

West Central Minnesota Teachers' Perceptions of Their Professional Development

Capstone Project

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By

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to the P-12 teachers of west central Minnesota. These teachers have influenced me at different times in my life, each having a life-long impact on my educational journey.

The first influential teacher in my life was my mother, Deanne Marty. As an elementary teacher, she taught me from an early age the importance of education. She provided me with the resources, support, and encouragement necessary for success. Her dedication to, and love for, teaching was a model for me to aspire to. I truly understood what a great teacher she was once I became a teacher myself.

The second group of teachers I would like to recognize are my elementary and secondary teachers at Chokio-Alberta Public Schools. These individuals were instrumental in forming my character, instilling a love for learning, and teaching me the core information and skills necessary to prepare me for post-secondary education and life in the “real world”.

The final teachers I would like to acknowledge are the ones I worked with once I became a teacher myself. I had the privilege of working with exceptional teachers at three west central Minnesota elementary schools. The teachers at Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley Elementary, Herman-Norcross Community School, and St. Mary’s Catholic School taught me about the importance of success for every student. As mentors, co-workers, and friends, these teachers showed me that quality schools aren’t about enrollment and test scores. Instead, they are about providing individual growth, a sense of belonging, and bringing the best out in students.

The words of James Levine ring true for my experience with teachers: “I was lucky that I met the right mentors and teachers at the right moment.” Thank you west central Minnesota teachers for your formative guidance and influence.

Abstract

This study examined west central Minnesota teachers' perceptions of their professional development. Preschool through twelfth grade teachers in three west central Minnesota school districts were surveyed to determine the practices, perceptions, barriers, and desires related to their profession development. The results indicate that all participants engaged in some form of professional development. Off-site workshops/conferences, college/graduate level courses, and informal professional development activities were perceived as most beneficial as were 'other', content area specific, and technology topics. The greatest barriers to professional development related to time, location, lack of financial resources, and district/state requirements. The results of this study can be used to enhance and maximize the meaningfulness of professional development for west central Minnesota teachers and other teachers across the nation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Another staff development day? What an inconvenience!” These are words often spoken by parents, and sometimes even teachers, when professional development days interrupt a school district’s calendar. Parents wonder what happens on these professional development days when their children are at home but the teachers are at school. Are teacher professional development days meaningful for the teacher and a benefit to a child’s education? Jones and Dexter (2014) indicate that effective K-12 teacher professional development plays a critical role in improving education in the United States. Minnesota legislators demonstrate that same belief by requiring public school districts in Minnesota to reserve at least two percent of their revenue for staff development (Revisor of Statutes, 2014). The need for and importance of teacher professional development is evident, however, it leaves people wondering how teachers view their professional development. This paper will look at how west central Minnesota teachers perceive their professional learning, identify where gaps exist, and provide potential solutions to improving teacher professional development.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine west central Minnesota teachers’ perceptions of their professional development. Specifically, these questions will be addressed:

- 1) Do teachers believe their professional development needs are being met?
- 2) What professional development methods do teachers view as most beneficial?
- 3) What are the barriers to effective professional development?
- 4) What professional opportunities would west central Minnesota teachers like to have?

Background and significance of the study

Continual learning and deepening of knowledge is essential in any profession, and teaching is no exception (Easton, 2013). School systems rely on professional development to strengthen educators' performance levels and coach educators about how to raise student achievement. In addition, educators who routinely develop their own knowledge and skills model for students that learning is important and useful (Mizell, 2010). In other words, they are practicing what they preach.

Teacher professional development comes in many shapes and sizes. Delivery methods can be both formal and informal and occur in a variety of settings. Typical modes of professional development include: individual reading/study/research, study groups among peers, observations of other teachers, mentoring, team meetings to plan lessons and problem solve, online or university courses, workshops, conferences, or whole school improvement programs (Mizell, 2010).

Each school system has its own way of addressing professional development for teachers. A district may believe that to meet its instructional goals, all educators in the system, school, or grade level must participate in professional development designed by the district. It may have a detailed and long range plan that guides and structures all educators' learning. Other districts may allow educators more freedom with their professional development. They may enable teachers to set their own goals and allow them to engage in professional development that the teacher believes is necessary to meet those individual goals (Mizell, 2010).

Teachers in rural areas are faced with additional challenges when it comes to their professional development. They are limited in collaborative and funding resources and by factors related to location (Erickson, Noonan, & McCall, 2012). Often, teachers in rural areas

have fewer colleagues to collaborate with and share committee responsibilities. Another limitation for rural educators is funding. Minnesota school districts are required to reserve at least two percent of their revenue for professional development (Revisor of Statutes, 2014). Since districts in rural areas typically have lower revenues than urban districts, they have less money available for professional development. The result is less funding available for bringing experts to the district, travel, registration, or substitute pay that is often necessary for professional development to occur. Finally, the proximity of rural schools to conferences, workshops, seminars, and courses is a challenge because professional development opportunities are often held in large cities a distance from rural schools.

