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Building a community of practice: shifting an M.Ed. program to a PDS school-based cohort model

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Building a community of practice: shifting an M.Ed. program to a PDS school-based cohort model

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to examine how participants experienced and perceived an M.Ed. program that had a school-based design. In particular, the authors sought to understand: (1) how participants experienced being in a school-based cohort and (2) whether and how participants experienced the three designated tenets of the M.Ed. program: teacher inquiry, social justice and student engagement and motivation.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study used semi-structured focus group interviews (n = 7) to examine teachers' perceptions, using a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of open coding to analyze the data and determine emergent themes.

Findings – The findings indicate the design of this school-based M.Ed. program provided both social and academic benefits including strengthening teachers' working relationships and their understanding of students outside their own classroom and a transfer from individual learning to organizational benefit. Teachers positively perceived the three tenets that guided the first year of the program, especially the ability to study social justice and student motivation in depth.

Practical implications – This study has implications for teacher education and retention as well as how boundary spanning roles in PDS schools can impact graduate students' experiences in schools. Given the current teacher shortage concerns, it is important to understand how M.Ed. programs can be designed with teacher needs at the forefront so learning is relevant and rewarding, both to the individual and the school.

Originality/value – While there are many studies that examine the use of cohorts in education, particularly in doctoral programs, few, if any, studies examine a school-based cohort M.Ed. program for practicing teachers. This study also puts a unique spotlight on how boundary-spanning roles can benefit not only teacher candidates but also practicing teachers in their M.Ed. programs.

Keywords Teacher education, M.Ed. program, PDS school

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

For many practicing teachers the decision to pursue a master's degree, which requires a significant investment of time, energy and oftentimes money, is one that is not made lightly. The experience of an M.Ed., a master's degree for those already working in education, ideally elevates teachers' understanding of their practice and better equips them with additional knowledge and skills that benefit both their relationships with students and the teaching of their content. With the right design, a master's program also has the ability to positively affect a teacher's self-efficacy and perception of their profession, which has repercussions for not only the individual but also the field in general. While there are many factors that contribute to teachers leaving the profession, most notably salary and leadership conditions of a school, research has pointed to the level of efficacy teachers feel or do not feel as one reason for leaving the field (Perryman & Calvert, 2020; Hughes, 2012).

One promising design for teacher education programs is the use of a cohort model, in which students follow the same or similar course of study and learn in a community bound by shared interests or experiences. The cohort model has been widely used in doctoral programs with numerous studies indicating this program characteristic positively affects program satisfaction and retention (Lake, Koper, Balayan, & Lynch, 2018; Nimer, 2009; Teitel, 1997), including those that moved to hybrid or online due to the pandemic (Colpitts et al., 2020; Webber et al., 2022). Cohorts have also been used in induction programs for new teachers, both within schools and within districts, as a way to support teacher quality and retention (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). In both contexts, the cohort model can provide a superior supportive learning community, in which the members benefit from shared knowledge, moral support and common learning experiences (Griffin, Taylor, Varner, & White, 2012).

Although less prevalent in teacher education literature, there are some examples of innovative master's programs for practicing teachers that use the cohort model (Lamb & Jacobs, 2009). Most, however, describe M.Ed. cohorts who are in the same academic program but teach in different schools. Far less prevalent are studies that examine the use of a cohort model in an M.Ed. program that is housed within a single school. Schools, however, are already a community unto themselves. The design of a school-based model then has the potential to offer the benefits of cohort models in both academic and practice settings described above.

The present study describes an examination of how a group of teachers from an urban, Title 1 elementary school perceived a school- and cohort-based M.Ed. program from a large public university in the southeast. In this article, we first describe the design of this practice-oriented cohort model and its evolution from a more traditional M.Ed. program, and then offer background information on cohorts as a learning model and their alignment with Wenger's (1998) theories around communities of practice. Next, we describe the voices of participating M.Ed. students in this study, followed by a discussion of how perceptions of participants aligned with the desired outcomes of this cohort design and the implications of findings on teacher education and retention.

Cohorts as communities of practice

One of the primary benefits of using a cohort model in any degree program is the emotional and social support that comes from being part of a consistent peer group. Studies that have examined these affective benefits point to development of personal relationships and a sense of belonging as important contributors to the quality of one's academic experience and the likeliness of persistence (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Lamb & Jacobs, 2009; Pascale, 2018). Studies have also shown that cohort models can be advantageous in relation to retention metrics, especially among women and students of color (Burke, 2019). While most studies of cohorts focus on the advantages such a model brings, research has also pointed to potential downsides such as negative experiences due to overpowering individuals in the group or tension created by the formation of cliques within the group (Lei et al., 2011).

