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Looking for hope:

The experience of early career teachers engaged in a collaborative community of reflective practice as a model of induction and professional development

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum, Culture and Change at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Donia E. Spott

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And Billy, my biggest cheerleader, best friend, and partner in this life through our darkest days and brightest moments—I love you and appreciate you immeasurably.

Thank you all.

Abstract

LOOKING FOR HOPE: THE EXPERIENCE OF EARLY CAREER TEACHERS ENGAGED IN A COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AS A MODEL OF INDUCTION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

By Donia E. Spott, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum, Culture and Change at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Teaching has always been an isolated profession and many professional development programs are seen as disconnected from the realities and daily needs of teaching. With the pressures of standards, paperwork, classroom management, and learning to teach, early career teachers can be especially vulnerable to becoming discouraged, disillusioned, and demoralized. This study used a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach to tell the stories of seven early career teachers' experiences with induction and the development of a reflective community to support early career teachers in their professional practice. As an instructional coach within the study site, the researcher conducted an insider action research investigation to develop a program of professional development and induction support by participating in and continually reflecting on the community of practice as it met throughout the school year. Data to write the narratives came from teacher interviews at the beginning and end of the 2019-2020 school year and researcher field notes and reflective memos based on the interviews and group meetings with the participating teachers. By telling these stories and designing a model of induction and

professional development based on reflection and collaboration, this study aimed to find and sustain hope in teachers' situations through improving their practice and building community. The study revealed the importance of strong and supportive relationships with both peers and students and the benefit of the safe space and support found in a community of peers through discussing shared experiences and hearing new perspectives. As part of the action research approach taken in designing the program, the discussions and themes that emerged in the reflective community played a role in shaping the focus of the group and future discussions. The participants' focus on relationships and community became especially critical in the context of navigating the interruptions and uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2019-2020 school year. For most of the participants, their perception of their first year teaching and their induction experience correlated with the strength of the relationships they formed with their peers during that first year. Strong connections with their mentor and teaching teams translated into a sense of support and well being. The importance of connections and relationships was also a factor in the success of the community we formed.

Keywords: induction, mentoring, professional learning community, reflective practice, professional development, action research, hope, teacher leadership, narrative inquiry, community, social and emotional learning, relationships

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

What is it about education that leads some to characterize it “as an occupation that cannibalizes its young” (Ingersoll, 2012, p. 47)? Early career teachers make up an increasing proportion of the teaching force but leave the profession at an alarming rate. “Sink or swim”, “lost at sea”, “trial by fire” (p. 47); these are some of the depressing analogies used to describe the experience of new and early career teachers. At the same time, significant resources of time, money, and personnel are spent on professional development programs that may not meet the current needs of teachers or lead to meaningful outcomes for teachers, students, or schools (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Research indicates that early career teachers are at high risk to leave the profession due to frustration and burnout coupled with lack of sufficient support (Ingersoll, 2002; Lambeth, 2012; Wang et al., 2008). Some sources of frustration include being isolated from colleagues and professional development programs that add to teachers’ workload without addressing their most immediate concerns (Ado, 2013; Zeichner, 2003). Although efforts have been made in recent decades to develop and implement models of induction to support new teachers, programs vary widely and there is little known about their impact and efficacy (Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Kennedy, 2016; Moir, 2003; Wang et al., 2008). A better understanding of the lived experiences of early career teachers is needed to design effective programs to meet their needs. The existing literature indicates that research is warranted to gather information on these experiences (Ingersoll, 2012; Wang et al., 2008). When early career teachers’ needs aren’t being met, they become disillusioned and frustrated instead of enthusiastic and committed. Most early career teachers crave support that focuses on their current and practical needs (Lovett &

Cameron, 2011). Finding out more about the actual experiences of early career teachers can inform efforts to develop meaningful and effective support systems. Better meeting the needs of early career teachers is a major step in better meeting the needs of all students.

My study looks at the induction experiences of a group of early career teachers and explores their experiences as they participated in a community of reflective practice. I designed this qualitative action research project using narrative inquiry to gather stories that reflected the experiences of a small group of early career teachers (in their first five years of teaching) in my school who met several times throughout the school year in a reflective community. The participants discussed their situation; talked through concerns, problems, and successes; and supported each other in developing solutions to issues within their practice. This community served as a support system for the early career teachers and as a means for me to gather stories about their experiences. The stories were collected in the form of notes and reflections from group meetings and individual interviews. Using these pieces and my own reactions and reflections on them, I reconstructed a narrative for each participant and a story that reflected their induction experiences and our experience as a group, as well as my own experiences through this process. This narrative inquiry approach involved the participants at all stages to honor and protect their voice and involved the researcher (myself) as a participant to recognize my insider position within the research setting. As an action research project, the emerging stories informed the evolving design and focus of the program. The structure and topics of the meetings developed in response to the priorities and concerns of the participants. In addition to the support and research functions of the group, my position in the school and division allowed me to serve as a resource for the participants to facilitate access to other supports they might have needed or wanted.

The following sections will review the study context and researcher positionality, and look at a few of the major influences that shaped my path and helped me form the framework of hope and community that led to this project. The rest of the chapter includes some background literature on new teachers, a description of the purpose of the study, the design and the structure of the community of practice, the significance of the study, the research questions, an overview of method, and concludes with an outline of the remaining chapters.

Study Context and Researcher Positionality

Understanding and supporting early career teachers has long been important to me as a veteran public school teacher and leader. When this study began, I was working as an Instructional Coach for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) in a middle school in a semi-rural, central Virginia district with over 25 years of experience as a middle school science teacher. As part of my professional work to support new teachers, I was interested in and concerned about the support provided to early career teachers. My own background history was an integral part of the development of the project.

My story in education began in 1993 when I started my teaching career as a middle school science teacher in a rural county in central Virginia. Twenty years later, after a third failed attempt to obtain a promotion of sorts to science curriculum coordinator for the school division where I was then working, I found myself wondering how best to challenge myself and breathe new life into my career. Although I still loved teaching, in my mid-forties, I could see myself working and teaching for twenty more years and both wanted and needed to find a way to grow professionally.

With no interest in moving into school administration, I ended up finding a doctoral program at my alma mater that had a strong focus on social justice. While continuing to teach

full time, I went back to graduate school, taking two courses a semester. This was an exciting time for me--I thrived on the challenge of both the coursework and the demands of writing papers in between grading papers. In most of my classes, I had to learn a new vocabulary--constructivism, capital, critical theory--and I realized that my years of experience in the classroom were of value to me in understanding and unpacking various theories and frameworks.

Initially, as a career science teacher, I planned to develop a dissertation project around science teaching methods for meeting the needs of marginalized students. At some point, I began to consider how those goals might be served by working to support early career science teachers, and eventually decided to focus on supporting early career teachers, not just those teaching science. Although I acknowledged that I could no longer imagine what it might be like to be a new teacher, I thought that my experience and status could be useful to early career teachers as part of a support system. As the project evolved, my role and how I understood it evolved as well, in ways that were both challenging and exciting.

Near the end of my second year of coursework in the doctoral program, my family suffered a tragedy that threatened to derail us. After a few months, I was able to continue taking courses, reading assignments, and turning in papers, but the passion for my project was gone and I struggled to make any real progress. My professional work took a toll as well and I found myself just going through the motions in my classroom, with little of the dedication and reward that I had found in teaching for so many years. This was compounded by changes in my teaching situation that made it difficult to teach in the way I believed was best for my students.

In the fall of 2018, I began a new job with my school as an Instructional Coach for STEM. This challenge gave me a chance to reimagine myself and my role in education. I was

able to reinvent myself professionally and rediscover everything I loved about teaching. I moved from discouraged and looking for the door to invigorated and eager to help others find joy in our school. In this new role, my job was to support students and teachers throughout the school with hands-on, student centered STEM activities connected to their curriculum and interests.

One of the first things I did was get permission to change the name of my work space from “STEM Lab” to “Innovation Lab”. I did this to make the space more inviting to everyone in the school, not just those traditionally considered part of STEM. My work days mostly involved designing, planning, and implementing cross-curricular lessons with teachers and students across grades 6-8 and all content areas. I planned with teachers from every grade and subject area and developed lessons that we taught collaboratively. They brought their students into the Innovation Lab and the students worked, usually cooperatively, to design and build solutions to various problems that came out of their coursework and individual questions. This gave me the opportunity to continue working directly with students and meet their needs, but also to learn how to better work with and support other teachers. I got to see not only students excited about learning, but teachers excited about teaching.

I have always loved teaching middle school science and helping students understand and discover more about how their world works. One of the most rewarding aspects of my work over the years was those moments when an otherwise disengaged or unmotivated student got excited and involved in an activity that I had planned and used in class. As a science teacher, I realized very early in my career that students truly learn best when they’re engaged in their own learning--with hands on, realistic, cooperative opportunities. In recent years, I saw the power of this not just to improve learning outcomes, but to empower students to take ownership and to even find joy in their own learning.

The unique design of the STEM and Innovation program I have had the freedom to create at our school has served not only to engage students in cross curricular, hands on learning, but has developed opportunities to engage classroom teachers in imagining and implementing lessons that they might never have tried on their own. By planning and teaching lessons with any and all of the teachers in the school, our program has had sixth grade English classes investigating chemistry as part of a novel study and seventh grade history classes exploring Newton's laws of motion and assembly lines with a flight activity. Through their participation and willingness to try something outside of their normal instructional methods, those teachers have experienced a form of authentic learning of their own. What better way to provide professional development for teachers than by modeling and supporting them in real time with their students?

As I worked through my doctoral coursework--reading, thinking, discussing, and writing about ideas such as constructivism, voice and power, social capital, pragmatism, adult learning, professionalism--and developing my own ideas around a dissertation project, I realized that for teachers, especially early career teachers, the same principles matter when it comes to finding joy and taking ownership over learning. When teacher learning includes critical and collaborative reflection on issues and situations that the teachers are actually involved and invested in, it is more likely to lead to transformation and improved situations for both teachers and their students. Working with my colleagues to effect change has given me hope for us all.

Over my career, I was the recipient of countless professional development programs and faculty committees. In the past ten to fifteen years, I also had the opportunity to design and lead many professional development sessions and meetings with my peers. These included summer sessions with my school district and presenting at the Virginia Association for Science Teachers

(VAST) on a nearly annual basis. For the first five summers of my doctoral studies, I worked with grant-funded programs at a local university providing weeks long professional development aimed at improving science teaching practices in underperforming school districts through modeling and designing hands on, inquiry based, student centered lessons. These experiences have helped me understand and put into practice what makes effective and impactful professional development. My experiences as both recipient and provider of professional development has shown that adult learners, like all learners, learn best when the experiences are relevant and the learner is engaged in the knowledge creation process. For teachers, having opportunities to examine their current problems of practice and develop new strategies is critical for professional growth. Professional development can be both engaging and effective when it allows for collaborative reflection and inquiry around the pedagogical and classroom management issues that teachers are interested in and concerned about.

As a lead teacher and mentor in various capacities over the years, I provided both formal and informal support for my peers in their professional practice and was a frequent sounding board for my colleagues when they had a question or frustration with their curricula or classroom management. In my position as STEM Coach, many of my colleagues quickly came to see me as both welcoming and willing to work hard and try new things with our students. As a veteran teacher, I saw myself as a resource for instructional and logistical problem solving.

My memories of being a new teacher reminded me that the support of peers was critical to my professional and personal well being and growth. I recall several specific moments of reflection with fellow teachers that were transformational in developing my beliefs about teaching and relationships with students. In my first teaching job, I had two mentors, one with decades of experience who took me under her wing, guided and redirected me often, and even

physically protected me once from a violent parent. The other mentor was only a few years older than I was and was able to offer advice and suggestions based on her own recent experiences as a new science teacher. If memory serves, our rooms even shared a connected storeroom which allowed for easy access and frequent check ins.

When I changed schools after five years, I once again found myself on a team with a veteran educator old enough to be my mother who not only made herself available to me to brainstorm and vent, but also valued my input on her own classroom dilemmas. This shared respect and support was fundamental to my continued growth as an educator. During this time, I also began to form a friendship with a colleague several years younger than I am. We spent many years collaborating in co-taught science classes where she was the special education teacher and I was the general education teacher. Although our roles have changed several times over the years, she is still the one person I lean on more than any other in our school. Our ideas and values around both education and politics are closely aligned and we trust each other enough to be honest in both our questions and our responses. I have been fortunate--many teachers work for years without anyone they can depend on or trust for advice and guidance.

A few years ago, I was interviewing a new teacher for a class project and he described his various sources of professional support. In addition to his mentor, a veteran teacher who he appreciated for guidance, he pointed out how valuable another teacher had been. This colleague had only been teaching a year or two longer, but because of that was able to offer insight into the specific challenges a new teacher faces and how he had dealt with them just a year or two before. This perspective stayed with me as I continued to consider how best to support new teachers and it was critical in the structure of our community as I tried to lead from behind and facilitate time,

space, and safety for the participants to support each other and develop relationships built on trust and shared values.

As a part of my job as an instructional coach, I was also a member of the school leadership team and the division curriculum and instruction leadership team. My job description was primarily student focused, but included teacher mentoring as one of my other functions. As I embraced this new role as teacher, collaborator, and coach, I became excited again about my ideas for supporting early career teachers and helping them identify and stay true to their professional values. Some of the most enthusiastic and empathetic teachers I was working with were young, early career educators, and this gave me the opportunity to begin relationships with them that I hoped would support a community of practice. Once my dissertation project was approved and I was able to recruit participants, seven of the nine teachers in the building who met the criteria almost immediately agreed to join me in the project and we began to form a community we called, “Looking for Hope”.

A Framework of Hope through Community; Thirty Years in the Making

This study was designed to tell the story of early career teachers engaged in developing a reflective community of practice as a means of induction support and professional development. As a member of the school community and a veteran teacher, my role was that of insider action researcher. I served both as facilitator of the group and a participant in the meetings. Since this project was as much about my own journey in education as it was about the community of reflective practice, I would like to reflect briefly on three readings that helped form the framework of the power of community to harness hope and cultivate freedom that this project is built on. Two books, The Dialectic of Freedom (Greene, 1988) and Demoralized (Santoro, 2018),

stand out as bookends around the past 30 years, my time so far in education. Connecting them is an essay on hope by Kathy Hytten (2011) that I encountered in my doctoral classes.

Sometime around 1990, probably in a Philosophy of Education class, I encountered Maxine Greene's The Dialectic of Freedom (1988). I still have my dog-eared paperback copy and its pages are highlighted and underlined by both my 20 year old self and this current self, a self somehow both more and less optimistic than the previous one. I had grown up very sheltered from much of the world, and this book opened my eyes and was instrumental in developing my ideas around freedom and democratic education. When I returned to its pages a few years ago during my doctoral classes, I was reminded of those ideas and discovered new truths alongside them. The portions underlined decades ago and those highlighted in recent years form a Venn diagram of sorts as my younger and older selves found separate but overlapping themes and thoughts. As a young, pre-service teacher, I was inspired by the ideas of moving beyond the confines of how a young woman should be, to "reconstitute [my] own internalized visions of [myself]" (p. 83). I was motivated to action by Greene's descriptions of finding and educating for freedom by identifying what stands in the way and imagining new possibilities for myself and my students. As I reread the book in my recent studies, I discovered in Greene some of what I was discovering in myself as I transitioned into a role of supporting other teachers, both in my work and in my dissertation research. Just as she gave voice and direction to my discontent at the beginning of my career, I wanted to support others in making space for new freedoms as they began their careers. I began to imagine a community of teachers supporting each other that could "seek a vision of education that brings together the need for wide-awakeness with the hunger for community, the desire to know with the wish to understand, the desire to feel with the passion to see" (p.23). As I sought to reinvent myself and my role in education, I was encouraged by the

idea that “a teacher in search of [their] own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own” (p.15).

During my doctoral classes, I read an essay by Kathy Hytten, “Building and Sustaining Hope,” (2011) that helped me begin to articulate my ideas around the potential significance of community to generate and maintain hope in the lives of teachers. In my mind, this essay now bridges the space between the bookends, connecting freedom to hope, hope to community, and community to remoralization--my own and that of others. When I first read this essay on hope, I was struck by her description of “meaningful hope...grounded in both habits of action and conscious shifts in thinking...generative, resourceful, engaged, and communal” (p. 1). This essay was instrumental in the early stages of developing this dissertation project as I began to seriously consider a model of new teacher induction that centered on a community of reflective practice. My plans began to take shape around a community that would “create spaces for dialogue...opportunities to collaborate” that would “continually reinvigorate the groups we are part of, and...regularly expand our connections to others” (p. 3). It was around this time that I began to name the project, “Looking for Hope,” and to see it as a means of action in my own work. As Hytten says, “this is a vision of hope as a way of living, an ongoing practice, a struggle; hope as a verb, not a noun. It is hope deeply connected to action and intrinsic to how we story our actions, to the narratives we share with others” (p. 3). I took action, not only in developing my dissertation project, but in pursuing an entirely new role for myself in my profession, a role that would come to reality just a year or two later and would allow me to develop my ideas of cultivating hope and freedom and even joy in the lives of others and my own.

At this end of my career, in early 2019, I was introduced to Doris Santoro through her book, Demoralized (2018), and I found some of my current self within its descriptions of veteran teachers. At that point, I was struggling to give final shape to my dissertation plans and find a path forward with my project. Her framework for understanding both the dissatisfaction and frustration teachers struggle with and the possibilities for re-moralization helped me better understand my own situation and reframe my dissertation project as not just action research, but as a strategy for my own professional remoralization. It became clear to me that my efforts to reimagine my professional role had been part of my own battle against demoralization. When I was struggling most to find moral rewards in my work, to believe that I was in fact doing “good work,” to “access the sources of satisfaction that made [my] work worthwhile,” (p. 49) I took action to find new purpose in my work by redefining my role. As I moved from a traditional classroom teacher position to that of instructional coach and was given the opportunity by my administrators to create a program that supported both students and teachers, I was able to engage in multiple actions that Santoro describes as examples of strategies toward re-moralization: “student-centered action, teacher leadership, activism, voice, and professional community” (p. 117). While I see elements of each of these strategies in my own re-moralization as a veteran teacher, I also embraced and encouraged them for the early career teachers in this study as means to combat their own demoralization. As Santoro concludes at the end of her book, I saw part of my role as a veteran teacher and teacher leader to “help novice teachers develop a vision for good work...to enable new teachers to sustain and enact the normative commitments” (p. 190).

Based on my review of the literature and this framework of hope through community, I designed this study to explore a model of induction and professional development to support new

and early career teachers in and beyond their first year of teaching. My goal was to create a collaborative community of early career teachers who could share and reflect on their problems of practice and develop solutions together. Through this community built on similar situations and shared concerns, the participants would have the opportunity to build relationships to strengthen and support their professional practice. With the strength of community and peer connections, these early career teachers would be better equipped to avoid demoralization, build leadership capacity, and find freedom within their situations. I imagined my role as both facilitator and role model through my own action research in this study. The narrative inquiry design of the study was chosen to identify and emphasize the themes, relationships, and stories that emerged.