Much research exists about the components of effective professional development. However, there is little research into teachers' perception of their professional development. This is particularly true for rural teachers. If teachers feel that the activities they are participating in are irrelevant to their teaching needs and day-to-day responsibilities, are they effective? A qualitative study done by Masuda, Ebersole, and Barrett (2013), reveals that teachers are willing to invest in professional development activities that they perceive as valuable. When teachers are able to share what they believe is meaningful and useful for their professional development, they view their learning as a shared responsibility that impacts students (Hirsch, 2013).

Examining west central Minnesota teachers' perceptions of their professional development will reveal if the professional development needs of these teachers are being met, the experiences teachers feel are most beneficial, the barriers to effective professional development, and the desires of west central Minnesota teachers regarding their professional development.

Setting

This study is being conducted in a rural location in west central Minnesota. Participants are Preschool through 12th grade teachers from three different school districts.

Assumptions

Because this study employs a quantitative survey presented in an online format, assumptions were made in regard to participant responses. One assumption was that respondents would be unfamiliar with the correct definitions for the various types of professional development in their survey responses. A second assumption was that the teachers would provide candid information and opinions from their own personal experiences with professional development. A final assumption would be that the teacher would be concerned with confidentiality and negative repercussions from their honest participation in the survey. The participant consent form, specific survey directions, and carefully worded survey questions helped to ensure these assumptions would be addressed in the study.

Scope and limitations of the study

The study is limited due to a small sample size and non-response error. Because only three districts in west central Minnesota were selected to participate, sampling error results from only surveying a small sample of the population. Non-response error also results from the possibility that non-respondents would have given different answers regarding their professional development experiences than the answers from the actual respondents.

Definitions

- *Conference*: often features keynote presentations delivered to all attendees, as well as multiple break-out sessions. Attendees often expect to receive information about industry trends and developments. (Hamby, 2014)
- *In-service*: training that takes place in the school of employment
- *Professional development*: specialized training, formal education, or advanced professional learning intended to help administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their professional knowledge, competence, skill, and effectiveness (Professional Development, n.d.)
- *Professional Learning Community (PLC)*: group of educators who continuously seek, share, and act on learning (Bullough, 2007)
- *Rural School*: School or multi-school system with 2,500 students or fewer in a community of 25,000 people or less located 25 miles or more from a large urban center or school or school system where students are bussed from several areas or communities and located 25 miles or more from an urban center (Rural Design, 2014).
- *Seminar*: educational event that features one or more subject matter experts delivering information primarily via lecture and discussion (Hamby, 2014)
- *Stakeholder*: anyone who is invested in the welfare and success of a school and its students, including administrators, teachers, staff members, students, parents, families, community members, local business leaders, and elected officials such as school board members, city councilors, and state representatives. Stakeholders may also be collective entities, such as local businesses, organizations, advocacy groups, committees, media outlets, and cultural institutions, in addition to organizations that represent specific

groups, such as teachers unions, parent-teacher organizations, and associations representing superintendents, principals, school boards, or teachers in specific academic disciplines (Stakeholder, n.d)

- *Workshop*: smaller and more intense seminar that involves participants doing work on a particular issue during the program (Hamby, 2014)

Summary

The professional development of teachers is essential to improving education for students. The State of Minnesota expects licensed teachers to demonstrate some form of professional development and each district has its own method for addressing this. In an effort to improve student achievement, rural teachers face additional challenges when it comes to their professional development. In addition, there is little research into how teachers perceive their professional learning. The purpose of this study is to examine west central Minnesota teachers' perceptions of their professional development, identify where gaps exist, and provide potential solutions to improving teachers' professional development.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This study looks at the professional development of P-12 teachers in west central Minnesota. The literature review will first identify the components of effective professional development for teachers, address the most common types of professional development, and point out challenges educators face in relation to traditional professional development.

Effective professional development

Effective professional development requires four things: considerable time, organized and structured sessions, purposeful direction, and focus on content or pedagogy or both. Guskey & Yoon (2009) found that most studies of professional development that result in improvements in student learning included significant amounts of structured and sustained follow-up activities or meetings. Many writers in education today also think professional development should utilize the expertise of school staff. They believe that educators should meet regularly on-site to explore common problems and seek solutions based on shared experiences and collective wisdom (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Similarly, Harwell (2003) suggests that teacher professional development should be a process rather than an event. It should support interactions among teachers, take place over an extended period of time, and provide opportunities for teachers to try new behaviors in safe environments in which they later receive feedback from peers.