The use of cohorts to create a sense of community has been used not only in the academic arena but also in school districts for practicing teachers. A study by Cuddapah and Clayton (2011), for example, examined the cohort model of a professional development–focused induction program for new K-12 teachers as a way to build a support network while attempting to address retention concerns across the district. In using Wenger's (1998) community of practice model as a lens, the authors highlighted how the cohort became a "third-space" where novice teachers from different schools could actively take part in a meaning-making process, both around issues of diversity and teaching practice. A key finding was that this space allowed for heightened peer learning in which participants both received and offered feedback, compared to a traditional mentor–mentee relationship, which could be seen as influencing new teacher's competence and self-perception. Additionally, this third space created a safe place away from their own school community where participants could be vulnerable and express frustrations, setbacks and doubts, making them feel less alone in their experiences.

M.Ed. programs pose a unique setting for cohort-based learning because those enrolled in such programs occupy both of the spaces described above, that is academia and schools. While there is not a significant amount of research examining the use of cohort models within a master's program of practicing teachers, such studies also highlight academic and affective benefits of such a model. In a 2001 study of a cohort-based M.Ed. program, Potthoff, Fredrickson, Batenhorst, and Tracy (2001) found that one of the most important contributions of the cohort model was that it fostered personal and family-like relationships, both between graduate students and between students and faculty. A similar study of a cohort-based M.Ed. program in England by Kershner, Pedder, & Doddington (2013), discussed the additional benefit of bringing a culture of learning into the professional workspace, with many participants highlighting "the significance of developing dialogue and collaboration with school colleagues as both a support and a consequence of their learning" (p. 43). An additional study by Wenzlaff and Wieseman (2004) echoed that the collaborative nature of cohorts was highly appreciated by teachers but also added that a key to the success of such a model was that assignments were practical and job-embedded. In this study, teachers pointed to the importance of relevance in assignments. That is, in order for their work as graduate students to meaningfully affect their work as colleagues, teachers' saw it as essential that assignments were grounded in their own practice as opposed to hypothetical scenarios.

The concept of a school-specific M.Ed. program aligns with Wenger's (1998) social learning theory, which posits that we all learn in multiple communities of practice, both formal and informal and that for job-related learning to be most effective it should occur in the place of practice. Similar to other sociocultural theories of learning, Wenger emphasizes that while the content of what one is learning matters, it is the social nature and environment of that learning that is most important as to how one learns. Wenger also contends that in an ideal community of practice, meaning-making for the individual and the group is an interactive and bidirectional process. One's individual learning both influences and is influenced by the learning of others within the community.

Shifting from a traditional M.Ed. program
Before the design of the current cohort model, the M.Ed. program at this college of education reflected a more traditional graduate program. Students were either full time students or practicing teachers from numerous schools in surrounding districts who attended in-person courses in the evenings. Students took coursework they chose each semester and were not part of a cohort. Due to low enrollment numbers for the M.Ed. program, we collected data from our PDS network to determine motivations and barriers for teachers pursuing graduate degrees. Results indicated teachers would be more likely to pursue a master's degree if the model was accommodating to their work schedules and if there were more scholarship

opportunities. In addition to securing additional funding for scholarships, faculty shifted the master's program to a hybrid model, where students met online for class every other week. We also shifted the placement of in-person classes from on campus to a PDS school after school hours. In the first year of the program, we recruited 60 teachers from two districts to be a part of this newly designed M.Ed. program with district-wide cohorts. Only one cohort, which is the basis of this study, was school-based, meaning most or all teachers that were in the cohort worked at the same school. The school in question already had a strong relationship with the college: it had been a part of the PDS network of schools for nine years, it hosted both field placements and student internships and had both a faculty-in-residence and resident clinical faculty.

