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Running head: PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHANGES

A Phenomenological Study of Professional and Practical Changes Experienced by
Teachers Involved with Action Research in a Learning Community Master's Program

By

Jay D. Meiners

This Dissertation is Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
the Educational Doctorate Degree
in Educational Leadership

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

March 2016

PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHANGES

Date: March 28, 2016

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PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHANGES

Abstract

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In the United States, the majority of teachers have a master's degree or higher. However, there exist concerns in the literature that having an advanced degree does not make teachers better. There thus needs to be a way to improve the outcome of a master's degree in education so that teachers do advance their practice and bring change to their classrooms as a direct result of their experience in a master's degree program. By focusing on the use of action research in a learning community, the intent of the present phenomenological study was to discover changes that occurred in teachers involved in action research in a learning community setting while obtaining their master's degree. The sample consisted of teachers that have attained their master's degree from a program involving both action research and the learning community setting offered at the same comprehensive regional university in the Upper Midwest. Based on the extant literature, it was expected that the changes experienced by the teachers may include variations in their teaching practice, professional development, collegial relationships, and leadership roles. The results of the study confirmed these changes and highlighted the development of personal control as an essential quality of effective teachers. The teachers involved in the study considered their perceived improvement as transformative and a direct result of their experience in the master's degree program.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Background of the Problem

In the United States, teachers find that they are often required to return to school to continue their education. Teachers most commonly link the reasons for such a return to required continued education hours, salary advancement, and state or school requirements for an advanced degree (Hill, 2007). According to Hill (2007), more than 30 states allow graduate coursework to count toward recertification; she also noted that the salary change brought on by the advanced degree averaged 11% (p. 113). However, some argue that this trend of teachers working towards their master's degree is a wasted effort. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has publicly denounced the practice, maintaining that there is no research-based evidence demonstrating that having an advanced degree will make a teacher better in the classroom (Ediger, 2001). Yet, as of 2012, 56.4% of all teachers have a master's degree or higher (United States Department of Education, 2013). The issue at hand is that the majority of teachers in the United States have a master's degree or higher; but with strong concerns that having an advanced degree does not make teachers better, there needs to be a way to improve the outcome of a master's degree in education so that teachers do advance their practice and bring change to their classroom as a direct result of their experience in the master's degree program.

Problem Statement

While the research in this area has demonstrated insignificant correlations between holding a master's degree and improved teaching skills, research nonetheless has

noted teacher quality as having a positive impact on student achievement (Dixon & Ward, 2015; Goldhaber, 2002; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Hanushek, 1986; Hanushek, 1997; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Wayne & Youngs, 2003). In a separate study, Darling-Hammond (2000) presented the significance of the relationship between teacher quality and teacher education. Darling-Hammond concluded that teachers that were most effective had more professional training in best practices, were more likely to use teaching practices associated with higher student achievement, were often enrolled in graduate studies or had a master's degree, and had recently engaged in voluntary professional development (p. 6). Even Goldhaber (2002) acknowledged that there are statistically significant relationships between teacher training and student achievement. Thus, the general results on student performance because of a teacher's advanced degree, or lack thereof, are mixed. However, there is a strong correlation to teachers' training in how to teach. While having a master's degree in itself will probably not make a teacher better, having a master's degree that focuses on making a teacher better may provide the correlation to improved student achievement.

Teachers find available a number of programs offered by universities, which can vary greatly in their approach, content, and rigor. As noted by Hill (2007), many higher education institutions have responded to this market by offering easy-to-obtain degrees of varying and probably poor quality. This study will consider a specific type of program for the attainment of a master's degree and the effect it has on the teachers that participate in the program.

Learning communities. One type of program associated with obtaining a master's degree involves participation in a learning community. A learning community, or cohort, is defined as a group of students who engage in a program of study together (Potthoff, Batenhorst, & Fredrickson, 2001). Potthoff et al. (2001) found positive attributes associated with the cohort structure in the areas of program coherence, increased collaboration, inquiry, and reflection. In addition, Potthoff et al. discovered that students working in a cohort improved their ability to develop multiple perspectives, do scholarly work, and improved their academic performance (p. 36). The learning community, or cohort, is especially effective at developing connections personally and professionally with colleagues (Potthoff et al., 2001).

With many researchers calling for a change in graduate education for teachers (Hill, 2007; Hine, 2013; Kershner, Pedder, & Doddington, 2013; White, Fox, & Isenberg, 2011), it is necessary to consider learning environments that make a difference in how teachers transfer their learning to their classrooms. Collaboration, such as found in the learning community environment, is essential to this goal due to its positive influence on how teachers work together to change the practice in their classrooms and ultimately affect student learning (Kershner et al., 2013; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

Action research. Just as the type of graduate education experience is important, so is the method of instruction. In many degree programs, the course content is disconnected from the daily teaching activities of the participants. Hill (2007) described the content of current graduate coursework as being relatively unknown, as many university programs fragment the courses and their content to meet supposed "best

practice” topics, without any true accountability for the rigor of the program.

Unfortunately, for many programs the result is a watered-down degree with little relevance to teachers’ actual practice in their classrooms (Hill, 2007).

In many studies, the concept of having teachers learn collaboratively and in the context of their classroom is essential (Hine, 2013; Kershner et al., 2013). One method that research has shown to be effective is the use of action research by the teacher participants (Hine, 2013; Kershner et al., 2013; White et al., 2011). Action research is a process where teachers actively evaluate their own practice, using this critical reflection to improve the quality of their instruction and their practical knowledge of teaching (Henson, 2001; Li, 2008; Seider & Lemma, 2004). Hine (2013) described action research as a systematic, collaborative, and participatory process of inquiry that provides teachers the technical skills and specialized knowledge to effect positive change within their classroom. By having the learning situated in the teacher’s practice, it allows the learning to be meaningful (White et al., 2011). When the teacher’s own classroom becomes the laboratory, the experience and learning become meaningful. If one of the critiques of current graduate education programs is that they are unable to effect change in teachers and in student performance, then the use of action research provides a viable agent for change.

Purpose Statement

The continued education and training of teachers is vital to the goal of teachers being able to effect change in their classrooms and improve student learning. However, since not all graduate programs are created equally, it behooves the education profession

to identify the programs that will bring classroom change and improved student learning. Accepting that whether a teacher has a master's degree is generally unrelated to student performance (Goldhaber, 2002; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Hanushek, 1986; Hanushek, 1997; Hill, 2007; Rivkin et al., 2005; Wayne & Youngs, 2003), there nonetheless is evidence that master's programs may elicit desired changes in teachers and their practice. Studies on action research by Hine (2013), Kershner et al. (2013), Li (2008), and White et al. (2011), as well as studies on learning communities by Kershner et al., Potthoff et al. (2001) and Vescio et al. (2008), indicate that progress towards these goals is possible. By focusing on the use of action research in a learning community, the intent of the present phenomenological study will be to discover changes that occur in teachers involved in action research in a learning community setting while obtaining their master's degree. The sample will consist of teachers that have attained their master's degree from a program involving both action research and the learning community setting offered at the same comprehensive regional university in the upper Midwest.

Research Question

The goal of the present study is to discover whether teachers change through the completion of a master's degree program that requires action research within a learning community environment. Therefore, the following research question forms the basis of the present study:

What is the experience of change among teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting while studying toward a master's degree?

Studies by Seider and Lemma (2004) and Eilks and Markic (2011) indicate that action research has been shown to improve the teacher's professional efficacy, classroom practice, and leadership. Consequently, the research question is subdivided into four specific subquestions:

1. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their teaching practice following the experience?
2. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their professional development following the experience?
3. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their collegial relationships following the experience?
4. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their leadership roles following the experience?

Significance of the Research

Teachers in the United States find themselves nearing a crossroads. With a majority of teachers holding a master's degree or higher (United States Department of Education, 2013), states allowing graduate coursework to count toward recertification, districts providing pay increases for attaining a master's degree (Hill, 2007), and questions of the actual effectiveness of having a master's degree on student learning (Ediger, 2001; Hill, 2007; Hine, 2013; Kershner et al., 2013; White et al., 2011), the need for a master's degree program that transforms teachers is essential. Placing quality teachers in the classroom has always been a priority in education; but as the education landscape continues to change, the need for teacher development that is effective

becomes more important than ever before. In 2014, the California Supreme Court ruled that teacher tenure laws deprived students of their right to an education, basing the decision on the belief that the current law left bad teachers in the classrooms preventing students from receiving an education (Medina, 2014). Medina (2014) further reports that similar lawsuits are planned for at least seven other states in an effort to strike down tenure laws allowing school districts the ability to retain the most effective teachers rather than the most senior.

In this new landscape, as long as states and school districts continue to allow teachers to use graduate coursework for recertification and pay increases, there will still be a need for master's degree programs. However, the impetus for change in the construction of the master's degree program has already begun with the recent California ruling as well as the critics questioning current master's degree effectiveness. Consequently, the results of this study are significant to college and university education departments, school district boards and administrators, and teachers because of the transformation experienced by the teachers that have participated in the master's degree program that involves action research within the learning community environment. If the results of this study confirm positive changes in the teachers that participate, it may provide a template for the design and execution of master's degree programs that will address the changes required in this new educational landscape.

Limitations

Several limitations may affect the generalizability of the results. First, the sample population will be recruited from four learning communities taught by a single professor at a regional comprehensive state university located in the upper Midwest. In addition, the sample size will follow recommendations by Creswell (2014) for phenomenological studies, resulting in only six to eight subjects to be included in the sample. Finally, the study will focus on perceived changes in teacher practice, professional development, collegial relationships, and leadership. It is conceivable that additional subquestions might be of relevance, but are nonetheless beyond the scope of the present study. The effect of these limitations is that the results of the study are limited in their generalizability and therefore will not transfer to a broader context.

Positionality

One of the characteristics of a qualitative study is the involvement of the researcher in the process, particularly as the primary data collection instrument (Creswell, 2014). To this end, the values and biases of the researcher must be considered, as they will shape and influence the research question, data collection, and analysis. My personal experience as a student, and now an instructor, in the master's degree program under study, has shaped my perceptions of the effects of this combination of action research and learning environment. Based on my personal experience, I begin the study with the perspective that this combination of action research and learning environment brings with it changes, mostly positive. Throughout this study, it is my goal to remain objective and not let these existing biases shape the outcome of the data collection and analysis. In

order to continually recognize my bias and avoid a loss of objectivity, I will require regular check-ins and discussions with my advisor concerning my methods, scripts, and analysis of data.

Definition of Key Terms

Within this study, several key terms are used that warrant definition.

Learning community. A group of students who engage in a program of study together (Potthoff et al., 2001).

Action research. A systematic, collaborative, and participatory process of inquiry that provides teachers the technical skills and specialized knowledge to effect positive change within their classroom (Hine, 2013).