Background Literature on New Teachers

In the 2015-2016 school year, there were almost 200,000 new teachers and 43% of public school teachers had ten or less years experience (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2018). For new teachers, their experiences in the first year have a strong impact on both retention and teaching. The disconnect often found between teaching preparation at the university level and the demands of actual practice add to the need for comprehensive support (Cameron & Lovett, 2011; Wang et al., 2008). The first few years of teaching are a time of “survival and discovery, adaptation and learning” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1027), as new teachers learn to teach, develop instructional activities, establish classroom routines and management, clarify their own attitudes about teaching and education, and develop their professional identity (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

In the early 2000s, researchers continued to advocate for improved teacher support through developing induction programs. With rising concerns over teacher attrition, many school systems invested in expanded mentorship and other induction initiatives (Ingersoll &

Smith, 2004; Moir, 2003; Wang et al., 2008). In the 2000s, policy measures such as No Child Left Behind and the accompanying accountability measures led to additional pressures to support new teachers (Wang et al., 2008).

Richard Ingersoll and Thomas Smith (2004) evaluated data from the National Center for Educational Statistics' Schools and Staffing Survey and the Teachers Follow-up Survey. The data were from 1999-2000 and included information on mentorship, professional development, common planning time, collaboration, and networking with other teachers. Ingersoll and Smith found that participation in a variety of types of mentorship and induction had increased. Their analysis indicated that receiving multiple induction supports had a statistically significant effect on decreasing turnover. In 2003, Ellen Moir reported on the efforts of the New Teacher Center at UCSC to develop and implement induction programs for over 10,000 new teachers across the U.S. from 1988-2000. Programs that were effective in reducing turnover and saving money were characterized by collaboration, professional communities, and opportunities to network and problem solve. More recently, as part of a mixed methods exploration of induction seminars for new teachers, mentoring alone was found to be insufficient for supporting new teachers. Induction was shown to be most effective when mentoring was supplemented with collaborative networks or learning communities, observations and feedback (Fresko & Alhija, 2015).

Richard Ingersoll and his colleagues have written extensively about issues surrounding teacher shortages, new teacher turnover, and induction programs (providing orientation, support, and guidance for new teachers) and identified several components of the working conditions in schools that impact new teachers: lack of support from the administration, low student motivation and poor behavior, and not being included in decision making (Ingersoll, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Developing or improving support and mentorship

programs in schools could make a significant difference in what has often been called a “trial by fire,” or “sink or swim” endeavor (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Designing professional development specifically to meet the needs of new teachers as part of induction can mitigate the pressures and demands that threaten to overwhelm them.

Teacher preparation programs and professional development in school systems need to be reconfigured to better equip teachers for the demands of policy, society, and technology. The support needs to be ongoing, collaborative, and relevant if teachers are to become and continue to be effective practitioners (Forlin, 2012). While mentoring is often the primary means of providing support to new teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Goldrick, 2016), new teachers need opportunities to develop inquiry and collaboration skills and to be brought into a community of practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Designing and implementing professional development that is targeted for new teachers as part of their induction can be critical in shaping their early career experience, reducing attrition, and developing community and empowerment (Ado, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

As part of an action research project in my own work as an instructional coach and school leader, this study was developed to explore how to provide induction support for new and early career teachers that goes beyond the traditional first year mentor model through participation in a reflective community of practice. The group was based on the idea of a professional learning community where participants could not only reflect collaboratively, but where they could be empowered in their own situations and experience the autonomy of exploring issues and problems that mattered to them. Made of teachers with anywhere from zero to four years of experience, this study approached induction as a long term support system, extending beyond the first year of teaching and capitalizing on collaboration with similar peers.

The study was designed to explore the lived experiences of early career teachers as they navigated the challenges of the school year and participated in a community of practice that provided opportunities for collaboration and reflection as a model of induction. The participants met regularly to share their experiences, reflect on their challenges and successes, and collaborate on solutions. Although professional learning communities are not new, utilizing them for induction has only recently been the subject of research (Fresko & Alhija, 2014; Lovett & Cameron, 2011). As a new program, it was subject to ongoing review and adjustment to best meet the needs of the participants. This flexibility and the resulting uncertainty were potential limitations or at the very least, areas of concern that needed to be paid attention to throughout the study. At the same time, as the program was being developed through continuous reflection and collaboration, its flexibility allowed for real time changes to better support the teachers involved. As a reflective practitioner engaged in action research, it was important for me to document and discuss adjustments and changes as they occur.

An important aspect of the project's purpose was that although it was designed to tell the story of the experience of the teachers who participated, the nature of the project was also to improve the situation for the participants as well as myself, a researcher-participant. For the participants, including myself, the community of practice provided opportunities for reflection and peer support. For myself, it also offered the possibility of professional and personal growth through reflective practice and supporting others. Stephen Kemmis (2010) argued that action research has the power to transform practice and by doing so, to change histories and make a better world. I hope that the participants, including myself, were transformed by our collective work as we discovered "new ways of doing things, new ways of thinking, and new ways of relating" (Kemmis, 2010, p. 425).

Design and Structure of the Community of Reflective Practice

For my dissertation project, I decided to use my position, both my official role and my status as a senior teacher in the school, to implement a new professional development opportunity for our early career teachers (years one to five) and develop a narrative of their experiences. As my job included teacher mentoring and supporting/providing professional development activities, these plans fell within that role. My research role was as an insider participant with both many years of professional knowledge and an investment in the success of the program. Continual reflection was necessary, not only on my own experiences and potential biases, but also on the experiences of the other participants, and how the design of the program was working to support the needs of the early career teachers involved. A narrative inquiry design facilitated this insider action research approach to telling our collective story (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

There were seven teachers who met the criteria for the study and agreed to participate both in the individual interviews and in the group that met throughout the school year. The group met six times from November through May, first in person, and then via Zoom once school buildings closed due to COVID-19. Each meeting was scheduled using a poll to determine a day that best suited the majority of the participants and for the in person meetings, we met immediately after school in my classroom. Our meetings were approximately an hour long and regardless of the main topic of discussion, we always began with some sort of sharing about our current situation or state of mind and ended with a future-focused discussion of either goals moving forward or possible topics for our next meeting.

For each in person meeting, I created protocols (see Appendix C for examples; McDonald et al., 2013) to guide our discussions and shared those ahead of time by email in the

form of agendas so that everyone could be prepared. The topics for our in person meetings were generally based on what we had discussed and decided at the conclusion of the prior meeting. Because of this, the topics and the protocols we followed changed to meet the needs of the group. The first meeting was primarily spent in setting norms, getting to know each other, and sharing some topics of concern that we could focus on in future meetings. Some of the topics we discussed at subsequent meetings included engaging reluctant learners, concerns about school culture, supporting social and emotional wellness for staff and students, and the impacts of the COVID-19 closure and distance learning on academic progress and social and emotional development. After schools closed in March and our focus shifted to how we and our students were managing the emergency shift to virtual teaching and learning, the Zoom meetings were more loosely structured and I simply shared a suggested theme or topic when I sent out the meeting invitations (more detail about the meetings is provided in chapter three).

My role was to schedule and facilitate the meetings around topics that the group wanted to discuss and explore. In addition, my position in the school was instrumental in procuring approval by the school administration of our group as an official professional development option for the participants and establishing it as a professional learning community. I had anticipated that I would also serve in somewhat of a mentor capacity and as a resource for whatever other support the participants might need. Although I made frequent reminders that I was available in that role, it was not something that the participants sought out. It became clear that they valued the community primarily as a safe space to share and listen to each other. While I felt included as an equal part of that community during the discussions, I realized that my preconceived notions about my own role were based in part on my own ideas about traditional mentorship, and by late winter, I started to shift away from attempts to provide additional support

and focus more on facilitating the discussions and amplifying the voices of the other participants. This redirection of my efforts challenged my ego when I found myself less overtly needed than I had anticipated.

As the study was in part an action research project in my work to develop a new model of professional development connected to my role as an instructional leader in my school, I had also hoped to begin to guide the participants in action research of their own, either individually or as a group. We had planned to begin peer observations as a means of understanding and supporting each other and I anticipated that this would help us develop some action research goals. Because of the school building closure in March, 2019 due to COVID-19, we were unable to move ahead with this part of the study and postponed these plans for our group until the following school year.

Significance of the Study

Providing opportunities for community, where teachers can learn together and support each other, helps create a school climate where educators can depend on each other and develop solutions together to authentic problems (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Lovett & Cameron, 2011; Michener & Jackson, 2012). Multiple studies have shown that an induction and professional development model based on a community of reflective practice provides opportunities to strengthen teacher autonomy, confidence, efficacy, and persistence through collaboration and in some cases, action research (Day & Gu, 2010; Fresko & Alhija, 2015; Kennedy, 2016; Meyer, 2002; O'Malley, 2010). Further understanding of early career teachers' experiences with this model can inform the existing knowledge base about induction supports for early career teachers and how professional learning communities can be part of an authentic and relevant professional development experience. Adding to the knowledge base on

induction programs, especially those based on collaboration and community, can lead to improvements in induction practices, not only in the immediate setting where the study takes place, but in wider areas in a descriptive way that might impact future policy. Returning again to Stephen Kemmis, he asserted that action research, especially when conducted in community, can contribute not just to knowledge, but to “living well, individually and collectively” (2010, p. 426). For me, this project was a means to explore and develop my role as an instructional leader and use my position to help early career teachers find support and hope in their own situations.

Using a narrative inquiry model in the context of a reflective community provided time and space to hear, honor, and begin to understand the voices of the early career teachers as they lived out and described their individual experiences, growth, challenges, and questions (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989; 2000), and learned to trust and collaborate within a community of practice. As I carried out this project of action research within my role as an instructional leader, I paid attention to and reflected on the voices of the participants and the issues they cared about as I made decisions about the protocols and topics of discussion for our meetings. This was an unconventional approach to both induction support and professional development and holds the potential to serve as a model for innovations in both. Since the community of practice was designed as a form of long term, collaborative support for early career teachers, it provided the participants with the opportunity to continue meeting beyond the year included in this study, to continue exploring problems of practice, develop action research of their own, and potentially help develop other similar groups within the school faculty, not just with the early career teachers.

Research Questions

This qualitative, narrative inquiry project was designed to answer the following questions. As it was conducted as an action research study and developed through reflection and iteration, some additional findings also emerged that affected the focus of the program. These will be discussed in chapters four and five.

RQ 1: What is the experience of early career teachers with induction?

- What type(s) of induction did they experience in year one?
- What is their perception of those experiences?

RQ 2: What is the experience of early career teachers participating in a community of reflective practice?

- What benefits does the community provide to the participants?
- How does the community meet professional development expectations of the administration while meeting the needs of the teachers?

Overview of the Method

Qualitative, narrative inquiry (Caine et al., 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2010) was used to develop descriptions of new teachers' experiences with induction and their participation in a collaborative, reflective community. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have researched and written extensively using narrative inquiry as a way to both represent and understand experiences. They describe it as a collaborative and ongoing process that occurs between researcher and participants, dependent on time, place, and cultural and social contexts.

Since narrative inquiry itself is a reflective and ongoing conversation about experiences, it was ideal as an approach to explore reflective practices. Narrative inquiry told the teachers' stories in a richer account than test scores and surveys would have allowed. The narrative approach to collecting, analyzing, and retelling our stories was a methodology that both

depended on and amplified the voices of the participants. These stories documented our experiences and helped show not just what occurred, but how (if) transformative learning took place (Hardy et al., 2018). As an insider studying my own practice through action research as well as collaborating with other insiders to study and support their practice, narrative inquiry allowed me to tell my own story as well as those of the other participants, and to tell the story of our collaboration. This was appropriate for communicating the professional knowledge of practitioners as it emerged in my own reflections and our group discussions during the course of the action research process (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Although ethnography and case-study methods could have been used instead, I was most interested in exploring the stories of a few individuals and their experiences both separately and together. This goal was best served by narrative inquiry research (Creswell, 2006). Narrative inquiry served as both methodology and as a means of developing relationships to tell stories and co-compose our lives together from ‘in the midst’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Huber et al., 2013). The stories for the narratives came from several sources:

- My own researcher participant journal (for reflection, collaboration--Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993)
- Interviews of individual teachers (at the beginning and end of the project)
- Field notes, reflective memos, and participant quotes from the group discussions during our community meetings (for context and depth: “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131)

The following chapters will cover a review of the literature; a description of the methodology; the findings as told through our stories; and a discussion of the implications for policy, practice, and scholarship.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Teaching presents unique challenges for those who plan and carry out the mission of schools and education. In his book, Who Controls Teachers' Work?, Richard Ingersoll (2003) described these challenges as “important tasks; multiple and often contradictory demands; mandatory, obligatory, non adult clients; altruistic practitioners; ambiguous practices; and finally, uncertain outcomes” (p. 219). These factors create a professional setting that is not only unlike any other, but fraught with tension over control and autonomy.

This project built on my role as an instructional coach and my experience as a teacher leader to both improve my practice and model for others through action research as I supported and encouraged early career teachers to support each other and take ownership of their own professional lives. As a model of both induction and professional development for early career teachers, the community of reflective practice that was formed through this project served as a safe space for listening and sharing, and a source of hope for myself and the other participants.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. First, in “Understanding the Problem,” I start with a review of relevant literature on attrition and turnover, professionalization and professionalism, professional development, and traditional supports for new teachers. The second section, “Looking for Hopeful Solutions,” begins with a review of collaboration and reflection as part of both action research and teacher leadership. It continues with a discussion of communities of reflective practice through the lenses of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) *situated learning* and Donald Schön’s (1987) *reflective practitioner*, as well as the strengths and concerns around professional learning communities. The section concludes with a look at the possibility of hope through community and the potential for action research and learning communities to serve as both induction and as transformative professional development.

Understanding the Problem

Attrition and turnover.

Although teacher attrition, and the attrition of early career teachers specifically, is the subject of much discussion and research, the problem of attrition has been poorly defined. In education, the term usually refers to “qualified teachers leaving the profession for reasons other than having reached the age of retirement” (Kelchtermans, 2017, p. 962). The phenomenon includes both voluntary and involuntary leaving and the data are complicated by the mobility of those who move schools, districts, or states and those who leave and return to teaching later (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011). Attrition rates for teachers doubled to around 15% from 1990-1991 to 2012-2013 (Goldring et al., 2014). While total rates of those moving schools or leaving was similar for Virginia and the country in 2012-2013, Virginia had a much higher rate of those planning to leave the profession (10.2%) compared to the national rate of 6.6% (Understanding Teacher Shortages, 2016). For the most recent data available (2016), these numbers were up somewhat, to 11% for Virginia and 7.3% nationally (Understanding Teacher Shortages, 2018). More than one million teachers enter, leave, or move schools annually, with a disproportionate effect on students and schools in high poverty areas (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). The financial cost of this turnover has been estimated from \$2.1 to \$7 billion a year in the United States (Glazer, 2018). The dropout rate for early career teachers is reported from about 17% in the first five years (Meyer et al., 2019; Sawchuk, 2015) to closer to 50% if the numbers include those teachers who also transfer to another school (Ingersoll, Merrill, Stuckey, & Collins, 2018; Phillips, 2015). Ingersoll et al., (2018) reported that almost 200,000 early career teachers left the profession in the 2015-2016 school year. These patterns lead to high turnover rates, especially in schools serving those populations considered most at

risk with up to 20% of teachers leaving high poverty schools every year (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Meyer et al., 2019).

Richard Ingersoll (2012) identified several trends responsible for this rapid change. Among them were greening--by 2008, one fourth of the teaching force had been teaching for five or fewer years; and attrition--in their first five years, as many as 40-50% of new teachers leave their jobs. Rapid turnover is largely responsible for these trends and the result is instability in the teaching force, with high needs schools bearing the brunt of the impact. Disproportionate rates of inexperienced teachers are disruptive and destabilizing to learning and learning cultures in school, with particular impact on schools identified as high-needs (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010).

Although attrition itself is a problem in education, the “greener” trend is of particular concern. The teachers most at risk to leave the profession are beginners and the data indicate that more than 44% of new teachers leave in their first five years (Ingersoll et al., 2018). The combination of ballooning and turnover continues to destabilize the profession. In addition, as the teaching force grows and becomes younger, less experienced, and primarily female, the professional status of teachers could be at risk of decreased respect, support, and compensation (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Meyer et al., 2019).

There are many reasons for attrition and mobility in the teaching profession. The most frequently reported factors include: working in a low performing school, low salary, working conditions, moral dissatisfaction, and inadequate teacher preparation (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Kelchtermans, 2017; Santoro, 2018). In a mixed methods study using 2010-2014 data from 37 Arizona schools and over 1400 teachers, supportive working conditions were found to be positively correlated with teacher retention. Analysis demonstrated the importance of administrative support, quality professional

development, professional relationships, and mentoring to promote retention (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Although teaching is a job with *structural vulnerability* where teachers often have little control over the working conditions that directly impact their practice, professional collaboration and relationships can hold the key to support and empower teachers to develop effective professional communities that provide opportunities for feedback and reflection. This can improve working conditions and reduce attrition (Kelchtermans, 2017). Understanding the professional status of teaching is important to work toward better supporting teaching and improving that status.

Professionalization and professionalism.

In order to understand and mitigate the causes of attrition among teachers, the professional status of teachers needs to be examined. Teaching experiences attrition rates higher than many other professions, including nursing, law, engineering, and architecture (Ingersoll et al., 2018). There has been ongoing discussion over both the professionalization of teaching and the professionalism of teachers and how these correlate with retention, contentment, and student outcomes. Although the terms are often conflated, professionalization refers to teachers' status (how teachers are perceived and treated by others--the public, policy makers, administrators) and teaching's characteristics (licensing, prestige, training, compensation), while professionalism describes the personal attitudes and behaviors (service oriented, high standards) of the teachers themselves (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2015). For teachers, the attributes that define their professional status--licensing, induction and mentoring for new teachers, professional development, authority over decisions, compensation, and prestige (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2015)--are usually decided on and implemented by others: school administration, lawmakers, and the public. Because of this, Ingersoll and Merrill assign teaching the description of "semi-profession". Although there are

clear standards for licensing, most of the other criteria are poorly defined, and outside of the control of the teachers themselves. The professional factors that Ingersoll and Merrill found to have the strongest effects on teachers' attitudes and retention were autonomy over decisions, support for new teachers (induction and mentoring), and compensation.

Taking issue with the concerns over “de-skilling” of teachers, Henry Smaller has also addressed the issue of teachers' status. He asserts that teachers have only ever had a “slender autonomy” (2015, p. 137). He maintains that for 150 years, surveillance and control of teachers' work has dominated and reduced their autonomy. Smaller claims that teachers have long been monitored and controlled with only enough of an illusion of professionalism to deter collective action. Although many teachers attest to the autonomy they have behind closed classroom doors, this disguises the true power dynamics in schools, and most still comply with top-down expectations and are aware of the “costs of non-compliance” (p.151). Despite this, teachers still use that “slender autonomy” to effect change when and where they can.

In the 20th century, professionalization was marked by an emphasis on scientific knowledge. This was an approach to professionalization as a technical model that treated teachers as vessels and tools to take in knowledge from above or outside and transmit it into practice. Gary Anderson (2017) discusses the increased reliance on quantifiable data (test scores) as a way to initially seek legitimacy for teachers' work by demonstrating that they were successfully teaching content. By quantifying and comparing student outcomes, high-stakes testing was “designed, in part, to increase demands on teachers, and make teachers put more effort into their jobs” (Sun et al., 2017). As high-stakes tests scores began to be relied on more as indicators of progress, they were leveraged into changing classroom practices, with teachers brought into the process through data analysis. Instead of discussing students as individuals with

learning goals, an audit culture was developed that saw students evaluated primarily according to test scores and sub-groups (Anderson, 2017). Anderson asserts that this was the result of the marketization of education that began with No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top along with the testing and data-analysis companies that saw the opportunity to profit from this accountability movement.