Working in partnership with the College Field Placement Coordinator, the College Graduate Program Director, the PDS School Administration, a specific course of study was developed for this school-based cohort of teachers based upon the needs of the school and standards for M.Ed. programs. We agreed there should be an intentional focus on assignments being job embedded and embodying "practice-based learning", which has been increasingly seen as an important and effective route to better teacher education (Yendol-Hoppey, Jacobs, & Burns, 2018). Integral to the design of a school-based cohort model was that the first-year coursework had to be applicable to all grade levels and content areas. All courses followed a hybrid model, in which students alternated between online modules and asynchronous classes with a professor. Faculty involved in this redesign decided that the first year would be guided by three main tenets–teacher inquiry, social justice and student engagement and motivation (see Figure 1). Each tenet had a designated course but was also seen as principles that would permeate throughout the program. In this first year, students also took a course on coaching and mentoring. In the second year, PDS teachers could choose between several concentrations, which were offered to all M.Ed. candidates at the college but aligned to the various specific needs of the PDS, including: Elementary STEM, Advanced Reading and Literacy and Early Childhood Education.

The current study focuses on the one cohort that was school- rather than district-specific, which consisted of seven M.Ed. students. The goal of our study was twofold: we wanted to examine how teachers perceived the redesign of the M.Ed. program, specifically the three tenets of social justice, student engagement and teacher inquiry, but we also wanted to understand benefits or challenges that might be unique to a school-based cohort. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, classes were originally planned as in-person classes at the school but
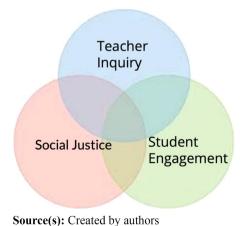
Source(s): Created by authors

instead were held on Zoom for the first year of this program. In response to financial needs, scholarships were made available to cover tuition for this particular school-based cohort. An additional characteristic of this school-based M.Ed. program was that, because it occurred in a PDS setting, one of the professors was a faculty-in-residence at the school and another professor was the executive director and had previously worked at the college of education. The following section discusses the three tenets that were central to the first year of this M.Ed. program along with descriptions of the specific courses that aligned with each tenet.

Teacher inquiry

Teacher inquiry, an intentional and systematic study of one's own practice, not only is a central theme and important component of the M.Ed. program at this college of education but also is central to the concept of clinically rich teacher education. This approach to learning about one's field elevates the teacher as participant and professional because "rather than bringing knowledge to the teacher, the teacher constructs knowledge *about* and *through* inquiry" (Yendol-Hoppey *et al.*, 2018, p. 513). While this concept of teacher as researcher is threaded throughout the program, the course Action Research in Education was designed to create a foundation in the first year of the program. The goal of this course was to engage the PDS teachers in transforming their reflective practice into action within their classrooms and improve their inquiry practice within their contexts. Layered upon these goals was the concept of ethical inquiry, including an emphasis on equity and access to instruction and opportunity. Ultimately, the overall goal of the course was to encourage the teachers to see themselves as agents of change, not only in their individual classrooms but also in the school and community as a whole.

As part of coursework, M.Ed. students learned to develop a systematic form of inquiry that teachers and school staff can use that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective and self-critical. A strong emphasis was placed on the classroom as a context for conducting teacher research to: (a) increase understanding of on-going challenges and issues, (b) solve classroom challenges and concerns and (c) contribute to the body of knowledge about teaching and learning. Students in this course also examined applications of action research in educational decision-making and policy development. Skills addressed in this course include research question development, development of research methods, collection and analysis of data (including research literature), data analysis and the interpretation and presentation of results.

The primary text for this course was *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn Through Practitioner Inquiry, 4th Edition* (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2019). Supplemental articles were assigned throughout the semester, many of which focused on teacher inquiry as a vehicle for social justice and equity within the classroom. Early on in the course, students had to choose a topic of inquiry that related to a problem of practice within their specific classroom or position. Students read a minimum of five professional articles (three of which had to be research articles) about their inquiry topics. They were required to write a review of the literature and use the information from their articles to help them create their research design. At the end of the course, students wrote a summary of their findings and presented their findings to their school community in an inquiry showcase held during a school based professional development day.