The effectiveness of professional development depends on how carefully educators conceive, plan and implement it. Professional development leaders need to understand not only the vision but also the means to accomplish it. The first step to effective professional development is to carefully analyze student achievement data and identify problem areas. From there, learning goals can be established. Once established a plan of action can take place. This

action plan can involve a variety of professional development formats and should allow participants to engage in an ongoing cycle of improvement (Mizell, 2010).

Types of teacher professional development

Professional development for educators can include a broad range of topics, formats, and funding sources. The method of delivery can be both formal and informal. It may be a one-day conference, a two-week workshop, or a multiyear advanced degree program. It may be delivered online, in-person, or a combination of both. Professional development can take place during the school day, outside normal school hours, or during summer break. Funding for professional development can come from the school, state budgets and programs, foundation grants, private corporations, or the teachers themselves.

Formal professional development. The most common types of formal professional development are: courses, conferences, workshops, seminars and professional learning communities.

Courses, conferences, workshops, and seminars. According to a 2009 study done by the National Staff Development Council, 92% of U.S. teachers reported attending courses, workshops, conferences and seminars (Easton, 2013). These same teachers reported that during these experiences, the highest impact occurred when they were able to participate in informal dialogue with colleagues about teaching. Few teachers reported participating in degree programs, but the teachers that did felt strongly about the impact of these programs (Easton, 2013).

Workshops are smaller and more intense seminars that involve participants doing work on a particular issue. The goal is for participants to have at least a rough plan or tools in place to

address the challenges in their classrooms (Hamby, 2014). Literature provides conflicting information about the usefulness of workshops.

Professional Learning Communities. A new trend in professional development is the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). A PLC is a group of educators who “continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning” (Bullough, 2007, p. 168). Their goal is to make educators more effective by gathering and using data to steer and support continuous inquiry and improvements in teaching and learning. “PLCs help teachers guide their own professional growth by collaboratively resolving the dilemmas they face in their classrooms and improving their instructional practices through site-based inquiry” (Poekert, 2012, p. 98). Essentially, a PLC is cooperative learning for teachers.

“The vision of PLCs is to improve student learning by improving teaching practice” (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 82). PLCs improve teaching by:

- Creating a collaborative culture by improving communication, building trust, and strengthening relationships
 - Allowing members to engage in critical conversations in which they share challenges and critique colleagues’ practice to improve their instruction and student learning
 - Setting specific instructional goals for teachers
 - Making changes in practice by employing new strategies and monitoring results
- (Poekert, 2012).

By participating in a PLC, teachers are no longer in isolation with what they are doing in their own classrooms or sitting and listening to what they should be doing. Instead, teachers are able to engage in dialogue with colleagues about what and how they are teaching and collaborate on ideas to improve instruction.

Another benefit of PLCs is that they improve student learning. Student achievement is at the forefront of teacher professional development. Vescio et al. (2008) reported “studies examining the relationship between teachers’ participation in PLCs and student achievement found that student learning was improved” (p. 86). Teachers work in PLCs to examine data on student progress, analyze student work, determine effective strategies to facilitate learning, design and critique powerful lessons, and develop classroom-based common assessment to measure progress (Stewart, 2014). All of this leads to better student understanding and achievement.

PLCs also improve school culture. By being able to have a say in their professional learning, teachers develop feelings of self-efficacy (Easton, 2013). Too often teachers are told what to do and are burned out by the demands of teaching. PLCs provide a safety ground in which teachers are able to feel supported and successful in what they are doing. “Teachers see clear connections between their own professional learning within a PLC and changes in their practice and student learning” (Vescio et al., 2008, p.86). Teachers are able to make decisions in their committees that guide positive results in their schools (Vescio et al., 2008).

Data also suggests there is improved morale for teachers who work collaboratively. Teachers participating in PLCs report an increase in collaboration (Vescio et al., 2008). Knowing that they have allies, teachers are more confident and feel like they belong. Kati McFadden supports this claim when she talks about her membership in a PLC at her Dubuque, Iowa school: “My teammates are a small but strong community of support,” she says, “I couldn’t teach without being a part of a team, and I wouldn’t want to” (Walker, 2013). PLCs make the work environment in a school more enjoyable.

Informal professional development. Less research exists on informal professional development. One reason for this is that it is harder to identify and measure. Informal professional development can include reading related to a teacher's field or area of instruction, involvement in professional organizations, and non-structured collaboration among educators. Informal professional development is often the choice of the teacher and there is anecdotal data to support the notion that teachers' informal learning might be highly important to their teaching (Shapiro, 2003).