In general, teachers have most of their control over instructional factors, and least over administrative decisions. Teachers are held responsible to enforce rules and structures established by others (Ingersoll, 2003). As “accountability” policies (analyses of student test scores as a measure of teacher efficacy) have taken hold, teacher autonomy has been negatively affected. Richard Ingersoll (2003) suggested that increased accountability should be paired with increased power. He found that although teachers do not have many of the benefits of traditional professions (prestige, high pay, authority), they do exhibit the attitudes associated with professionals (public service orientation, commitment, and altruism). Ingersoll associated this disconnect with high rates of turnover and dissatisfaction. As a result, he tied top down accountability reforms to diminished teacher performance and student outcomes. Changes in professional development programs have been part of the accountability reforms as school districts attempt to manage their standing by controlling and changing teacher practices. Teacher dissatisfaction and the “degradation of the profession” (Santoro, 2018, p. 103) have also been explored as factors in the demoralization that contributes to teacher turnover. Some of the factors identified in this process include top down pressures to meet accreditation standards and pass students, and being assigned to professional development activities that don’t align with professional needs or honor teachers’ voices (Santoro, 2018).

The technical model of professionalization can be countered with the view that teachers can (and should) create and use knowledge themselves. Donald Schön described the importance of reflection, dialogue, and improvisation in developing professional knowledge, skills, confidence, and theories. He suggested that teachers could combat burnout and frustration by fostering the artistry and craft of teaching and by taking ownership of their own professional development (Schön, 1987). In their 1993 book, *Inside/Outside*, Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle wrote about teachers taking on authority over their own situations: “no one can empower teachers to respond to...the many other complex challenges that face today’s teachers” (p. 64). They asserted that teachers can “interrupt role expectations” (p. 71) and become both aware of their own power and involved in making changes. Better systems of support can serve to both prevent moral dissatisfaction and to re-moralize teachers who are struggling with their situation. An awareness of the issues and a proactive approach could reduce demoralizing conditions for teachers of all experience levels (Santoro, 2018).

Professional development.

Although professional development has the potential to support and improve teacher learning, practice, and professionalism (Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Lieberman & Miller, 2001), it has also been identified as a factor in teacher dissatisfaction, demoralization, and eventually turnover, and therefore warrants further discussion (Borko, 2004; Kennedy, 2016; Santoro, 2018; Zeichner, 2003). Professional development can refer to both the learning opportunities provided to teachers and the learning that occurs in the process. Most professional development opportunities are mandated and disseminated by administrators (principals, central office staff, curriculum specialists). These programs are often planned and provided with little input from teachers, rarely any time for interactions between teachers, and often no follow-up or support

provided after the hour or half day is complete (Borko, 2004; Zeichner, 2003). There is a lack of both context and connection to teachers' situations and needs (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Kennedy, 2016). New and early career teachers often report being frustrated and overwhelmed with existing professional development that is unrelated to their immediate needs and perceived as a waste of time (Lovett & Cameron, 2011; Martin et al., 2016). There is little agreement on what good professional development looks like or should accomplish (Borko, 2004; Kennedy, 2016). Additionally, teachers often experience *the problem of enactment* in which they may learn and espouse particular methods or skills, but continue to act otherwise in practice, often without even noticing or acknowledging the contradictions (Kennedy, 2016).

Thirty years ago, Linda Darling-Hammond reported on the data and policy changes around the high quality teaching goals established by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. The commission's challenge was to ensure that all U.S. students would have "access to competent, caring and qualified teaching" (1997, p. 1). They called for "practically useful learning opportunities for teachers," collaborative planning time, study groups, and time to work together (p. 2-5). They asserted that school reform and improvement policies depended on teachers being "armed with the knowledge, skills and supports they need" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1013). Research through the 1990s led to agreement that learning opportunities need to be related to teachers' concerns, based on collaboration, and connected to actual teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Although researchers concurred that there was a need for high quality professional development for teachers, there was little consensus on what that should be or how to implement it. In 2001, No Child Left Behind required high quality professional development for all but did not define what that looked like or how to provide it. Soon after, in 2004, The Teaching

Commission called for “ongoing and targeted professional development” (Borko, 2004, p. 3) without elaborating on what that should be. With no coherent plan, goals, or clear outcomes, millions or more have been spent by federal, state, and local agencies on professional development initiatives with uncertain results (Borko, 2004). When education in our country continues to face annual budget cuts and personnel turnover that pose critical threats to the system, this issue is a major and unresolved concern for American schools (Borko, 2004).

While there is some evidence that professional development correlates with improved teacher practices and student learning, little is known about teacher learning (Borko, 2004) and much professional development is designed as a training model instead of toward transformative learning (Zeichner, 2003). If teachers are to facilitate student centered classrooms where learners work collaboratively and critically to solve problems and effect change, they need professional development opportunities that model those practices. Teachers, especially those new to the profession, need opportunities for professional talk and a collaborative learning culture where they have an equal voice in the dialogue (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011; Lovett & Cameron, 2011). Professional development is effective when it leads to teachers constructing knowledge and transforming the culture of their classroom and school (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Feiman-Nemser, 2012).

In her 2004 overview of research on professional development for teachers, Hilda Borko identified four components of professional development systems: the professional development program itself; teachers as learners; a facilitator or guide; and context. Using a situative approach based on Lave and Wenger’s theories of learning through participation (1991), she looked at teacher learning in the context of classrooms and school communities as well as the professional development programs. Regardless of whether the focus of a program was

improving content knowledge, understanding student thinking, or improving classroom practices, Borko found that effective programs engage participants as active learners in problem solving or scientific inquiry. These programs are often time intensive, but when supported by a strong professional community within the school, can lead to improvements in learning and instructional practices, as well as school reform (Borko, 2004).

In a related study, Sharon Feiman-Nemser (2001), described the old way of conducting professional development as “experts” talking to teachers and the new approach as teachers engaging in critical conversations. She advocated for developing communities of practice where teachers could engage in professional discourse around issues of content, students, and pedagogy. These communities can transform teachers and teaching at all stages of their careers, but are especially critical for early career teachers as they develop their professional identity and teaching practices.

More recently, Kennedy (2016), through a literature review, found that professional development programs based on developing strategies for teacher insight had a greater impact than those that relied on prescribed actions or developing content knowledge. Action research by teachers within a collaborative community can build capacity for teachers developing strategies and problem solving and lead to a culture of support and empowerment (Ado, 2013). This type of professional development allows early career teachers to find freedom and power in their own professional development (Mitchener & Jackson, 2012). In contrast to professional development designed and assessed at an administrative level, an action research model attends to both practice and context, builds meaningful collaboration, and enables authentic teacher learning that contributes to the professional knowledge base (vanOostveen, 2017). This approach “represents a long-term investment in building the capacity of teachers to exercise their judgement and

leadership abilities to improve learning for themselves and their students” (Zeichner, 2003, p. 320).

As a strategy to combat demoralization, authentic professional communities can provide the support that teachers need to seek advice, collaborate on solutions, take risks, and experience re-moralization. The connections formed through community can develop effective and sustainable actions that support teachers’ moral and professional values and help develop and strengthen their practice. Forming, joining, and developing these authentic communities early in teachers’ careers might have the power to ward against demoralization (Santoro, 2018).

Induction and mentoring as existing support for new teachers.

While communities of practice or professional learning communities have been used with teachers at all levels of experience, they can also be a deliberate part of induction for new teachers. Induction is the process by which new members are brought into a profession. In education, this is generally made up of various levels of guidance and support, but has not historically paralleled the experiences in other professions (apprenticeships, medical interns, etc.) (Ingersoll, 2012). The work of teachers is often isolated from fellow educators, with new teachers left to fend for themselves, overwhelmed by the many demands of their new profession as they both teach and learn to teach (Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Moir, 2003). Lack of support has often been blamed for the “revolving door” of educators, especially early career teachers (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011; Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

In recent years, induction programs have moved to the forefront of education research with several assertions about teaching and teacher preparation. Richard Ingersoll (2012) maintains that teaching is complex and that teacher preparatory programs are insufficient without

on the job experience and support for novices as a necessary part of teacher training. Although there is limited research and a lack of clarity around induction programs and their impact, if we improve and retain new teachers, it will lead to improved student outcomes and education as a whole would benefit from stronger induction programs (Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Starting in the early 1990s, induction models focused on emotional support for new teachers and socializing them into the school community (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Wang et al., 2008). Early iterations of induction models were considered temporary measures to ease the transition into teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 2012). With increased pressures from national curriculum and accountability standards, the focus shifted toward supporting student learning outcomes. This movement assumed a link between induction, new teachers' attitudes, their practice, and student outcomes (Wang et al., 2008). Induction became a means to provide professional development and mentoring to new teachers in order to improve student outcomes (test scores) and to train *highly qualified teachers* as mandated through the legislation of No Child Left Behind (Bullough, 2012). In recent years, in at least part as reaction against accountability pressures, some have begun to advocate for collaborative professional learning communities as a transformative model of professional development that moves teaching (and professional development) from individual and isolated to interdependent and connected (Feiman-Nemser, 2012).

The push for induction programs has increased, not only because of an awareness of the needs new teachers have, but because both the number and instability of new teachers has increased (Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll et al., 2018). As a result of concerns about turnover and retention, induction programs have also expanded. In 1990-91, 51% of new teachers (61,000)

reported participating in some form of induction. By 2007-08, that had risen to 91% (179,000). By 2008, 27 states required some type of induction support for new teachers (Goldrick et al., 2012). The form of support varies widely, from supportive communication with an administrator (87%), to mentors (80%), to collaborative planning (~50%) (Ingersoll, 2012). In a study by Wang et al. (2008), three primary components of formal induction programs were identified: mentoring, collaboration, and professional development aimed at improving student outcomes.

In education, mentoring is a broad term that refers to the pairing of an experienced teacher with a new teacher for the purpose of support. Although some studies indicate that mentoring programs are effective in reducing new teacher turnover and improving student outcomes (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), how the mentoring relationship and the mentoring program are defined, implemented, or evaluated varies widely across schools, districts, and states (DeCesare et al., 2016). While Virginia's public schools are required to provide mentor programs (Education Accountability and Quality Enhancement Act of 1999), there is little consistency or documentation about the processes that are being used.

In their study, DeCesare et al. (2016) reviewed mentoring programs from almost 1000 school districts across five states to discover trends and improve our understanding of how mentoring is being carried out. They pointed out that much of the literature about mentoring is anecdotal and loosely structured. To develop a better picture of what is being done, the researchers distributed a survey to identify the following: who provides mentoring, how does mentoring change after the first year, do mentors observe mentees, do mentors receive training, do mentors receive stipends, and what are the barriers to mentoring (p. 3). Some of their findings included the following: most mentors are full time teachers who do not have release time from their schedule for meeting with, observing, or otherwise supporting their mentee; less than a third

of districts mandate training for mentors; less than a fourth of districts continue mentoring at the same level after the first year of teaching, and 36% end it altogether after the first year; about half of districts require mentors to observe their mentees; and about half of districts provide a stipend for mentors, averaging about \$476 per mentee for those districts. In terms of barriers to mentoring, the three that were identified as problems were lack of funding for the programs, lack of time for mentoring, and lack of stipends to pay mentors.

As part of a comprehensive study of induction programs across all 50 states, Liam Goldrick of the New Teacher Center (2016) reported that as of the 2015-2016 school year, only 16 states have funding dedicated to teacher induction, including mentorship. While 23 states require or encourage release time for mentors to observe and support new teachers during the school day, only four have full time teacher mentors. In addition, only 12 states mandate minimum contact time for new teachers and their mentors. Only four states require and specifically fund multi-year induction support, including mentoring, for new teachers.

Mentorship programs that are thoughtfully developed, with training, time, and compensation for mentors, can be a strong component of a school's professional development and induction program. They can support new teachers as they develop their professional identity, classroom strategies, and pedagogical skills (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). When new teachers were surveyed in 2014, 55% reported that having access to a mentor was the most important factor in their success (Goldrick, 2016). Careful matching of mentors to new teachers based on location, subject matter, common planning time, and experience of the mentor can make a critical difference in the success of the pairing (Goldrick, 2016).

Mentors themselves should be carefully selected and trained. While more than 30 states require mentor training, it is loosely defined. Only 18 states provide continued, ongoing

professional development for mentors, and only two states require a mentor certification (Goldrick, 2016). Mentoring is usually the largest component of support for new teachers, also known as induction (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Goldrick, 2016).

Extensive research by the New Teacher Center illustrated both the progress that has been made in providing induction supports and the gaps that still exist (Goldrick, 2016; Goldrick et al., 2012). Although 21 states do not require support for all new teachers and only 20 have formal induction standards, as of the 2015-2016 school year, 11 states (not including Virginia) have policies that include requirements for these three induction components: classroom observations both by and of new teachers; mentor feedback; and professional learning communities or peer networks (Goldrick, 2016). Goldrick and his colleagues identified the following in successful induction programs: capable mentors, effective principals, multiple support structures, and ongoing program evaluation (Goldrick, 2016; Goldrick et al., 2012). Additionally, to improve induction programs, there must be opportunities for collaboration and personalized professional development (Goldrick, 2016).

Although some of the impetus for expanded induction programs came from trying to meet the demands of accountability pressures, Wang et al. (2008), examined the literature going back to 1997 and found that most studies did not address any connection between induction and student outcomes. They were, however, able to draw a few conclusions about the studies included. Although workshops were described as cost effective, the data from the case studies on workshop based induction showed there were not positive impacts on teacher beliefs or practices. Collaboration (planning, reflecting, observing, and modeling) between teachers was found to be a positive source of support as was content-specific pedagogical training. Finally, mentoring had mixed effects on new teachers' experiences and success. This seemed largely

dependent on the training the mentors had received. The researchers point out that these studies did not address what new teachers are thinking, barriers that might exist in collaborative relationships, and insight into mentors' dispositions. They suggest further research using case studies to gain insight into context, thinking, and experience of the participants and comparative studies between different induction programs.

Another review of induction studies (Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011) identified the strongest effects for new teachers from having both a mentor and access to collaborative planning. This analysis of 15 studies from the mid 1980s to early 2000s (from a search return of more than 500) indicated that participation in more types of support led to better retention and positive effects on satisfaction, commitment, classroom practices, and student outcomes. The studies selected were all empirical and evaluative, with no descriptive studies. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) suggested further study to address the costs and benefits of various induction models. Understanding how different programs impact both new teacher retention and student outcomes would provide valuable information to policy makers.

In 2004, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences initiated a large scale teacher induction study. They carried out a randomized experiment involving 1009 teachers from 418 elementary schools. Schools were assigned to either the treatment group that received comprehensive induction services, or the control group that received their district's current induction program. Primary support in the treatment group was through full time, trained mentors (one per 12 teachers). The findings showed that treatment group teachers received more overall support, including increased time with mentors and time to observe other teachers. These effects leveled off after two years in the program. Significant positive effects on retention, classroom practices, and student achievement were not seen until the third year of treatment

(Glazerman et al., 2010). These results indicated that induction programs need to be planned, supported, and evaluated past the first year or two of teachers' careers. The implication for my study is that a more intensive system of intervention may warrant investigation as increased mentoring and observation opportunities did not seem to translate into sustained impact on teacher or student outcomes.

Concluding her review of research on professional development, Hilda Borko (2004) pointed out that the research necessary to develop a rich knowledge base and provide high quality professional development to all teachers requires many types of inquiry and research tools. Additionally, instead of short term (first year or two) efforts, she indicated that induction should be part of a larger learning continuum. Teachers' needs change through their career as they move from induction to experimentation and consolidation to mastery and stabilization (usually around or after year seven) (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). One way of strengthening and developing a continuum of learning for new and early career teachers is to engage them in communities of reflective practice.

Looking for Hopeful Solutions

Action research and reflective practice as teacher leadership.

Action research began as research targeted at social change (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In education, it became a means to enact change and to improve the status of education and of educators as knowledge creators outside of the university (Noffke, 2009). Kurt Lewin's iterative spiral of plan-act-observe-reflect-repeat became the basis for much of the action research in schools as some teachers began to explore the connections between theory and practice as part of their professional development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2003; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Noffke, 2009). Action research can be defined as "inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders to an

organization or community, but never *to* or *on* them” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 3). Most descriptions of action research involve some variation of the following characteristics: reflective; addressing real problems of practice; targeted at bringing about change; collaborative; value-laden; contextual; and pragmatic or mindful of consequences (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hardy et al., 2018; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Luttenberg et al., 2017; Noffke, 2009; vanOostveen, 2017).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) made a persuasive case for teachers taking ownership of their situations and professional lives. They advocated for the “voices of teachers themselves, the questions that teachers ask, and the interpretive frames that teachers use to understand and improve their own classroom practices” (p. 7). As “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers,” (p. 7) action research is a model of professional development that is reflective and both powerful and empowering (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Ado, 2013). In one study of new teachers’ perceptions of action research, when new teachers collaborated on research during induction, retention improved (Ado, 2013).

Susan Noffke (2009) made the case that action research is a “set of commitments” (p. 16) connected to practice and useful not only to generate knowledge, but to work toward social justice and both personal and professional growth through a complex, political process of change involving vision, values, and power. Through action, talk, and relationships, action research can lead to transformative learning for teachers (Hardy et al., 2018; Noffke, 2009). This approach resonated with me as I planned my project to transform not only my own practice, but the experiences of my colleagues as well.

The reflective nature of action research provides a valuable opportunity to effect change (Kemmis, 2010). As both mindfulness and a “lever for change” (Luttenberg et al., 2017, p. 89),

reflection as a part of action research can serve to increase awareness of moral tensions, contradictions, and gaps between theory and practice (Luttenberg et al., 2017). The development of *situated self-understanding*, both individually and collectively, is what allows action research to transform us and our world (Kemmis, 2010). Attention to consequences can lead to “less unsustainable ways of living in the world” (Kemmis, 2010, p. 423). The realization that outcomes are uncertain and the willingness to be accountable for them can lead to new knowledge and understanding. The frustration and discomfort of this process are a necessary part of growth and transformation through a commitment to act for the good (Kemmis, 2010; Luttenberg et al., 2017). “To know and deeply appreciate this frailty is wisdom borne of praxis” (Kemmis, 2010, p. 424).

Stephen Kemmis (2010) proposed that action research provides a means to change histories through transformation and make a better world. He challenged practitioners to be stewards of their practice and stated that the goals of action research should be self-understanding, collective action for good, and better, more democratic relationships. Action research should “help us avoid three kinds of things: to avoid irrationality and falsehood; to avoid harm, waste and excess; and to avoid injustice, exclusion and causing suffering” (p. 420). This idea that action research can help us live well and transform our world brings to mind a quote from Dr. Cornel West, “For us in these times, to even have hope is too abstract, too detached, too spectatorial. Instead we must be a hope, a participant and a force for good as we face this catastrophe” (West, 2016).