An important aspect of education is the voluntary furthered training of teachers that result in a master's degree. The attainment of the master's degree could be a way to satisfy recertification, to secure a salary increase, or to improve teaching practice. Regardless of the intent behind pursuing an advanced degree in education, the practice is coming under scrutiny. Critics point to research that suggests there is no correlation to having a master's degree and student achievement, and states have begun to pass legislation to remove teacher tenure laws to put an emphasis on retaining the most effective teachers. In this light, there is a necessity to find a master's degree format that brings about the desired changes in teachers. This phenomenological study examines the perceived changes experienced by teachers when they complete a master's degree program that involves action research in a learning community environment.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section addresses action research, including its description, the benefits associated with action research, and the research that has been conducted on its effectiveness. The second section addresses the research on learning communities, including its definition, positive effects, and characteristics. The final section clarifies the importance of the anticipated transformations in teachers as a result of their participation in action research in a learning community.

Action Research

Action research is ultimately about changing practice within a teacher's classroom. According to Li (2008), action research is a process wherein a teacher actively evaluates his own practice, a belief supported by other researchers as well (Kemmis, 2009; McIntyre, 2005). According to Kemmis (2009), "action research aims at changing three things: practitioner's practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions in which they practice" (p. 463). He states that action research is "practice-changing practice" (p. 464). McIntyre (2005) added that there is a clinical side to action research, where teachers test research-based ideas within the context of their own classroom. The ability to change their practice is not limited to any particular teacher group, as action research has been shown to be effective for most teachers, regardless of the experience, qualifications, or sex of the teacher (Ross & Bruce, 2012).

The need for action research. Student learning is tied to the quality of a teacher's practices (Kunter et al., 2013). Unfortunately, these practices are often flawed. The only way that these flaws can be exposed is if the teacher undergoes critical reflection of their practice, which is a cornerstone of action research (Kemmis, 2009). According to Eilks and Markic (2011), action research has arrived as a necessity of innovation. As teachers continue to reflect on their practice, there must be a forum for the determined proposals to be tested. Again, this is the realm of action research, a method for classroom teachers to implement their proposals within their practice (McIntyre, 2005). Because of this, action research can act as professional development for all teachers (Ax et al., 2008; Henson, 2001).

Importance of action research. According to prior studies, action research has the potential to be transformative. Bonner (2006) described action research as a transformative approach to professional development. Ross and Bruce (2012) declared that the result of action research is a transformation of instructional practice. Within action research, the process of reflection is the basis for this transformation. This exercise of critical reflection as a part of action research is the key to changes and refinements in classroom practice (Li, 2008). Eilks and Markic (2011) summarized this by stating that action research can be the driving force for change in teaching practice, because when teachers are involved in action research there is a change in their attitudes and convictions that lead to innovation and a rethinking of their ideas making them "self-determined causers of change" (p. 157). The change in teaching practice will occur at a

classroom level, but will also have the potential to alter educational policy and practice at a broader level (McIntyre, 2005).

Benefits of Action Research

The benefits of action research are wide reaching, and include professional growth (Atay, 2008; Bonner, 2006; Eilks & Markic, 2011; Furtado & Anderson, 2012; Gilles, Wilson, & Elias, 2010; Seider & Lemma, 2004), increased teaching efficacy (Atay, 2008; Bonner, 2006; Eilks & Markic, 2011; Hall, 2009; Henson, 2001; Ross & Bruce, 2012; Seider & Lemma, 2004), improved student achievement and attitudes (Bonner, 2006; Ross & Bruce, 2012; Seider & Lemma, 2004), and a broad impact outside of the immediate teacher classroom (Atay, 2008; Furtado & Anderson, 2012; Henson, 2001; Seider & Lemma, 2004).

Professional growth. The most commonly noted benefit of action research is the impact on the professional growth of the teacher (Atay, 2008; Bonner, 2006; Eilks & Markic, 2011; Seider & Lemma, 2004). Seider and Lemma (2004) linked the growth to both personal and professional areas, while Atay (2008) carried the professional growth to a more specific area of professional competence. However, the professional growth does not need to be limited to individuals acting alone. A study by Furtado and Anderson (2012) found a connection between teachers participating in action research and their formation, and inclusion, in a highly intellectual professional community. An additional discovery by Furtado and Anderson was that the positive changes brought about from participating in action research led to further learning and leading, expanding the professional growth of the individuals involved. Finally, Bonner (2006) articulated the

professional growth by describing the professional transformation as being present in new viewpoints, new ways of thinking about learning, their students and themselves.

Teacher efficacy. The efficacy of a teacher incorporates many aspects, which include teaching strategies, attitudes and beliefs, confidence, and pedagogical and content knowledge. Teachers can improve each of these areas through action research, as demonstrated by several previous studies. Henson (2001) showed a link between teacher research and large gains in teacher efficacy in general. Seider and Lemma (2004) demonstrated in their study that there was a greater influence on teaching strategies. Their study showed that involvement in action research brought “increased teacher efficacy with specific regard to the probability of increasing student achievement and the belief in their own ability to bring about desired outcomes” (p. 234). Improvements in teachers’ attitudes because of action research were shown by Bonner (2006) to result in a belief that teachers could teach their students in more powerful and meaningful ways.

Atay (2008) studied action research and its requirement for being relevant and meaningful for the teacher involved. In the study, Atay found that this connection between a teacher and the teacher’s research raised awareness of that teacher’s practice. Reflecting on the relevance and meaning of their personal data, teachers initiated change in their own teaching practice. Hall (2009) continued the connection between the research and the classroom. She found the more a teacher explored research literature, the more inquiry appeared in that teacher’s classroom. When a teacher is involved in action research, Eilks and Markic (2011) found an improvement in teachers’ attitudes and competencies. They described these improvements in attitude and competencies as

translating into “action with self-confidence” (p. 158). Finally, Ross and Bruce (2012) discovered a significant statistical improvement in teacher attitudes towards research and in teacher efficacy (p. 551). Their study found that those teachers who are confident about their professional abilities implemented a broader range of strategies and brought about higher levels of student achievement.

Through all of these studies, there is a clear case for increased teacher efficacy because of action research. However, teachers are not the only beneficiaries of action research. As teachers grow, the effect begins to move to those around the teacher. This could result in benefits for students, colleagues, and administrators associated with the teacher. However, depending on the relationship to the teacher, some benefits are more significant than others.

Student achievement and attitude. While the obvious benefits of action research are for teachers involved, the benefits may extend beyond the immediate classroom. Benefits for students, colleagues, and the long-term development of the teacher all may be affected. As was previously stated, Ross and Bruce (2012) determined that when a teacher is more confident about their professional abilities, students experience higher levels of achievement. Seider and Lemma (2004) and Bonner (2006) found that there are immediate benefits for students when their teachers are involved in action research. Both studies showed increased student benefits highlighted by improved student attitudes and competence. However, Seider and Lemma (2004) noted that they were unable to report any long-term benefits for students.

Broader impact. With the teacher conducting the research being the beneficiary of the majority of the immediate benefits of action research, there also may be long-term benefits for these teachers, as well as benefits for colleagues of these teachers. Furtado and Anderson (2012) found that action research leads to teachers becoming life-long learners and that these teachers were more likely to influence others to do the same. Henson (2001), who found that action research brought about increased collaboration for the teacher involved and their colleagues, echoed this involvement of other teachers. Seider and Lemma (2004) found evidence to support this finding of increased collaboration coming directly from the colleagues and administrators of the teachers involved in action research. Seider and Lemma also noted that the majority of teachers involved, years later maintained the inquiry mindset acquired during action research. However, they also discovered that few teachers actually initiated another action research project after completing their research. Finally, Ross and Bruce (2012) showed statistical evidence that teachers, by participating in action research, experienced a positive effect in their perception of the value of educational research (p. 551).

When viewed as a whole, there is strong evidence that action research provides many benefits. The teacher involved as a participant may grow professionally and improve their efficacy, and their students may achieve at a higher level. Finally, their colleagues and administrators may experience collaborative results as well. Nevertheless, for action research to be effective, and to deliver all these benefits, there are conditions that must be met in conducting the research.

Conditions for Effective Action Research

Action research has the potential to provide many benefits to the teachers involved in the research. In addition, the benefits carry over to the students and colleagues associated with the teachers in the research. However, for action research to be beneficial and to provide the professional development that participants can expect, there are certain conditions that must be present in the research process. Prior studies have indicated that rigor (Atay, 2008, Ax et al., 2008; Ross & Bruce, 2012; Seider & Lemma, 2004), relevance (Ax et al., 2008; Eilks & Markic, 2011; Hall, 2009; McIntyre, 2005), and ownership and value (Ax et al., 2008; Eilks & Markic, 2011; Hall, 2009) are the key conditions necessary for effective action research.

Rigor. The most commonly noted condition required in action research is rigor. In some cases, action research is a requirement of a degree program that teachers must complete in order to graduate. If the action research loses its rigor and becomes a hollow component of the course or program, then the teachers lose the benefits that they would have normally obtained (Ax et al., 2008). Additional studies by Seider and Lemma (2004), Ross and Bruce (2012), and Atay (2008) found a similar emphasis on the requirement of rigor in action research. The teachers involved in the research acknowledged the rigor and complexity of the action research process and came to an agreement on this condition leading to a positive experience and professional growth (Atay, 2008; Seider & Lemma, 2004).

Relevance. Next to requiring rigor, having an action research study that is relevant to the practice of the teacher involved was essential. McIntyre (2005) stated that

often the knowledge that research provides is disconnected from the knowledge that teachers need. This disconnect is the reason why the action research must be relevant to the practices within the teachers classroom, rather than to a broad educational topic that may or may not relate to the teachers involved (Hall, 2009). Eilks and Markic (2011) were more specific in their recommendation, suggesting that the most effective action research involves essential questions in domain-specific content areas in which teachers have an active role. Other studies echoed this same theme, in which the goal of a transformative effect, because of action research, is dependent on the action research being something that teachers are capable of doing as research and that the teachers are able to adapt their practice accordingly (Ax et al., 2008). The ability to adapt, because the research is relevant to the teacher's practice, is the final piece of relevance. To this end, McIntyre (2005) emphasized that the knowledge gained from action research needs to focus on usability and usefulness; the priority needs to include practicality. Teachers must have the ability to take the knowledge they have acquired and apply it to their own practice.

Ownership and value. The final condition for effective action research is for teachers to take ownership in the process, and to recognize the value of the knowledge gained through the research. The process begins by requiring teachers to take personal ownership and focused intent in the action research (Hall, 2009). When teachers "own" the research, they are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards the research process (Eilks & Markic, 2011). This increased positive attitude towards action research will also happen if the teachers involved in the research recognize the value of data

analysis and practice reflection (Ross & Bruce, 2012). However, this ownership will not happen on its own. Unfortunately, while all teachers can experience the benefits of action research regardless of their experience level, qualifications, or sex (Ross & Bruce, 2012), it is harder to change the teaching efficacy in more experienced teachers (Henson, 2001). Because of this, it is necessary to provide the opportunity to conduct action research as part of the professional development for all teachers (Ax et al., 2008). To this end, learning communities may provide the necessary environment to support action research.