Social justice course

Although the last few decades have seen an increased emphasis on social justice as an important theme in education (Cochran-Smith, 2010) the recent high-profile murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others, have heightened calls for a reexamination

of how social justice is addressed in teacher education (Milner, Harmon, & McGee, 2021). Many pre-service teachers tell us their motivations to teach stem from wanting to make a difference and they are passionate in explaining their desire for a more just and equitable world. The complexities of social justice, however, go far beyond the desire to make a difference. The majority of teachers in schools with predominantly black and brown students are still white females, (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012) and this is true in our school district. While certainly teachers, regardless of race, come to their positions with varying degrees of awareness and perception of racial and cultural knowledge, we felt it was important that there was a space to examine these issues in depth. "Social justice education" is a claim that is often made in teacher education programs, but not always realized. One common problem is that social justice education is prone to collapse into rhetoric, that is attention to these complex issues does not go beyond a surface level. Although some education programs might claim that social justice is infused across all courses, and although that may to some degree be true, rarely can that, by virtue of competing subject matter, provide a substantial understanding of the complex issues of power and equity in our country as a foundational, dedicated and mandatory class would. We wanted social justice to have a specific, designated course in our re-envisioned M.Ed. program as we knew that students who are engaged in studying social justice are more likely to be confident and committed to action toward these causes (Storms, 2012).

This course, Foundations of Multicultural and Urban Education, was taught by a professor with experience in teaching social justice courses in higher education and at the secondary level and who was willing to adapt and tailor assignments for practicing teachers. This course had two major goals. One was to provide students with a theoretical and critical lens to better understand social justice and oppression. A second goal was to provide students with opportunities to operationalize their learning, making it actionable and carrying it forward into their teaching worlds. At its heart, the course aimed to follow in the footsteps of critical pedagogues like Joe Kincheloe (2008), who argue that teachers make curricular and pedagogical decisions that are based on ideological orientations, and that they need to be given opportunity to examine and question the contexts that shape them as well as the moral and ethical repercussions of their pedagogies and practices.

The first major assignment was to write a paper on intersectionality and identity with the goal of having students interrogate their positionality within their individual and shared communities. During class, students were given opportunities to discuss, guided by the popular but useful meme, "What? So what? Now what?", how and where power circulates to perpetuate inequalities in reaction to a series of readings and videos. This first assignment was followed by three teaching social justice projects, each designed to provide opportunities for students to work with, learn with, critique and support each other in creating an artifact for their school setting (e.g. poster, handout, staff development video, etc.) that addressed or supported an issue of equity. Each project was iterative and collective, and required students to draw from foundational background knowledge (as rationale), and then from local institutions, and a range of educational websites that educate and inform about social justice issues.

Student engagement and motivation

While somewhat abstract in nature, motivation is often understood as a personal characteristic that reflects one's own sense of efficacy and competence that brings about a desire to pursue a particular goal (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Student engagement, a construct that is equally abstract and internal, is generally understood as how a student experiences a task or activity from a cognitive, emotional and behavioral standpoint (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), with most studies indicating a strong and positive relationship

between levels of student engagement and academic performance (Lei, Cui, & Zhou, 2018). Due to the abstract nature of these constructs, there are various interpretations of how motivation and engagement relate to one another (Axelson & Flick, 2010) but most educators agree that these concepts are foundational to teaching and learning and critical if not essential to students' success in school. Similar to social justice, there may be many education courses that discuss or touch on student motivation and engagement. However, given the undeniably critical and powerful role these constructs play in teaching and learning, a singular focus on this topic can allow teachers to have a deeper understanding of these concepts and the space to discuss and learn practical strategies for how to affect student motivation in the classroom.

The course that aligned with this theme, titled Elementary Curriculum: The Role of Language to Support Engagement and Motivation, focused on student and teacher language as the vehicle for examining student engagement and motivation from both a theoretical and practical perspective. Unlike the social justice and teacher inquiry courses, this student engagement course was created specifically for the school-based cohort, with the idea that it would become one of three tenets of the program moving forward. The first part of this course included interactive lectures, discussions, readings and videos on basic neuroscience, specifically how and why the sympathetic and parasympathetic (fight or flight) systems operate in response to stress. One teacher-focused module also focused on how mindfulness practice can be used to mitigate reactions and improve student–teacher relationships. The final part of the course focused on the relationship between student talk and engagement including specific strategies for implementing productive student talk in the classroom.

One of the course texts, Teaching with the Brain in Mind, by Jensen (2005), was used to support understanding of the relationship between brain anatomy and teaching and learning in areas such as motivation, memory and emotion. The purpose of including these more scientific topics was to deepen understanding of the human condition of classrooms and how we, whether we are children or adults, are wired from a physiological perspective. The other course text, Choice Words, by Johnston (2004), provided a theoretically grounded but relatable reading for the M.Ed. candidates to consider the complex relationship between language, teacher perception and student self-perception. As part of this course, M.Ed. candidates did a case study, in which they documented observations about their own language use, both external and internal, either with a particular student or in a particular setting (such as the hallway). They then chose a language intervention such as using specific phrases from Choice Words or an assigned article about giving specific and positive academic praise (Hale, 2018). After documenting their intervention over four weeks, students described and analyzed their intervention.

