Habits and Practices of Teachers Who Develop Expertise

Amanda Shuford Mayeaux, Ed.D.

University of Louisiana at Lafayette, United States of American

Abstract

This paper highlights the findings through multiple studies focused on recruitment, retention, and the development of expertise in teachers. These practices and processes have research-based promise for making the active pursuit of teacher expertise an important and valued part of a teacher's career and school culture. Authors have focused through multiple studies on how the habits and practices of teachers who pursue expertise impact these teachers, but also their school culture. Our studies have focused on various methods of practitioner inquiry, lesson study, and professional learning communities. These approaches serve as potential vehicles to build ongoing professional learning and student-centered school improvement as a critical component of what it means to be an expert teacher. Through collective processes, our profession can be reimagined to be one that impacts student success, classroom innovations, and creates optimum culture for educators.

Keywords: *Lesson Study; Professional Inquiry, Teaching Expertise*

1. Introduction

Expertise development of teachers is based upon a recursive, career-long pursuit of growth through inquiry, reflection, and purposeful practice [1], [12]. [13]. Teachers hold various levels of motivation to pursue expertise. While some are instinctively driven to pursue expertise, other teachers require greater professional learning support through strong school cultures. When school leaders align professional learning opportunities for the pursuit of expertise situated in one's real practice, professional learning becomes a place where teacher of generate their own knowledge and focus professional learning focused on student needs [2]. [4], [9]. The practices and habits of teachers who continuously pursue expertise are strongest when these are realistic, sustainable, and supported through job-embedded practices.

2. Defining Expertise

Expert teachers are defined as those whose students consistently exceed academic expectations, increase in their individual learning habits, and exhibit extreme growth in their social-emotional skills [1], [11], [16]. Expert teachers are acutely context-bound to their current students, which impacts their pedagogical choices, the content they share, and their professional learning goals [1], [11], [16], [17]. Their high teacher-efficacy pushes their insatiable need to grow and improve their practice.

The motivating factor is the relationship expert teachers develop with their students. Defined as Teacher-Student Kinship, it is a familial type of relationship between experts and students ([17}). Every decision is based upon these relationships and these relationships are life-long. Expert teachers take their responsibility towards their students' academic, pedagogical, and social-emotional growth extremely seriously. Expertise thrives through ccollaborative practices, such as practitioner inquiry, lesson study, and professional learning communities lend to continuous improvement, which increase collective efficacy and professional capital [8], [23], [24], [25].

When expert teachers struggle, they will seek specific professional learning for solutions through their expert network ([16]). For example, a math teacher may join a writing seminar to improve her students' ability to communicate mathematical thinking in a written form. A teacher struggling to help students with specific social-emotional needs may join a graduate course on social-emotional learning. Because these teachers are so focused on the needs of their current students, they may or may not fully engage in the professional learning offered by their schools or districts. If the learning is not aligned to the needs of their current students, they see little value in participating (Berliner, 200; Hattie 2003; [16]). The expert teachers studied shared their optimal school culture is one where they seek to solve difficult problems through open and authentic professional learning communities [3]; [16].

Expert teachers can function at high capacity regardless of school culture, but prefer optimal school culture with strong shared leadership, differentiated professional learning, positive collegial

relationships, and strong collective efficacy [17]. If the professional culture is restraining or damaging to their professional growth, expert teachers will often seek high-functioning professional cultures elsewhere. Therefore, over-standardization of day-to-day practices is damaging for the development of expertise.

3. Reimagining the Profession

Education can be all-consuming when done at expert levels. When reimagined as a profession, the experts described their optimum [3], [16]). Such a profession occurs in schools where everyone in the building is a learner. Collective efficacy is nurtured and valued and is critical to success [6]. Leadership applies a laser-like focus on developing expertise and leveraging the expertise for the benefit of all learners. Such a profession is one where autonomy and collaboration are perfectly intertwined. Standards are set and understood, but methods are highly individualized to meet the needs of students, while also being collectively explored and developed. Such a profession values innovation and democracy, while moving toward a collective vision of excellence.

