it might mean learning how to let students’ interests and abilities guide their work in reading and writing as they chose what book to read and what to write about, rather than assigning one book to the entire class or asking students to write in response to prepared topics or writing prompts. Participants who learned new ways to teach based on their work with coaches and professional communities explained how these collegial exchanges supported their learning and how they changed their practice. The experiences of Heather and Colleen provide examples of how participants said they learned and implemented new teaching practices based on their work with coaches or professional communities.

Heather, a kindergarten teacher, explained how a literacy coach taught her a new literacy curriculum and then how she worked with her grade team to understand how to implement that

new curriculum. At the time of her interview Heather, along with others, was learning about balanced literacy (an approach to literacy instruction that blends phonics and whole language; see, for example, Adams, 1990) from her school-based coach. They learned how to use a workshop approach to teach both the familiar “rules” for reading and writing (sound-symbol correspondence, basic punctuation such as capital letters and periods) along with more authentic reading and writing experiences (students reading basic-level books and writing short stories on their own). Heather and her peers began to try out these approaches to teaching reading and writing in their classrooms. She spoke of how this new approach differed radically from her previous approach to literacy, in which she had taught reading and writing as part of her thematic instruction about topics such as families or nature. Given the wholesale change in her literacy instruction, Heather found the support of her coach to be invaluable. She described “having our literacy coach come observe” and then “follow up” with feedback about how to improve her implementation. Heather struggled to implement the various components of balanced literacy and found her coach to be a valuable resource in her learning process. She saw her coach as “very involved. She’s right there,” which gave her a sense of support as she was learning the new literacy practices. She noted the value of learning concrete approaches from her coach, such as how to store the materials for specific lessons in marked ziplock bags.

In order to meet the challenge of fully implementing the new literacy practices in the upcoming school year, Heather worked with the other teacher at her grade level to “map out” their literacy instruction. They figured out ways to help students choose books that were appropriate to their reading levels and how to support students’ independent reading of these books. This would allow them time to work directly with small groups, where they could focus on skills such as decoding, reading with proper intonation, and comprehension. Working with

her teammate helped Heather to see how using balanced literacy was actually possible.

Reflecting on their plans, she noted that the next year, literacy would be “less of a management nightmare” and ultimately “really fun.”

Working with a team enabled Colleen to learn new approaches to teaching social studies. She and her colleagues learned to use the Teaching for Understanding Framework (TFU), which helped them shape their social studies instruction around guiding questions and understanding goals, as opposed to discrete skills. This approach emphasizes the use of an overarching question and understanding goals related to that question to guide the social studies curriculum. Collaboratively, teachers plan learning activities and assessments for students to demonstrate what they have learned related to the guiding questions and understanding goals. Colleen said that working with a team on this new approach to instruction was useful because it helped her “gain practice and understanding” of TFU.

Colleen thought that the TFU framework “was a nice fit” for her own teaching philosophy. She found it useful to discuss strategies with her team as she introduced TFU in her classroom. She also knew that those on her team “had an open door policy” and she could always turn to them if she had questions or needed support. She noted that, as a result of her collaborative work, she learned “how to use those understanding goals.” Colleen provided the following guiding question as an example of an understanding goal: “How does geography play a part in a thriving civilization?” Whereas in the past she might have taught her students a conglomeration of facts on a given social studies subject, Colleen, through this work with her team, learned the importance of using a guiding question as an “anchor to help kids focus.” Team collaboration ultimately supported Colleen in using TFU as a framework for teaching social

studies where, instead of focusing on discrete facts, her lessons “focus on that one understanding [goal].”

Refining and Tuning Existing Teaching Practices

Coaching and professional communities provided some participants an opportunity to learn ways to revise their existing teaching practices. Conversations with a coach or with peers helped them to see ways that they could refine and tune their current approaches. For example, a teacher might refine her writing instruction by having students share drafts of their essays with each other for peer feedback rather than having them work alone on revising their writing. Or it might mean learning new ways to organize class discussions that let students lead and facilitate. Revising existing teaching practices, for these participants, meant taking an existing practice and improving upon it, as opposed to replacing it with an entirely new approach. In what follows, I use the experiences of Jane, Jenna, and Maya to illustrate how work with a professional community or coach led them to refine and tune their existing teaching practice.