In recent years, action research and its inquiry approach to improving practice and constructing knowledge has become linked to teacher leadership as a mindset that sees teaching as both a political position and a collaborative professional process (Hunzicker, 2017). In a

qualitative, multiple case study with phenomenological analysis and a grounded theory approach, eight teachers from k-12 who recently graduated with a STEM education Master's degree that included a teacher leadership component completed questionnaires and written self reflections (Hunzicker, 2017). The findings demonstrated that becoming a teacher leader is a long term, non-linear process that occurs when supported through collaboration, communities of practice, and opportunities for reflection. As a slow and recursive process, many don't see their own leadership progress. "Approachability, humility, and willingness to take risks" (Hunzicker, 2017, p. 5) were identified as important traits in the transition from teacher to teacher leader. The small number of participants and reliance on self reporting were discussed as limitations to the generalizability of the study, but they allow the findings to reflect the participants' voices and experiences authentically.

In another recent qualitative study using collective self study and collaborative action research over two years, action research was used to develop teacher leadership (Ryan et al., 2017). Data were collected from reflective narratives, field notes of meetings and other sources from six teachers, one principal, and a teacher educator. The study defined action research as "inquiry to develop deeper knowledge about our practices and ourselves" (Ryan et al., 2017, p. 106) and used action research to help teachers find their voice, take ownership of their own learning, and actively construct knowledge. The study demonstrated the importance of collaboration between the teacher participants and the need for school administration to support teacher leadership by creating space and time for professional inquiry within the teachers' worklives (Ryan et al., 2017). Another 2017 study by Wolkenhauer et al. emphasized the need for transparent sharing and learning with participants about both process and findings. In this study, two of the authors were engaged in collaborative inquiry and action research to develop a

new model of professional development that met the needs of their newly formed school and faculty. They used protocols in teacher meetings to reduce stress, focus conversations, and manage time constraints (Wolkenhauer et al., 2017).

Additional studies demonstrated the importance of collaboration and reflection in both action research and teacher leadership. Furtado and Anderson (2012) worked with 26 participants from a master's degree program in curriculum and instruction who were teachers in urban southern California schools. All of the teachers kept reflective journals and participated in assigned action research readings and four weekly discourse meetings. Four journals were selected to illustrate the iterative and reflective action research process. The findings emphasized the importance of mentorship, collaborative inquiry, and reflective practices in building teachers into learners and leaders (Furtado & Anderson, 2012). In another qualitative study with 81 participants over three years, semi-structured interviews and artifacts such as parent letters and student work were used to develop a model of exemplary teaching and teacher leaders (Collinson, 2012). This model described teachers who are exemplary and/or leaders as committed to learning and improving their practice, curious, humble, open-minded, and open to collaboration. This study also found that teacher leaders flourish in schools where they are encouraged to take risks and collaborate with their peers (Collinson, 2012).

Although there is ample evidence in the literature of the power of action research to support and develop teacher leadership, there is not much research available on action research to design or explore induction and professional development models. In a study conducted in 2013, a pair of instructional coaches at a new elementary school carried out a collaborative action research study with two university level researchers to examine and develop the professional development program for their colleagues (Wolkenhauer et al., 2017). This study

demonstrated the power of teacher leaders engaged in action research as models for other teachers and staff.

These studies of teacher leadership and action research highlight the importance of collaboration and openness when teachers work within their roles to effect change for themselves, their colleagues, their school, and their students. As an insider researcher and participant in this project, my position is that of a veteran teacher who has grown into leadership and hopes to model and encourage that in early career teachers by meeting in a community of support and reflective practice with early career teachers. The lack of literature around action research that is focused on developing induction and professional development programs indicates a need for the type of work started by this project.

Communities of reflective practice.

“The paradox of learning a really new competence is this: that a student cannot at first understand what he needs to learn, can learn it only by educating himself, and can educate himself only by beginning to do what he does not yet understand” (Schön, 1987, p. 93). As Carl Rogers explained in a speech at Harvard in 1952, we cannot teach how to teach; it must be discovered (Schön, 1987).

The work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger on situated learning, and Donald Schön on reflective practice, provides a foundation for the idea of a collaborative reflective community to support new and early career teachers in developing and improving their teaching practices. Lave and Wenger (1991) wrote extensively about the importance of apprenticeship opportunities to provide “legitimate peripheral participation” that brings professional newcomers into “the sociocultural practices of a community” (p. 29). As theory and academic knowledge alone are insufficient, these opportunities depend on context and real world experiences (Schön, 1987;

Lave & Wenger, 1991). The tasks and activities faced by developing professionals should lead to continual renegotiations of meaning as the novices construct problems and develop solutions. Schön referred to this as “indeterminate zones of practice” where unique situations defy abstract theory and no clear technical solution may be seen (1987, p. 6, 36). This illustrates a gap between what new teachers have been taught and the actual skills and competencies they require to be successful.

A community of practice should develop relationships between the context, people, and activities involved (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Schön, 1987) and should provide conditions for constructing and interpreting knowledge (Schön, 1987). Building on John Dewey’s beliefs about learning by doing, Schön suggested that “everything is practicum” and that students cannot be taught, but only guided through experience (p. 16). Through a reflective dialogue within a community of practitioners who share context, norms, and goals, participants can move from confusion and mystery to a “convergence of meaning” (p. 20).

Lave and Wenger (1991) identified one of the problems of schooling as how newcomers are assimilated (or not) and form relationships. They advocated for the importance of low risk participation for novices. Donald Schön (1987) also recommended allowing space for newcomers to learn by doing with the freedom to make mistakes. While most early career teachers are unlikely to have the reduced workload and one-on-one support to have the luxury of low risk participation, improved support and coaching can allow them the increased freedom to take some risks.

In his book, Educating the Reflective Practitioner, Donald Schön (1987) discussed both reflection on action and reflection in action as means to understanding situations, constructing knowledge, developing solutions, and implementing change. These are iterative processes that

cycle between challenge, reflection, and change both during and after an event or activity. The ongoing reflection continues to inform both current and future actions. He described this as a “reflective conversation with the materials of the situation” (p. 42) that has the power to transform messy situations, construct coherence, and discover connections through critical analysis. Professionals in communities of practitioners can engage in reflection and transformation together. Schools can use the power of community to support both induction for new teachers and ongoing professional development. Participating in a community with a shared vision can reduce the feelings of isolation experienced by teachers (Dozier, 2007).

Effective early teacher learning depends on a school culture that deliberately plans for and encourages collaborative communities of practice where early career teachers’ voices are heard and valued (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011; Lovett & Cameron, 2011). In a Professional Learning Community (PLC) model, early career teachers are empowered as both individual professionals and as members of a professional community (Mitchener & Jackson, 2012). In a PLC, teachers work toward shared decision making and relationship building as they develop as both individuals and as a group (O’Malley, 2010). Kennedy (2016) conducted a review of the literature on professional development and found that PLC models are effective in facilitating reflective discussions among new teachers, especially when the participating coaches are collaborative, not evaluative.

Several studies have demonstrated the potential of PLCs as a support system for new teachers. Using a case study approach, Meyer (2002) followed a group of 6-14 new and early career teachers in a learning community over four years. The teachers shared that the benefits of the PLC included: opportunities to reflect on both their practice and professional identity; collaboration on concerns and solutions; and increased productivity due to collective authority.

The researchers indicated that more documentation of the new teacher experience is warranted to increase understanding of the challenges and benefits of PLC as an induction support.

In a descriptive study that followed 5-13 new and early career teachers over a four year PLC (O'Malley, 2010), teachers identified community, collaboration, time to reflect, and respect as key components that made the program successful. As new teachers can be reluctant learners, this study found that PLCs are strengthened when they avoid authoritative mandates, are non-evaluative, and are iterative to allow for cycles of reflection and improvement. The study concluded that although the new teachers demonstrated improved confidence and competence within the PLC group, further work is necessary to develop and extend these attitudes beyond the induction program.

Recently, a mixed methods exploration of induction seminars was conducted with teachers in Israel (Fresko & Alhija, 2015). Using data from 378 new teachers and 29 seminar leaders, the study found that the learning community model was valued as a safe space to share and vent with peers. There were tensions in the program between the mandatory and prescriptive status of the seminars and the reflective, empowerment goals described for them. The researchers suggest that additional research would be useful in describing the dynamics of learning communities in other settings as part of induction supports. Having a safe space to vent frustrations and concerns is justification for designing communities of practice where teachers can not just vent, but can reflect together to better understand and improve their practice (Fresko & Alhija, 2015; Meyer, 2002; Nolan & Stitzlein, 2011).

Professional learning communities provide opportunities for collaboration, inquiry around problems of practice, dialogue, and building teacher leadership (Day & Gu, 2010), but there are several challenges that must be addressed to build and maintain effective PLCs. One of

the biggest potential problems is that of control and power. When teachers give up autonomy to simply comply with administrative direction of the process, the possibility of transformation is diluted (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Without opportunities for authentic dialogue, genuine growth is limited (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011). For many teachers, prior experience with top-down mandated PLC agendas has created a negative opinion of even the term, PLC (Hord & Tobia, 2012; Lieberman & Miller, 2008).

Other challenges faced in building a sustainable and effective PLC include finding the time and space to meet, developing manageable communication structures, managing material and human resources, and actually initiating a PLC within a school (Hord & Tobia, 2012; Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Once these challenges have been met and a PLC has been initiated, the relationships within the group must be developed and nurtured. These relationships between participants and with the facilitator are built on trust. Trust is built through respect and support without conditions or judgment (Hord & Tobia, 2012). In a study reported by Day and Gu (2010), a program of peer observations developed for mutual support and professional transformation was key in building a trusting PLC. In a comparison of two different scenarios for structuring a professional community, the positioning and identification of the group's facilitator had an impact on the development of the community and what it accomplished. When a "coach" led the meeting from a position of "expert," instead of "colleague" and "collaborator," the other participants were diminished in both voice and power (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011).

Looking for hope through transformative professional development.

In her 2012 assessment of induction for new teachers, Sharon Feiman-Nemser concludes that "induction can be a catalyst for building professional learning communities in which teachers across all levels of experience work together to ensure powerful teaching and learning"

(p. 16). She advocates for a model of “induction as cultural transformation” that leads to continuous learning, increased student achievement, and rewarding careers (p. 15). As Richard Ingersoll (2003) asserts, teachers have limited authority, mainly over instructional factors. If teachers can begin to collaborate deliberately and with purpose, they may find they can collectively impact the culture of their school and begin to make changes both behind and beyond their classroom doors.

The early experiences of a new teacher can shape their attitudes and professional practice. Social support and collaboration through community can work to combat attrition among new teachers (Lambeth, 2012). New teachers are often reluctant to turn to their experienced mentors for help and may crave voluntary participation in safe spaces for reflection and non-evaluative support (Meyer, 2002). Opportunities for authentic dialogue with similar peers can lead to professional growth and transformation (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011).

There is evidence that teachers working together in professional learning communities can lead to improvements in their own learning and instructional practices (Fresko & Alhija, 2015; Kennedy, 2016; Meyer, 2002). Developing these communities is challenging and demands time. However, when trust and communication are fostered, critical dialogue can be enabled and lead to improvement, reform, and sustainable professional improvement (Borko, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Hardy et al., 2018). These communities of practice can provide the time and space for teachers to come together and share student work, classroom challenges, notes and journals, observations and videos. Reflecting on these sources of data can lead to new understanding, shared endeavors, and creating new ideas to solve problems (Borko, 2004).

This idea of professional communities for teachers isn't new. In their 1993 book, Inside/Outside, Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle included collaborative networks and

study groups as a source of power for teachers to take control of their classrooms and professional lives as “transformative intellectuals” (p. 21). They cautioned that it is critical that these collaborations be both voluntary and designed by the teachers. This sentiment was echoed decades later by Gary Anderson (2017) when he described as “contrived collegiality” (p. 434) the professional learning community model that emerged from the audit culture of No Child Left Behind and the business structure of data driven decision making that co-opted school policies in the 1990s to early 2000s.

In order for teachers to “lift our heads up out of the stream,” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 55) teachers can develop intellectual communities and collaborate in networks instead of working in isolation. Doing so may confront traditional hierarchies of power and status in schools, but that may be necessary to make changes in teachers, classrooms, schools, and beyond. As teachers combat isolation through community, they can bridge the gaps between theory and practice, and experience transformation (West, 2011). The reflective practice these communities engage in is a form of professional development that has the potential to lead to growth and improvement. These innovative structures are necessary to transform teachers from isolated semi-professionals to collaborative learners, researchers, and knowledge creators (Carver, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Saavedra, 1996; West, 2011). When provided with safe spaces to discuss and problem solve concerns, new and early career teachers can experience shared authority in their situation and feel supported in taking risks that lead to professional growth (Lambeth, 2012; O’Malley, 2010).

In her recent book, Doris Santoro describes strategies for re-moralizing teachers’ practice. These strategies include activism, voice, teacher leadership, and student centered action. In her visualization of the connections between these strategies, she places professional

community at the center of the rest (2018, p. 117) as the essential “hub” (p. 125) that provides support and minimizes individual risks for all other strategies.

How can we expect teachers, especially new teachers, to be “a hope,” an agent of democracy and transformation in their classrooms when they struggle under the same structures of bureaucracy, public opinion, economic and social factors that burden and oppress their students? Sarah Stitzlein identified several habits that can help combat challenges to living and teaching democratically. Her list included “citizenship as shared fate, collaboration and compromise, deliberation, analysis and critique, and hope” (2014, p. 79). She leaned on Dewey to define hope as “a habit that entails action” (p. 71). Along with Carrie Nolan, she described a “pragmatist hope” found through critical and realistic reflection within a supportive community (Nolan & Stitzlein, 2011, p. 9). Maxine Greene referred to being “on the verge,” that moment of consciousness when we confront a void and have the opportunity to recreate our world and discover the freedom and power to act (1986; 1988, p. 23). She saw this as a means toward freedom, “in the capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise” (1988, p.3). The idea of community was described by Maxine Greene as creating space for individuals to be authentic, to share what is in common, to discover and explore new ideas, to challenge, initiate, engage in dialogue, and together become more free. She believed that freedom must be pursued within our situations but without accepting the given. Instead of complacency, she said we must name the barriers in our way, take action, be passionate, and continually reflect on what is happening in our situations (1986). She concluded chapter one of her book, *The Dialectic of Freedom*, by saying her goal was to “seek a vision of education that brings together the need for wide-awakeness with the hunger for community, the desire to know with the wish to understand, the desire to feel with the passion to see” (1988, p. 23). Through a

collaborative community model in which early career teachers are free to express their fears and frustrations, brainstorm solutions, discuss and share their successes, they can move from being voiceless and at risk to finding power and taking action as part of a community that supports them. By identifying the problems and barriers that exist, they can seek freedom within those structures and seek to be a part of the hope. To quote Maxine Greene once more, they may “become empowered to engage in some sort of praxis, engaged enough to name the obstacles in the way of their shared becoming” (1988, p. 133) “and when freedom is the question, it is always a time to begin” (p. 135).

Although the book, *Demoralized* (Santoro, 2018), is primarily concerned with the situation of more experienced teachers who find themselves ready to give up the work they love because they can no longer “access the moral rewards offered and expected in teaching” (p. 8), it offers some promise for early career teachers as well. By engaging in authentic professional communities, early career teachers can discover their vision and voice and develop both activism and leadership. Perhaps hope and remoralization can be found through induction programs that encourage early career teachers to reflect critically and explicitly on their morals, their practice, and their commitment to both. By encouraging new and early career teachers to understand themselves and their practice and to be engaged in their own learning through a reflective community, it is even possible for them to “find and sustain a deep happiness in work (Bullough, 2012, p. 71).

Connecting to the literature

Based on this review of literature, the framework of hope through community, and my understanding of the current induction support being offered to the new and early career teachers I worked with, I designed a study based on developing a reflective community of practice for my

early career colleagues. Although they had all been matched with an experienced mentor in their first year of teaching, there was no formal support provided beyond that first year. My model of induction and professional development was designed to provide time and space for those teachers in their first five years of teaching to meet, share their concerns, and collaborate on solutions for their problems of practice. The community of practice was planned as voluntary and confidential to encourage openness and trust, and my role was that of a non-evaluative facilitator and mentor.

As a way of extending induction support beyond the first year, I saw this program as a way of improving the situation for early career teachers and approached the idea as an action research project in my role as an instructional coach. Initially, I had anticipated that the group would develop its own action research plans but this proved to be overly ambitious in our first year, especially with the interruptions due to COVID-19. My goal was that the participants, myself included, would find both hope and transformation in our professional practice as we built a reflective community together and explored issues that were relevant and important to us individually and collectively.

The project was designed to work with a small group of early career teachers through dialogue and reflection in order to tell the story of their experiences with induction support in their first year as well as their experiences participating in a community of reflective practice together. As both action research for myself and a narrative inquiry, the project was based on both my own background story and that of the relationships we formed as a group.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I will describe and justify the methods selected for carrying out this study to answer these research questions:

RQ 1: What is the experience of new teachers with induction?

a) What type(s) of induction did they experience in year one?

b) What is their perception of those experiences?

RQ 2: What is the experience of early career teachers participating in a community of reflective practice?

a) What benefits does the community provide to the participants?

b) How does the community meet professional development expectations of the administration while meeting the needs of the teachers?

The following sections of this chapter will address my researcher positionality; the qualitative, narrative inquiry design of the study; participants and study site; story collection; story analysis and restorying; credibility and trust; and confidentiality and privacy.

Researcher Positionality

The qualitative, narrative inquiry approach matched my action research goals, as well as my relationship to the research. As an action researcher in the role of participant observer, my experiences and my story inevitably became part of at least some of the stories told in this study. I served as facilitator for the small group discussions and offered to provide support to the teachers who participated. My passion for teaching, students, and my colleagues motivated this project and had an impact on my participation. As a veteran teacher and instructional leader in the school where I carried out the study, I worked with several of the participants in multiple contexts outside of the study group. My own professional knowledge and prior experiences were

a potential source of bias that needed to be examined through continual self-reflection (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

My experiences with peer support and mentoring across my career played a significant role in shaping my expectations for the project. I saw myself as both a mentor and resource for the other participants. I anticipated being useful to them because of my years of experience in the classroom, my position of leadership in the school, and my access to resources, both human and material. Although I was explicit that my role in the community was that of a non-evaluative, non-administrative peer, I still perceived and even positioned myself as “the senior teacher” who was there to help in any way needed. The participants and our experiences together challenged my assumptions in ways that will be discussed in chapters four and five. As part of the project, even as a veteran teacher, I found myself still one of the “selves as always in the making,” (Greene, 1993, p. 213) as I was pushed to reconsider my role in the group and the faculty at large.

Design

My dissertation research plans employed a qualitative, narrative, action research approach to gather information on the lived experiences of early career teachers as they navigated their situation throughout the school year and participated in a collaborative reflective community of practice designed to support them. This pragmatic constructivist perspective depended on reflection and consideration of consequences and allowed for the voices of the participants (including myself) to be heard as they engaged in making meaning and creating knowledge together. As action research, this project was designed to use the information gathered to develop and improve a community of practice for the early career teachers I worked with. Over the course of the school year, this community evolved based on my continual

reflection, the iterative design of the process, and the changing circumstances we found ourselves in. Working together in reflective community, we began to meet our responsibility as educators to be stewards of our practice, “to protect, nurture, support and strengthen the practice for changing times and circumstances...to meet new historical demands in the interests of changing communities, societies and the good of mankind” (Kemmis, 2010, p. 420).