Challenges with traditional professional development

Traditionally, formal professional development for teachers meant offsite workshops and conferences or in-service speakers. It may have required rural teachers to travel many miles to a hotel conference room to view a Power Point created by a so called "expert" or to gather in the school's auditorium to listen to a speaker the school administrator deemed beneficial. Teachers often left these events with the good intention of implementing the new information they learned. When they got back to their classrooms, however, the information was invariably set aside and/or touched on but rarely revisited as they tried to catch up with work missed from their being away at these professional development events. These types of professional development are often referred to as "Spray and Pray," "Drive By," or "Sit and Get" (Walker, 2013). As a result, many education leaders regarded workshops as a waste of both time and money and believed the professional needs of teachers were not being met (Easton, 2014; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). The old adage, "If you do what you've always done, you will get the results you've always gotten" (Harwell, 2003, p. 2) made stakeholders question the effectiveness of traditional professional development practices.

Summary

The key to successful schools involves knowing the components of effective professional development, weaving those components throughout all types of teacher learning, and collaborating with teachers to address challenges in regards to their professional development. By investing in and putting teachers at the forefront of change, both schools and teachers are better able to reach their full potential (Patton, Parker & Pratt, 2013). Professional development can be a result of PLCs, courses, conferences, workshops, or seminars. No matter what the mode, it needs to include the components of effective professional development and be considered meaningful by the participants. National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel supports the need for effective professional development when he says: “Ultimately, providing more effective professional development isn’t about benefiting teachers, it’s about benefitting students.. .we will invest in research-based professional development programs that get us there, and we’ll have to have the patience to let them work” (Walker, 2013). By working with west central Minnesota teachers to find out their perceptions of professional development, gaps will be identified, potential solutions will be addressed, and instruction and student learning will improve.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Professional development for teachers in Minnesota is a required and necessary expectation. It is so important that State of Minnesota Statute 122A.61 (2014) requires public school districts in Minnesota to reserve at least two percent of their revenue for staff development. The professional association, Learning Forward, suggests in its Standards for Professional Development that school districts reserve at least 10% of their revenue to staff development and that at least 25% of an educator's work time be devoted to learning and collaboration with colleagues (Mizell, 2010). Professional development engages teachers in learning opportunities in which student achievement and success is the ultimate goal (Mizell, 2010). The need for, and importance of, teacher professional development is evident, however, it leaves people wondering how teachers view their professional development. The purpose of this study is to examine west central Minnesota teacher's perceptions of their professional development, identify where gaps exist, and provide potential solutions to improving teacher professional development. This chapter will explain the research design used to conduct this study, describe the setting and participants, and will conclude with information about the process used to gather and analyze the data.

Research design

This research used a quantitative approach. A cross-sectional survey design was chosen to help determine the current opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and practices west central Minnesota teachers have in regards to their professional development. By using this process, the data from the survey provide understanding of teachers' perceptions of their professional development in a short amount of time (Creswell, 2015).

Setting and participants

Participants were chosen from three school districts in west central Minnesota. The districts were chosen because of their less than 1,000 student enrollment, location in west central Minnesota, and the willingness of the school administration to support teacher participation. The online survey was sent to 140 Pre-K to twelfth grade teachers.

Measures

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design used the online Qualtrics software to e-mail participants a survey (Creswell, 2015). Qualtrics was selected as the survey software for three main reasons. First, the researcher was familiar with Qualtrics and had experience using it to create previous surveys. Second, Qualtrics is the preferred online survey tool of the University of Minnesota because of its stringent security requirements. Password protection provided secure storage and access to the data. Finally, Qualtrics provided user-friendly click-and-point survey creation and data analysis options such as frequency, response rate, mean, median and standard deviation (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2014).

Data gathering and analysis

Data was gathered by sending an online questionnaire to teachers in three west central Minnesota schools. The majority of the survey questions were closed-ended and asked about the types of professional development the respondent has engaged in, the methods of professional development the respondent perceived as most effective, and the barriers to effective professional development. An open-ended question was asked to determine the respondents' desired professional development opportunities. The survey was prefaced with the researcher's name, a description of the purpose of the study, and the assurance of confidentiality in survey responses. The online survey questions can be found in Appendix II.

The researcher contacted school administrators from three districts in west central Minnesota, shared the survey and interview instruments with them, and gained consent for their teachers to participate. The researcher worked with the individual administrators to schedule and plan for a suitable time to conduct the survey. While the administrator was requested to encourage teacher participation, the teachers were assured that participation was optional.

The Qualtrics survey link was distributed to teachers in one of two ways. In two districts the survey link was sent directly to the teachers using e-mail addresses provided by the administration. In one instance, the administrator e-mailed the teachers in his district the link encouraging participation.

The results of the survey were statistically analyzed using Qualtrics tools. Frequency, response rate, mean, median, and standard deviation were determined.

Summary

A cross-sectional survey design was used to gain information about west central Minnesota teachers' perceptions of their professional development. The online Qualtrics survey used a questionnaire format to determine the current opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and practices west central Minnesota teachers have in regards to their professional development. The results of the research are revealed in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Results and Discussion

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was used to help determine the current opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and practices west central Minnesota teachers have in regards to their professional development. Select P-12 teachers in west central Minnesota were e-mailed the survey using the online Qualtrics software. The results of the participants' demographics, professional development trends and perceptions, as well as barriers and desires are shared below. Additionally, the results will be synthesized and linked to current research in professional development.