Jane, a third- and fourth-grade teacher, described how working with her grade-level team helped her to refine her instruction so that it was more collaborative and had a better balance of structure and creativity. At her previous grade level, she described working with her team as “tense” and unproductive. That team was unable to help Jane in her struggle to balance her students’ needs for structure with her desire to infuse her teaching with creativity and “multiple intelligence angles.” In contrast, with her current team, Jane said she and other teachers could “bounce ideas off of each other.” They also shared the responsibility for designing instruction that both conveyed the required content and engaged their students in creative projects – one of the tenets of the school’s mission.

Jane described how, with the support of her team, she was able to integrate creative elements into a unit on US geography. Instead of merely teaching her students basic information about the United States through approaches such as reading a common text or lecture as she might have in the past, Jane and her colleagues worked to design projects that gave students an alternate entry point to their learning. Collaboration allowed Jane's team to achieve the "idea of project-based learning that the school wants us to do." Whereas previously, Jane traded creative instructional practice for the structure that she believed her students needed, now, with the help of her team, she was able to integrate projects such as informational brochures, dioramas, and collages as a way for students to deepen their learning of the subject matter. Doing this helped Jane move towards her goal of integrating many facets of students' skills and interests into her teaching, as the projects drew on their artistic, visual, and collaborative abilities and helped them learn alternative ways of communicating information beyond formal essay writing. With the help of her team, Jane found a way to balance the structure that she knew her students needed with creative curricular elements that she believed enlivened and enriched their learning.

Jenna also learned from work with a professional community – in this case, her grade-level team. She described how her weekly conversations with this team helped her to gain insight into her students, explaining how talking with others on her team helped her to "see each kid exactly at where they were and then try to push them forward." Previously, Jenna had thought about her first- and second-graders simply as two groups – one for each grade level – and she instructed them accordingly. If a student was a first grader, she looked for and worked on first grade-level skills with her.

However, what Jenna described as "equal exchanges" with her team members helped her to think about students' *actual* abilities. For example, if she sat with a second-grade student and

saw that he was struggling with a first-grade skill, such as using capital and lower case letters, she would address the student's struggle and support him in using the correct letter cases.

Previously, Jenna might have glossed over such a teaching opportunity to focus on what she believed to be a second-grade skill, such as indenting or creating paragraphs. Jenna noted the importance of her team in encouraging her to revise her teaching practice: "Having feedback from them...forced me to just rethink...how I'm teaching my lessons." Jenna's team helped her learn how to think about and tailor her instruction to the unique needs of each of her students.

For Maya, working with a coach helped her to turn a critical eye on her teaching practice. Until she was observed and received feedback on her approaches to teaching reading and writing, Maya said she "didn't realize how many areas of the curriculum [her teaching] needed cleaning up." She explained that none of the changes that she wanted or needed to make were "earth-shattering," but rather that some of her reading and writing instruction was "sloppy." Working with a coach helped her to see the areas of her practice that "need[ed] a lot of attention" and then to figure out ways to improve those areas. For example, Maya worked with her coach on her strategies for reading books aloud to her class. She learned how to help her students "get...into a character in a book, and [into] the character's life." These more in-depth reading experiences helped her to "feel the fire" in this area of instruction. She said that these approaches generated a new level of excitement among students to read books by authors whose stories she had read aloud.

Belief-oriented Outcomes

In addition to describing how their work with professional communities and coaches affected their teaching practice, participants also spoke of how their learning affected their

beliefs. Some teachers said that their learning experiences catalyzed a change in their fundamental thinking about the work of teaching. Other teachers found their professional learning experiences to be a fit for the collegial experience they believed was ideal. Whether participants experienced a shift in their beliefs or found a fit for how they had hoped to work with colleagues, this extension of their learning experiences holds the potential to affect both their instruction and the length of their career in teaching.

Learning that Changed Beliefs

Over half of the participants described ways in which their professional learning experiences produced not only changes in their teaching but also changes in their beliefs. Not only did they describe teaching differently day to day as a result of their work with coaches or in professional communities, but this learning produced changes in their beliefs about the essential features of teaching (Sharp & Green, 1975 as cited in Ball, 1987). For example, these teachers attested to shifts in their beliefs about what, how, and how much their students could learn or about their own responsibilities for teaching content matter. In what follows, I use the experiences of Maya and Liz to illustrate participants' changes in beliefs about both the work of teaching and student learning.