3.1 Build Professional Kinship

Relationships are the foundation of all organizations. Like Teacher-Student Kinship, Professional Kinship is an almost familial professional relationship between professionals [17]. Expert teachers describe their choice school culture as one of mutual respect, strong trust, highly developed collective efficacy, and powerful persistence on the part of all members [16]. When Professional Kinship is developed and is the foundation of the professional learning in schools, teachers and leadership can function at the highest capacity and professional capital thrives [10]. When schools have strong Professional Kinship, teachers and leaders will focus all efforts to help each other and students overcome obstacles. They will develop and test innovative solutions and take responsibility for success and for struggles.

The alignment between words and actions is the evidence experts seek before they trust. While experts are highly efficacious about their own practice and their own classroom, this does not always transcend into strong collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is developed over time between peers as all focus and work towards a common vision [5]. Experts desire to be challenged and developed but are not always confident in their ability to develop others.

Mentoring has long been held as a tool for building relationships and strengthening practices of young teachers. However, mentoring is often seen as a Yoda-to-Luke Skywalker type of relationship where one is the giver and the other is the receiver. Relationships are strengthened through mentorship that is custom to need and reciprocal in nature (Sorbet & Kohler-Evans, 2019). Custom mentorship allows everyone in the building to share strengths, but also seek mentors to overcome struggles.

3.2 Create Spaces for Innovation

When strong professional relationships exist, the culture is a safe place for innovation to flourish through teacher agency [18], [19], [21]. Additionally, teachers are supported through time and structure for learning to happen [21]. In such a culture to exist, people must be allowed to openly share their struggles for discussion and collaboration. Expert teachers are extremely persistent and highly effective problem solvers [1], [11], [16]. Professional Kinship hinges on the persistence of the group to remain focused, overcome obstacles, and to achieve the vision. Persistence is where leadership can really be the deciding factor. Collective problem-solving means once the issue is clearly and definitively understood, various solutions can be suggested and tried. When there is strong Professional Kinship, then teachers and leaders can discuss how workable solutions worked or failed to work. This notion of transparency, again, is critical as teachers pose and try out various solutions. When the culture is strongly reflective and collaborative, teachers may reflect individually and in groups. They are constantly questioning and working through issues to find solutions for all learners. This constant refinement in practice leads to solutions being normed into the culture. The impact of collective problem solving only strengthens Professional Kinship and the practices of each educator in the building. When schools have strong Professional Kinship, teachers and leaders will focus all efforts to support peers and students solve problems [16]. They will develop and test innovative solutions and take responsibility for success and struggles [18], [19], [21].

Build Leadership

Also, critical to the development of expertise is building leadership. Build professional learning so teachers towards leadership and understand expertise is a perpetual cycle of growth and learning (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Hattie, 2003; Ladd, 2008; Podolsky et al., 2019). When leadership engages faculty in the professional discussions to find possible solutions to difficult issues, not only does expertise develop, but so does leadership (Kruse & Louis, 2009: Lee & Louis, 2019). While

engaged in finding the solutions, professional capital is also being built [7], [8], [20]. Many expert teachers have shared stories of being ostracized for their students' extreme academic success or for presenting at conferences [16], [17]. Others have shared the negative ramifications for winning awards or earning advanced degrees. Such actions diminish the profession and undermine leadership development. Schools where expertise flourishes are the ones where success is celebrated and encouraged. Reimagining schools where every classroom is led by an expert means developing teachers as leaders and supporting their leadership within and outside of schools.

4. Final Thoughts

We have spent decades researching how to create effective schools and how to attract and retain teachers. The answers lead to these simple conclusions. Highly effective people are attracted to strong, innovative cultures where they are supported and recognized for their work. Students benefit most when taught by expert teachers who are engaged in strong professional cultures. Expert teachers change the lives of children. Our students need experts in every classroom and time is of the essence.

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