Results

Using online Qualtrics software, 140 participants were e-mailed the survey link. The survey questions are available in Appendix II. Of the selected participants, 51 (36%) responded. Of those, 49 agreed to participate and only 40 actually selected responses.

Demographics. Of the 40 participants, 9 (23%) identified as male and 31 (78%) as female.¹ Eleven respondents or 28% belonged to each of the 30-39 and 50-59 age groups. Ten respondents or 25% belonged to the 40-49 age group and 8 respondents or 20% belonged to the 20-29 age group. All but one of the respondents (98%) identified as white. The exception (3%) was an individual who identified with two or more races.

Professional development participation and perception. The data in Table 1 show the types of professional development activities that respondents have participated in. All 40 respondents reported participating in some form of formal and informal professional development. In fact, participation in Professional Learning Communities and school based in-services was indicated by every respondent. 39 (98%) participants engaged in informal

^{1,2,3} Numbers do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

professional development such as involvement in a professional organization, professional reading, or collaboration with other teachers and 38 (95%) reported participation in lesson observations with follow-up review and goal sessions. Participation in college or graduate level courses was reported by only 16 (40%) respondents.

Table 1
Teacher Participation and Perception in Professional Development Activities Ordered by Participation

Activity	Participation	Perceived Benefit	
	n=40	Mean	SD
Professional Learning Communities	100%	3.73	1.01
School based in-services	100%	3.58	1.06
Informal professional development	98%	3.85	0.96
Lesson observations	95%	3.11	1.20
Off-site workshops or conferences	78%	3.94	1.03
Mentoring/Peer Coaching	73%	3.83	1.18
Online courses or webinars	58%	3.26	1.00
College or graduate level courses	40%	3.94	1.18

Note: Perceived Benefit Rating: 1=least beneficial, 5=most beneficial

Table 2 further shows teachers' perceptions of professional activities that were most beneficial and least beneficial to them. Off-site workshops or conferences and college or graduate level courses were perceived to have the most benefit with both having received a mean rating of 3.94. Informal professional development such as involvement in professional organizations, professional reading, and collaboration with other teachers were also viewed as beneficial with a mean rating of 3.85. Lesson observations with follow-up review and goal sessions were reported to provide the least benefit with a mean rating of 3.11.

Table 2

Teacher Participation and Perception in Professional Development Activities Ordered by Perceived Benefit

Activity	Participation	Perceived Benefit	
	n=40	Mean	SD
Off-site workshops or conferences	78%	3.94	1.03
College or graduate level courses	40%	3.94	1.18
Informal professional development	98%	3.85	0.96
Mentoring/Peer Coaching	73%	3.83	1.18
Professional Learning Communities	100%	3.73	1.01
School based in-services	100%	3.58	1.06
Online courses or webinars	58%	3.26	1.00
Lesson observations	95%	3.11	1.20

Note: Perceived Benefit Rating: 1=least beneficial, 5=most beneficial

The respondents also indicated their participation and perception of professional development topics. Table 3 provides data on respondent participation in the various topics. All 40 respondents (100%) participated in professional development related to technology, 36 (90%) engaged in lesson observations, 35 (88%) indicated participation in the topic of assessment, and 32 (80%) in meeting the needs of diverse learners.

The perceived benefit of the professional development topics is shown in Table 4. One individual perceived the ‘other’ category as being most beneficial (mean=5.00). Content specific (mean=4.15) and technology (mean=4.13) topics were also viewed as beneficial. Positive behavioral intervention strategy topics (mean=3.22) and lesson observations (mean=3.19) were perceived as having the least benefit.

Table 3

Teacher Participation and Perception in Professional Development Topics Ordered by Participation

Activity	Participation Perceived Benefit		
	n=40	Mean	SD
Technology	100%	4.13	0.97
Lesson Observation	90%	3.19	1.19
Assessment	88%	3.60	1.03
Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners	80%	3.53	1.08
Reading preparation	70%	3.75	1.24
Positive Behavioral Intervention	68%	3.22	1.12
Warning signs of mental illness	68%	3.52	1.12
Content Specific	65%	4.15	1.05
Accommodations & Modifications	65%	3.73	1.15
Curriculum Development	63%	3.72	1.06
School Improvement	55%	3.41	1.01
Other	3%	5.00	0

Note: Perceived Benefit Rating: 1=least beneficial, 5=most beneficial

Table 4

Teacher Participation and Perception in Professional Development Topics Ordered by Perceived Benefit