Methodology

While we as faculty saw the evolution of our M.Ed. program as positive and better suited to practicing teachers' needs, we wanted to confirm how well our perceptions aligned with participating teachers' experiences. To do this, we undertook a qualitative study that used focus group interviews to examine teachers' perceptions of the school-based M.Ed. program.

All of the students in this M.Ed. cohort ($n = 7$) participated in the focus groups. Five teachers and school staff were from the primary PDS school. Two teachers, who were from two other PDS schools in the district, joined this cohort. Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 62 years and had various years of teaching experience. One teacher was in his first full year of teaching while another teacher had been teaching for 26 years. In this cohort were two black females, four white females and one black male. Candidates also held a variety of positions including: a pre-Kindergarten teacher, two first grade teachers, a fourth-grade teacher, a technology teacher, a director of student services and an instructional coach.

We used a semi-structured focus group in that we had prepared questions but also asked follow-up questions based on participants' comments. We used focus groups since the interactive conversation can allow participants to build on one another's comments and elaborate on similar or different experiences (Morgan, 2002). To accommodate schedules, there were two different focus groups, one held at the school (n = 3) and one held on Zoom (n = 4). Although we were interested in how participants viewed the three tenets of the first year, we did not include questions that specifically addressed these themes: we wanted to see if participants would bring up these core concepts unprompted. We also asked questions about how participants perceived the school-based cohort design of the program.

Both focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed and then analyzed by the first and second author. We used a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to analyze the data by taking lines of transcripts and placing them in groups to determine initial codes. Once in groups, we created category headings that described the general nature of each group of statements. We then used axial coding to compare and connect codes to determine larger categories where appropriate. In the following section, we describe our findings and the categories that emerged about how participants' experienced their school-based M.Ed. program.

Findings

Cohort as a support system

Similar to other studies that examined the use of cohort models within an academic program, one of the primary findings of this study was that participants saw being part of a cohort as greatly affecting both their enjoyment of the program but also their persistence. Many teachers commented on how being part of a cohort made them feel "less alone", particularly during the more stressful parts of the semester. Participants' comments highlighted the psychological benefit that came from working with others who were in the same situation of balancing school and work demands. As one participant explained, "I think one of the things that's hard about being in a grad program is your balance between work and school, right? ...A lot of times it's hard to be torn between two different things. But (we) are all in the same boat." Another teacher expanded on this idea of a shared experience, pointing out that the advantages of having the same assignments as your working colleagues had more than just affective implications: "The first thing that came to mind, there would be a reading that I read through and couldn't quite get the gist of, I knew I could pick up the phone and call, or we started texting each other. Did you think this was what we were supposed to turn in?...(It) just made the experience easier even though at times the amount of work was stressful."

While the above comments could be seen as relevant to a district-based cohort, some comments described benefits that were unique to a school-based cohort. Several participants said that being in this secondary community within their own building made teaching feel much less "like an isolated profession" and gave them an opportunity to better know their colleagues. As one teacher stated, "I was able to learn alongside fellow staff members that I rarely saw in a day. I felt like I was a part of a new club at school and in a sense I was." Another teacher said, "I loved the whole cohort aspect because you really grow to know who you're working with." Another participant commented how the cohort space carried over into how and how often they interacted during the school day: "Normally, Kevin or even Ms. Delray and I wouldn't see each other on a normal day. Now we're able to interact more and we have a reason."

Connecting academic and professional communities

Participants commented on how getting to know their colleagues had not only personal repercussions but also curricular. "The fact that we were together through it all, we could just

keep on building from that information that we knew about each other to the next course and just really getting to dive deep together." The shared academic conversations also led to learning more about curriculum and students in other grades. As one teacher stated, "it was really a smooth transition when Kevin had to go from 5th grade to 4th grade because I was working with the 4th grade kids, then knowing Kevin from class, we were able to work together and help each other."