Learning Communities

The second component to be included in the study is a learning community. While the terms *learning community* and *cohort* are often interchangeable depending on the definition used, for the purpose of this study the two terms are distinctly distinguishable. Hilliard (2012) defined a learning community as being “made up of a leadership team and faculty members as a collaborative group who seek to improve the learning experiences for students through a shared vision” (p. 71). Key elements from this definition that differentiate a learning community from a cohort are the focus on collaboration, deliberate attention on improving practice, and a shared vision. Another key difference between two is the intentional development of a sense of community in the learning community. The type of professional learning associated with this type of learning community is an improvement in a teacher’s understanding of their course content and learning outcomes, and how to apply that learning to their practice in the classroom (White, Fox, & Isenberg, 2011).

Characteristics of learning communities. In order for a learning community to be effective, there are several characteristics that must be present.

Active learning and relevance. The first characteristic is that the work of the learning community must emphasize active learning, assessment, observation, and reflection (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). The learning community also needs to provide learning opportunities that are relevant to the teachers involved. In order for this to occur, the learning needs to be both an active and experiential process (Gregson & Sturko, 2007). However, it is not enough for the learning experience to be active and experiential; it must also be important and meaningful to the participating teachers. This sentiment is supported by both White et al. (2011) and Gilles, Wilson, and Elias (2010), who found in their respective studies that the learning experienced is the strongest and most meaningful when it is within the context of the teachers' actual practice. According to Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), the most useful professional development includes the aforementioned features.

Collegiality and collaboration. A second essential characteristic of an effective learning community is that there must be collegiality and collaboration. As teaching professionals, it is necessary for teachers to be able to collaborate with other professionals (Gregson & Sturko, 2007). Gregson and Sturko (2007) added that collegial relationships are a component of effective professional development that allows teachers to improve pedagogical practice, and apply that practice. To that end, professional development should be a transformative process (Kabas, Lamb, & Engstrom, 2010). But

that transformation can only occur when there is a climate of trust and collegiality (Harrison & Brodeth, 1999).

According to Ahn (2011), relationships are at the core of learning communities. The focus on relationships is a strength of a learning community as it produces a collegial and collaborative environment (Holmes, Birds, Seay, Smith, & Wilson, 2010). This focus on producing a collegial and collaborative environment is emphasized by White et al. (2011), who noted that learning communities bring out the importance of working together. Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) supported the importance of the collegial, collaborative environment by stating that effective professional development is collegial. When collegiality is present, then teachers can make progress towards transforming and improving their pedagogical practice (Gregson & Sturko, 2007).

Learning to change teacher practice. The third characteristic of learning communities is the purposeful learning the participating teachers experience concerning their teaching practice. The changes to teachers' practice are necessary to improve student learning. As noted by Gregson and Sturko (2007), to bring about student learning teachers need to learn how to change their practice. This assertion is supported by Kunter et al. (2013), as they indicated in their study that evidence exists that teacher education is important to teacher success. This professional knowledge necessary to change practice is gained through formal learning opportunities and self-initiated learning activities (Kunter et al., 2013) as would be included in a learning community. In addition to developing professional knowledge to change practice, it is also necessary for the

learning community to help the participating teachers cultivate self-efficacy (Sparks, 1988) to continue the practice of self-initiated learning activities.

Community. The final characteristic of effective learning communities is the intentional development of a sense of community. A sense of community as it applies here was originally defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986) as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Rovai (2002) added to the description of a classroom community by stating that there would be two components present: “feelings of connectedness among community members and commonality of learning expectations and goals” (p. 322). Rovai continued by describing community as being dysfunctional when members of the community feel disconnected due to lack of interaction, there is mistrust and competition between members, smaller groups exclude individuals, or there is a lack of common learning goals or values.

Holmes et al. (2010) stated that learning communities share a common experience which includes an event that leads to the creation of a community. Dawson, Burnett, and O’Donohue (2006) described the importance of community as being necessary to support the learning process. Additional backing for the significance of a sense of community comes from Rovai and Gallien (2005), who stated there is an increase in “the flow of information, the availability of support, commitment to group goals, sense of well-being, cooperation among members, satisfaction with group efforts, and persistence in an

educational program” (p. 54). Therefore, the importance of community cannot be understated when describing an effective learning community.

As one of the main characteristics differentiating a learning community from a cohort, the development of a sense of community must be intentional and purposeful. Holmes et al. (2010) stressed the importance of ensuring deliberate attention be paid to developing community. Dawson et al. (2006) additionally recognized the importance of developing a sense of community. The importance of developing community was established by Graham (2007), who found that teacher improvement was predicated on the ability to build a sense of community. With the intent of a learning community being to improve teacher practice through collaborative and collegial efforts (Hilliard, 2012; White et al., 2011), the thoughtful establishment of community is paramount.

Positive Effects of Learning Communities

As described, learning communities are deliberate and purposeful working groups of teachers. As a result of the purposefulness, there are several positive effects associated with learning communities. Hellner (2008) listed the positive effects to include “reduced isolation, job satisfaction, higher morale, less absenteeism, and making teaching adaptations for students” (p. 51). Hellner added that “commitment to school mission and to systemic changes, shared responsibility for student success, new and powerful knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners, increased meaning and understanding of curriculum and the teacher’s role, professional renewal, and inspiration” (pp. 50-51) are additional positive effects of learning communities.

Transformation as leaders. Building on these effects, learning communities have the potential to transform teachers in terms of their development as leaders (Kilpatrick, Jones, & Barrett, 2006). This positive effect on leadership was promoted in several studies. Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) stated that learning communities are avenues to intellectual renewal and cultivation of leadership. Kabes et al. (2010) indicated that transformation of practice and development of leadership occurs when teachers are involved in learning communities. Kabes et al. additionally asserted that the transformation in leadership of teachers was due to their involvement in a learning community, as that involvement increases the ability of teachers to transform themselves as educational leaders. Finally, White et al. (2011) explained that when teachers were involved in a learning community, they “felt more empowered ... to assume leadership roles” (p. 398).

Transformation of teaching practice and effectiveness. In addition to transforming the leadership of teachers, participation in a learning community may also lead to a transformation in teaching practice (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009) and effectiveness (Graham, 2007). In support of this, Darling-Hammond & Richardson (2009) stated that “current research suggests that providing intensive, content-rich, and collegial learning opportunities can improve both teaching and student learning” (p. 52). In addition, Kabes et al. (2010) indicated that teaching improves when teachers are involved in intensive, content-rich collegial learning opportunities, such as would be found in a learning community.

The transformation of teaching practices for teachers involved in learning communities is explained by Gregson and Sturko (2007). They noted that teachers can change their practice when they participate in professional development in which they research, discuss, and collaborate. Gregson and Sturko elaborated that in order for the professional development to change teaching practices, it must be in the teachers' classroom, ongoing, and collaborative. As defined earlier, the necessity of being contextualized within the teacher's practice (Gilles et al., 2010; White et al., 2011) and collaborative (Ahn, 2011; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Holmes et al., 2010; White et al., 2011) are requirements of an effective learning community.

Transformation of collegiality and collaboration. As key characteristics of a learning community, the growth of collegiality and collaboration is a desired effect. However, the growth of collegiality and collaboration is not limited to being between participants in the learning community. Kilpatrick et al. (2006) specified that in addition to reducing isolation of teachers by providing a professional group with which to interact, learning communities help develop better collaboration with colleagues outside of the learning community. The nature of the learning community provides a forum to increase professional talk, which promotes collegiality as well (Gilles et al., 2010). In the study by Graham (2007), he found that collaboration with others in a learning community is what led to professional improvement. Possibly, this is best summarized by saying, "where there is cooperation there is progress" (Leisman, 2013, p. 413).

Importance of Professional and Personal Changes

There are a number of changes that may be experienced by teachers participating in action research within the context of a learning community. This study focuses on four areas of professional or personal change to teachers that partake in this experience.

Seider and Lemma (2004) and Eilks and Markic (2011) indicated that action research has been shown to improve a teacher's professional efficacy, classroom practice, and leadership. Research by Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), Graham (2007), Kabes et al. (2010), and Gregson and Sturko (2007) illustrated similar changes in professional efficacy and teaching practice due to participation in learning communities. Studies by Kilpatrick et al. (2006), Gilles et al. (2010), and Graham (2007) indicated that participation in learning communities can change the collegiality of teachers. These changes all have importance directly related to teacher performance.

Leadership. To understand the importance of a change in leadership for the better, it is necessary to understand how teacher leadership can have an impact. As teachers become leaders, Phelps (2008) described three roles in which they may become active: advocates that speak up, innovators that are creative doers, or stewards that shape the teaching profession. In a study of teachers in action research, it was determined that action research resulted in participants as agents of change (Warren, Doorn, & Green, 2008). Phelps (2008) reinforced this outcome by stating that, "teacher leaders can change schools for the better" (p. 120). Finally, Richardson (2003) concluded that teacher leadership can lead to school improvement.

Teachers can influence change in other ways as leaders. In schools where teachers are leaders, collegiality exists. Essentially, “increased collegiality is a benefit of teacher leadership” (Phelps, 2008, p. 122). As the collegiality built through teacher leadership in a building or district increases, there is a correlation to an improvement in teaching. Richardson (2003) indicated that when there is an improvement in leadership there is an accompanying development in effective teaching skills, as well as interpersonal skills. As previously discussed, transformations in teaching skills come from participation in professional development involving reflective work on a relevant issue within the context of the teachers practice. In order to carry out learning of this manner, teachers must be willing to work outside of their comfort zone and take risks in regard to bringing about change. Phelps (2008) identified that risk taking is fundamental to being a teacher leader. Phelps also noted that risk taking comes from the sharing of experiences as would be found within a learning community. As presented earlier, one of the functions of a learning community is to help participants develop self-efficacy (Sparks, 1988). Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as being how an individual believes in their ability to carry out the behaviors needed to achieve success in areas that affect their lives. His view of self-efficacy described how people think, feel, motivate themselves, and behave. For teachers, this could mean how they view their abilities as a leader or agent of change. By helping teachers develop their abilities in their practices, learning communities can help teachers improve their confidence in the actions they take to improve their practice. By having the confidence to take risks and believe in what they

are doing, teachers are able to advance their leadership skills by changing the practice of the profession.