Activity	Participation Perceived Benefit		
	n=40	Mean	SD
Other	3%	5.00	0
Content Specific	65%	4.15	1.05
Technology	100%	4.13	0.97
Reading preparation	70%	3.75	1.24
Accommodations & Modifications	65%	3.73	1.15
Curriculum Development	63%	3.72	1.06
Assessment	88%	3.60	1.03
Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners	80%	3.53	1.08
Warning signs of mental illness	68%	3.52	1.12
School Improvement	55%	3.41	1.01
Positive Behavioral Intervention	68%	3.22	1.12
Lesson Observation	90%	3.19	1.19

Note: Perceived Benefit Rating: 1=least beneficial, 5=most beneficial

For the general professional development perception questions, 39 participants responded. Overall, 21 (54%) respondents believed their professional development needs were being met ‘completely’ or ‘for the most part’ and 23 (59%) indicated that they had the ability to ‘completely’ or ‘for the most part’ choose professional development activities that they deem most meaningful. A larger majority of respondents, 26 (67%), indicated that their professional development activities and topics were ‘completely’ or ‘for the most part’ a result of district or license renewal requirements. Additionally, only 3 (8%) indicated the lack of support from administration was ‘a significant barrier’ their professional development.

Barriers and desires. The data show that four main barriers hinder the professional development of teachers in west central Minnesota. These include the lack of available time and funding, the location of professional development activities, and district/state professional development requirements. The most important barrier reported was the lack of time available to participate in professional development activities. 97% of participants rated this as a ‘signification barrier’ or ‘somewhat of a barrier’. The second most identified professional development barrier was the location of, or proximity to, professional development activities. 85% indicated this as a ‘significant barrier or ‘somewhat of a barrier’. Both the lack of financial resources to pay for professional development activities and district/state required professional development activities were noted by 67% of participants as a ‘significant barrier’ or ‘somewhat of a barrier’.

A variety of professional development desires were shared in the open-ended response question: ‘If barriers did not exist (time, cost, distance), what would make your professional development most meaningful and/or what activities or topics would you like to engage in?’ Over half (56%) of the respondents mentioned an interest in working specifically with other

teachers in their content area or grade level. For example, one participant responded, “I would like to be able to meet more with educators in my area to exchange ideas. I think we are each other's best resources.” Additionally, three participants desired time to review, design, and implement best practice models for assessment and instruction in their own classroom.

Discussion

Easton’s (2013) view of the importance for continual learning and deepening of knowledge for teachers coincide with the data showing every rural Minnesota teachers’ participation in a variety of professional development activities and topics in this study. With 100% of respondents also reporting involvement in professional learning communities, west central Minnesota schools are following what Mizell (2010) says is the most effective professional development: engaging teams of teachers to focus on the needs of their students. The data, however, does contradict Easton’s (2013) claim that employers don’t support professional learning for teachers as 79% of the participants indicated administrative support for their professional development.

Lack of time was the largest perceived professional development barrier reported by study participants. The time barrier is supported by Walker’s (2013) indication that teachers attending traditional professional development such as workshops, conferences, or in-services, leave with good intentions of implementing what they learned. However, once they go back to their classrooms, the information is set aside and rarely revisited as the teacher tries to catch up from being away. One response mirrored this experience: “Classroom teachers do not have enough time to review, organize, and implement methods, assessments, techniques that would be effective in the classroom. We receive training and then hop right back into the pig pen!”

The results also support what Erickson et al. (2012) point out about the limited collaborative resources available for rural teachers in regards to professional development. One respondent expressed the frustration of having a limited number of colleagues in the same content area: “As a specialist we often get ‘lumped in’ with classroom teachers and are not provided with content related professional development on our staff development days.”

Summary

The data show perceptions that west central Minnesota teachers have and the barriers they encounter in regards to their professional development. The results align with Jones and Dexter’s (2014) research conveying the importance of professional development as all teachers reported some level of engagement in professional learning. The data also support Erickson et al.’s (2012) research indicating the lack of collaborative, content area professional development opportunities available for rural teachers.

Chapter Five

Summary and Conclusions

According to a 2014 study sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, a typical teacher spends 89 hours per year on professional learning. This can include district directed in-services, self-guided professional development, or courses. Since teachers spend more than two weeks on professional learning, there was a need to investigate how teachers perceived their professional development. This quantitative research design used an online Qualtrics survey to examine west central Minnesota teachers' perceptions of, barriers to, and potential visions of their professional development. The significant findings, educational implications, and recommendations for future research are shared below.

Significant Findings

The goal of this study was to address four main questions related to teacher professional development in west central Minnesota. The findings to each question are shared below and indicate both positive results and challenges for P-12 teachers' professional learning in west central Minnesota.