A related and somewhat unexpected finding was that, because of this cohort experience that connected across grade levels and content, teachers saw their dialogue and perceptions around teaching and learning shift from a grade-focused perspective to one that reflected shared responsibility and ownership that the students K-5 are "all our kids." Participants also described how the cohort provided an academic space for enhancing their own practice. One teacher, for example, described how another group's "study on children's books and the diversity of them impacted me in planning a parent night this year. Our literacy night is coming up and the books that we're using for that are now diverse. They are either talking about different skin colors, or being beautiful in your own skin."

An additional implication of the school-based cohort model was how its benefits extended into the larger school community, both in explicit and implicit ways. Participants described how the shared knowledge of theory and practice that was learned in their courses was intentionally shared on a larger scale in both grade team meetings and in after school professional development: "We could take what we learned from class, and put it into our PLCs." In addition, because there were multiple teachers at the school who were in the cohort, the principal made space for these teachers to share with the rest of the school community. In one afterschool professional development, for example, M.Ed. candidates presented their collaborative inquiry projects in which they shared the data they had collected, their findings and how the process impacted their own learning.

Another way the M.Ed. experience impacted whole school improvement was the continued application of learning beyond the end of the courses themselves. As the student services support coordinator explained, "My inquiry project started with one family (but) I ended up working on behavior systems. Now the school is going through a positive behavior group and revamping how our school does that, which has added a new task for me in my role." In another example, several teachers took aspects of what they learned from the course on student engagement and "helped a colleague create a school-wide mentor program and conduct professional development around the words we are choosing to use as teachers."

Multiple benefits of common coursework
Although we intentionally did not ask about the three tenets of the program, the topics of teacher inquiry, social justice and student engagement surfaced when teachers described what they appreciated about this first common year. The following quote reflects the intended design of a first year that focused not on subject matter but on aspects that are central to and run underneath all teaching and learning.

> I love how last year's theme. . .was making our classrooms better overall: learning how to work with the kids, learning how to deal with behaviors and creating an equitable environment. I feel like (the curriculum) gave me a deeper understanding. It wasn't about a math course or literacy. . .. It gave us a better understanding of our scholars.

When examining teachers' perceptions of the three tenets individually, there appeared to be complementary but still distinct benefits of each theme. For most of the participants, using an inquiry cycle to address a challenge "was something that I'd heard about, (but) never participated in." Participant comments highlighted a transference of learning, that is in addition to examining a particular topic relevant to their position, they learned a new way of

responding to challenges or questions. The teacher inquiry course allowed teachers to be reflective and learn a system for "how to find our problem of practice" and work in a systematic way to dig underneath the challenge rather than just react. As one teacher stated, "I was able to take what we were doing and apply it in the classroom: I (could) utilize the knowledge and put it into practice."

Perceived benefits of the social justice tenet were less about classroom practice per se and more about teachers' understanding of issues that relate to their work as educators. Having a course dedicated to this topic appeared to have both personal and professional ramifications. One white, female teacher, for example, stated that having focused assignments, readings and discussions on race from a historical and societal perspective made her "less defensive with the term 'white privilege'" and that she "started to notice more gender inequities as well as age inequities than I did before." For the instructional coach, a Black female, participating in this course elevated her self-perception from one who educates to being a change agent:

> Our conversations about equity really had a great impact. I don't know if it was just the timing of what was going on in the world, from race relations to the Me Too movement, but it just really hit home. A lot of the things that we were reading in articles, including your voice, having a voice and just speaking to that voice. . .it just solidified thoughts about the things that we see in the educational system and what might need to change. Then also not just having that feeling of knowing something might need to change and be different, but having some strategies about how to have that type of an impact.

When talking about the student motivation course, some teachers talked about "better underst(anding) the importance of student talk" and how they were more intentional in creating "meaningful student talk opportunities throughout the day." Most of their statements about this course, however, were in relation to their own use of language. "(This) class really helped me hone in on all the word choices that I use, whether it's in school, or working with my colleagues, or out in my personal life. It really helped me hone in, like, why am I saying this? Can I say it in a better way?" Many statements reflected the idea that understanding the physiology of emotions helped them be "less reactionary" because "we were learning about behaviors, how to deal, what triggers that, how to calm that." One somewhat unexpected finding was how much teachers valued the modules that got them to consider and analyze the language they used with themselves and then experience mindfulness activities. As one teacher stated, "with COVID going on too, there was a very high amount of stress that was involved in it. So to have that type of conversation, not just as a teacher, but just the whole person, was beneficial."