Collegiality. The improvement of collegiality within a school or district also demonstrates positive results. The development of collegiality comes from participation in both learning communities (Holmes et al., 2010; White et al., 2011) and action research (Gilles et al., 2010; Warren et al., 2008). Warren et al. (2008) found that participation in action research led to benefits that included increased professional expertise, valuing professional development and being more engaged with colleagues. Gilles et al. (2010) also concluded that classroom research provided collegiality. Finally, Harrison and Brodeth (1999) added that collegiality is accompanied by improved communication and collaboration. Gilles et al. (2010) raised two strong points regarding the benefit of collegiality. First, it was noted that the collaboration of collegiality affects professionalism, and second, collegiality aided in the relief of isolation often experienced by teachers. Hatfield (2006) focused on the effects when collegiality is not present in a school or district, namely, an increase in conflict and stress. As a summary of the effect of collegiality, Leisman (2013) emphasized that success occurs because of collegiality, by working hard and with others.

Professional development. The tool for continuous growth in teachers is professional development. As such, it is important for teachers to find professional development that contributes to positive transformations in their practice. Action research has been shown to lead to ongoing involvement in research resulting in continuous professional development (Gilles et al., 2010). Kunter et al. (2013) espoused

the connection that professional education leads to professional knowledge. This ongoing professional development, coupled with enriched professional knowledge is essential to improving teacher practice.

Teaching practice. Perhaps greater than all other areas, the ability to teach students may be the most important change for teachers. The importance of a strong pedagogy for teachers is widely supported. According to Nuthall (2004), excellent teachers have “a pedagogical content knowledge... a collaborative working style..., and a constant questioning of, reflecting on, and modifying of their own practice” (p. 282). When it comes to effective teaching, quality of instruction is tied to student outcomes (Kunter et al., 2013), just as pedagogical knowledge is key to student achievement (Graham, 2007). This effect was reinforced by Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), who found that improving pedagogical skills had a strong positive effect on practice. Similarly, Kunter et al. (2013) determined that teachers with greater pedagogical content knowledge had better instruction and better student achievement. If teacher success depends on a strong pedagogical content then it is important to make sure teachers receive the training they need in this area (Kunter et al., 2013). In a study of teacher quality, Boe, Shin, and Cook (2007) realized that removing the emphasis on pedagogy would be counterproductive to having quality teachers.

But pedagogical knowledge is not the only factor to have an impact on student learning. Stes, Coertjens, and Van Petegem (2010) indicated that how teachers approach teaching has important implications for how students learn. Likewise, Kunter et al.

(2013) discussed their finding that teachers that had greater competence and enthusiasm showed higher student achievement.

When it comes to improving teaching practice, change leads to change. This statement is supported by the work of Sparks (1988), who found teachers that showed improvement in their teaching practice had a greater willingness to experiment with their practice and had greater self-efficacy. The heightened self-efficacy can come from engagement in action research (Warren et al., 2008), and the improvement in teaching can be connected to sharing of information with other teachers (Gilles et al., 2010). Regardless of the source of change, the findings of Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) remain salient: “Current research suggests that providing intensive, content-rich, and collegial learning opportunities can improve both teaching and student learning” (p. 52).

Summary

This study aims to understand the changes, both professional and personal, that teachers may experience when they participate in action research within a learning community. Both action research and learning communities have demonstrated the ability to cause these expected changes in teachers. Graham (2007) indicated that when teachers are involved in these activities they experienced change in their knowledge, skills, and practices. In addition, Warren et al. (2008) determined that teachers “valued a heightened awareness in their risk taking, self-concept as a professional, professional relationships, knowledge as power, and change in teaching strategies” (p. 267). Finally,

the importance of the expected changes in leadership, collegiality, professional development, and teaching practice as they relate to education was demonstrated.

Chapter III

Methods

The intent of this phenomenological study was to discover changes that occurred in teachers who completed action research in a learning community setting in order to obtain their master's degree in education. Based on the extant literature, it was expected that the changes experienced by the teachers may include variations in their teaching practice, professional development, collegial relationships, and leadership roles (Atay, 2008; Bonner, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Dixon & Ward, 2015; Eilks & Markic, 2011; Furtado & Anderson, 2012; Hall, 2009; Henson, 2001; Kersher, Pedder, & Doddington, 2013; Potthoff, Batenhorst, & Fredrickson, 2001; Ross & Bruce, 2012; Seider & Lemma, 2004; White, Fox, & Isenberg, 2011) because of their lived experience completing action research in the learning community setting.

Central Question and Subquestions

The central question for this study sought to explore the experience of change: What is the experience of change among teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting while studying toward a master's degree?

To further break down the research question, four subquestions have been created that will look at specific changes that teachers may have experienced in this lived experience.

1. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their teaching practice following the experience?

2. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their professional development following the experience?
3. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their collegial relationships following the experience?
4. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their leadership roles following the experience?

Phenomenology. The choice of phenomenology as the approach to this study was based on the defining characteristics of the method. The foundations of phenomenology were initially established by Husserl (1970). Husserl explained that phenomenology is a descriptive study of consciousness in an attempt to discover the essence of an experience. Later researchers such as Giorgi (1985), Patton (1990), Moustakas (1994), and Creswell (2014) furthered the phenomenological approach. As noted by these researchers, the purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe the experience of participants in a common phenomenon (e.g. childbirth, grief over loss of a spouse, participation in a doctoral cohort). The insights to these experiences are gained through interviews with the participants, and from these insights, the essences of the shared lived experience are determined. Creswell (2014) described the essence of a phenomenon as being the “essential, invariant structure” (p. 82), or simply, the underlying structure of the experience that all participants were a part of. Understanding

the essence of the shared lived experience allows the reader to come away feeling that they now know what it was like to experience that phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

Subjects

Subjects were graduates of an educational leadership master's program at a Midwestern state comprehensive university. Subjects were recruited based on their participation in a master's degree program that has included the use of action research in a learning community environment. The teachers selected had varying levels of experience, taught at different grade levels and disciplines, and had both males and females participating. All teachers selected were graduates of the master's degree program at the Midwestern state comprehensive university, and were practicing teachers in public schools in Minnesota or South Dakota.

The particular master's degree program requires teachers complete action research as part of their fulfillment towards their degree. This program also entails a learning community format in which the teachers are involved for the entirety of the two years of the program. The targeted learning communities from which subjects were recruited are the from the learning communities active from 2010 to 2014.

According to Creswell (2014), a phenomenological study should include between 3 and 10 subjects. Following Creswell's recommendation, the target sample would include 6 to 8 subjects selected to participate in this phenomenological study. In an effort to establish a subject sample that would best help to gain an understanding of the experiences stated in the research question and subquestions, the selection of the subjects was purposive in its process. The selection process began with a survey of interest sent

out to all graduates of the targeted learning communities. To avoid issues related to a privileged situation as a result of a dual relationship between the researcher, the professor of the learning community, and the potential subjects, the initial survey of interest was sent out to all qualifying individuals through the primary instructor for the learning community. This allowed all individuals contacted to remain anonymous in this initial invitation if they chose. There were a total of 15 teachers that responded to the initial interest survey. From the initial list of teachers that expressed interest in the study, nine potential candidates were contacted to determine their ability to participate in the study so as to arrive at the final set of subjects. In order to have a final set of subjects that covered a wider range of teachers, the selection was purposive in that teachers were chosen in order to represent various grade levels and disciplines, ranges of experience, and to include both males and females. Out of the nine subjects that were selected, one subject chose to withdraw from the study prior to their interview, leaving the final set of subjects at eight participants. The final subjects included four males and four females; five high school teachers, one junior high teach, and two elementary teachers; three social studies teachers, two English teachers, two elementary teachers, and one band teacher; with all four possible learning communities being represented.

Methods

The method used in the study was a single set of interviews utilized to collect qualitative data from the subjects regarding their lived experiences in the master's degree program. The first step was a phone interview with the candidates to establish views and opinions brought forth by the subjects as they answered the subquestions of the study.

During the interviews, a semi-structured script was used for the questions. The script included the four subquestions of the research question, which ensured that all subjects were asked the identical questions. The interviews were digitally recorded through the use of an iPad using the Notability app in order to accurately record the responses of the teachers. The researcher then transcribed these recordings into Microsoft Word documents so that a written record of the conversation is available.

Procedure for Data Collection

As a phenomenological study, the data collection was qualitative in nature. The method of data collection was through interviews. There was a single round of interviews for data collection. The interviews were individual interviews utilizing FaceTime, or other form of technology if FaceTime was not available for the subject, in order to have a face-to-face meeting in which subjects were prompted to respond to the subquestions of the proposed study.

Reflexivity. One of the characteristics of the qualitative study is the involvement of the researcher in the process, particularly as the primary data collection instrument. To this end, the values and biases of the researcher were considered, as they shaped and influenced the research question, data collection, and analysis. The personal experience of the researcher as a student, and now an instructor of this particular master's degree program, shaped his perceptions of the effects of this combination of action research and learning environment. Having spent two years completing his own master's degree, and now having taught for seven years in the same program, the researcher acknowledged the bias he has regarding the effects he is researching. The researcher began the study with

the perspective that this combination of action research and learning environment bring with it changes, mostly positive. The goal was to remain objective and not let these existing biases shape the outcome of the data collection and analysis through regular debriefing with his advisor. While bias is unavoidable in this study, attempts to recognize and limit the bias were implemented. The subject sampling was purposive in nature, however bias was limited by choosing participants that provided the broadest demographic for the sample size. To further reduce bias, the interviews were digitally recorded and saved so that no omissions of the interview would occur. Finally, the themes developed during coding of the transcripts were reviewed with the advisor to look for bias in the analysis phase.

Procedure for Data Analysis

The nature of a phenomenological study is a search for common essences of the lived experience of the participants in a shared phenomenon. To distill these essences from the interviews conducted, a coding of the responses is necessary. The analysis of the data began by following guidelines recommended by Saldaña (2013). The analysis began with a preliminary reading of all transcripts from the interviews. As suggested by Saldaña, the subsequent initial round of coding consisted of theming the data. With the limited number of transcripts, the coding of the transcripts was done manually.

Saldaña has identified theming as being especially appropriate for phenomenological studies, as the focus of theming is to establish what a unit of data is about and what it means. Saldaña described the process of theming as looking for “repeating ideas, participant or indigenous terms, metaphors and analogies, transitions or

shifts in topic, similarities and differences of participant expression, linguistic connectors,” (p. 180) or even what is missing from the data. After the initial coding for themes, a second cycle of coding followed as prescribed by Saldaña.

This second cycle focused on the themes developed in the first cycle of coding and attempted to cultivate a categorical arrangement of the initial themes into major component themes for each subquestion. A basic categorization process entails looking at the themes derived in the initial round of coding to determine how the themes are similar or different, and what kind of relationships exist between them. The themes were categorized according to their commonality, and then ordered in superordinate and subordinate levels to reflect the relationships that were the major component themes for the subquestions (Saldaña, 2013). The analysis of the coded themes for the interview provided the themes for the study as they pertained to the changes experienced by the teachers as they completed their action research in a learning community environment. As a final step, quotes from the interviews were identified to use in support of the themes as they are presented in the analysis and discussion.

