

Professional standards in practice: A study of how the standards develop professional capital and collective efficacy in mid-career teachers during change

Laura Hurla, EdD

“Mid-career teachers need leaders with whom they feel belonging to effectively lead them through times of change.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learning Forward updated its professional learning standards in 2022. While the concepts and research highlighted in the standards are not necessarily new to the field of education, orchestrating the standards to create conditions for success and enact transformational processes can be challenging. This interview study explored the results of applying the concepts underscored in the 2022 Standards for Professional Learning on the professional capital and collective efficacy of mid-career teachers.

Four mid-career teachers, two administrators, and two professional learning trainers were engaged in interviews and focus groups. The mid-career teachers and leaders involved in the study confirmed the concepts included in the 2022 Standards for Professional Learning that significantly contributed to individual professional capital and collective efficacy. The concepts included ongoing, connected professional learning with feedback and collaboration, quality communication, a shared vision, a focus on change, and a strong sense of belonging in the school culture.

This study highlights what mid-career teachers value when undergoing high levels of stress, such as experienced in the Covid-19 Pandemic while thriving in professional learning settings. Leaders can reference this study to better understand how to create a culture to support the growth of mid-career teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The most important investment in education is the classroom teacher. High-quality professional learning and development (PLD) nurtures both the individual and collective capacity of educators. Learning Forward (2022) states when school systems leverage standards to increase equitable access to professional learning, the organization is transformed where high-quality leading, teaching, and learning takes place.

The purpose of this study was to explore how four mid-career teachers in a suburban Midwestern elementary school perceived the role of PLD as it related to their individual professional capital and collective teacher efficacy. The study explored the conditions preceding, during, and following the Covid-19 Pandemic. The overarching research question guiding this study was: How do mid-career teachers experience professional learning and development and respond to leadership practices to develop individual professional capital and collective efficacy during times of change?

The elementary school was chosen for its participation in a two-year PLD experience in which it became the first Quantum Learning Distinguished School (QLDS) in the United States. The four mid-career teachers selected for this study participated as teacher lead-learners during the QLDS experience; hence, providing an important perspective as to what conditions and processes drive a mid-career teacher to be committed to professional growth and to build strong relationships with colleagues. Mid-career teachers, defined as having eight to fifteen years of experience, demonstrate some of the highest levels of commitment, which is foundational for understanding the contributing

factors of collective teacher efficacy, building trust, and producing professional capital (Day, 2012).

This study also examined how leadership established conditions for success and employed transformational processes to enact change and build capacity in the school's staff. The researcher interviewed the current and past building principals to tell the story of leadership practices during the last decade. School principals are second in impact to student achievement, just behind the classroom teacher (Goodwin et al., 2015). Therefore, it was important to understand how leaders influence student and teacher success through their actions. Finally, this study interviewed the professional development trainer who provided professional learning and support to the instructional coach as part of this school's QLDS process as well as included perspectives from the building's instructional coach. These interviews defined what professional learning experiences were provided and why these learning designs were chosen.

The researcher identified the intersection of themes between the perceptions and actions of mid-career teachers, principals, and professional learning trainers as they developed the individual professional capital and collective efficacy in a system of school-based educators. The study will help leaders identify how professional learning standards are utilized to improve classroom instruction and cause positive change. This study focused on the specific categories of creating conditions of success and transformational processes for PLD.

METHODS

During the Covid-19 Pandemic, educators across the United States endured higher levels of stress than ever before. Despite this strain, the staff at the selected elementary school maintained a strong sense of collective efficacy and professional growth during this time. Authors note that the mid-career teacher has the greatest capacity for professional growth if in the right setting (Day, 2017; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Lambert, 2002). Therefore, this study examined mid-career teachers' perceptions on the development of their individual professional capital and collective efficacy in an elementary school which saw noteworthy professional growth during trying times. The data is anchored in the conceptual framework of professional learning standards.

This study applied the methodology of a qualitative interview study. The teacher participants were each interviewed individually twice and then participated in a focus group. Since the focus of the study was on the mid-career teacher, the researcher elected to take a deeper dive into their experiences as a part of the study's design. The teacher focus group was held to offer an opportunity for participant reflection on a set of questions focused on individual professional capital, collective efficacy, and trust. The former school principal and the present school principal participated in one individual interview as well as a focus group together. Finally, the Quantum Learning trainer was interviewed with a set of open-ended questions on the QLDS process.

The findings for the data collected from four mid-career teachers, two building principals, and PLD provider aligned with the themes of Professional Learning Standards (Learning Forward, 2022). The standards as a conceptual framework for this study allowed the emerging themes from the data to be categorized across the standards. The major themes are summarized below.

Trust and Belonging. The most significant theme from the data from all participants was that the building culture must support adult-learning through trust and belonging. A healthy building culture is multi-faceted. A sense of belonging is one contributor to a strong school culture, and it was clear this was valued by the mid-career teacher above all else. A sense of belonging and collective trust has proven to have many beneficial outcomes in

“Leaders who effectively leverage the Standards for Professional Learning will have what they need to develop the professional capital and collective efficacy of their staff.”

promoting collective efficacy. Forsyth et al (2011) explains, “high collective efficacy, in turn, stimulates teachers to set challenging student goals, to work harder, to persist longer in their teaching, to be resilient when they confront difficulties, and to seek and use constructive feedback” (p. 89). The teachers at this elementary school saw similar positive consequences due to the trust and belonging they felt among the staff. Each teacher expressed that the trust and belonging they felt with the school’s leadership allowed them to grow professionally at greater rates. The leaders in this study also shared how important it was to build trusting relationships with staff to nurture this growth. The principals suggested doing this by taking invested interests in the personal and professional lives of teachers.