Qualitative research design provided the opportunity to understand meanings, contexts, and processes, as well as the possibility of identifying “unanticipated phenomena” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 30). It also led to credible theories to inform existing practice, policy, and scholarship. This was well suited to my goals of both gathering information to understand experiences and using that understanding to improve practice or potentially change policy.

This qualitative study used a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2006). Narrative inquiry provided the method to develop stories about the lived experience of just a few participants using information gathered in multiple ways with attention to the context of culture, time, and place, and the collaboration of the participants (Creswell, 2006). The collaborative, constructivist nature of the methodology allowed for the participants’ voices to be heard as their experiences were told through group discussions and interviews. This design was appropriate to address the research questions because stories gathered were used to “re-story” the participants’ experiences as early career teachers engaged in reflective practice through a professional learning community. The design allowed me to develop and co-construct the stories of participants’ experiences by working collaboratively with them in both practice and research as our community took form and we strengthened our relationships.

Narrative inquiry “occurs within relationships,” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4) in a community that empowers the participants as their stories are lived, told, re-lived, and retold

(Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The use of narrative inquiry as methodology allowed me to begin to understand the relationships between us as I listened to and heard stories that might not have been heard (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Acknowledging the voices of early career teachers gave shape to a world in the making as the participants began “to know their own stories” (Carter, 1993, p. 8). The story of our experience provided “documentation of a successful collaboration...a case study of not only the process but also the product of the collaboration” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 6). This lent transferability to the findings as what we did and what we created together can serve as a model for others seeking to better understand and support early career teachers.

Participants and Study Site

Part of my job involved mentoring new teachers and I had the opportunity as an instructional leader to work with them in a professional learning community format. For this study, I recruited from those teachers who were newest to the school. At the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, there were nine teachers in my school who were in their first five years of teaching. At the beginning of the school year, I sent out an email with information on the study, links to the project proposal, and a copy of the consent form. I followed up in person to allow them to ask questions and to provide paper copies of the consent form and seven of them agreed to participate in the interviews and community of reflective practice for the study. Of the seven, one was a first year teacher, two were career switchers in their second and fourth years of teaching, and the other four were in their first five years of teaching, all in the same school. There were three elective teachers (art, P.E., and world languages), two social studies teachers, and two special education math teachers. Three of them taught sixth grade, one taught seventh grade, one taught eighth grade, and the other two taught more than one grade (see Appendix G,

Table 1 for a table of participants). This purposeful selection from my own work setting was necessary to have a community of peers who could work together as a system of support. In addition, my role as mentor and facilitator required that the participants be faculty in my school. Participants were provided professional development credit and/or recertification points to encourage participation and compensate for their time and contributions. The professional community also served to meet existing professional development requirements within the school.

The participating teachers and I worked at a semi-rural middle school in Central Virginia within sight of a busy four lane highway. The school opened in a new building in the fall of 2018 with grades six through eight made up of a combined faculty and student body from the older junior high school and middle school. The north facing building was two stories, with an open air central courtyard and large windows in most classrooms. The grade levels were largely separated by floor and/or hallway, with the exception of one hallway mainly used for elective classes. The building had wide halls, plenty of natural light, and spacious classrooms. Teachers' schedules were organized to provide common planning time with their grade level and core teaching team, but elective teachers were not included in this schedule and were not assigned to specific teaching teams. For those grouped by content or teaching team, there tended to be a high level of departmental collegiality, but given the physical size of the school building, there were not many opportunities for teachers to collaborate with or even talk to those outside of their teams or hallways.

There had been several changes in building administration over the past five years as the local schools were reconfigured (the previous schools housed grades five and six separately from grades seven and eight and was replaced by a new building for grades six through eight). The

current principal and two assistant principals were in their third year in leadership for our school and were focused on developing and strengthening a positive and inclusive culture and learning environment for staff, students, and their families. The student body was less diverse than much of central Virginia, at about 86% white and with less than 20% receiving free or reduced lunch. The local community had similar demographics and was politically conservative.

In the school division where the study site was located, the attrition rate among teaching staff was low, even for new teachers. In 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, 10% and 6% respectively of the division teachers left, but only 1.5% (five teachers each year) left with five or fewer years of experience. At the study site school, four teachers left each of the past two school years. The data included those who left for retirement or moved to another school division (T. Allison, personal communication, July 1, 2019). Although turnover was low, staff still were subject to issues of frustration and demoralization and early career teachers received no formal support past their first year of teaching (T. Omohundro, personal communication, July 1, 2019).

The school division had three components to their induction program for new teachers. New teachers participated in a two day orientation program prior to the beginning of their first year; they were assigned a colleague mentor for at least one year; and they participated in a monthly after school meeting focused on topics such as assessment, special education, and literacy (T. Omohundro, personal communication, July 1, 2019). The orientation program was usually packed with meetings to introduce new teachers to division policies and various division staff, pick up their work laptop, get signed into multiple technology platforms for things like gradebooks and professional development, and meet their mentors. The mentoring program required the new teachers to meet with their mentors weekly and the mentors had to document their time and topics of discussion. None of the participants in this study received formal mentor

support past their first year of teaching. The monthly after school meetings included first year teachers from all five schools in the division and were planned and facilitated by administrative staff. All but one of the participating teachers had been part of these programs as new teachers who started their careers in our school division.

Additional support was provided to all staff through a division wide professional development program known as DL421 (Deeper Learning for the 21st Century) that continued to evolve to better meet the needs of the staff. For the study site school during the year of the research study, that program was focused on using peer observations and developing professional learning communities to better understand and improve teaching practices (S. Martin, personal communication, June 25, 2019). The professional community we formed as part of this study was approved as one of the DL421 options.

Collecting Stories

The stories for the study's narrative findings were developed using multiple data sources including participant interviews, group meetings, and my own research journal of field notes and reflective memos. All data were labeled with contextual information that identified time, place, social, and personal interactions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the interviews and group meetings, I made an effort to "listen first" so that the participants were "given the time and space to tell [their] story so that it too gains the authority..." (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). This positioned the participants as storytellers creating meaning, not merely as objects of research (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007).

- My personal research journal included my own reflections and field notes of meetings and interviews, as well as ongoing reflections on the program and study site. The journal served as both a way to document events and as a means of reflection on those events and

“to construct and reconstruct theories” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 20). Format of the journal varied as I explored different types of reflective journaling and memos (See Appendix A for examples). The research journal also included both handwritten and digital entries. All meetings and interviews were recorded to verify my notes and provide quotes in support of key findings.

- Initial semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) were conducted at the beginning of the school year (August-September, 2019) with each participant describing their experiences with induction and identifying their philosophy of teaching and areas of interest, perceived strengths, concerns, and background (conducted before or soon after the start of the school year).
- “Final” interviews (Appendix D) were held virtually via Zoom with each participant to identify their experiences in the community of practice, as well areas of growth, success, and continued concern or work in progress moving forward (these were conducted at the end of the school year, in late May-early June). We also discussed the impacts of school closing due to COVID-19.
- Group meetings were designed to build relationships between the participants as we formed a reflective community of practice and explored problems of practice that concerned us. The one hour meetings were structured around specific protocols designed to elicit reflection and collaboration (see Appendix C for examples) and focused on topics suggested by the participants. My role as facilitator was to schedule the meetings and provide a space for us to meet, to develop and share an agenda and protocol to guide our discussions, and to lead the meeting through the planned protocol, ensuring we started and ended each meeting on time. After the first meeting, the topics of discussion

and the protocols used were chosen based on the issues and concerns the group had shared at the previous meeting. The meetings were scheduled based on polling of the participants to determine when most were available. The agenda and protocol being followed were shared with the participants ahead of time along with a Google calendar invitation as a reminder of each meeting. In person meetings were held in my spacious classroom with refreshments provided by me. These meetings reflected the iterative nature of the action research project and their focus and the protocols in use shifted in response to the changing needs of the participants. My notes and reflections on these meetings served to help make those decisions as I continued to explore the development and usefulness of the community of practice as a model of induction and professional development.

- November, 2019: This meeting was used to set norms, get to know each other and share topics of concern or interest to focus on in future meetings.
- December, 2019: Discussion was primarily around the topic of engaging reluctant learners and included a frank discussion of elective courses and their position in the school culture.
- February, 2020: Participants wanted time to share issues they were facing in the classroom and most of them discussed concerns around student behaviors and how they were responding to these challenges.
- March, 2020: We had planned to discuss our goals for the next school year, but the morning before the meeting, we had a school-wide assembly that generated a lot of emotional response; because the group had demonstrated a commitment to

social and emotional wellness, I suggested we spend time reflecting together on the assembly and how it impacted both us and our students.

- April, 2020: Once the governor announced that schools statewide were closing their buildings for the remainder of the school year, I emailed the group to determine if they were willing to continue meeting via Zoom. The consensus was that our community was still of value as a means of support, despite not being able to meet in person. While not everyone joined, we met virtually in April to share our concerns and support each other during this uncertain and unsettling time. The discussion mainly focused on the various challenges everyone was facing in the emergency transition to distance learning and our concerns for our students.
- May, 2020: this was our final meeting and was also virtual via Zoom. We shared our positive experiences over the past weeks of distance learning and discussed our hopes and fears for the following school year.

Story Analysis: Restorying

Once the story components were collected, the narratives were written through a process known as restorying. This was a reflective cycle of analysis that attempted to involve the participants throughout the process (Caine et al., 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Although they offered feedback during our group meetings when I shared my reflections, they did not take an active role in the process beyond that, despite repeated opportunities to do so. Restorying the narrative was an iterative process that started with writing field notes during and reflections after the interviews and group meetings. The recordings of the interviews and meetings were listened to several times, at least once to listen for and note the tone, themes, and group dynamics, and at

least once more to capture quotes that supported the themes and major findings that were emerging from the data.

For the *Prologue*, I wanted to tell the background story of each participant using the data obtained through our initial interviews. With my field notes as a guide, I listened to recordings of the initial interviews, adding notes and transcribing portions that were relevant to the research questions or that I found particularly interesting. I hand coded each set of notes and transcription based on the interview question topics and emerging themes (induction experiences, mentor relationships, philosophy of teaching, relationships, etc.). Using these notes and selected quotations, I wrote a descriptive piece for each participant to help myself and the reader begin to understand who they were as people and as teachers. At this point, I shared the narratives individually with each participant for their review and input. Although I was willing to make changes at their request, none of them asked for any alterations, several expressed appreciation for how I captured them in writing, and several did not respond at all. In order to identify the emerging themes and summarize the initial interviews, I listened to the interviews again (some parts more than once) and continued to hand code and organize the notes and quotations. The individual stories were further edited as pieces of the narrative became part of the summary of the findings for research question one.

To write *Our Story*, based on our six group meetings throughout the year, I used my field notes, audio recordings, and written reflections to write out a chronological narrative story for the group that reflected the experiences as told through the collected materials. The story of our year together was organized by chronology and theme based on the main ideas that emerged throughout the year. In a similar fashion as for the *Prologue*, I took field notes during the meetings, wrote up reflections in the days that followed, and made additional notes while

listening to the recordings of the meetings. Based on those notes and reflections, I selected portions of the recordings to transcribe and use to write the narrative. The notes and transcripts were hand coded to identify themes and connections. The selection of portions to transcribe and include in the narrative was guided by the themes that were emerging in the data, the framework of hope through community, an interest in the relationships being formed, and the research question, “what benefits does the community provide the participants?” As I wrote about each meeting, I wanted to capture the tone of our group and included pieces of conversations, comments from the participants, and descriptive information to convey the setting. Some of the dialogue was chosen to illustrate the development of relationships within the community and to demonstrate the trust and respect we had for each other. Other portions of the dialogue were used to highlight the topics of interest that participants chose to focus on.

As stories were collected, they were labeled with contextual information including names, setting, time and date, any key terms to identify connections or significance as part of the larger story, and annotated with my own reactions or responses (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As themes, connections, or big ideas emerged, they were identified and used to label any relevant story components as well. This identification mainly took place through a monthly reflection on the story components that had been collected. This reflection occurred on my own and in collaboration with the other participants. Identifying themes and connections also happened during group meetings and informally in conversation with individual participants. Attention was paid to noticing both connections and conflicts within or between stories as well as changes in the participants, including myself. This attention to the tensions within and between the stories was important in identifying themes and connecting threads of the stories (Clandinin et al., 2010).

These stories of our meetings were reviewed and rewritten several times as I relistened to the recordings and tried to bring clarity to the narrative. They were shared with the participants for confirmation of the story, to maintain credibility, and to ensure their voices were heard in the stories while maintaining confidentiality and trust. At no point did any of the participants request that I make any changes to the narrative as I had written it.

After the end of the school year, after final interviews were conducted, I continued to review the stories and discuss them with the participants as necessary to clarify any questions, chronology, or uncertainty around the information. For the *Epilogue*, the final interviews were listened to in the same way as the other pieces and portions were also transcribed and hand coded. For analysing the final interviews, the focus was on identifying findings to answer research question two, “What is the experience of early career teachers participating in a community of reflective practice? What benefits does the community provide to the participants?” Several themes emerged to answer this question and the participants’ interview responses were organized based on these.

As the findings and discussions chapters were completed, participants were given the opportunity to read and review and offer feedback for revisions. Participants were given access to the full dissertation as a shared Google document as it was being written and could comment or request edits at any time. I also created individual documents for each participant to review that included any reflections and direct quotes from their interviews. Once again, there were no requests made by the participants for changes to the narratives.

Restorying is a process of reorganizing and rewriting to present a chronological narrative of the participants’ experiences, “their story and the themes that emerge” (Creswell, 2006, p. 56). In addition to the individual participants’ experiences, the experiences of the community of

reflective practice as a collaborative group was told through the retelling of the stories from our meetings. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) establish the need to include dimensions of personal and social interactions, situation/place, and continuity or temporality (past--background, assumptions, expectations; present--what do they experience; and future--what lies ahead).

Another potential component of the analysis is deconstruction of the data--looking for what isn't said, tensions, contradictions (Czarniawska, 2004). Attention was paid to the emergence of unexpected findings, "epiphanies," and interruptions that disrupted our stories (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). "Epiphanies are seen as transformational...a vital component of people's storied lives" (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007, p. 465). For this project, the unexpected findings described and discussed in chapters four and five became critical parts of the significance of the study.

My own story, both my background and my role in the project and in the collective story, also emerged as I reflected on it throughout the process. This was a challenging and liberating part of the study as I examined and told my own story. When "we write to create ourselves, to give voice to our experiences, to learn who we are and who we have been...these diaries...can serve to make us whole" (Cooper, in Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 111).

Credibility and Trust

As a veteran teacher in the school, I entered the field with a great deal of experience and professional knowledge--this was valuable to my role, but necessitated caution in influencing others and imposing judgment or opinion and acknowledging potential biases. My complicated role as colleague, mentor, and collaborator in the learning community both allowed access and required diligence in areas of influence and power. Mindful attention had to be paid to issues of power and perceived coercion in my relationships with the participants. Transparency about my

purpose and my role(s) was critical to build and maintain trust with participants. Mindfulness to the relationships I had with the participants was also critical in being aware of if or when trust had been established or compromised between us. For example, teacher participation was voluntary but compensated with professional development credit and/or recertification points. To establish trust, my role with the participants was explicitly identified as collaborative and facilitative, not evaluative. Participants were also fully informed of the role of this study and their stories in my dissertation and provided multiple opportunities for review of the paper.

As an insider facilitator, I was challenged to balance my role in a way that encouraged participants to fully engage. I employed restraint as a deliberate action to empower the participants to take an initiative or even “lead from the middle” (Hardy et al., 2018, p. 11). Keeping a journal and annotating my notes from meetings and interviews served to track my own reactions to the stories as they emerged. Acknowledging and describing my own story and my role in the stories of others also served to increase transparency around the multiple dimensions of my role as participant, facilitator, and researcher. On several occasions, I discussed my roles with the other participants and shared my reflections on the project as it evolved.

Several steps were taken to maximize the credibility of the data and analysis. Member checking was intended to be a vital part of the data analysis as participants were involved in the collaborative construction of their stories and had the voice and power to confirm the details and the stories. Although they were offered multiple opportunities in various formats (including individual documents and access to the entire paper), none of them had any suggestions, expressed concerns, or made requests for changes. As I reviewed my notes and reflections, I frequently compared the data collected in group discussions to the teachers’ interview data to

maintain credibility. Frequent reflection also helped guard against or at least recognize and identify biases I may have brought to the study due to my own professional knowledge and experience. My researcher journal included reflective memos written periodically to maintain continuous accountability and awareness of progress, concerns, conflicts, or other important issues. On multiple occasions, I shared and discussed my reflections with the other participants, both individually and in our group meetings. Although no one ever brought up any concerns or reservations about the narratives or my conclusions, I hope and believe we had enough trust between us that they would have if needed.

Confidentiality and Privacy

In order to maintain both confidentiality of the data and privacy for the participants, all recordings of interviews and meetings maintained for verification purposes were only accessible by the researcher and involved participants. Researcher field notes and reflective memos referred to participants by pseudonyms selected by participants to be used in the final narrative. Participants were also given the opportunity to have certain details about them or quotes by them removed from the narrative. The school itself was not referred to by name or district. The only circumstances under which personally identifiable information would have been released would have been in cases when the researcher had reason to suspect child abuse and was obligated to report to the school administration and/or social services. This did not occur.

Chapter 4: Findings

“Stories have the power to direct and change our lives” (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 157).

The following chapter is the story told so far of a community of reflective practice among middle school teachers. I developed the idea for the group as a means of professional development and induction support for the early career teachers in my school. At the time of the story told here, only one of the participants was a first year teacher and receiving formal induction support through an assigned mentor and regular check-ins with district administration. The other participants were in their second through fifth year of teaching and were no longer receiving any formal induction support. My research questions asked about the induction experiences of these teachers as well as their experience participating in the group. My hope was that the participants would find the group beneficial as a means of support in their practice while meeting the requirements set by the school district for professional development during the school year. As a narrative study, the findings and answers to the research questions are grounded in data gathered from individual interviews and group meetings and supported by quotes from those interactions.

The original research questions were:

RQ 1: What is the experience of early career teachers with induction?

- What type(s) of induction did they experience in year one?
- What is their perception of those experiences?

RQ 2: What is the experience of early career teachers participating in a community of reflective practice?

- What benefits does the community provide to the participants?

- How does the community meet professional development expectations of the administration while meeting the needs of the teachers?

These questions were answered with data in the form of anecdotes, reflections, quotes, and dialogue from the individual interviews and group meetings. As we worked together through the school year to tell our story and answer the research questions, additional information emerged that provided depth and detail to our story and shaped our group discussions.

This chapter follows the general chronology of the 2019-2020 school year and focuses on the main ideas that emerged as our stories were both told and re-told. The chapter is divided into prologue, our story, interlogue, and epilogue. In the prologue, I draw on interviews conducted with the participants to tell their stories as individuals and describe what brought them up to the time we formed our group. These interviews included questions about the participants' induction experiences in their first year and are used to answer research question one. Following that is the story of our group through the school year, as we met six times after school, either in person or via Zoom. This story begins to answer research question two as it explores our experience in community together. There is an interlogue, an unanticipated interruption, that tells the story of our adjustment to the realities and uncertainties of sudden school closing due to COVID-19 and the possibility of multiple reopening scenarios in the fall. 'Unprecedented' has become one of the most overused words of 2020, but I can't find a better alternative, and this story cannot be written without addressing the disruption, change, and ongoing uncertainty we continue to live with in these extraordinary times. As we reflected on the end of the school year and tried to plan for the future, we had many questions about what school would look like for us in the fall of 2020, a national election was looming, and we faced the reality that our local

community, staff, and students were not united around issues of pandemic response, or racism and equality.