Chapter IV

Results

By nature, the analysis of a phenomenological study is to search for common essences experienced by participants of a shared phenomenon. The participants in this study shared in the experience of completing their master's degree in a learning community environment that required action research at the same comprehensive regional university in the Upper Midwest. The master's degree program was a two-year process that culminated in a master's degree in teaching, learning, and leadership. In addition, the professor and adjunct were constant over the course of the entire two years.

Demographic Characteristics

The initial survey was sent out to all 92 graduates of the four learning communities identified for this study. Fifteen graduates, a 16.3% response rate, responded with consent to participate. These 15 respondents were sorted by demographics and a population of 9 subjects was purposively selected. The criteria used to select the final subjects were to find a balance between males and females, grade level, learning communities, and to a lesser degree, subject taught and years of experience. Prior to the interviews, one of the subjects elected to withdraw from the study, leaving a final subject population of 8 teachers. The demographics for the group were four males and four females, with five high school teachers, one middle school teacher, and two elementary teachers. Each of the four learning communities had at least one participant, with one group having two and another group having four representatives. Concerning subjects taught, there were three social studies teachers, two English teachers, one band

teacher, and two elementary teachers. Three of the teachers had less than 10 years of experience, three had between 11 and 14 years of experience, and two had over 20 years of experience. The full demographics of the participants are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of Teachers Participating in Study

Teacher	Gender	Grade level	Learning Community	Subject taught	Years of experience
Subject A	M	High School	1	Social	22
Subject B	M	Junior High	1	Social	11
Subject C	F	Elementary	1	2 nd Grade	9
Subject D	M	High School	1	Band	13
Subject E	M	High School	2	Social	27
Subject F	F	High School	3	English	8
Subject G	F	High School	4	English	14
Subject H	F	Elementary	2	3 rd Grade	7

Thematic Analysis

The information gathered consisted of interviews conducted by the investigator and transcribed into Word documents that required analysis through a process of coding. Adhering to guidelines recommended by Saldaña (2013), the analysis began with a preliminary reading of all of the interview transcripts followed by an initial round of open coding. With the completion of the initial round of open coding, a second round of coding was conducted to establish axial codes. The axial codes served as the major component themes for each of the stated subquestions. After the component themes had been established, they were reviewed to determine the relationships that existed between

them. The themes were then categorized according to their commonality, and ordered in superordinate and subordinate levels to reflect the relationships that are the major component themes for the subquestions (Saldaña, 2013). These final themes thus demonstrated by report the changes experienced by the teachers as they completed their action research in a learning community environment.

Open coding. After the initial reading of the transcripts, the first round of coding was completed to establish the open codes. The open coding (Appendix A) was divided into each of the four subquestions, plus a fifth category of general comments. The subquestions asked,

1. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their teaching practice following the experience?
2. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their professional development following the experience?
3. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their collegial relationships following the experience?
4. How do teachers who participate in action research within a learning community setting describe their leadership roles following the experience?

Under the subquestion pertaining to Teaching Practice, a total of 36 open codes were identified. The Professional Development subquestion contained 30 open codes, the Collegial Relationships subquestion contained 31 open codes, and the Leadership subquestion contained 20 open codes. Additionally, 6 open codes were present in General Comments.

Axial coding. The goal of the axial coding was to establish the major component themes present in each of the subquestions (Appendix B). Three component themes, or axial codes, were identified within the Teaching Practice subquestion: (a) stronger self-perception, (b) added pedagogical tools, and (c) contribution of master's program. Within the Professional Development subquestion, three component themes were determined as well: (a) personal motivation, (b) impact of professional development, and (c) personal control. The subquestion of Collegial Relationships produced three component themes: (a) benefits of collegial relationships, (b) professional lasting relationships, and (c) changed professional relationships. Two component themes were pulled from the open codes for the Leadership Roles subquestion: (a) growth as leaders and (b) altered leadership. Finally, a single component theme was developed from the general comments: teachers connected their master's program experience to their changed practices.

Themes. After reviewing the component themes for each of the subquestions and the general comments, the overarching themes of the study were identified. Across all the subquestions, four major themes emerged. The first theme was the master's program itself, the second theme was the development of improved tools for the teacher, the third theme was leadership growth, and the final theme was personal control (Appendix C).

The Master's Program

The first major theme identified in the study was the contribution of the master's degree program. Support for this theme was present primarily in the teaching practice subquestion and in the general comments, but coding of the entire set of transcripts

showed evidence of the program throughout the subquestions. The master's degree program of interest in this study had two major components: a learning community setting and a requirement for action research. The development of this theme arose from the comments from the subjects either directly referencing the master's degree program, or in comments specifically mentioning the two components of this master's degree program as they pertained to other themes.

In the open coding process, the master's degree program was referenced with statements describing the attributes of the program. The resulting codes included *relevant learning*, *immediate application of learning*, *individually valued*, and *highlighted value of collaboration with peers*. The program itself was described with codes stating the program was *comfortable*, and a *great learning experience*, and that the master's program was the *best experience* and *credited program for change*. Subject A noted the value of the experience of participating in the master's program; "I think I am probably one of the people that going through the learning community, going with the master's program, where it did transform literally what I did in my classroom." Along this line, Subject B added, "The master's class was the best educational thing I have done in my high school or college career."

Support was found throughout the subquestions for the individual components of the master's degree program: a learning community environment and a requirement of action research. In both cases, the codes created referencing the learning community or action research, helped build support of the other major themes.

Learning communities. As noted in the literature review, the learning community in this study emphasized *community*, “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). There were numerous references to the importance of community in the master’s degree program. “I am still in contact with several of the people that I was in my master’s with, just to get ideas, input and things...you really develop a relationship with them” (Subject H). Out of the eight subjects interviewed, seven directly mentioned the ongoing relationships with the members of their learning community.

The importance of the learning community as an impetus of collaboration was evident in the coding as well. This was a subtheme that appeared frequently in the open and axial coding of the transcripts. Subjects noted that collaboration began in the learning community of the master’s degree program and carried on after the master’s degree program was completed. “I just take more initiative and I have more confidence I guess, in doing that with other people” (Subject C). Subject H added that the learned collaboration, “just helps you communicate better with people, as well as feeling you are on a similar level, too.” Finally, “just to have, I don’t know, something to fall back on, the experience, to get to talk to all those people in the class from different schools. You weren’t so much out on an island, everyone gets it” (Subject E).

Action research. The second component of the master’s degree program was the requirement of action research. Throughout the coding, the importance of action research

to the perceived value of the master's degree program was evident in statements the subjects made supporting other themes. While the subjects were not asked directly about their action research, it did appear in the coding of five of the eight subjects. In some cases, the subject directly mentioned their action research; "my action research was on doing some reading groups, and actually doing more student lead reading groups than teacher lead" (Subject H). But for others, such as Subject G, the reference to the action research was in how it has affected their current practice.

Now I study more data or look for practices or assignments that will be beneficial to my students. And that I can actually see more growth. And I think automatically of how can I see growth, how can I report data, is this measurable? And then finally I looked to see like what was my baseline and what was the final assessment, and do I see growth?

With the connection to the master's degree program being so pervasive in the coding of the subquestions, the formation of the master's degree program as a major theme was required, as it appeared to form the substrate for the succeeding themes.

Improved Tools

The second major theme present in the analysis is the development of improved tools for teaching practice. During the interviews, the subjects were asked directly about the effect on their teaching practice as a result of their participation in the master's degree program. All of the subjects responded positively to this subquestion. The open coding for this subquestion produced *best practices*, *use of action research*, *use of data in teaching*, *more reflective in practice*, and *read more*; along with general codes for

improved classroom practice, analyzed practice, students more engaged, and aware of education topics and research. A common sentiment was summed up by Subject D, “I thought about so much in how different my teaching is now from when I...before I started the program. And it is so different, and only in the most positive ways.”

In addition to the more obvious tools that teachers may have added, such as accepted best practices, three non-pedagogical tools became apparent: reflection, reading, and relationships with their students. The first of these three was the emphasis on reflection as a tool for improved teaching. As noted by most of the subjects, the exercise of reflecting on their practice proved to be a powerful tool in their teaching.

I would say, first of all, I think the biggest change for me, I think is that I am much more reflective. I think our conversations and everything that we did in class help me, just be more aware of what I am doing and how I can do things better, all the time. So I guess I am constantly analyzing what went well, what didn't go well, what I should change, how I can make it better. So I think that is the biggest change in my classroom. (Subject C)

Subject A echoed this sentiment when they stated, “I reevaluated everything I was doing. Whether or not if it was actually useful or if it was just me talking and doing all the work...[I] found out what was more important.” In almost every interview, the subjects revealed this reflective practice in how they approached their craft.

The second non-pedagogical tool was the emphasis on reading, particularly teaching related materials. For six of the subjects, reading practice related materials became a priority. This point of emphasis was specifically addressed by Subject D:

I am finding time to read. I am not as good as I was when I was in the program, as there was always a deadline...I think before I always felt like I couldn't fit that stuff in, that reading portion of things in, when I was trying to do everything else. But you find time for that important stuff when you realize how good it is. I haven't read a lot of books, but I have read more books in the last two years than I did in probably the eight years before. Especially, I mean, books as far as how to make my teaching better. How to look at what I am doing differently.

This same focus on reading to improve their practice was mentioned by other subjects as well. For some this meant simply making an effort to continue the practice of reading (e.g., "I would say I have taken an interest now in different articles" [Subject E]). For another, it meant a concerted attempt to reach beyond the confines of their classroom to stay abreast of changes in education that may affect their classroom. "I think I read a lot more than I ever did before, and I just try to stay on top of everything that is happening out there. So I think that also affects my classroom quite a bit" (Subject C).

The third non-pedagogical tool is the relationships with their students. Every teacher has established relationships with their classes. But for many of the subjects, this relationship was viewed in a different light following their master's degree program. Through the coding process, it was evident that these teachers now viewed the relationships with their classes as an important aspect of their practice, not just a necessary component of being in the classroom. This new practice was summed up best by Subject D with the statement;

One of the biggest things is my relationship with my students. I know that part of it...really changed how I looked at the teacher student relationships. I also know from having just other people in other areas in my learning community, that I understood more about the kids as a whole. You know, sometimes you see the kids in a singular way, especially for me, I see them in music class. I see them in sports and all that stuff, but there was something about that – that really changed me.

This change in approach to their students was found at all levels, from elementary to high school. While not every teacher in the study mentioned this changed relationship specifically, for those teachers that did note this change, it appears to be a major turning point for them in their approach to teaching.