1) Do teachers believe their professional development needs are being met? Encouragingly, every respondent reported participating in some form of professional development during the past 24 months and 54% of the participants believed their professional development needs are being met. This affirms the value districts, administrators, and teachers of west central Minnesota place on continued learning. Another notable finding is that every respondent (n=40) acknowledged participation in Professional Learning Communities. Poekert (2012) supports the best practice of PLCs by stating that "PLCs help teachers guide their own professional growth by

collaboratively resolving the dilemmas they face in their classrooms and improving their instructional practice through site-based inquiry” (p.98).

2) What professional development methods do teachers view as most beneficial? The findings identified the professional activities teachers’ perceived as most beneficial and least beneficial. Off-site workshops or conferences and college or graduate level courses were perceived to have the most benefit with both having received a mean rating of 3.94. These results coincide with Easton’s (2013) findings that few teachers reported participating in degree programs, but the teachers that did felt strongly about the impact of these programs. Informal professional development such as involvement in professional organizations, professional reading, and collaboration with other teachers were also viewed as beneficial (mean=3.85). Lesson observations with follow-up review and goal sessions were reported to provide the least benefit with a mean rating of 3.11.

3) What are the barriers to effective professional development? Four main barriers hinder effective teacher professional development: lack of time, location of or proximity to training sites, lack of financial resources, and district/state requirements. The most noted barrier is the lack of time available for professional development activities. 97% of participants rated this as a ‘significant barrier’ or ‘somewhat of a barrier’. This supports the assertion by Guskey and Yoon (2009) that effective profession development requires considerable time. When teachers are planning, instructing, assessing, and communicating with stakeholders, there is little to no time remaining for their own professional learning and collaboration.

Additionally, the location of rural Minnesota school districts can cause additional barriers to professional development. 85% of respondents mentioned this as a ‘significant barrier’ or ‘somewhat of a barrier’. Many professional development activities take place hours away from

the teacher's home district. This requires teachers to travel, be away from the classroom longer, and spend additional money on lodging, meals, and gas.

Funding and district/state professional development requirements were perceived equally as barriers; 67% of participants indicated both were a 'significant barrier' or 'somewhat of a barrier'. Although Minnesota districts are required to reserve two percent of their budget for staff development, these dollars are sometimes given back to the school during negotiations or used for district planned development (Revisor of Statutes, 2014). Small schools have smaller budgets. This means fewer dollars reserved for staff development. Proportionally, required district and state professional development requirements allowed for little to no time to participate in professional development customized to individual needs or desires.

4) What professional opportunities would west central Minnesota teachers like to have?

Teachers in west central Minnesota conveyed a desire for collaboration with other colleagues. One respondent stated, "I get the most out of leaving the campus to work with other educators from around the state and the country. The interaction challenges, engages, and excites me." Specifically, collaboration in content areas was desired. Over half (56%) of the respondents mentioned an interest in working specifically with other teachers in their content area or grade level. Easton (2013) reported similar findings by revealing that teachers reported the highest impact of formal professional development activities occurred when they were able to participate in informal dialogue with colleagues about teaching.

Educational Implications

In today's education era, student achievement is top priority. We want to see kids succeeding. We want to see test scores rise. We want assurance of students getting a top-notch education measured by results (Riccards, n.d.). Furthermore, parents want validation that what

teachers are doing on staff development days is worth their child's day off from school and teachers want to perceive what they are doing as meaningful and useful.

The findings of this survey identify the participation and perception west central Minnesota teachers' have in relations to their professional development types and activities, as well as professional development barriers and desires. West central Minnesota teachers (100% of participants) are engaging in professional development. For the most part, teachers view professional development as meaningful and useful. Although 54% of the participants believed their professional development needs were being met, teachers indicated a desire for additional time, funding, and collaboration with colleagues in their content areas. Guskey & Yoon (2009) found that most studies of professional development that result in improvements in student learning included significant amounts of structured and sustained follow-up activities or meetings.

The future goal is to use the findings of this study to enhance and improve professional development for west central Minnesota teachers. This can be accomplished by continuing to offer the professional development topics and activities perceived as meaningful by teachers, working to reduce the barriers to effective professional development, and creating opportunities for teachers to fulfill their personal visions for professional development.

Recommendations for Future Research

Additional research is needed into the best method for providing adequate time, funding, and opportunities for meaningful professional development for west central Minnesota teachers. First, more detailed research into how professional development is funded is necessary. Are teachers utilizing grants, district staff development funds, or their own money? Would online or hybrid professional learning communities be a possibility? Is student achievement the focus of

or linked to teacher professional development? Additionally, a more detailed needs assessment of professional development would provide more information into the specific professional development wants and needs of teachers. Follow-up focus groups may provide more candid and specific information about west central Minnesota professional development.

Summary

The results of this survey and the supporting literature provide a better understanding of the professional development practices, barriers to and desires of west central Minnesota teachers' professional development, and future professional development research needs. Sharing this information with school stakeholders and parents may promote a more positive response to professional development days. The words, "Another staff development day? What an inconvenience!" may be replaced with, "Another staff development day! I admire that my children's teachers engage in continual learning and profession growth in order to help my child succeed!"