Almost all participants, regardless of what course they were talking about, emphasized their appreciation that the course was "highly related to their everyday work as teachers" and that assignments were "job embedded." As one teacher stated, "I always say just everything was so practical. I could apply it to my actual job. That's extremely helpful for me." Another teacher said the M.Ed. program, "reignited my passion for the career path I had chosen. I had more work to do, but it was work that was embedded in my day-to-day life and made a positive change in my purpose at work."

Discussion and implications
Breaking down silos
An important outcome of the school-based cohort model, according to participants, was how it affected their relationships with each other. Despite a school schedule that encouraged collaboration among staff, the school inherently still mirrored the traditional silo model, where teachers spend most of the day with their own students. The master's cohort created a

secondary community beyond the typical school day, which allowed both time and space for teachers and staff, especially those in different grade levels, to develop relationships with one another and break down silos that inherently exist in schools. Such implications are important not only for individual teachers themselves but also school-based leaders who are looking for effective and meaningful ways to foster whole school community and curricular understanding between grades.

There appeared to be several ways that the cohort model broke down silos, the first being the silos that naturally occur between grade levels. Rarely do teachers in different grades have the opportunity to discuss with each other in any depth teaching and learning that occurs in their classrooms. Similar to other studies that examined the effects of cross grade collaboration (Gore & Rosser, 2022; Nelson & Slavit, 2007) teachers in this cohort model described how understanding what was occurring in other grades gave them an expanded view of not only the students in their classroom but also of how content was being taught in the grades preceding and following their own. This cross-grade knowledge can allow teachers to better understand and capitalize on each other's expertise, but can also support knowledge of how to differentiate for students who are either below- or above-grade-level in their own classrooms. An important comment that surfaced in relation to this idea of a third space is the concept of a shift of responsibility from one's own class to all students being "our kids," a mentality that is desirable but arguably not always prevalent. According to Wenger (1998), it is the mutual engagement and the space for shared meaning-making that are critical building blocks for "a joint enterprise." This points to one of the challenges of schools: despite the physical proximity of teachers within a building, the inherent separation needed for teaching large groups of students leaves less room, in comparison to, for example, medical personnel who may interact within a hospital, for these building blocks to be nurtured.

Other silos the cohort design appeared to impact were the ones that often exist between academics and practice. Similar to the cohort model described in Lamb and Jacobs (2009) a priority of this M.Ed. program, both the district-based and school-based programs, was that coursework and assignments were grounded in teacher's practice. Teachers often described the cohort model and the teacher-embedded assignments as separate but related components, that is the togetherness and support brought about by the cohort characteristic and the assignments that were practical and relevant to their practice. But it was the job embedded aspect of the curriculum and assignments that seemed to be what allowed for carryover from the M.Ed. experience to their everyday work as educators. While a cohort design makes it more conducive to have job-embedded assignments, it is important to point out that this does not necessarily occur. A college of education, for example, could have a cohort model in which teachers participate in that "second community" but have primarily traditional theory-based written assignments rather than ones that encourage application.

An additional characteristic of this M.Ed. program that allowed for synergy between academia and practice was that it occurred in a PDS setting. There already was a close relationship between the university and this particular school. An additional factor was the presence of what the NAPDS calls "boundary-spanning roles." The fact that two of the professors also worked at the school (one as executive director and one as a faculty-in-residence) provided an additional bridge between coursework and continued application of learning. Both could encourage and make space for the sharing and extension of learning from coursework. While PDS research often examines the effect of such dual-community relationships in the context of undergraduate teacher candidates, the present study highlights the need for more research to examine the impact of such positions on the continuing education of practicing teachers.

Connected content

When examining teachers' comments about what worked well in this M.Ed. program, there was a clear interdependency between the content, the cohort characteristic and the curriculum. That is, the creation of a cross-content and cross-grade cohort would not have been possible without courses that were relevant to both staff and teachers from a wide range of grades. What began as a necessity in order to have a cohort model come to fruition, particularly in a smaller school, encouraged courses that focused less on what teachers were teaching and more on examining larger universal issues that impact practice.

The teacher inquiry course, while it allowed teachers to delve into a content or grade-specific topic, supported two skills that are generally acknowledged as important in teaching but not always explicitly taught which are the ability to be reflective and to use data to inform one's practice. What appeared to have the most impact on teachers in terms of personal and professional transformation, however, were the social justice and engagement courses. One possible reason teachers talked more about these courses is that they gave teachers time and space to better understand two aspects of the human condition that are constantly at play in classrooms and run underneath all content in powerful ways but not always addressed or at least discussed in depth. Teachers' comments about these courses illustrated a shift in not just how they understood their students, but also how they understood themselves, whether it was greater awareness of their own self-talk, how they handled stress, how they saw themselves as vehicles for change or, in some cases, how they viewed their own racial and cultural background in relation to others.