I think what I got out of the program was that education does not run necessarily through me, I am not the expert, I am more of a facilitator getting them to understand how they think, and that is the biggest thing that I took away from it.

(Subject A)

It thus appears, with these improved tools, that the subjects perceived themselves to be better teachers than they were before the master's degree program. Subject B expressed this simply with “I think I am a lot better teacher now than I was four or five years ago.” Six of the eight subjects, reinforcing the importance of their new view of relationships with their students, provided this same line.

Leadership Growth

The third major theme of the study is the growth in the subjects' leadership. As evidenced by the coding of the interviews, the subjects experienced a wide range of leadership changes. Some of the codes addressed how the subjects viewed leadership: *importance of leadership, increased self and peer-perception as a leader, confidence, deeper understanding, more effective leadership, and wanting to contribute*. Other codes expressed the changes in their leadership: *more initiative as a leader, increased leadership roles, left some leadership roles, and more meaningful leadership roles*.

The first set of codes reflected a changed view of leadership. All eight subjects discussed how their view of leadership was different after completing their master's degree program. This changed view appeared in a variety of manners. One of the subjects (Subject D) felt "that there is a certain amount of confidence that I have now in what I am doing." According to Subject H, "I wanted it to be something that I knew I was part of, that I knew I could help, just to provide what I needed to do." It was also noted in the interviews that there was a changed perception in their leadership, both by themselves and by others (e.g., "I am a lot more confident than I was...I feel like I am more knowledgeable and comfortable with so many subjects...I think other people notice that in you too" [Subject C]). To exemplify the code for a deeper understanding, several subjects reflected on their effectiveness as leaders. For example, "Through the program, I realized that it was more important to do really well at something than to try to do everything" (Subject F). Or as Subject H stated regarding their current leadership roles, "I don't want to say they are a higher level, but there is more depth to them...and a

deeper understanding of a district and what is going on.” This was encapsulated by Subject G, “I feel like I am probably more of a leader now than I was before.”

The second set of codes highlighted how the leadership roles for the subjects changed following their master’s degree program. It is worth noting that the subjects did not present a consensus on either adding or stepping down from leadership roles. Rather, the general consensus was on establishing the quality of the leadership experience. For some of the subjects, this meant becoming more active in leadership roles, while for others this led to stepping down from existing leadership roles. For Subject F this necessitated that

I eliminated the roles where I was not effective or the structure wasn’t allowing for change, and focused my energy where they would matter, where my voice could be heard. So I think I am in less roles, but more important roles.

For others, the opportunity to take on previously unavailable leadership roles was a priority (e.g., “There are specific roles you cannot have until you have your master’s, and as soon as I got my master’s I got those roles” [Subject H]).

Another component to this group of codes was the initiative shown regarding leadership roles by the subjects after completing the master’s degree program. For five of the eight subjects, taking the initiative to become leaders was highlighted in their comments. In some cases, this was evident in their volunteering for existing leadership roles (e.g. “That’s the PLC Leader thing, again you had to seek that out” [Subject E]; “I volunteered for the roles” [Subject H]). But for two of the subjects, this translated into working together to start a new leadership program in their school’s athletic programs.

According to Subject B, “that was one thing on the leadership piece that really hit home with me and [Subject A], and we try to bring that back to our school.” Throughout the comments of all of the subjects, the changed leadership view was an important theme.

Personal Control

As a final theme, the concept of Personal Control was dominant. The subjects were consistent in their expression of how they had taken charge of many aspects of their teaching. Most notably, the control they wielded was directed at their professional development and their collegial relationships. But the personal control extended into all aspects of their teaching practice due to the impact and reach of their professional development and collegial relationships. The codes used in identifying this theme were divided into professional development and collegial relationships. The professional development codes sorted into groups that included their motivation for professional development (*open to change, want to learn more, do things better, and found value of professional development*); their view of how professional development has affected their practice (*immediate application, more aware of their practice, invigorated, recharged teaching, and reawakened love of learning*); and their decision to take control of their professional development (*increased professional development compared to district, look for opportunities, drive their own development, increased priority, more proactive, and sharing professional development with others*). The collegial relationship codes sorted into positive relationships (*more initiative to form relationships, validation of self, continue to collaborate, remain connected, more meaningful relationships, relationships more professional than social, and relationships centered on learning*), and control over

relationships (*peer relationships are different, going different direction than peers, peers felt threatened, some strained relationships, and different worldview of education*). Of all the themes presented to this point, the most powerful, at least in terms of the transformation of the subjects, was personal control.

Professional development. Every subject in the study referenced professional development as an area in which they had taken control. While they still participated in required professional development provided by their districts, they all had added a personal professional development plan. Across the subjects, this changed view of professional development started with a motivation to experience continued professional growth due to a realized impact that meaningful professional development had on their practice. Once this was established, the next step taken by the subjects was to take personal control over their professional development.

Motivation for professional development. Many of the subjects underscored their motivation to improve their professional development. For Subject H, referring to the professional development they experience during their master's degree program, "because it was so good and so strong ...it would be good to have more of that." Some of the subjects expanded on the reasons for their motivation (e.g., "...I want to understand something or be better at it" [Subject A]; "I am constantly trying to find new ways" [Subject B]; "I constantly want to be better" [Subject C]). As noted by Subject D, "you find time for that important stuff when you realize how good it is." The motivation factor is probably best stated by Subject G, "I can't do this on my own anymore."

Impact of professional development. As many of the subjects stated, they found value in professional development when there was a positive impact on their practice or on themselves. In the case of Subject B, the learning they experienced in their master's degree program allowed them to take their professional development and "make this work in my classroom tomorrow or the next day." Subject H, stating that "having been teaching while doing it, you are able to use exactly what you are learning as you learn it and apply it right away", echoed this same thought. For a few of the subjects, the impact of their professional development was in how it changed their awareness of their teaching practice (e.g., "I am just much more aware of everything that I do in my teaching" [Subject C]).

Another aspect of the impact of their professional development was how it affected their mindset and approach to teaching. Several of the subjects commented on an attitudinal change as a result of their experience in the master's degree program. For these teachers, the experience of the program broke them out of complacency and delivered them to a better place in their teaching. Subject B stated that the experience of their master's degree program "brought back the last two years, of me being a new teacher." When asked, Subject F described their practice as "invigorated", and continued by noting, "the whole thing reawakened my love of learning for myself. And that's been really refreshing and fulfilling." Whether stated explicitly or woven through their comments, all of the subjects referenced a changed mindset following completion of their master's degree program.

Control of professional development. One of the strongest themes that emerged from the interviews was the personal control each of the teachers now placed over their professional development. In most cases, the subjects noted how the type of professional development they received while in the master's degree program fueled their initiative to continue their development on their own (e.g., "the way we did our master's program has to do with that" [Subject C]; "has a lot to do at how I look at professional development" [Subject D]). They also compared the professional development to what was occurring in their districts. For most of the subjects, it was noted that what the district was providing was lacking in comparison to what they had been receiving in their master's degree program. Subject A commented on this by stating, "I found that a lot of what we do in our workshops and our professional development are things that are really, in some cases, not necessary or superficial." As a result, almost every subject stated that they had taken the initiative to find and determine their own professional development, and not rely on their district to provide the development they need (e.g., "we are actually starting to drive our own development, rather than having it come from the top down." [Subject A]; "I am definitely more willing to create opportunities if I don't see them." [Subject G]).

How this initiative looked for each teacher was varied, but present nonetheless. Most subjects mentioned a renewed commitment to professional reading (e.g., "I read a lot more than I ever did before." [Subject C]; "I am much more active with reading current research and keeping up with the latest trends." [Subject F]). But the initiative to take control of their professional development went beyond just reading more. This proactive approach led to volunteering to attend conferences (Subject E), searching out

classes (Subject C), determining content of shared professional development (Subject D), and presenting their research at a professional conference (Subjects A & B). Subject G found themselves lacking the colleagues in their district to form a content specific learning community, so they sought out teachers from the surrounding districts to form their own learning community. When asked about this, Subject G simply responded, “So I look for it and make it if it is not there for me.” This commitment to self-control over their professional development ran through the comments of every subject interviewed.

Collegial relationships. The second major area under the theme of personal control is the professional relationships of the subjects. The relationships of the subjects coded into two areas: positive relationships and control over relationships. These two areas are interconnected, but both show distinctly in the interviews.

Positive relationships. The subjects all made mention of the importance of their professional relationships. Through the comments provided by the subjects, it became apparent that the positive aspect of the relationship was quite significant. The relationships formed with their colleagues in the master’s degree program remained of value to the subjects (e.g., “That group we spent two years with, it is a special bond.” [Subject B]; “We still try to get together as a group.” [Subject D]). According to Subject C, the relationships formed in their learning community were built on collaboration and learning, “Our learning community was always collaborating and always discussing.” For several of the subjects, this led to relationships that were based on learning rather than social connections. As noted by Subject F, “with my other colleagues at work, I feel like we talk more now about what we are doing in our classrooms, rather than small talk

about our weekends,” and referring to the relationships again, “I feel like they are more meaningful and they are centered on student learning.” Subject A, who stated, “I love sitting down with people that are teaching, and just talk teaching”, repeated this feeling.

Control over relationships. While the subjects generally discussed the positive aspects of their relationships, it was evident that they had also taken more control over the relationships they were in currently. The subjects mentioned how their relationships with other colleagues, and even with administrators, had changed. Typically, this change was due to the subjects’ renewed approach to teaching, the professional development they had received, and the resulting new direction their teaching was taking them.

Subject A expressed this situation,

I have found that my understanding of what education is, has wanted me to express that to my colleagues, but my colleagues don’t necessarily want to hear it. I have found that my relationships with my high school colleagues has probably not gotten better, has gotten a lot more...not disengaged, but it has been a lot more separated. I don’t know what I equate that to, if it’s the fact that I am going a different direction than they are, they don’t want to change; maybe I am too over-zealous. I want things to change, but I have found that I have less of a relationship with my colleague now than prior to that.

This changed relationship was not limited to other colleagues. Subject F reported a similar experience with their administrator,

My relationships with some administrators are more strained, because I find myself in some positions where I have more current research or more up to date

information than they do, or maybe more vibrant professional development than they currently have. So that puts me at odds with them if we are not seeing eye to eye. I have one administrator that I used to work with, he is not really an administrator, but he works in that capacity. I think he was almost threatened with some of the new ideas that I brought forward and there was some tense moments there. And positions that I actually resigned from, that came from that.

Neither of the subjects considered the changed relationships as being negative, merely different. But they did express the feeling that they were not going to expend energy in a relationship that was not going to prove collaborative. Other subjects expressed this sentiment as well. Subject B reflected,

A lot of teachers will ask me what I do and some think it is cool, some think it's way non-traditional and it's not correct. So I guess there is a certain audience for everything. If you like it you like it, if you don't you don't.