Working with a coach taught Maya the value of continuous reflection on her practice. She reported that her coach helped her to “look...more critically at my practice.” She was now able to step back and consider: “This is what I do well. This is what I can do so much better.” Incorporating reflection into her practice represented a shift in Maya's beliefs in that now she was able to see the importance of reflection and subsequent improvement in her work towards becoming an effective teacher.

Whereas previously Maya believed that increasing her own enthusiasm about a subject area, or doing exciting activities, would lead to improvement in her instruction, she now saw the value of using the process of reflection to pinpoint specific areas of the curriculum that needed improvement. For example, in reflecting on her teaching with her coach, Maya identified her approach to reading books to the entire class as an area of her literacy curriculum that was “really sloppy.” She then used what she learned from her coach both individually and in group training sessions to focus her efforts on improving her literacy instruction. As described in a previous section, she used the new skills that her coach taught to bring new energy and “magic” to read-alouds with her class.

Liz explained how coaching helped her to see new capacities in her students. She said, “I never would have used the terms with students that I use [now].... Like I never would have said the word ‘genre’ to 3rd and 4th graders. You know, especially low achieving. You know, I would have thought that I would lose them.” Working with her coach helped Liz to change her beliefs about her students’ capacities. Instead of limiting her instruction because she thought her students could not handle it, Liz pushed her students to understand sophisticated literacy concepts such as genre.

For both Maya and Liz, learning was iterative: In implementing new approaches to practice, they gradually shifted some of their fundamental beliefs about their teaching and their students. In turn, this led to further changes in their teaching practice, such as Liz’s use of sophisticated literacy terms with her low-achieving students or Maya’s focus on sharpening and enhancing how she read books aloud to her students. Ultimately, students may benefit from these changes in teaching practice that can be linked to teachers’ changed beliefs.

Learning that Fit Professional Ideals

While professional learning catalyzed a change in some teachers' beliefs about instruction and/or students, others found, in their learning experiences, a fit for how they hoped to work with their colleagues. For them, working with others in coaching relationships or professional communities helped them to realize their belief that collegial exchange was an essential component of their work. As a result, they were more engaged and excited about their work, which might then enhance how they experience teaching and thus affect how long they will remain in the classroom. In what follows, I describe the experiences of Jane and Colleen, who found that their beliefs and expectations about how they worked best with colleagues were realized through their learning experiences.

Jane described how working with her grade team fulfilled her hope for interdependent collegial work, which she believed was a necessary part of her professional experience. In speaking of collaboration, she noted, "Personally, I think that's [collaboration] what good teaching is." She explained that she knows herself as a "collaborative worker," and that participating on this grade team has allowed her to work interdependently with the other team members towards achieving a shared vision for instructional improvement. Working with a team of likeminded colleagues was fulfilling and energizing for Jane. She explained, "My team gives me energy...you know, I can go, go, go!...and I think it has a lot to do with being on the team that I'm on." Jane believed that collaboration was essential to her work, and so finding a team where her ideals were realized improved her experience of her job – it gave her "energy."

Colleen experienced a similar kind of synergy between her ideal of collaborative learning and what she experienced in her work with a professional community. Reflecting on her work with a cohort of teachers about using the TFU framework to develop social studies curricula,

Colleen remarked, “It kind of affirmed the collaborative thing.” Working with a community helped her to deepen her understanding of TFU and to improve her social studies instruction. It also aligned with the value that she placed on working collaboratively with her colleagues. She explained, “It was a nice fit.” Similar to Jane, this match with Colleen’s hope to work collaboratively made the learning experience all the more satisfying for her.

These teachers were energized by finding opportunities for the collegial interaction that they believed was essential to their work. The satisfaction that they felt from finding learning experiences that matched their ideals for collegial work has the potential to influence their commitment to their work and to the profession. Jane and Colleen described the intrinsic rewards that they received through collaborative professional learning – rewards that may well factor into their decisions about whether or not to remain in the profession in the coming years. Targeting learning experiences to provide such rewards for second-stage teachers presents a possible approach for school and district leaders, as well as policymakers, to consider as they seek to increase retention at this stage of the career.