Leadership and Change Management. While the standards separate leadership and change management into the Conditions for Success and Transformational Processes categories respectively, one cannot ignore the overlap. Mid-career teachers need leaders with whom they feel belonging to effectively lead them through times of change.

The participants of this study shared how important their leaders’ clear communication style was especially while undergoing significant change. The literature confirms that leading change successfully must include clear communication. Principals in this study spoke about how important ongoing conversations and accessibility is for teachers’ continual growth. Similarly, the mid-career teachers appreciated the accessibility of their leaders during the pandemic. Furthermore, the communication from the mid-career teachers’ principals exemplified a clear vision and constant reinforcement of agreed upon values. This enabled teachers to set a purposeful path forward, connecting new learning to desired goals.

When considering change, the leaders in this study discussed the importance of knowing the preferences of their staff and adapting to what everyone needed. While the principals in the study did not explicitly discuss first- or second-order change, they alluded to the concepts when they explained how some changes require more of their teachers’ time and perseverance than others and commented on how they adjusted as leaders. When undergoing second-order change, these mid-career teachers needed their principal to be aware of the challenge, exhibit patience, and provide lots of positive feedback.

Feedback and Evidence. While the Standards for Professional Learning (2022) expound on feedback under the implementation standard, feedback is mentioned in several of the standards. Leaders must give consistent, positive feedback for implementation. Feedback was mentioned over and over by the mid-career teachers as a necessary ingredient to their professional capital. The teachers suggested that leaders and peers include feedback that highlights what is going well and what needs improvement. Ongoing feedback can be an impactful tool to increase teachers’ confidence and competence.

Learning Designs: Sustained Duration and Best Praxis. As the mid-career teachers explained what is important to their growth in PLD designs, a reoccurring response was the need for content to be chunked into understandable amounts and reviewed often. This approach also allowed for processing time, an opportunity to implement new learning and reflection. Goal setting and reflection are central factors to ongoing, quality professional learning. This practice establishes a process for continued growth and teacher effectiveness. The mid-career teachers in this study shared how being goal-oriented and reflective allowed them to focus their efforts, build confidence, and move toward mastery sooner.

Professional Identity and Expertise. Both the leaders and the mid-career teachers acknowledged the benefit of autonomy in PLD practices. The mid-career teachers admitted that they became more divergent from basic pedagogy and more specialized in certain areas as they gained more experience. They voiced appreciation for the opportunity to explore

“Utilizing the Standards for Professional Learning will help support a healthy culture with effective PLD practices.”

interests, attend outside conferences or trainings, and have a say in what they are learning as professionals. However, they also saw great value in learning together around common goals and receiving related training in their school building. The leaders had a very similar dissonance allowing teachers autonomy and presenting common learning experiences. This can be a juggling act for leaders. The leaders explained that it is necessary to have a shared vision, but that it is just as important to push teachers to find their individual passion. The leaders in this study alluded to helping teachers find their professional identities and professional agency as an important part of PLD practices and growth.

CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on what mid-career teachers perceived as most beneficial to their development of professional capital and to the collective efficacy of staff especially during times of change. Perceptions of leaders were included to understand commonalities between perceived needs. It yielded results that included a strong sense of belonging in a healthy school culture, leaders who communicate well and understand change theory, effective and positive feedback, ongoing and engaging professional learning opportunities, and meeting the unique needs of the mid-career stage. Leaders who effectively leverage the Standards for Professional Learning will have what they need to develop the professional capital and collective efficacy of their staff.

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has significant implications for current practice. It solidifies the research and practicality of Learning Forward's (2022) Standards for Professional Learning. It highlights the effects of a healthy culture on professional capital. It provides leaders with strategies to support mid-career teachers during times of change and it gives insight into learning designs for ongoing, meaningful PLD. Implications include apply and integrate the professional learning standards, increase teacher commitment with trust and belonging, provide the gift of time, meet the unique needs of mid-career teachers, provide quality feedback, and plan and facilitate purposeful PLD. If leaders want to retain teachers, they should consider effective PLD and other impactful experiences that will increase teacher commitment and growth. Utilizing the Standards for Professional Learning will help support a healthy culture with effective PLD practices.

REFERENCES

- Day, C. (2012). New lives of teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 39(1), 7–26.
- Day, C. (2017). *Teachers' worlds and work: Understanding complexity, building quality*. Routledge.
- Forsyth, P. B., Adams, C. M., & Hoy, W. K. (2011). *Collective Trust: Why schools can't improve without it*. Teachers College Press.
- Goodwin, B., Cameron, G., & Hein, H. (2015). *Balanced leadership for powerful learning: Tools for achieving success in your school*. ASCD.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. Teachers College Press.
- Lambert, L. (2002). Beyond instructional leadership: A framework for shared leadership. 59(8), 37–40.
- Learning Forward. (2022). *Standards for professional learning*.

CONTACT INFORMATION

To learn more about this research brief and other research endeavors in the College of Education at Kansas State University, please reach out to the Office of External Funding and Research at: coeresearch@k-state.edu

Major Professor: Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw

To view the full Dissertation, go here: <https://hdl.handle.net/2097/42948>