The general view by the subjects was that they were confident in their abilities and more sure of themselves as educators. As a result, they were more thoughtful about their relationships and chose to spend their time focused on the relationships that would strengthen and support their practice.

Summary

The participants in this study shared in the experience of completing their master's degree in a learning community environment that required action research at a comprehensive regional university in the Upper Midwest. The analysis of their interviews identified four overarching themes common to the shared experience. At the

base level was the master's program itself. Evident in the coding was the impact the master's program had on the subjects, specifically the role of action research in the program and the emphasis on community. The master's program served as the impetus for the development of improved tools for the teacher, which was the second overarching theme of the study. With the master's program providing the research, professional development, and collaborative environment, the change in the teachers' practice due to their improved tools was possible. The third overarching theme of the study was leadership growth. Again, the master's program itself directly led to the changes experienced by the teachers regarding their leadership. Similarly, the improved teaching practices of the teachers contributed to the development of their changed leadership. The fourth, and most significant of the themes in the study, was the development of personal control by the teachers over their teaching practice and professional lives. The personal control exhibited by the teachers in the study was due to the influence of all three of the other major themes. However, the theme of personal control appeared to be the culmination of their development and influenced in return the other themes. When the teachers reached this level of personal control, they had developed into stronger, better teachers.

Chapter V

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The continued education and training of teachers is vital to the goal of effecting change in the classroom and improving student learning. However, not all graduate programs are created equally. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the education profession to identify those programs that will lead to the achievement of these goals. However, this is where the difficulties begin. Teachers with master's degrees have created a paradox for education. On the one hand, numerous researchers have demonstrated that the merely having a master's degree as a teacher is unrelated to student performance (Goldhaber, 2002; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Hanushek, 1986; Hanushek, 1997; Hill, 2007; Rivkin et al., 2005; Wayne & Youngs, 2003). Yet on the other hand, teachers every year continue to work towards a master's degree, and over half of all educators in the United States currently possess a master's degree or higher (United States Department of Education, 2013).

A potential solution lies in research on teacher quality as it affects student achievement. Numerous researchers (i.e., Dixon & Ward, 2015; Goldhaber, 2002; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Hanushek, 1986; Hanushek, 1997; Rivkin et al., 2005; Wayne & Youngs, 2003) have noted a positive impact on student achievement due to teacher quality. Most notable was research by Darling-Hammond (2000), in which she presented the significance of the relationship between teacher quality and teacher education. Darling-Hammond concluded that teachers that were most effective had more

professional training in best practices, were more likely to use teaching practices associated with higher student achievement, were often enrolled in graduate studies or had a master's degree, and had recently engaged in voluntary professional development. Even Goldhaber (2002) acknowledged that there are statistically significant relationships between teacher training and student achievement.

It seems then that the bigger issue might not be that having a master's degree in and of itself does not impact student achievement. But rather, does the master's degree make the teacher better, which will lead to improved student achievement? Simply, can a master's degree program make better teachers? There is evidence that master's programs may elicit the desired changes in teachers and their practice. Studies on action research by Hine (2013), Kershner et al. (2013), Li (2008) and White et al. (2011), as well as studies on learning communities by Kershner et al., Potthoff et al. (2001) and Vescio et al. (2008), indicate that progress towards these goals is possible within a master's degree program. While having a master's degree in itself will probably not make a teacher better, having a master's degree that focuses on making a teacher better may provide the correlation to improved student achievement

By focusing on the use of action research in a learning community, the intent of the present phenomenological study was to discover changes that occurred in teachers involved in action research in a learning community setting while obtaining their master's degree; these expected changes would be correlated with making better teachers. The sample consisted of eight teachers that had attained their master's degree from a program

involving both action research and a learning community setting offered at the same comprehensive regional university in the Upper Midwest.

Action research and learning communities. The master's program that was part of this study involved two important components: action research and learning communities. Identified as one of the major themes of the study, the master's program itself appeared to play a key role in the changes experienced by the teachers. However, the components of the master's degree program proved integral to the changes experienced, more specifically than the master's degree program on its own.

Action research. For any teacher, their students' learning is tied to the quality of the teacher's practice. Unfortunately, the practices of teachers are often flawed. One way that these flaws can be exposed is if the teacher undergoes critical reflection of their practice, which is a cornerstone of action research (Kemmis, 2009). The value of action research, therefore, is that it is "practice-changing practice" (Kemmis, 2009, p. 464). Throughout the interviews with the subjects, there was reference to their changed practice. Based on the results of the analysis, this was often attributed to their use of reflection in and about their practice. Most notably, Subject G spoke at length of the value now placed on reflection and research, and Subject C identified the biggest change in their practice as being more reflective. Consistent with the findings of Li (2008), reflection on their practice was a key benefit to the action research they conducted.

Action research, however, is not limited to just how teachers view their practice. The impact on the efficacy of teachers in the classroom is also of note. Henson (2001) and Seider and Lemma (2004) demonstrated a link between teacher research and teacher

efficacy, and teaching strategies. Bonner (2006), Eilks and Markic (2011), and Atay (2008) found connections between the attitude of teachers and action research, with this improved attitude carrying into the classroom and impacting the students. Consistent with the results of Henson (2011), Seider and Lemma (2004), Bonner (2006), Eilks and Markic (2011), and Atay (2008) were comments by the teachers in this study. Subjects mentioned a renewed confidence in their practice, a changed view of their role as a teacher, a different worldview of education, and an expressed belief that they are better teachers now than they were before they started the master's degree program.

Learning communities. The master's degree program in this study placed an emphasis on the use of learning communities and more specifically, the element of community. A learning community is built on the premise of relevant active learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009), collegial and collaborative relationships (Gregson & Sturko, 2007), and purposeful learning about teaching practice (Kunter et al., 2013). The emphasis on community, however, came through the strongest in this study. In the analysis of the interviews, every subject mentioned at least one aspect of the learning community. The analysis provided support for the importance of collaboration for the teachers in this study. Relevance of their learning was noted by many of the subjects as being a key to the master's degree program, as well as the acknowledgement of a focus on improved teaching practice.

The sentiment of community resonated with all subjects. Recalling McMillan and Chavis' (1986) definition of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that

members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9), this belief was evident with every subject. The analysis of the interviews indicated a strong attachment that the subjects had with the members of their learning communities. They commented on the continued relationships they have with the members of their learning communities, as well as the support they felt from their colleagues at all times during their master's degree program continuing to the present.

Prior research demonstrated a link between learning communities and changes in teachers. The positive changes associated with learning communities include reduced isolation (Hellner, 2008), transformation as leaders (Kilpatrick et al., 2006; White et al., 2011), transformation of teaching practice and effectiveness (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Graham, 2007), and improved collegiality and collaboration (Kilpatrick et al., 2006). Again, the analysis of the interviews provided support for all of these areas in comments made by the subjects.

When viewed together, it is evident that the contributions of both action research and a learning community environment made the master's degree program successful in making teachers better. The interviews analyzed provided strong support for the findings of prior research in these areas, but did so in a manner that emphasized the perceived improvement of the subjects as teachers. While this study did not review student performance to support the claims by the subjects that they were better teachers, it did substantiate their improvement by connecting to prior studies. As noted by Ross and Bruce (2012), teachers who are confident about their professional abilities implement a broader range of strategies and bring about higher levels of student achievement. The

teachers in this study have all indicated their improved confidence in their abilities as a teacher and have noted the improvements in their practice as a result of their action research and involvement in a learning community.

Improved teachers. The second and most important finding of this study is the indication that the subjects involved perceived themselves as better teachers. Three themes were identified in the analysis of the interviews and were linked together resulting in improved teachers. The three themes developed from the substrate that was the master's degree program, and consisted of improved tools, leadership growth, and personal control. The master's degree program, the fourth main theme, provided the opportunity and resources necessary for the subjects to develop the improved teaching tools they now possessed. In addition, the master's degree program gave the subjects the occasion and confidence to develop as leaders. The interaction of the master's degree program, the improved tools, and the leadership growth allowed for the development of the most important of the main themes: personal control.

Entering the master's degree program, each of the subjects had existing teaching tools and some level of leadership. What was not developed was the personal control found at the intersection of these components. The experience of the master's degree program, and the development of the teaching tools and growth in leadership, resulted in a greater overlap of the components. The result was an enhanced level of personal control (Figure 1).

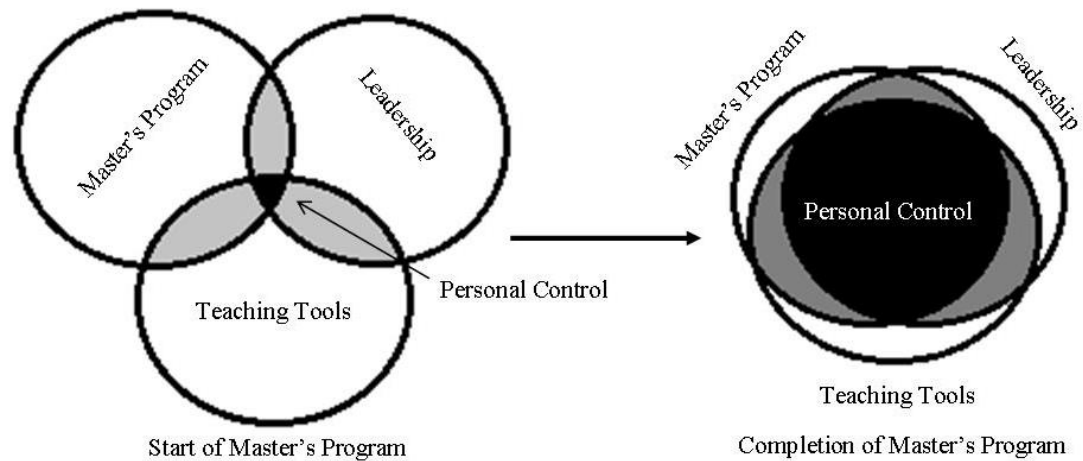


Figure 1. Development of personal control during master's degree program.

Personal control over their professional lives appears to be the culmination of their development as teachers. As noted in the analysis, when the subjects reached this point they had taken charge of their development. No longer content to follow the prescribed professional development of their district, they now identified the areas they needed to improve and sought out the professional development required to make that change. They used this control to determine how their leadership skills would be most productive and effective. It may have meant taking on a new role, or even leaving a current role, but it always meant that they were mindful of how they could make the most impact. This same personal control extended to the relationships they formed and maintained. For most of the subjects, this meant reaching out beyond their own school and forming relationships with other professionals. Within their schools, it meant that they invested in relationships that were positive and productive, and limited time spent in

negative relationships. In all areas, when the subjects took control over who they were as a teacher, they demonstrated confidence, control, and competence.