Trust and Professional Learning

Participants in this study described powerful learning experiences, both related to their teaching practices and related to their beliefs about their roles as teachers and their students’ capacities. They were able to turn to both coaches and professional communities as a source of knowledge in their learning process. None of this learning, however, would be possible were there not a foundation of trust present in these relationships. Trust among colleagues can play a key role in instructional improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Settings that lack trust, on the other hand, are often replete with struggle and controversy, which inhibit any work on

instructional improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). While trust is essential in effective coaching and professional communities, it is not always present in these relationships (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). In this study, however, participants reported a strong sense of trust in their colleagues, which helped them learn through their professional collaboration.

For example, Annie noted that, in her work with her coach, “We had to have a level of trust,” which allowed her to feel comfortable both being observed by her coach and receiving feedback from her. Additionally, the trust between these two teachers allowed the coach to help Annie learn new instructional practices because she knew that Annie was open to her feedback and ready to benefit from her expert knowledge. Similarly, Isabelle described how she and her grade-level team “found an amazing way of talking and learning together.” For her team, open dialogue established trust among the team members, which then allowed them to learn “together” through their conversations about instructional practice.

The trust that participants described differed, depending on whether they were discussing coaches or professional communities. By and large, when participants described the trust that they placed in a coach, it was based on a sense that they were working with an expert colleague. The coach’s expertise, then, played a role in garnering trust from teachers. For example, Liz noted that her coach “knows her stuff.” Similarly, Isabelle described the comfort that she felt knowing that she could turn to a district-level literacy coach for “anything.” Because she trusted this coach’s expertise, Isabelle felt comfortable looking to her for guidance.

The trust that participants placed in other members of their professional communities, on the other hand, came from a sense that everyone in that community was working towards the same goal. A shared focus on instructional improvement can build trust among members of a

professional community (Jones, 2007). Kira, for example, said that working with a team on curriculum planning meant that three people, rather than one, were “steering [the] boat.” Because she trusted her colleagues, their work together was coordinated and collaborative. Annie described a similar experience. She explained that working with her literacy team built “community” and helped her feel like she was “not alone” in her work on instructional improvement.

Participants’ accounts of learning with and from colleagues illustrate their willingness to move beyond the norm of privacy that typically permeates the culture of teaching (Lortie, 1975) and to place a high level of trust in their colleagues. This sense of trust helped to create relationships with coaches and within professional communities where authentic collaboration, or “critical collegueship” (Lord, 1994) was possible. This stands in contrast to the kinds of superficial shared work that is apt to occur in contrived or mandated professional collaborations (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990).

Professional Learning and Retention

Teachers in the second stage of their career are not immune to the high levels of attrition that we often associate with novice teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). For the teachers in this study, professional learning helped them to remain confident and satisfied in their current commitment to teaching. Specifically, opportunities to open up their practice to the scrutiny of others and to learn from their feedback helped, as Kira said, to “buoy” them. However, like other teachers of their generation, few participants planned to remain in the classroom for the duration of their career (Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). Many expressed a desire to remain within the field of education, but explained that they hoped for

differentiation in their work, as opposed to only the flat career trajectory available to classroom teachers.

Although the professional learning experiences these participants described did not ensure that they would commit to a lifetime in the classroom, they did produce results that will affect their work, no matter the length of their commitment to the profession. Some of their learning experiences may in fact lead them to remain in the classroom longer than previously planned, if not for the duration of their career.

In addition to outcomes in teachers' practice and beliefs, teachers' learning experiences helped to sustain their current commitment to teaching. For example, Maya noted that all of her professional learning experiences "have helped me sustain myself personally *and* professionally." Jane had similar sentiments about her professional learning experiences, describing how they "keep [her] fresh." For Colleen, collaborating with colleagues in order to learn "keeps teaching dynamic and interesting" and stimulates her intellectually. And for Isabelle, professional learning kept teaching "dynamic."

Although three participants, Colleen, Annie, and Isabelle, were certain that they would remain in classroom teaching until retirement, the others were not. Of the remaining seven teachers, however, all but one expressed at least some interest in remaining within the field of education. The remaining teacher planned to leave the workforce in order to start a family. Those who planned to stay in either the classroom or another education-related role, stand to benefit from what they learned from both coaching and professional communities. For example, Hugh spoke of an interest in entering teacher education, Kira hoped to work as a curriculum developer, and Liz hoped to work as a teaching librarian. These participants, because of what they learned with both coaches and professional communities, will be able to bring a deeper understanding of

effective instructional practice and the importance and intricacies of collegial learning to their work in new roles.