Teaching is a highly personal and social endeavor. While many educators discuss the concept of teaching the "whole child" when it comes to K-12 education, rarely is the same concept given to teachers. Yet the need to do so has never been greater. In a recent study (Kush, Badillo Goicoechea, Musci, & Stuart, 2022) that examined mental health reports from various professions, researchers found that during the pandemic teachers reported significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to healthcare workers. Although the researchers found the results surprising, anyone who has taught understands the high level of emotional stress the job can bring even before conditions brought about by COVID-19. The authors rightly point out "the need for tools and programs to support and safeguard the mental health of teachers" (Kush *et al.*, 2022, p. 4). Teachers' comments about understanding the physiology and psychology of stress, both in relation to their students and themselves, which was only one aspect of the course, offers one avenue for how to address this challenge. Both the student engagement and social justice course, which created space for teachers to not just learn the skills of teaching and classroom practice, but examine and grow in personal aspects related to the teaching profession, aligned with Wenger's (1998) emphasis on the connection between practice and identity. An ideal learning experience is often transformational because a person does more than just accumulate skills but also grows in their identity and understanding of themselves. As Wenger points out, "inevitably, our practices deal with the profound issue of how to be a human being" (2008, p. 105).

While the school-based cohort model is invariably what led to topics and coursework that focused more on psychological and societal topics rather than content, it also created an optimal environment for examining these more sensitive and personal topics. In their systematic review of social justice education, for example, Mills and Ballantyne (2016) found that in many programs the use of a cohort provided an important sense of community that allows future or practicing teachers to examine and actually renegotiate their beliefs and to link such beliefs to classroom practice. Implicit in this statement is that such renegotiation of beliefs requires one to be honest and reflective about current beliefs in the first place and that being in a connected community where one is known matters.

Although not a focus of this study, it is worth noting how the intentional evolution of this M.Ed. program heightened program coherence. In order to shift from the traditional coursework

to one that reflected the three tenets described above and that was specific to a school, we needed to attend to not only how courses complemented one another from a content perspective but also from a programmatic perspective. Similar to Lamb and Jacobs (2009), this shift allowed students and faculty to view each semester, at least in this first year, as an integrated program rather than as a collection of independent courses. While we might have previously argued that our master's courses were "student-centered", the cohort model forced us to literally view the program from the practicing teacher's point of view, both in terms of content and scheduling.

Future research
Given participants' reported positive experience of an M.Ed. program that used a cohort model, future research could more carefully examine the impact of such a program on teacher retention. Using pre- and post-survey data, researchers could identify whether participation in such a program increased, if at all, job satisfaction factors that are associated with staying in the profession. Such a study would be particularly informative as a comparative study. A college of education, for example, that is interested in piloting a school-based cohort model could collect survey data on both school- and nonschool-based cohorts, which would further highlight the impact of that characteristic.

Conclusion
According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (Haynes, 2014), one of the major reasons nearly half a million teachers leave the teaching profession each year is because of isolated working conditions (Haynes, 2014). Given the teacher shortage supply that, even before the pandemic, was cause for alarm (García & Weiss, 2019), it is important to understand how practicing teachers perceive different types of graduate teacher programs, particularly in states where advanced degrees are neither required nor compensated and in high-poverty schools where teacher retention tends to be even more concerning. While this study examined one particular group of teachers, findings indicate that, unlike a traditional M.Ed. program, a school-based cohort model strengthens factors that can mitigate teacher attrition, namely creating a sense of belonging and a social network to offer support and persistence during challenging times. This study also illustrates the benefit of creating a community of practice that bridges the study and practice of education, in a word, making it relevant. Aligning with Wegner's definition of a community of practice, there was a true synergy between the participants' place of study and their place of work, which not only supported the application of learning but, particularly when compared to a traditional M.Ed. program, was more conducive to learning that extended to the larger organization. This study offers one window into how transforming graduate teacher programs with teacher needs at the forefront of design benefits not only the individual student but also the synergy between the learner, the school and the university communities of practice.

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