The epilogue draws primarily from the end of school year interviews with each participant to describe the outcomes and benefits of our reflective community for us both individually and as a group. It also discusses our hopes and plans for continuing to support each other as part of this community. The data from the final interviews provide answers to research question two.

Prologue: Who Are We?

These are the participants' stories, or at least a piece of them. This section tells a part of who they are, how they came to education, what they believe in, and what they had experienced so far in terms of support and significant moments. Despite our many differences, we had a lot in common, and found much to build a community around. The details of the stories in this section are based on interviews conducted at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year and my ongoing relationships with the participants. The participants were my colleagues and I had worked with them in various settings in our school over the past one to four years before the study began. All names of participants have been replaced with pseudonyms of their choosing. To my delight, some of them shared with me their deeply personal reasons for the name they chose. My own story was told in chapter one to provide context and positionality for the study.

At the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, eight of us started a journey together without really knowing where it would take us and without any way to predict how the school year would end. Our group included one first year teacher, six other teachers in their first five years, and me, who had been teaching since before several of them were even born. Without realizing the extent of it at first, we began to form a community built on a rich, multidimensional

web of connections that extended across grade levels and content areas, passions and interests, even time and space.

As I interviewed the seven participants for this study, two themes already shone clearly through each discussion. The participants spoke passionately about the value they placed on social and emotional wellness and relationship building with students over curriculum and they craved the support found in strong relationships with their peers. These themes will be discussed in the context of the research questions following a brief look at each participants' background and experiences as a first year teacher.

Participants' background stories.

Carol

Carol came from a family where both parents were in education, but they discouraged her from following in their footsteps and she began her professional career in the corporate world. The cycle and routine of teaching appealed to her, and after six years working in the technology industry, she enrolled in a career switcher program and then spent two years teaching in Ecuador. With no student teaching beforehand, this was a tough on-the-job learning experience. Carol described herself as working hard in her classroom to make learning history creative and fun, incorporating puzzles, games, and hands-on, student centered learning such as creating a crime scene around the Boston Massacre, or putting students into the roles of the members of the Continental Congress. She was also one of the teachers most likely to sign up for planning and teaching lessons with me in the Innovation Lab at our school and we had developed several lessons for her students to work collaboratively on solving problems related to not only their history curriculum but connected to other content areas as well.

Some of the challenges Carol faced were around teaching students with disabilities. Carol recalled her first day teaching in the US, when she received a list of accommodations for over twenty students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), about a fifth of the students she was teaching that year. She remembered crying, overwhelmed by the expectations before she even knew the students themselves. In meetings with her and other new teachers, administrators had emphasized the importance and legality of the student IEP accommodations, and while there was always pressure to provide accommodations, there was not sufficient support provided.

In addition to her team and co-teacher, Carol credited her first U.S. supervising administrator for lending support and guidance. She received frequent observations that were followed up with constructive feedback and ideas for improvement. She found subsequent observations and evaluations that have generated only positive feedback to be disappointing; she pointed out that we all have room for growth and improvement. Various mentors also supported her over the past few years, both in Ecuador and in the US. When asked about goals for the 2019-2020 school year, Carol described two. First, she described concerns about teachers' possessiveness around their classrooms and work and wanted to develop more collaboration with her colleagues. Second, she was working towards National Board Certification and wanted to complete those requirements, and in the process, continue to be more reflective on her own teaching and classroom.

Sarah

As an athlete, Sarah combined her love of art and coaching kids into an art education major and loved her college experience and the connections she formed in her program. After attending lots of job fairs and interviews, she was hired for her first year just days before school started and recalls being nervous that she wasn't ready on such short notice. She was paired with

an experienced art teacher as her mentor who provided much needed support. Looking back over her first three years, Sarah wished that administrators had been more present and had checked in regularly on her emotional well being, handling the logistics of teaching, and helping her make connections within the school community.

Because of challenges she faced in her classroom with students, Sarah was working on a masters degree in education with a specialization in special education. She hoped to gain a better understanding of her students and be better prepared to teach them and provide the accommodations they need in her classroom.

Sally

Originally an occupational therapy major in college, Sally shifted her focus to special education after an experience working with young adults with disabilities. She credited the professors in her program for their transparency about the challenges faced by teachers in special education. They were candid about the demands of data collection and meetings and she felt prepared for those expectations.

Before she was even hired, Sally felt supported by the school division. She recalled an individual in the central office who worked closely with her on licensing requirements and described an early meeting with the building principal whose shared background in special education made her both supportive and approachable. She mentioned that the monthly after-school sessions for new teachers did not seem beneficial and would have been better included in the before school teacher work week.

Chad

Raised by parents who were both teachers, Chad was also inspired to go into education by a memorable high school history teacher whose methods were engaging. He felt well

prepared by his college program where he had a fantastic teaching methods instructor. His student teaching experience was positive and he realized how much of a difference relationships with students can make. Some of his successes in the classroom were with lessons that were risky or stressful, when he took chances to try new things. One example he shared was a Bubonic plague simulation using bags of dried beans that he recalled as both fun and impactful.

As a new teacher, Chad credited his team and department in providing a lot of support with both content and classroom management. He did not recall much support from the administrators and wished they had checked in on him regularly and provided positive feedback, not just showing up when there was a problem with a student. He participated in monthly new teacher meetings organized by the school division, but these felt like a burden and he believed most of the content could have been delivered via email. His suggestion for supporting new teachers was to provide opportunities for peer observations.

Chad believed that he had an advantage over some new teachers as he was teaching where he grew up (disclaimer: I was his eighth grade science teacher) and he was curious about the challenges that other new teachers might face. As we discussed our plans for a community of reflective practice for early career teachers, he was interested in discussing these challenges and hearing what works for other teachers. His goals for the school year were to improve his digital organization skills and to work on managing students groups for collaborative work.

Charlotte

Influenced by her high school French teacher and summer exchange program in Dijon, France, Charlotte fell in love with the language and entered a French education program in college. At the urging of her advisor, she switched her major to international business, went to France for university, and stayed after graduation. While there, she worked teaching English to

French elementary students and this renewed her interest in an education career. After she returned to the U.S., she worked first as a translator and after having children, became an elementary substitute teacher while pursuing her teaching license. At the time of the interview, she had a provisional license and was taking classes and preparing for her French Praxis and other required licensure exams.

After being hired shortly before the beginning of the school year, Charlotte said that she went into her first year of teaching blind; not knowing what to expect, she operated by trial and error. As a career switcher, she had little in the way of teacher preparation and received minimal support as a new teacher. Her assigned mentor did not teach the same content and was not helpful in guiding Charlotte through that first year. In her second year, she knew better both what to expect and what was expected of her, but described herself as very self critical and often prone to second guessing her decisions around both content and classroom management. She still felt like she didn't have the skills she needed or the time to focus on developing them.

Although she felt supported by the school administration when she needed it, Charlotte recalled being overwhelmed by not knowing how to do all of the things that were expected of her. She wished that the professional development time provided was focused on some of the requirements she continued to struggle with, such as the online learning management system.

Robert

A love of sports and positive experiences working with children led Robert to an interest in coaching and teaching. In high school, he made some lifestyle changes to get in shape and become healthier and became interested in being an influence on others' good health choices. Going into health education was an opportunity to help students make healthier choices. He had a health and PE education professor in college who was impactful as a life advisor and role

model and continues to be a resource. Robert started his career in elementary school and switched to middle school for his second year. He was also actively involved in coaching soccer in the school division.

Robert saw himself as a role model for students and wanted to make a difference in their future but struggled with the balance between building relationships and maintaining order in the classroom. In the gym setting, there were often multiple classes and grade levels and safety was a concern as students interacted with each other and with the equipment. He also had concerns about getting students motivated with the health curriculum and tried to modify his instruction and activities to maximize student buy in. One success he recalled was when a student was given the opportunity to share their research during a mental health discussion and was both passionate and prepared in their presentation.

When Robert started teaching, even though he was only teaching part time, he felt warmly welcomed into the elementary school family by staff and students and he had the benefit of both new teacher orientation and a mentor who was very helpful. After the first year, he no longer had an official mentor, but at the middle school Robert received a lot of help with planning and feedback from the other Health and PE teachers. He also appreciated and benefited from opportunities for one on one reflection with his administrator but expressed a desire for better communication and more resources around classroom management and best practices. When he transferred to the middle school, he had the sense that his class was not given equal respect and treatment as other courses and felt a need to prove both himself and the importance of his course content.

Robert continued to seek guidance on behavior management and consistency with his teaching practices and felt that new teachers need support beyond their first year. In his own

practice, Robert's goals were to continue to improve his professional time management and to develop his teaching approach to motivate students and keep them engaged, specifically around health topics.

Erin

The only first year teacher in our group, Erin became interested in special education in high school when, as a senior, she mentored a ninth grade student with a learning disability and began talking to special education teachers about their work. She was also inspired by a high school science teacher who used a lot of hands on experiences and worked with students with various disabilities. She remembered feeling a sense of accomplishment at helping a peer succeed and found it very satisfying. At the time of the interview, she was finishing a graduate program in special education for which she met weekly with her professors and classmates in a supportive peer program. In addition, she had the opportunity for frequent reflection with her residency professor who conducted repeated observations with her. This program was designed specifically to provide on the job support in a residency program for students in their final year of graduate school and first year of teaching.

She was striving to find a balance in her classroom between direct instruction and student centered activities and was concerned about managing student behavior appropriately. After just three weeks of teaching, she already reported success with collaborative group work in her self contained classroom. She taught both collaborative and self contained classes and worked closely with both co-teachers and instructional assistants to meet the needs of her students. Because of this, she found communication with everyone involved to be a challenge, especially when students had specific needs and behavior plans in place.

Erin really appreciated the new teacher orientation program and human resources personnel's efforts to make her feel comfortable and welcome. Her only suggestion to improve that experience was to have more time to set up required online tools and resources. She also found her administrators approachable and appreciated their feedback after observations and their help with navigating the professional setting. She did feel frustrated by some of the larger meetings she attended, for example, content area meetings when the discussion rarely applied to her self contained classes and she felt disconnected from the group.

Emerging themes.

As I conducted the initial interviews at the beginning of the school year, it became clear that relationships were of critical importance to the participants. As they described their experiences in their first year teaching and the forms of support they had benefited from, each one returned again and again to discussions of connections and community. The collective focus on social and emotional wellness and building strong relationships with students and peers became clearly evident and formed the foundation for our group discussions throughout the school year. For each of the participants, the strength of their relationships within the school corresponded with their perceptions of their experiences as new teachers. For most of them, like Sally, Sarah, and Chad, their relationship with their assigned mentor was an important support; for Charlotte especially, it was the lack of connection that was significant. Since they recognized and valued these supports for themselves, they also prioritized them for their students. The relationship themes were important as part of the study's findings because they not only defined their experiences as early years teachers and as participants in our group, but these themes became the foundation of our group discussions and helped shape our path together. In the following sections, I identify these themes, support them with quotes selected from the

interviews with each participant, and connect them to research question one concerning their induction experiences. These sections demonstrate the significance of relationships with both peers and students in the experiences of the participants as they navigated their early years of teaching.

Needing strong peer relationships as part of a healthy professional practice.

As the participants shared stories from their first year of teaching, it was obvious that one of the determining factors in their perspective was the accessibility and quality of peer support. This was demonstrated through the following descriptions, anecdotes, and quotes from the initial interviews. The shared belief in the value of strong peer relationships became important as we formed our community. The participants' perceptions of their relationships and support system within the school was the predominant factor in their perception of their experiences as new and early career teachers.

Carol was placed with a supportive team who all taught the same group of students and a special education teacher who she collaborated with for over three years and who she credited with providing valuable support, patience, and balance in her professional practice. She described her collaborative partner as “an amazing support in terms of helping me keep my patience and see the big picture. I’m really lucky because in the moments I’m struggling, she's the one to remind me...and allow me to reset.” She expressed concern about new teachers who don't have a “person,” whether a formal mentor or a friend, to turn to for help and as a sounding board. As part of her commitment to a reflective practice, Carol expressed enthusiasm about joining the community of practice we were preparing to start, and suggested the topics of classroom management and teachers' emotional well being.

Sarah's first year of teaching was difficult and she felt so isolated that she wondered if it was some sort of new teacher initiation. On top of feeling ignored by most of her colleagues (I can't express the remorse this part of her story brings me--I was in the building and rarely interacted with her that year), she struggled with an administrator who was not only highly critical, but was unsupportive to the point that Sarah stopped asking for their help and felt like she was a failure. She did get support from her mentor, her "second mom," and they spent a lot of time planning projects and lessons together. The one thing that she credited with saving her that year was a colleague who happened to stop by her classroom one day and befriended her. "They were one of the only people to even talk to me my first year teaching." This relationship gave her the opportunity to vent and cry when she needed to.

After three years of teaching, Sarah continued to lean on her first year mentor as well as her colleague friend for both emotional and professional support. In addition, she became part of an informal community of the teachers and support staff on her hall of the school building. An eclectic group of mostly elective class teachers and instructional assistants, she affectionately called them the "misfit toys," and said, "The support of the whole hall has helped so much. We check in on each other. It really does feel like a community, a little family."

As a result of her isolation and struggle in her first two years, Sarah set goals for herself to become more involved and make connections. Having seen the impact that just one or two caring coworkers made for her, she wanted to find ways to both support and collaborate with her colleagues. She made an effort to volunteer for committees, functions, and other opportunities to meet her colleagues and develop relationships.

Several of the participants described the benefit of having a strong mentor to guide them. Sally remembered being very supported her first year by her administrator, specialist, and

mentor, stating, “The mentor program is awesome and [my mentor] was great.” As a new teacher, Chad was assigned to a mentor who taught similar content. He said this colleague “went above and beyond” in supporting him in his first year.

Charlotte expressed a sense of isolation within the school. As an elective teacher and the only one teaching her content, she didn’t feel like she belonged to any of the ‘teams’ in the building and said, “I know that a lot of new teachers feel...not included. They feel very isolated and that’s sad.” Having come from elementary school, she was used to a faculty that felt more like a family and she missed that.

Robert described struggling to find ways to build relationships with his peers during his first year in the middle school and explained, “I think [new teachers] need to be given opportunities to be more involved in the school...connected. It could be...coaching...committee meetings, a project with another teacher, just something that gets them right away, engaged, so they feel like, ‘I matter’.” For him, coaching soccer helped build a sense of belonging.

Erin worked closely with her mentor, a veteran teacher who worked with similar content and student groups, her team, and her co-teacher. She said, “I’m sure that this doesn’t happen everywhere, but I feel so supported by everyone.” Another early career teacher who worked with the same teaching team and content last year was also a valuable resource, as was the special education lead teacher. She was also enrolled in a graduate level program at her university that provided weekly meetings and regular observations during her first year teaching. She saw this as an important source of help and said, “I have the support of my professor and my colleagues at [university]...we meet on Saturdays. That’s been amazing.”

Building student relationships and prioritizing students’ social and emotional wellness.

While not directly tied to the research questions, the participants all spent significant time in their interview describing their beliefs about the importance of developing relationships within their classrooms. This unexpected but unsurprising finding makes sense in the context of the participants' experiences as new and early career teachers. I realized that for most of them, there was little distinction between themselves and their students when it came to the importance of relationships and social and emotional wellness. When asked about their philosophy of teaching, none of the participants started by mentioning their curriculum or classroom management. Every single one of them shared instead their commitment to building strong relationships with their students and prioritizing their students' social and emotional wellness. Given the important role that relationships played in their own experiences and perceptions of their first year, it was not surprising that they in turn placed a great deal of value on the relationships that their students formed in the classroom. Whether they articulated it or not, their own need for connection seemed to translate into a desire to help their students develop that as well.

Carol recounted a pivotal moment in her time there when, in a reflective conversation with a colleague about classroom management, she became aware that her role in the classroom mattered. She realized that her words and actions impacted situations with students and that she could choose to do or say something differently to change the direction and outcome of a given moment. She said, "I felt like it was reflective, the first moment where I turned it back on myself and realized all these instances where my actions and words were not what I intended in the classroom." Carol recalled the significance of this as her first moment of professional reflection and continued to deliberately reflect on her practice and how she interacted with students and peers. After four years of teaching, Carol had developed a strong sense of her personal

philosophy of teaching. She saw her role as helping “students become adults in the world who are going to be kind; use history to understand and be empathetic in their current world”.

Sarah’s philosophy of teaching art had several components. From her own experience as a student, she felt strongly that art can serve as a much needed escape from the pressures of school and she wanted students to be able to relax in her classroom. At the same time, she believed that art can be an important part of learning to problem solve. She explained that when given a safe space where they can make mistakes, students can not only develop both critical and creative thinking skills, but can learn to express themselves and make their own art their own. She explained,

“I want it to be a way for them to get a break from everything else. Art can be a stress relief where you can mess up and it’s not a problem. I’m trying to teach the kids that mistakes are ok in art, just like in life. It’s about what you do after the mistake. You have options.”

Sarah tried to achieve this goal by offering students choice and the opportunity to develop their own style that reflects their personality while pushing them to go beyond the bare minimum expectations.

Sally was absolutely clear on her philosophy of teaching and said, “My main thing is social emotional comes before content 100% of the time.” When asked about her goals, she stated, “My main goal when a student leaves my classroom is they leave a better person.” She was passionate about building trust and relationships with her students and even commented, “I like working with challenging students.” In fact, the only concern she voiced about her job was that it can be challenging working closely with colleagues who don’t share this philosophy and who have different priorities in the classroom.

For Sally, seeing students grow as people is what gave her hope. She committed significant time and effort not only at the beginning of the school year but all year long to develop and maintain relationships with her students and between her students. Having worked with Sally and her students, I've witnessed this passion and its impact on her students and their engagement with learning.

Chad's philosophy of teaching focused on relationships with students and his drive to make a difference in their lives as a role model. He stated, "My number one goal is relationships with the students. Some of these kids don't have a single soul who really cares about them...they all have different needs." He strived to treat students as individuals, to acknowledge their differences, and to develop lessons that met their diverse needs. Because he realized that every student comes from a different background, he was aware of the impact of their home life on school and wanted to provide a classroom where they could enjoy being at school. He struggled to balance these relationship goals with discipline and classroom management.

Charlotte credited her start in elementary school with her belief in the importance of building relationships with students. Her philosophy was that when teachers invest themselves and students know and feel connected to you, they are more likely to work for and with you. "It's very important to me to build that relationship with my students. It's important to invest yourself in them." She worked toward this by spending time in the beginning of the school year getting to know her students and helping them feel more at ease and welcome in her class. Even though she wasn't sure if she was 'allowed' to do so, she relied on weekly talking circles to keep her classes communicating with her and each other.