Discussion

Feiman-Nemser (2001) argues that the ideal learning for teachers in the second stage of their career occurs “through serious, ongoing conversation;” that this conversation “occurs in communities of practice;” and that these conversations must be focused “on the particulars of teaching, learning, subject matter, and students” (p. 1042). Strikingly, participants in this study, all of whom worked with coaches and colleagues in professional communities, experienced just that type of learning – collegial conversations that dealt directly with teaching, learning, and students. For these teachers, learning affected not only their teaching practice, but also their beliefs.

Participants described a professional terrain full of opportunities for learning. Such a context is a rare find (Borko, 2004). Even more unique, perhaps, was the willingness that these teachers expressed to engage in ongoing, demanding professional learning (Sikes, 1992). They described professional learning that yielded improvements in their practice as well as changes in their beliefs about the work of teaching. Three factors shaped these teachers’ experiences. The first is a district context where schools and teachers can decide how to structure teachers’ professional learning. The second is these teachers’ career stage, in which they are ready to learn and deepen their craft. Finally, participants in this study placed a deep trust in each other and displayed a willingness to deprivatize their practice in order to enhance their learning.

In an era of standards-based reform and standardization, participants in this district found themselves working in schools where teachers and principals exercised discretion in making

decisions about teachers' professional learning. They provided teachers with opportunities to learn from and with their colleagues, specifically site or district-based coaches and professional learning communities. As a result, all of the participants experienced in-depth, on-going, school-based learning (Hawley & Valli, 1999; Little, 1993). Working with coaches, as well as with teams that were embedded in their schools, gave these teachers the opportunity to engage in professional learning that was intricately connected to their own teaching practice. According to their accounts, this made for more meaningful learning experiences, which enhanced their current satisfaction with teaching and affirmed their decision to teach.

Now in the second stage of their career, all ten of the participants in this study actively sought out learning that would improve their practice. They felt competent with their basic teaching skills and were ready to enhance their teaching abilities. Findings from this study illustrate what is possible when there is a match between participants' readiness to learn and the learning opportunities provided to them by their schools. Too often, professional learning opportunities are fragmented and unrelated to teachers' daily work (Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002). These participants, however, found what they thought they needed.

Perhaps most notable amongst the factors shaping participants' learning was their willingness to deprivatize their teaching practice as they learned. These teachers allowed coaches to observe their practice and brought specific examples of both their triumphs and struggles to discussions with their professional communities. They placed a surprising sense of trust in their colleagues, which enabled them to receive their feedback and engage in discussions with them around specific teaching strategies. These exchanges, then, helped participants learn new ways to teach their subject matter or ways to revise and fine-tune their existing teaching strategies.

Additionally, only because of participants' willingness to engage in candid conversations about teaching practice were they able to experience the changes in beliefs reported above. Without the trust that they placed in their colleagues and their readiness to open up their practice to scrutiny and suggestions from others, these participants would not have experienced learning with others that matched their ideals of collaboration. This willingness speaks to the fact that participants found themselves both working with colleagues whom they respected and felt deserved their trust, and that they had reached a point in their career where they could open up their practice to these colleagues for discussion and critical feedback.

Conclusion and Implications

The participants in this study described professional learning opportunities that informed their classroom practice, their fundamental beliefs about teaching, and their current commitment to teaching. Their descriptions highlight important implications for both research and policy.

Participants' willingness to learn at this stage of their career was matched by meaningful collegial learning opportunities at their school sites. Although it seemed to occur naturally, participants' school sites provided professional learning that was tailored to their unique needs and desires at this point in their career. Providing differentiated learning opportunities for teachers at different stages of their careers may help to address what has emerged as the differing needs of teachers at varying career stages. In particular, schools need to find ways to offer second-stage teachers collegial learning opportunities so that they can engage in questions about teaching practice with others and thus learn interdependently. Schools and school districts would do well to attend to their teachers' career stage in order to provide a selection of learning opportunities that will meet teachers' specific needs. In the short run, school-based, ongoing, and

differentiated learning opportunities have the potential to ensure that teachers are committed to their work. In the long run, these approaches may help to retain teachers for longer, if not for the duration of their career. Further research could also investigate what types of professional learning are most useful to teachers at a variety of points across the career spectrum.