Personal control did not mean that the subjects went rogue and ignored the requirements of their districts. Rather, they focused their time on becoming better. Through reflection, reading, research, and collaboration the subjects found where the weaknesses were in their classrooms and their practice and worked to correct and improve on any deficiencies. In every interview, it was evident that the subject possessed a true level of confidence in their abilities and a plan for continued improvement. It is this manifestation of personal control that was most evident when any of the subjects described how they were now better teachers.

Implications

The results of the present study suggest that master's degree programs that incorporate action research within learning communities may provide an opportunity for programmatic emulation. Research has clearly shown that having a master's degree does not make better classroom teachers (Ediger, 2001; Goldhaber, 2002; Hanushek, 1986). Yet, there is evidence in research that does show that when teachers learn how to be better teachers they are more effective in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goldhaber, 2002). This study may provide these universities a template for improving their programs to produce more effective teachers to send out to the nation's classrooms. School districts and individual teachers may also benefit from the study as they consider which master's degree programs to endorse as it pertains to teachers in the district continuing their education. If the overall intent of education is to provide children with

the best opportunity to learn, then it is necessary to put the most effective teachers in the classroom. One such method to produce these teachers is presented in this present study.

Strengths and Limitations

It must be acknowledged, however, that while the initial interest survey was sent to all graduates of the program, the respondents may not represent the experience of every graduate of the program. It is possible that their experience was such that they felt compelled to participate, whereas other graduates may not have had as positive of an experience and as a result were less likely to participate in the study. While the experience of the participants in the master's degree program may not represent all graduates, their experience did provide the opportunity in the study to determine the factors that made the program successful for them.

While a strength of the study was the uniformity of the participants' experience, a limitation of the study was the sample size. As a phenomenological study, the generalizability of the results is limited. The study was limited to eight subjects from one university, participating in one type of master's degree program involving a single professor, and therefore is limited in its applicability beyond this setting.

Recommendations for Further Research

The results of this study provide guidance for future research. First, it is recommended that this study be expanded to additional learning communities within the same program to address the size limitation inherent in this type of study and to determine if the results are present in a larger group. Second, it is recommended that this study be replicated at other master's degree programs emphasizing aspects other than

action research and learning communities to determine if the results of the study are limited to the type master's degree program used in the study, or if similar results are found in other programs as well. In doing so, the research would help identify which components identified in this study are most important to improving teacher quality. Third, it is recommended that the profession begin discussion regarding the potential of graduate certificates oriented around learning communities and action research as one possible route to more efficiently educate reflective teachers.

Summary

In the United States, the majority of classroom teachers hold an advanced degree. As of 2012, 56.4% of all teachers had a master's degree or higher (United States Department of Education, 2013). Unfortunately, there is no compelling evidence that the earning of the degree itself has done anything to improve education and student achievement (Ediger, 2001; Hill, 2007; Hine, 2013; Kershner et al., 2013; White et al., 2011). With recent court cases challenging tenure laws claiming that these laws deprived students of their right to an education because they allowed poor teachers to remain in the classroom (Medina, 2014), it is more important than ever that teachers become better at their practice. The present study looked to identify changes experienced by teachers as they completed a master's degree program at a regional comprehensive state university located in the Upper Midwest.

As demonstrated in this study, the subjects reported positive changes in their practice as a result of their participation in the master's degree program, which they identified as contributing to their perception of being a better teacher. The changes they

experienced affected their teaching practice, their leadership roles, their collegial relationships, and their professional development. The themes identified in this study were the master's degree program, improved tools, leadership growth, and personal control. The main finding, however, was how important the development of personal control was to the improvement of the subjects as teachers. It is this quality that stands out as the key to better teachers. When teachers develop this personal control, they understand their practice and how they can improve what they do, they have a confidence in themselves that is based in research and reflection, and this serves to indeed make them better teachers. By placing these teachers in the classroom, students are provided the best opportunity to learn and achieve.

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Appendix A

Open Codes

Teaching Practice

- Validation of teaching practice
- Confidence in teaching practice
- Best Practices
- Use of action research
- Improved classroom practice
- Analyzed practice
- Immense change in practice
- Analyzed data
- See growth in teaching practice
- Use of data in teaching
- Brain has changed
- Approach to practice has changed
- Credit master's program for change
- Relevant learning
- Immediate application of learning
- Tools to practice change
- Invigorated
- More cautious with technology
- Pushed independent reading
- No one particular learning strategy recalled
- Classroom is different
- More reflective in practice
- Increased awareness of practice
- Do things better
- Aware of education topics and research
- Read more
- Made a better teacher
- Improved relationships with students
- Collaboration with peers
- All areas of practice impacted
- More engaged with students
- Students more engaged
- Different worldview of education
- Transformed practice
- Students more reflective/responsible
- Changed from a "traditional" teacher role

Professional Development

- Open to change
- Want to learn more
- Recharged teaching
- Immediate application
- Feel like they are going back to school
- Made a better teacher
- Increased professional development compared to district
- District professional development not beneficial to them
- Look for opportunities for professional development
- Do things better
- More initiative for their own professional development
- Drive their own development
- Read more
- Share professional development with others
- Increased priority for their professional development
- Found value of professional development
- More proactive with professional development
- More aware of their practice
- Credit masters program format
- Collaboration as part of learning community
- Relationships developed in learning community
- Better communication
- Invigorated
- Aware of education topics and research
- Continued development/further degree
- Reawakened love of learning
- Refreshing and fulfilling
- Pursue administrative role
- Look for collaboration
- Want to contribute

Collegial Relationships

- More reflective
- Analyze situation
- Want to contribute
- Maintain contact with classmates
- Developed relationships in learning community
- Collaboration within learning community
- More confidence with peers
- Increased professional relationships
- Continue to collaborate after learning community
- Communicate better with peers
- Made a better teacher because of it
- Relationships more professional rather than social
- More meaningful relationships
- Relationships centered on learning
- Credit the master's program format
- Some strained relationships – administration
- Some strained relationships – Peers
- More aware of current research than peers
- More or better professional development than peers
- Peers felt threatened
- Left some leadership positions
- Peer relationships are different
- More initiative to form relationships
- Validation of self
- More reflective
- Close connections with classmates
- Remain connected
- Different worldview of education
- Going different direction than peers
- More wanting to change than peers
- Presented professionally at a conference

Leadership Roles

- Understanding of importance of leadership
- More initiative as a leader
- More effective leadership
- Confidence as a leader
- Increased leadership roles
- No new leadership roles
- Impact of professional development
- Credit master's program
- Increased knowledge as a leader
- Improved self-perception as a leader
- Improved peer-perception as a leader
- Asked to lead
- More comfortable with role of leader
- Left some leadership roles
- More meaningful leadership roles
- Awareness of effectiveness of leadership roles
- Awareness of education topics and research
- Want to contribute
- Wanted to be connected
- Deeper understanding of school

General comments

- Master's program was best experience
- Learning was relevant
- Program was comfortable
- Program highlighted value of collaboration
- Individually valued
- Great learning experience

Appendix B

Axial Codes

Teaching Practice

1. Stronger self-perception.

- Validation of teaching practice
- Confidence in teaching practice
- Immense change in practice
- See growth in teaching practice
- Brain has changed
- Approach to practice has changed
- Invigorated
- Classroom is different
- Do things better
- Made a better teacher
- Improved relationships with students
- All areas of practice impacted
- More engaged with students
- Different worldview of education
- Transformed practice
- Changed from a “traditional” teacher role

2. Added pedagogical tools.

- Best Practices
- Use of action research
- Analyzed practice
- Improved classroom practice
- Analyzed data
- Use of data in teaching
- More cautious with technology
- Pushed independent reading
- No one particular learning strategy recalled
- More reflective in practice
- Increased awareness of practice
- Aware of education topics and research
- Read more
- Students more engaged
- Students more reflective/responsible

3. Contribution of master’s program.

- Credit master’s program for change
- Relevant learning
- Immediate application of learning
- Tools to practice change
- Collaboration with peers

Professional Development**1. Personal motivation.**

- Open to change
- Want to learn more
- Do things better
- Found value of professional development
- Better communication
- Continued development/further degree
- Pursue administrative role
- Want to contribute

2. Impact of professional development.

- Feel like they are going back to school
- Immediate application
- Made a better teacher
- More aware of their practice
- Invigorated
- Aware of education topics and research
- Recharged teaching
- Refreshing and fulfilling
- Credit master's program format
- Collaboration as part of learning community
- Relationships developed in learning community
- Reawakened love of learning

3. Personal control.

- Increased professional development compared to district
- District professional development not beneficial to them
- Look for opportunities for professional development
- More initiative for their own professional development
- Drive their own development
- Read more
- Share professional development with others
- Increased priority for their professional development
- More proactive with professional development
- Look for collaboration

Collegial Relationships

1. Benefits of collegial relationships.

- More reflective
- Analyze situation
- More confidence with peers
- Communicate better with peers
- Made a better teacher because of it
- More initiative to form relationships
- Validation of self
- More reflective
- Presented professionally at a conference
- Want to contribute

2. Professional, lasting relationships.

- Maintain contact with classmates
- Developed relationships in learning community
- Collaboration within learning community
- Continue to collaborate after learning community
- Credit the master's program format
- Close connections with classmates
- Remain connected
- Increased professional relationships
- Relationships more professional rather than social
- More meaningful relationships
- Relationships centered on learning

3. Changed professional relationships.

- Some strained relationships – administration
- Some strained relationships – Peers
- More aware of current research than peers
- More or better professional development than peers
- Peers felt threatened
- Left some leadership positions
- Peer relationships are different
- Different worldview of education
- Going different direction than peers
- More wanting to change than peers

Leadership Roles**1. Growth as leaders.**

- Understanding of importance of leadership
- More effective leadership
- Confidence as a leader
- Increased knowledge as a leader
- Improved self-perception as a leader
- Improved peer-perception as a leader
- More comfortable with role of leader
- Awareness of effectiveness of leadership roles
- Awareness of education topics and research
- Want to contribute
- Wanted to be connected
- Deeper understanding of school
- Credit master's program
- Impact of professional development

2. Altered leadership.

- More initiative as a leader
- Increased leadership roles
- No new leadership roles
- Asked to lead
- Left some leadership roles
- More meaningful leadership roles

General Comments**1. Connection to master's program.**

- Master's program was best experience
- Learning was relevant
- Program was comfortable
- Program highlighted value of collaboration
- Individually valued
- Great learning experience

Appendix C

Major Themes

Master's Program

- Contribution of master's program
- Connection to master's program

Improved Tools

- Stronger self-perception
- Added pedagogical tools

Leadership Growth

- Growth as leaders
- Altered leadership

Personal Control

- Benefits of collegial relationships
- Professional, lasting relationships
- Changed professional relationships
- Personal motivation
- Impact of professional development
- Personal control