Robert described his philosophy of teaching as one based on relationships, not just between him and his students but between students. He said, "I really do care about the student

relationships. [P.E. class] should be a time where they can interact with their classmates.” He saw his classes as an outlet where students could build social skills by learning to work with their peers while mastering the content, both physical and academic.

Erin’s philosophy of teaching was founded on the principles of building classroom culture through both developing relationships and establishing expectations and routines. She explained, “Building those teacher and student relationships. I think that’s the most important thing. I could have a great lesson, but if I don’t have that relationship with my students, it’s not a great lesson.”

Again, this finding about prioritizing relationships and students’ social and emotional wellness does not directly address the research questions; however, the participants’ philosophies of teaching and their commitment to relationships is critical in understanding their experiences, especially in the early years when they are most vulnerable to leave the profession.

Summary of the interviews and answering research question one.

RQ 1: What is the experience of early career teachers with induction?

- What type(s) of induction did they experience in year one?
- What is their perception of those experiences?

These interviews addressed the participants’ experiences with induction and answered research question one. Although most of the teachers had started teaching in the same school, their experiences as first year teachers were very different. Those who started their careers in our school were all assigned mentors and most found these at least somewhat helpful as they navigated that first school year. None of them received formal induction support after their first year, although most maintained strong working relationships with the colleague who had been their first year mentor. New teachers in the school division also participated in monthly after

school/evening professional development sessions. These were generally informational or instructional meetings run by central office staff with prescribed topics that were considered relevant for new teachers (assessment, special education). The participants did not find these to be an important support, stating “most of it could have been an email,” and “it was never the thing that I was worried about right then”.

What made the biggest difference in the participants’ induction experience was whether or not they found support among their peers in that first year. The four social studies and math teachers in the group benefited from the support provided by working on both academic core teams (four or more teachers working with the same 100 or so students) and on content teams (three or more teachers teaching similar content). Several of them also were part of a collaborative partnership made up of a content-area teacher and a special education teacher who taught several sections of classes together. These peer structures were overwhelmingly described as positive, supportive, and critical in their managing their first year (and beyond) in the classroom. The three elective teachers in the group did not experience the same depth of peer support and although they were assigned another teacher as their mentor during their first year, the mentor did not necessarily teach the same content and/or grade level. Not having a built in peer support system added to the challenges of being an early years teacher. These three all sought out support and connections in various other ways, whether by making a deliberate effort to become involved in committees and activities, or seeking out relationships with their hallway neighbors. I’m still haunted by my interview with Sarah who described her first year as so isolating that she wondered if she was being hazed.

Several of the participants also described their relationship with administrators (principal, assistant principal) as a critical factor in their first year in the school. For Carol, it was a strong

and supportive relationship that provided frequent constructive feedback on her practice. Sally also appreciated administrative support as she navigated both teaching and the logistics of special education in her first year. Sarah had the opposite experience, and felt alienated by the critical nature of an administrator and the lack of support with her teaching and classroom management concerns.

Each participant expressed their belief in the power and importance of relationships for both themselves and their students. This focus helped to answer research question one and became a central theme in our group discussions as we developed our reflective community and talked through the issues that concerned us.

Our Story: Looking for Hope

For early career teachers, the lack of connection can be career ending. Several of the participants whose stories I shared in the previous section discussed the significance of relationships to their professional survival. My title, “Looking for Hope,” also became the name of our small community as we supported each other and found hope together. What gave me hope in the fall of 2019 was our shared hunger for connection and the promise of building a community together. The following sections tell the story of our nearly monthly meetings throughout the school year, our reflective community of practice, my own reflections on our group, and how I found hope in these young teachers every time we met. This hope and these amazing people sustain me now, even in the uncertainty of public school during a pandemic. My desire is that they find that same hope in each other and our community.

Research question two asked about the experience of early career teachers participating in a community of reflective practice and the benefits to the participants. In order to tell the story of the participants’ (and my own) experiences, the following sections are written as a chronological

narrative of our meetings, what we chose to discuss, and my reflections on the project as it evolved. Our story, as told in these sections, provides a look into our group as we built a community that provided time and space where it was safe to share our hopes and frustrations and support each other in seeking solutions. As we met, our shared priorities for ourselves, our peers, and our students became central to our discussions and part of the foundation of our community. The safe space we carved out and the hope we built together were an important part of our school year, especially as we faced a global pandemic and a sudden end to school as we knew it. Even when our meetings were moved onto Zoom, we felt the support and connections of our community and the opportunity it provided to talk about our shared experiences and concerns.

Fall: building relationships and seeking community.

“...how important it is for teachers to have spaces where they can attend to their narrative histories and to all that is at work in the meeting of their and children’s diverse lives (Huber et al., 2013, p. 231).

As the school year began and I wrapped up the initial interviews with the participants, they all continued to express enthusiasm for the idea of this project and what it represented. In preparation for our first meeting, I developed a protocol (McDonald et al., 2013) to provide structure for our time together. Although it was important to honor the participants’ voices and make sure that our discussions focused on topics and issues of their choosing, the protocols were designed and implemented to help us all also honor each other’s time. As with each subsequent meeting, I sought suggestions for discussion topics and shared the meeting protocol and agenda several days ahead of time.

Despite my decades of experience as a teacher, I was optimistic about the possibility of getting our group off the ground and meeting as early as the first month of school. For many reasons, this proved difficult. Even on a full day scheduled for professional development, including professional learning communities such as ours, the time was taken up with other meetings and obligations until we only had time to touch base briefly and agree on the date of our actual first meeting.

Meeting One.

Our first official meeting took place in early November and was designed to build trust and community within our group and allow us to begin to get to know each other. After briefly introducing ourselves, we developed a short list of norms to guide our time together. We wrote them on a large whiteboard and revisited them during each in person meeting. The norms were: what is said here, stays here; assume positive intent; be respectful of different views; have an open mind set; treat each other as equals. We opened the meeting with a discussion of community and closed with sharing what we hoped to get out of being part of the group. Both discussions focused on similar themes--looking for opportunities to both support each other and to be supported, as well as seeking time to reflect and talk out problems. Several of us also mentioned the value of learning from each other by hearing and comparing to others' experiences and perspectives. The following comments selected from those discussions provided an early glimpse into the benefits the group would provide us:

Carol: "I want to support others and feel supported by them."

Sally: "A community is a place where I belong and can be my whole self."

Erin: "In terms of goals for the group, I think to talk problems out and get input from each other."

Chad: “I’d like to work with similar peers and find out how they do things.”

Sarah: “We can provide support and hear different ideas.”

As part of getting to know each other, we paired up and shared experiences that had been significant in our teacher preparation or teaching career. Several pairs then shared out with the whole group and we began to find the connections and common experiences between us.

Charlotte was surprised to learn how similar her background was to Carol’s, commenting, “I never would have known that we had anything in common. We’re both [she and Carol] career switchers who worked corporate jobs and started teaching overseas.”

During our discussion about the role of our small group, some of the participants expressed their concerns about not even knowing what they need help with and suggested that our group could help each other and future new teachers stay on top of the many tasks that teachers are expected to keep up with. Chad said, “From your second year on, you’re in the deep end. Could there be a checklist of everything that needs to be done?” The group agreed that they felt more on their own after their first year when the mentor connection was no longer a formal support and no other induction supports were available.

My impression was that several of the members knew each other well and clearly had a friendly relationship as indicated by their bantering during the meeting. In our discussions, they seemed pleasantly surprised to discover things in common and to find similar concerns. All seemed to appreciate learning about each other and were both comfortable and happy to be there. The group members presented themselves as open minded and caring, and interested in both receiving and providing support. A few ideas were suggested for the next meeting topic and the general consensus was for us to focus on engaging reluctant learners.

Meeting Two.

In the second week of December, we had our second meeting. As an opening activity, we each took some time to voice our state of mind. Several participants referred to our norm of “what’s said here doesn’t leave the room,” before sharing specific concerns and experiences. To me, this was an indication of developing trust within the group as members were willing to be transparent about their frustrations and concerns. The general mood seemed to reflect frustration with maintaining relationships with students as we approached the winter holiday and concerns about the culture of our school professional community. Several shared their current status and their comments reflected being somewhat overwhelmed with managing their students. My perception was that they felt comfortable being honest with each other because they felt like they were with similar and non-judgmental peers. The following comments were shared at the beginning of the meeting when the participants took turns voicing their current state of mind as our opening activity:

Charlotte: “It’s one of those fake it until you make it...this year is five times worse than last year which was my first year. I can’t make a real connection with the kids. I’m trying to be more positive and get there.”

Chad: “I’m feeling goofy, but it’s a weird defeated goofy. I’m at my wits’ end with a class. I don’t want to walk in everyday like I hate myself and everything going on in there. So I decided to be more goofy with them. I’m making a conscious effort to go around to the kids who aren’t really doing anything and crack jokes. I’m trying to do something different to restart connections with them. I’m taking a break from just getting on them all the time.”

Robert: “I’m kinda cruisin...I have that mindset...deep breath...nine more wakeups until break. When the kids act up, I just take a deep breath.”

Sarah: “Today, just all the kids were bouncing off the walls...crazy.”

For the main topic of discussion, two members had agreed to share their experiences and perceptions around motivating reluctant learners. Each shared for about five minutes, we responded to each for about five minutes, and then they each had a chance to respond before we opened it up for a whole group discussion. Carol started out with a discussion mainly focused on her frustrations with those learners who are most difficult to engage despite attempts to use best practices such as employing student choice, collaborative learning, hands-on learning, and topics of student interest. She said, “My struggle is that...these things do work for student engagement, but you can’t do these things all the time. What about those other times?” Chad agreed, responding, “It’s an impossible balancing act between covering the required standards and keeping students engaged.”

The group’s response was supportive and the consensus seemed to be that despite our best efforts, we won’t engage all learners all the time, but perhaps we’re still making progress with them, even if it’s so incremental as to not always be perceptible in the moment. Several spoke up with their perspective on this and the comments included:

Chad: “My goal this year is to reach out to those students who are kind of in-between, the ones in the middle, the quiet ones.”

Charlotte asked, “At what point do I change my whole class for this one kid?”

Robert: “If you break through with a reluctant learner, they are more willing to work.”

Carol: listened to our responses, and replied, “I guess I just need to take the victories, the days they get excited, and celebrate and keep trying. It’s hard.”

Sarah shared next and started a discussion that re-emerged throughout the year and came up again in the end of year interviews with several of the participants. When asked explicitly

about the benefits of the community of practice (research question two), several participants brought up this discussion as an example of the group serving as an opportunity for them to be honest and learn from each other's perspective and experiences. As an elective teacher, Sarah described her struggle to engage learners and gain the support of parents who have the perception that her class is "just an elective" and "doesn't matter". She explained, "The struggle I'm having is the kids who don't care because it's an elective. It's tough when their parents don't seem to care either. They aren't even trying and just cause issues in class. They even hear from other teachers that it doesn't matter." She continued to explain how this was compounded by colleagues and staff who also didn't demonstrate respect for the subject matter and class time of elective classes. This generated quite a bit of discussion in the group about the perceived hierarchy of subjects in the school, mainly as a result of accountability measures (standardized test scores) that put added emphasis on core classes, especially math and language arts.

When pressed for examples of this hierarchy, Charlotte, Sarah, and Robert responded with these details and observations from their experience. As the three elective teachers in the group, they found themselves explaining their perspective to the others in a way they had not had an opportunity to do before:

Charlotte: "She's right, though. In any meeting you go in, with guidance or special education, it's clear that electives aren't as important. So of course, kids pick up on that."

Sarah: "I have kids who will show up 10-15 minutes late to my class because their core teacher had to keep them to finish something. They're sending the message that it's ok to miss a chunk of my class and now they're behind and aren't going to make up the work because they missed it for 'a good reason'."

Charlotte: "Just an email from a teacher would be nice to let me know."

Sarah: “I have teachers who show up to my class and pull a kid out into the hall to talk and don’t even check with me first. It sends that message that they can take time away from my class and it’s fine.”

Robert: “A math teacher came to get a student out of my class for a math test and wouldn’t really take no for an answer.”

Several other members of the group spoke up to admit that they were unaware of how elective teachers were affected by the issues being addressed. We realized that this was probably true for many of our colleagues and that these issues needed to be discussed with more of our staff. The conversation transitioned into the following frank discussion of our school culture and how we are all both impacted by and complicit in the structures that provide support and build community.

Carol: “This is a really unique perspective. She’s so right--we assume that kids are in electives by choice and that’s not always true. Just like in social studies, we know where we rank--after math and English because we don’t have an SOL test. We prioritize math and English over everything else because we know those teachers are so stressed about scores and data. I totally get the frustration. This is a culture thing that teachers and administrators are all guilty of. We should fix this!”

Sally: “From a special education perspective, it’s hard to find that balance. We don’t provide the same support in elective classes but in the core classes, we’re told that they cannot fail. It’s added pressure and those learners are often the reluctant learners who are so hard to deal with.”

Chad: “It is a cultural problem. Sometimes an admin doesn’t even show up to our content meetings. I get why math and English are more valued, but stuff like art and other electives get shunned and kids don’t find those interests until much later in the future.”

Sally: “How can it be framed to students in a way that shows the importance and the necessity of those elective classes?”

Sarah: “I don’t know how many times I try to ask other teachers to collaborate with us in our art classes.”

Charlotte: “Nobody cares what I do. My class isn’t connected to anything at the high school and I can literally teach whatever I want. I don’t have anyone else to help me figure out what to do.”

Carol: “I think the solution, in case anyone is interested, is that we get rid of grades and we actually get rid of subject areas. You have a topic and just dive into all the things connected to it. That’s what life is!”

Sarah: “Kids don’t understand that art is more than just drawing on paper. At least for me, I understand that core classes are important, we would just like the decency of asking first if a student can be pulled or miss part of class. We want to feel the respect that our class matters as well.”

Carol: “I’m not even sure a majority of teachers realize they’re doing this. I’m a huge advocate of communication. I didn’t even know there was resentment about this. It’s not going to change unless we say something.”

This conversation marked an important moment in our group. As a group made up of teachers who taught different grade levels and different subjects, this discussion ended up being one of the things that really built cohesion and trust between us. For the elective teachers, this

was an opportunity to be heard on an issue that gave them a lot of concern. They appreciated the attention and response they received from the other teachers. The core class teachers in the group were largely unaware of the issue until it came up and they not only listened, but demonstrated respect for the position of the elective teachers. This moment was referred to repeatedly in later meetings and in the end of year interviews as critical in us becoming aware of each other's perspectives and finding common ground toward addressing a problem. The opportunity to speak honestly among peers, and to be heard and supported, even when others had a different perspective, was a vivid example of the positive benefit that the participants reported from being part of the group.

The conversation then moved into a discussion of community and support throughout our building and staff. A couple of the participants had classrooms in an area of the building that had developed a strong and supportive community, but we agreed that many elective teachers in the building, including some in the group, felt isolated and unsupported, despite being on grade level or content area teams. Given the significance of peer relationships to the participants' well being and their perceptions of their first year, it was not surprising that the topic generated a lot of interest in the group. The following conversation excerpt reflects the shift in our discussion toward concerns about staff well being and our relationships with our peers:

Sarah: "Our hall is almost all elective teachers and our classes are mostly unique. We're misfits. We want that sense of family and community because we aren't on teams. We're having a lot of fun on our hall and getting into a lot of mischief."

Charlotte interrupted, excitedly: "That's the only reason I'm coming to work someday!"

Carol: “I think our culture at school is struggling and a number of people aren’t feeling supported. I think it’s great that you guys are doing that but there are people on teams who still feel alone.”

Sally: “I had a rough week last week...to the point that I was looking for another job. I’m being micromanaged and don’t want to participate in any after school activities. I need more support during the school day. It’s a huge thing right now and we should try to support each other more.”

Carol: “We’re told to build relationships with our students, but people aren’t taking the time to get to know us. Nobody asks how things are going. That’s what’s missing.”

Chad: “It’s the ultimate dilemma. Just like when we’re trying to engage our students.

Administrators can have all kinds of good ideas but teachers aren’t going to participate in a lot of them for various reasons.”

We brainstormed some ideas for these concerns and came up with a few suggestions: find ways to support our colleagues throughout the school day (bathroom breaks, encouraging notes); develop a need to know and do checklist for new teachers; remind each other of the importance of our elective program for our students; encourage and develop collaboration between core teams and elective teachers. Once again, the group demonstrated its benefit to each of us as a safe space to listen and share frustrations while seeking solutions.

In the days following this meeting, several in the group reached out by email and in person to express their gratitude for the conversation we had. They noted the value of having time to reflect together, to be heard, and to hear others’ perspectives on the issues we discussed. I was moved to tears by these responses. Although the goal of the group was to provide support and be a reflective community, in my dual role as both participant and researcher, I was often

concerned about whether I was doing either very well, and it was so encouraging to receive such positive and unsolicited feedback. Even more gratifying was the realization that this group was truly becoming a community that could support each other. While I had noticed and reflected on the ways that I perceived the participants both supporting each other and benefiting from the reflective community, this was documented evidence of those benefits and a concrete answer to research question two.

Spring: looking for help and building relationships with students.

As we entered the second semester of the school year, I was struggling with what felt like slow progress on the project. Although I offered several times to go into the participants' classrooms to help out with activities or lessons, no one had taken me up on it and, without explicit planning, that wasn't likely to happen on its own. Several in the group did plan lessons with me in the Innovation Lab and it was rewarding to work with them and their students. Overall, however, the reality of the school year was quite different from what I imagined in my self-imposed role of "new teacher supporter". This was perhaps an ego check for me as well as I realized that I was expecting to serve more in my role of "veteran teacher" despite my written and spoken intent to primarily facilitate the group in supporting each other. It was challenging to accept that what the group needed from me might not be what I thought I had to offer. It became clear that what they needed from me wasn't me, it was the time and space to support each other. This realization was both humbling and exciting. It was humbling in my position as an instructional leader to acknowledge this shift in my perception of my role; it was exciting in my role as researcher to gain this particular perspective into the function and benefits of the group.

Meeting Three.

Our third meeting took place in mid February and we opened with a connections protocol where everyone had the opportunity to share something that was on their mind--could be personal or professional--with no response or dialogue. This was challenging as most of the things people shared elicited the urge to comment back. The following quotes reflect the overall positive nature of the sharing as participants described taking on new challenges and considering making big changes in their personal and professional lives.

Sally: "I am going to hopefully be trying to get National Board Certification. [Carol] was really helpful with guiding with that...I'm nervous, but excited."

Carol: "I'm in the middle of trying to get National Board Certified. I'm always thinking about what I need to do for that. I'm feeling a little stressed about that. But it's great, and [Sally] should definitely still do it."

Chad: "I've been going through this thought process since the beginning of the year about whether to move. Some days I have really awesome days here and wonder why I would move."

Sarah: "Someone in the room [points at Carol] challenged me to get really creative with a creative side project. We're working together to create a history board game. It's helping keep my mind off of everything else."

Robert: "What's been on my mind is taking on this varsity coaching position. The logistics and planning...it's a new thing...and it's a lot on the plate at the moment."

After a review of the norms and the protocol, we loosely followed an informal tuning protocol where participants took turns describing a concern or challenge they were currently facing and the group listened and then responded. The concerns and discussion were almost entirely focused on student behaviors and how they were being handled both in the classroom

and by administration. The participants' mix of frustration and genuine concern for their students came through in this discussion about classroom management:

Sally: "We're finding that it's mostly our general education students who are causing most of the classroom problems. It makes it difficult to focus on our students with disabilities. It's beyond frustrating."