Participants' willingness to work interdependently runs directly counter to the norm of privacy (Lortie, 1975), which remains prevalent in many schools to this day (Donaldson, et al., forthcoming). Given that collaboration represents an ideal medium for professional learning (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Lieberman, 1996; Rosenholtz, Bassler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 1986; Smylie, 1996), these teachers' experiences send an important message to those working on instructional improvement. Schools and districts would do well to provide teachers with opportunities similar to those described by participants – opportunities to collaborate with colleagues directly on instructional improvement. Although many recent reform efforts call on teachers to collaborate on instructional improvement, schools continue to lack the organizational capacity to support such collaboration (Elmore, 2004). This study points to the need for schools to build this capacity so that other teachers can experience learning similar to that described by participants. Ultimately, providing teachers, and particularly second-stage teachers, with collaborative learning experiences has the potential to enhance their current commitment to teaching and potentially their retention in the profession.

Participants overwhelmingly described the benefits of engaging in what Lord (1984) calls “critical collegueship.” The critical conversations that they had with coaches and professional communities were possible because their learning was embedded in their school context (Hawley & Valli, 1999), because there was time and space in the day to engage in these collaborations, and because there was a sense of trust among those engaged in the collegial interchange. It is

challenging for school and district leaders to move away from large-scale, one-time professional development offerings, yet this study points to the benefits of meeting teachers' learning needs on-site, in an on-going manner. Additionally, it illustrates the need to help teachers build support within their collegial learning relationships.

Coaching and professional communities can provide teachers with learning opportunities that are responsive to their needs, to their career stage, and to their individual students. Given that teachers' classroom practice is at the core of instructional improvement, school and district leaders should consider how to couple opportunities for both coaching and work within professional communities with reforms in these domains. For example, a shift in the pedagogy used to teach reading and writing could be paired with the support of a coach who has already mastered the new pedagogy. Or the adoption of a new math curriculum could be accompanied by weekly meetings among those implementing it in order for teachers to share their struggles and successes and to work collectively on improved methods for implementation. Importantly, just as teachers in this study were afforded time within their day to work with coaches and professional communities, school and district leaders must find time within teachers' work days to support their learning with coaches or professional communities. When viewed as tools of school reform, coaching and professional communities can be powerful forms of instructional improvement and can support the unique needs of teachers and students at a given school site.

Further research is obviously needed on the topic of second-stage teachers' professional learning. Not only are larger studies necessary, but studies that follow teachers longitudinally and that involve observations of teachers' practice, the work of coaches, and the process of teams. Such studies would help researchers to see the results of teachers' learning over time, as well as to make stronger links between professional learning, changed teaching practices, and

teacher retention. In addition to such larger studies, research is necessary that looks at second-stage teachers' professional learning across contexts. These participants found themselves in contexts that were rich with meaningful opportunities for professional learning. Yet, many factors combine to make theirs an unusual setting. Not all teachers have access to such a context. Given that, research across varied contexts is necessary: How are second-stage teachers experiencing learning in high-performing, urban or high-poverty schools? In suburban contexts? In large schools versus small schools? Many questions remain, and further investigation is warranted, because better understanding both the learning needs of second-stage teachers and how to meet those needs stands to benefit those teachers, their students' learning, and their ultimate retention in the profession.

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Appendix 1

Interview Protocol

Thanks for taking the time to sit down with me today. I'm interested in learning about what you have learned over the course of your career that you think has helped you to improve as a teacher. I know that teachers learn in a variety of ways. Some of them are formal, some informal. Some of this learning takes place within the school and some beyond the school. I'm interested in the whole gamut of learning experiences. Most of the interview will be about that, but first I'd like to ask you some background questions.

Background:

1. How long have you been teaching?
 - a. In this school? If you've been at other schools previously, for how long?
 - b. At this grade level?
2. How old are you?
3. Did you have a different career prior to entering teaching or is teaching your first career?
4. What kind of preparation did you have for teaching?
 - a. University-based, alternative certification, graduate level, undergrad?