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1503E66781 - PI Rohloff - IRB - Exempt Study Notification

3 messages

irb@umn.edu <irb@umn.edu>

Fri, Apr 17, 2015 at 2:49 PM

TO : nhazaree@umn.edu, rohlofft@umn.edu,

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

Study Number: 1503E66781

Principal Investigator: Tricia Rohloff

Title(s):

West Central Minnesota Teachers' Perceptions of Their Professional Development

This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota HRPP notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter.

This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study's expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at [\(612\) 626-5654](tel:6126265654).

Appendix B

Invitation e-mail message for survey:

Welcome to this online survey. My name is Tricia Rohloff and I am conducting research as part of my Master of Education program. I will be surveying P-12 grade teachers in West Central Minnesota to determine teachers' perceptions of their professional development. Specifically, I want to determine if teachers feel their professional needs are being met, identify the professional development methods teachers believe are most beneficial, identify barriers to teacher professional development, and determine needs and wants of teachers regarding their professional development.

You were selected as a possible participant because you are a licensed teacher in a West Central Minnesota school district. If you agree to be in the study, please complete this brief survey which will take no more than 20 minutes. We ask that you read the [information/consent form](#) and ask any questions you may have before taking the survey.

If you have any questions or would like a copy of the results, please contact me at rohlofft@morris.umn.edu.

Thank you for taking the time to help me with this project!

Tricia Rohloff
rohlofft@morris.umn.edu
320-287-0553

Follow this link to the Survey:

[\\${l://SurveyLink?d=Take the Survey}](#)

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

[\\${l://SurveyURL}](#)

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:

[\\${l://OptOutLink?d=Click here to unsubscribe}](#)

CONSENT FORM/INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH

Professional Development in West Central Minnesota

You are invited to be in a research study about West Central Minnesota teachers' perceptions of their professional development. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a P-12 teacher in West Central Minnesota. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Tricia Rohloff, M.Ed. student at University of Minnesota, Duluth

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things: Complete the electronic survey. The survey will take approximately 10-20 minutes. The survey is about West Central Minnesota teachers' perceptions of their professional development.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. Your level of involvement and responses to this study will not be shared with the district in which you teach. Any sort of report we might publish will not include information that may make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is: Tricia Rohloff. If you have questions, **you are encouraged** to contact her at rohlofft@morris.umn.edu, 320-287-0553 or her research advisor, Nedra Hazareesingh, nhazaree@d.umn.edu, 218-726-8167.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

Professional Development in West Central Minnesota

SURVEY

On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the professional development ACTIVITIES you have participated in during the past 24 months (1=not beneficial, 5=most beneficial).

If you did not participate in the activity, select N/A.

	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
School based in-services	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Off-site workshops or conferences	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Professional Learning Community (PLC) or Professional Learning Network (PLN)	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Lesson observation with follow-up review and goal session	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
College or graduate level courses	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Mentoring and/or peer coaching	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Online courses or webinars	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Informal professional development (e.g. involvement in a professional organization, professional reading, collaboration with other teachers)	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q

On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the TOPICS of the professional development you have participated in during the past 24 months (1=not beneficial, 5=most beneficial).

If you did not participate in the activity, select N/A.

	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Curriculum Development	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Assessment	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Lesson observation with follow-up review and goal session	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Content specific (ex: social studies, science, math)	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
School Improvement Strategies	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Positive Behavioral Intervention Strategies	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Accommodations, Modifications and Adaption of Curriculum Materials and Instruction	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Key warning signs of early onset mental illness in children and adolescents	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Reading preparation	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Using Technology	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Other (please describe)	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q

To what degree...

	Completely	For the most part	Somewhat	Very Little	Not at all
Do you feel your professional development needs are being met?	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Are you able to choose the professional learning activities you believe are most meaningful for you?	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q
Is your professional development the result of district or license renewal requirements?	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q

What barriers do you face in relation to your professional development?
Move the item to the descriptor that you believe best describes it.

A significant barrier **Somewhat of a barrier**

Not a barrier

Lack of financial resources to pay for the professional development activities

Lack of available time to participate

Location or proximity to professional development activities

Lack of support from administration

Required professional development (district or state requirements) leave little to no time to participate in professional development customized to my needs or wants

Other: Please describe

If barriers did not exist (time, cost, distance), what would make your professional development most meaningful and/or what activities or topics would you like to engage in?

Professional Development in West Central Minnesota

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Gender

Q Male

Q Female

Age

Q 20-29

Q 30-39

Q 40-49

Q 50-59

Q 60+

Race/Ethnicity

Q Hispanic/Latino of any race

Q American Indian or Alaskan Native

Q Asian

Q Black or African American

Q Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

Q White

Q Two or more races

Q Other