Perceived Effectiveness Graph:

Now, I'd like you to use this graph to chart how effective you think your teaching was in each year of your career so far. We will use what you have here to shape the rest of our conversation. I'll ask you questions about things that you might have learned that you believe contributed to your effectiveness at different points in your career, corresponding with what you put on the graph. This graph is meant to help guide our conversation. In my analysis, I'll use your descriptions of different learning experiences, not the graph itself, to tell a story of professional learning. The graph is meant as a tool for you to represent your experiences as best you can and to guide our conversation.



Questions about Perceived Effectiveness Graph:

Note to interviewer : I want what they say about what mattered. What was going on and how they explain what happened.

Tell me about what happened here, where you see yourself improving substantially

If participant talks about supports, changing schools, etc, get some details on that and then probe about learning that might have occurred as well:

- Did you learn anything during that time that you think helped you to become a better teacher?
 - If yes, probe for details:
 - How did this learning happen? Was it collaborative or did it take place on your own?
 - If on own: Did it take place within your classroom with your students, or after hours, perhaps through your personal reflections?
 - Did it take place at your school or somewhere else, like at a university or one-day course?

- Were you required by the school to participate in this experience (workshop, ongoing training, coaching, teaming, etc)? If not, how did it develop?
- How long did this experience last? Was there any follow-up support if it was short-term? Was there any ongoing support from administration, coaches, etc?
- What did this experience help you to understand better?
- Based on what you learned through this experience, how did your instruction change? How was that an improvement, given what you indicated on your graph?
- Why do you think that learning experience was particularly helpful at that point in your career?
- Were there any supports in place that helped you be able to learn? (Supportive admin, a teaching team, an “easy” group of students)
- Was this learning helping you in an area in which you felt particularly weak, or did you already feel confident or your instruction in that area? Did that affect your decision to participate in the experience at all?
- Did what you learned through doing ____ match any goals that you had for your own improvement as a teacher at the time?
- Did it match any school goals, a school mission, or intended school outcomes?

Continue with this set of questions about other notable increases on the Perceived Effectiveness Graph.

For clear drops in perceived effectiveness:

Why did you note a drop here?

- What do you think contributed to the drop in effectiveness at this point?
 - What kinds of learning might have helped you to deal with that situation or at that point in your career?
 - Were there things that you were learning at this time that were helping your teaching? If so, please describe.

Further Questions:

For plateaus on the graph: why do you think that’s so?

- You suggest here that your success remained constant. Is that right? Why do you think that is so?
- Were you learning anything at that point that helped you to improve?
- Do you think there were any changes in your teaching during that time? If so, what were they?
 - If there were changes: Even with these changes, why do you think they didn’t affect your effectiveness as a teacher?
- I know that other teachers in your school participate in the Literacy Collaborative. Have you participated in any similar comprehensive reform program? (Need not be literacy). If so, what year did it start? (I’ll then find that year on the graph. Is the start of this program reflected in how effective you were then? How so?

- What, if anything, have you learned from this program? (note on graph whether this is a year or improvement or not)
 - Has that learning helped you to become a better teacher? If so, how? If not, why not?
 - If teacher indicates low levels of effectiveness: You marked a low level of effectiveness during this first year of the program, does that mean that the program didn't help support you in improving your teaching? If it did support you, how do you explain this low level of effectiveness?
- What are your current goals for improving your teaching?
 - Does this program play any role in shaping your improvement goals? Will it play a role in helping you to meet your goals?
- Thinking about your teaching right now, what are you currently working on?
 - What have you mastered at this point in your career?
 - What remains challenging to you?
 - Thinking about areas that remain challenging, what do you think you need to learn in order to improve?
 - What would that learning, ideally, look like?
- Looking towards the future, do you see yourself staying in teaching? For how long? What else can you see yourself doing?
 - Do your professional learning experiences, such as those we have discussed (name them specifically) affect your decision to stay in teaching? If so, how are they important?
 - If the learning experiences you've already had don't play a big role in this decision, could you envision some that might? If so, what would they be like, and how would they affect your decisions about the future or your career in teaching?

Is there anything else that you think I should know about your professional learning?

Can I contact you with further questions? If so, what is the best way to reach you?