Carol: "We were also told that we wouldn't have students who were known to have behavior concerns in our collaborative classes with students with disabilities."

Chad: "I think it's a structural problem with how the teams are set up. There just aren't many options for how to group the students."

Sally: "We have the same repeat offenders. The consequences aren't working. It's been very tough."

Robert: "It is tough figuring out what motivates the students."

Carol: "I think the system does work for most of the students. What we haven't figured out is what to do for the students who it isn't working for. We need something different for them and that's our weakness."

Sally: "We've got to do something different."

Robert: "It makes me think about [Chad's] goal that he talked about before of trying to reach those kids in the middle. Every kid needs something different."

Carol: "Sometimes a kid is just having an off day. I get it, we try to figure out why something isn't working, but some days, nothing works. You just know when they walk in the room that it's an off day."

Chad: "There's some stuff we just can't control and that's frustrating as teachers. We like to be in control."

Sally: “There’s so much pressure on the special education case managers. It’s definitely wearing. It’s a lot. There’s no good solution.”

Although most of our discussion time focused on student behavior concerns, there was additional conversation about teacher well being and the need for opportunities to address concerns with the school administration. I was struck in particular by Sally and Carol who seemed especially weary and worn down. From my perspective, these two were among the most caring, hard working, and effective teachers in our school. They were both working with challenging groups of students and seemed overburdened with care and stretched thin. Carol voiced this and asked where teachers should turn to find support for their personal and emotional needs, saying,

“This is a very selfish thing to say. And I trust you guys. We’re told, you’re the adult. Sometimes you’re having a bad day and you have to put all that aside and step up to be there for the students. Who does that for us? I get that I have to leave all my stress and personal stuff at the door and be there for my kids. But I’m human and when do I get to pick all my stuff back up? I’ve had a lot of issues with feeling supported. I have to support the kids--who’s supporting me? When do you get to be human? I can’t do this for very long. Education is my second career. I’ve said it before that I’ll do this for ten years and then I’m done. It’s the hardest thing in the world to have to let go of all that and give all your energy and patience to 120 kids. I’m blaming admin, but maybe I need to find that support somewhere else, like in groups like this. I need to be heard.”

Sally responded by sharing another area she was struggling with,

“I’ve been dealing with the special education side of it. I had a teacher come to me and threaten to resign over one of the students on my caseload. I don’t know what they think

I'm supposed to do. I'm not a therapist and I can't solve their problems. It's very draining.”

We spent some time brainstorming how to address our concerns and frustrations and the following comments identified common concerns around being heard by administrators in the building:

Chad said, “We don't really get time to vent and get our frustrations out. Are there opportunities for teachers to put in feedback about changes?”

Carol: “The sixth grade teachers were disappointed in our last grade level meeting that we didn't have a real opportunity to speak and share concerns. We suggested that we provide our concerns with administrators ahead of time before our next meeting.”

Sally: “I took the initiative to do that for our last team meeting with administrators and it was extremely helpful to give them a heads up.”

I was reminded of the idea of demoralization and remoralization (Santoro, 2018) because despite, or perhaps because of, their frustrations, both Carol and Sally were not only actively seeking solutions to their frustrations, but were both pursuing National Board Certification. In fact, one of them recently convinced the other one to do so. As the meeting concluded, we shared goals for the rest of the school year. The overwhelming consensus was “survive”. The concluding comments were shared by Sally, who despite her obvious weariness, continued to be true to her philosophy of supporting students' well being and building relationships, stating,

“I want to help these kids get it together in their other classes. The kids my colleagues complain about aren't having behavior problems in my class. I want them to be successful all around and I can't go everywhere with them.”

Following the meeting, I reevaluated my role and tried once again to set up opportunities for me to support their classes and for us to observe each other. I made a chart to share that showed everyone's class schedule so it would be easy for us all to find classes to observe. In addition to encouraging the group to visit and observe each other's classes, I planned to continue our monthly meetings through May and to solicit suggestions for continuing our community over the summer and into the next school year.

Meeting Four.

For our March meeting, we had originally planned to discuss our goals for the next school year and how we saw the role of our reflective community moving forward. That morning, however, we had a school assembly with an impactful speaker, and I suggested via email that we take some time to reflect on that instead. The speaker spoke directly to the students in his own voice as well as through the voice of several characters whose experiences he portrayed on stage. His message was largely about both acceptance of others' differences and the potential for each one of us to make a difference in someone else's life. He touched on issues of disability, mental health, abuse, and discrimination. It was not only an engaging and moving performance, but in my decades of teaching experience, it was the best behaved student assembly I have ever attended and supervised. Following the assembly, students had the opportunity to reflect and process in small groups with their teachers, but teachers had not had the chance to do the same with their peers. Because the group had not only established our collective commitment to social and emotional wellness, but had developed into a safe space where members were comfortable sharing and willing to listen, the participants welcomed my suggestion to take time through our meeting to discuss the experience and how it impacted both us and our students.

To open our meeting, we each chose from a selection of plastic animals to illustrate our current state of mind and being. Most of the group members shared feelings of being overwhelmed by the various demands on them at work. A few of their comments illustrated this:

Erin: "Squirrels are kind of all over the place and today has just been one of those all over the place kind of days."

Sally: "I feel like lately, I'm small and I'm young, and I've had to turn into a bear to get people to respect me. It's unfortunate, but I have to assert myself to get respect. I'm little but mighty."

Carol: "I think I picked a beaver, and my understanding is that they build dams to block water flow and I feel like that is what my life is right now. It's like there's this flow and I'm trying everything I can to like...and it's just...I feel like I'm in the position where I don't think I can stop this water from coming. It's just coming at me and I'm working on it but I don't feel like it's getting done."

Chad: "I've just been stealthily going around all day trying to actively catch kids in the act of doing something good. I picked a fox because I usually feel like I'm always on the attack."

Clearly, with just a few weeks left until spring break, and having had zero snow days, everyone was stretched thin. Sarah on the other hand, was excited to share that her coaching season was just getting started and her team was playing its first scrimmage later that afternoon. With each person's sharing, several others chimed in with supportive comments as we let each other know that we empathized with their struggle, identified with their experience, and supported them.

The main discussion then opened with me sharing that I had struggled with my own emotions in the assembly that morning and because I had not had an opportunity to discuss it, I thought we might all benefit from time to process it together. Various members then shared from what they had experienced, witnessed, and engaged in throughout the day, both personally and with their students. This discussion really illustrated the empathy these teachers have for their students and their commitment to their students' social and emotional well being.

Sally: "I spent a lot of time crying, because I hate seeing them cry. One of the girls, she has the roughest home life and I thought she was going to talk about her own life, but she said the assembly made her think of kids in elementary school who people made fun of. She said it made her sad and she just wanted everyone to be kind to everybody. I just wanted to take her home. She doesn't even realize how amazing she is, that she goes through so much, and at the end of the day, she cares about other people."

Sarah: "My group handled the discussion really well. They talked through how they felt sad, even though there were funny moments. One girl said she felt more connected to the speaker and her peers because it was relatable. She says she doesn't feel so alone and then more of her classmates were willing to speak up to."

Chad: "The speaker was able to connect with and reach just about every student through his stories."

We also spent some time discussing the potential of even one person to interrupt or alter the course of someone's life, especially from the perspective of being a teacher. Several participants made connections from the assembly not just for their students but for themselves as well. The time spent sharing on this topic reflected its significance to the participants and their philosophy:

Chad: “That guy still remembers the two people who helped him. It could be a teacher. Maybe some of these kids, their first option could be a teacher.”

Sarah: “He said his teacher just said, “You’re not alone, I see you, I appreciate you. We can talk.” And that made the difference.”

Sally: “I asked my students what they were going to do differently in their day-to-day life and I told them that I’m going to make more of a conscious effort to reach those kids who are quiet. I want to get to everyone and make sure that everybody talks. And then some of those quiet students actually spoke up and shared. I think, for them to see, oh--you’re processing it too, that meant something to them to see me want to make a change and then they were willing to try too. They realized I’m human too.”

Sarah: “I asked them what they were going to take away from this. One student said she’s going to think more about what she says and try not to judge so much.”

Sally: “We ended up talking about this in every class for at least 30 minutes. We were like, math, whatever, we’ll get to it. In different settings, they were really willing to share. It was very impactful. It was really amazing to see the whole class having such a serious conversation with no judgment.”

Carol: “One of the things that stuck with me was the permission to feel sad, or whatever you’re feeling, even if it’s different from what someone else is going through. I’ve got a dam in my own life right now and it feels real to me. Sometimes we need someone to say, ‘It’s ok to be that way.’ I appreciated him saying that. We’re all here because we care about our kids and we forget sometimes that we have a lot going on too. We’re dealing with a lot.”

Sally: “We’re told that we need to be the adults, but adults feel too. We take on a lot of secondary trauma from these kids.”

Carol: “Another thing I took out of it, which [Sally] and [Chad] both said before about trying to deal with that middle group of kids, the quiet ones, the ones who get lost. It reminds me of a meme I saw on social media recently that said, ‘check on your strong friends.’ We don’t always check on the kids who seem to be ok. And I wish somebody would check in with me.”

Chad: “I think this message was just as much for us as it was for them. We do have to take care of ourselves before we can take care of our students. And it felt good to see a lot of male students showing emotion today. I’m glad something reached them.”

Carol: “The speaker was very direct with the students, he was real with them. I tend to be more hesitant to talk about difficult things.”

At this point, the conversation turned from the assembly to focus directly on the mindset and well being of the participants themselves. Sally, who had opened the meeting by describing herself as “little but mighty” and needing to assert herself, talked about some unpleasant encounters she had recently had both in person and online.

“Lately I’ve been dealing with a lot of negative feedback from co-workers. I’ve noticed people using social media to shame people. I love to post about education and constantly get age-shamed and a lot of negativity. I’ve been struggling with how to handle it. I love my job and just want to share about it!”

Chad commented, excitedly, “I love your posts! When I see other people posting about being happy at this job, teaching, it does really bring me happiness. Even if I had a bad day, that’s freakin awesome.”

We discussed for a while all the flippant, sometimes sarcastic responses we often give and receive throughout a school day when someone asks “How are you?” and debated why people can seem so negative. Our meeting closed with a reflection from Carol on what that negativity might actually be signalling and once again provides insight into the importance of relationships to Carol and the other participants:

“I’ll play devil’s advocate. I asked someone recently, ‘How are you?’ and we stopped and talked for 15 minutes about how they really were. This person really needed someone to talk to. I think sometimes when someone makes negative comments, they’re really saying, ‘Somebody see me.’ Maybe we should ask again, ‘Do you need to talk?’ I think sometimes it’s a cry for help.”

Interlogue: An unanticipated interruption

I’ve reflected on that March meeting many times over the subsequent months. It was on Monday, March 9, 2020, and was our last in person meeting. We could not have known that life and school and the world as we knew it was on the verge of being turned upside down. We could not have known that it was our last week of in person school for the rest of the school year. Just three days later, with only one day’s notice, we got the news that school would close for at least two weeks because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and later that month, the governor announced that school buildings would not re-open for the rest of the school year. I am grateful that the last in person meeting of our reflective community was one that focused on relationships, connections, and how we (both staff and students) support each other. I’m grateful too that so many of our school staff, especially those in our group, had committed significant time and effort to building relationships throughout the school year. The abrupt shift to emergency virtual classrooms was challenging both academically and emotionally and those groups who had put in

the work to build strong relationships before the pandemic were better prepared and able to maintain the relationships and connections already established. This was true in classrooms as well as in our professional learning community.

Meeting Five.

In early April, not long after the governor announced that schools statewide were closing their buildings for the remainder of the school year, our group met via Zoom. Not everyone was able to attend and the mood was somber. With so much uncertainty and even fear about both health and education, it was difficult to be positive and engage in planning for the future. The teachers were dealing with the sudden and unexpected emergency transition to virtual classrooms and experiencing multiple issues with both technology and pedagogy. They shared openly about what was and wasn't working for them at the time. The following comments provide some insight into their situation:

Sarah: "I'm figuring out how to adapt my art lessons to distance learning knowing the kids have limited materials. Just trying to figure out how to make those detailed instructions so the kids can do it on their own. Thankfully, I follow a few art Instagram accounts and have been able to use some of their ideas and adapt them. It's just more extensive than it used to be since I can't just show them how to do it."

Chad: "It's kind of cool because I can lecture for 10-15 minutes without being interrupted. It feels unnatural to not have those useful interruptions. It is nice to have more time to plan and mess around with technology and new ideas."

Carol: "I'll be honest, I'm not in a real positive place with distance learning. What we've decided is going to work best is to post a video or audio version of everything we post in

writing. It's a lot of work and I'm not optimistic about how much they are going to access or understand. I'll try to be positive."

I asked how our teaching in the future will be changed because of the pandemic and how we've tried to continue teaching. Most of the responses focused on the use of technology in our teaching practice and included these comments:

Sarah: "I never really used technology before in my classroom and this has forced me to. I think I'll continue to adapt and use more technology even when we're in person. Especially for assessments to see who needs more help."

Chad: "A lot of teachers didn't really know how to do anything with the technology and it was cool to be able to help them and see them realize how great it can be."

Carol: "I think of myself as relatively tech-savvy and I'm struggling with this. I cannot imagine teachers who weren't already incorporating technology in their classrooms. I feel for them."

Our concluding discussion was around our regrets for how the school year ended. Given the passion this group had expressed all year for their relationships with students and concern for students' well being, it was not surprising that this is what they focused on in these final remarks:

Sarah: "Relationships. I didn't think we were going to close school. I thought I would see them again. I wished I'd taken advantage of that last day to really connect with them and I let the craziness of the events take over instead of thinking about my relationships with the students."

Carol: "While I miss all my kids, there's like five or six that I'm really worried about and we were working on our relationship. One kid, things were really turning around for us

and I wish we had more time. I needed this last quarter to help set him up for success. I really hope they're doing ok. I worry about them.”

Chad: “I always like to give an end of the year talk and I had to do it virtually this year. It's just not the same. Our relationships are completely digital now. A lot of individual students I've been thinking about. One had really turned himself around just recently and we never got to see him really prove himself. There's a lot of growth that's just incomplete. It's a feeling of incompleteness with all this.”

As we concluded the meeting, Carol reminded us to focus on the good we're doing even when we don't feel it's being noticed.

“I think whatever anyone is accomplishing during this time is awesome. I keep having to remind myself of that. It's tough. Regardless of what you're getting done, we should be patting ourselves on the back. It's hard to feel that you're being acknowledged. Emails are just so impersonal.”

Sarah responded, “As crazy as it is, I'm just grateful to have this job right now.”

Meeting Six.

By mid-May, the school year was nearing an end and while we still had absolutely no idea what to expect for the next year, most of the participants were in a better position to discuss the end of this year and begin planning and setting goals for the next one. We had another virtual meeting to wrap up our group for the year and it was much more relaxed and upbeat than our April meeting. We started by discussing how we were doing and how our time at home was going. The comments related to both work and our personal lives:

Sarah: “I've been reinventing my curriculum for how art can be done at home and finishing up grad school.”

Carol: “A lot of quarantine has been spent with my son. He’s like a real little person. This has been a really cool time to be at home with him, getting to know him.”

Our conversation then moved onto reviewing our individual goals for the year, how we did or didn’t meet them, and what goals we had for the next school year. Carol and Sally were both open about areas that had tested them over the past year:

Carol: “I’ve made some progress with my National Board Certification. Unfortunately, that’s going to continue into next year since I wasn’t able to finish under these circumstances. I had some good reflection about giving myself some grace on that. One positive thing about that process is that it forces you to be reflective on a very specific student level. That kind of goes with the relationship talk we’ve been having. That’s been a cool, growing experience that I hope to grow on.”

Sally: “With the kids on my caseload this year, especially, they were very challenging and I definitely grew my patience. And one of my students who I was never sure if I had that strong of a relationship because she was so quiet, thanks to [Sarah’s] art assignment, she sent us a teacher appreciation card. It was just so genuine and thoughtful, very detailed, and I feel like I did connect with someone I was worried I wasn’t able to.”

We concluded our meeting by sharing our hopes and fears for next year. While we were all feeling better about things than back in April, there was still a lot of uncertainty that came through in our conversation and it was evident in the following excerpts:

Sally: “Going along with the social-emotional piece, we want to pilot a mindful space in our classroom with music and activities. I don’t know how well we’ll be able to implement this next year [in light of COVID-19 precautions].”

Sarah: “Some of the articles I’ve read talk about doing away with art classes and shared materials. A lot of elective teachers are on edge in terms of if we’re even going to get to have jobs. With budget cuts, electives are the first to go. Even if I have a job, I’ll have to reinvent how to teach art.”

Carol: “We could do ‘what ifs’ forever. I’m doing the same thing. I need somebody to stop me. I’ve been pleasantly surprised at how well distance learning has been going for most of my students, but I can’t imagine doing this with students I didn’t know. We had built a pretty good relationship with these kids, so moving to this was ok. I can’t imagine starting the relationship with a new group of kids this way. I really will struggle if I have to get to know a group of kids in this way. That’s my biggest worry. So much of the first part of the year is that relationship building. How do we do that if we’re not together?”

As we closed out, several spoke out to ask about whether or not the group would be continuing the following school year. Their comments gave voice to the theme that had already emerged of our community as a safe space for reflection, listening, and being heard. This directly answered research question two, and while it was addressed in more detail in the final interviews just a few weeks later, these responses helped define the participants’ experiences with our group and the benefits they received through it:

Sarah: “I would love to continue this next year. I know sometimes our conversations didn’t necessarily stick to the topic of what the meeting was supposed to be, but sometimes it turned it into a meeting about what we needed as teachers, being able to vent or talk about what we were struggling with and hearing it wasn’t just us because we are a pretty big variety of different subjects and grade levels. This group really helped me a lot this year.”

Carol: “Yeah, I’ll just second that. I really enjoyed it. I’m sure there are other people who would really benefit from having a group of people they can talk to about school stuff. Like teacher support groups. It’s been really helpful that we are such a diverse group. [Sarah], ever since you talked about how electives are treated, I’m so much more aware of it now and that was really good for me to hear you talk about it and now I’m recognizing it. The fact that we all have different perspectives made this even more beneficial.”

Sarah: “It’s like having that safe zone. One of the things I learned the hard way my first year is that you think you go to someone looking for help or advice, and you think you can trust them, and the next thing you know, ten other people know about it the next day.”

Findings from the school year.

Being part of and telling the story of our time together has reminded me of not just the importance of relationships and community, but the importance of knowing what matters to you. The teachers who joined me in these meetings were (and continue to be) committed to their students and to each other. Although more detailed and specific data emerged from their responses to the end of year interviews, these meetings and conversations demonstrated the benefits we all gained from participating in the community. Research question two asked about the experiences of early career teachers participating in a community of reflective practice and our story provides a look at those experiences.

In the day or two immediately following our second meeting, several participants made a point to share with each other and with me about how much that meeting had impacted them. Sarah wrote by email to the group, “I know we may not have necessarily solved what we discussed, but I really enjoyed and appreciated hearing from different perspectives about these

topics! It gives me a lot to think about;” and Carol responded, “Thank you for sharing perspectives that I wouldn't otherwise hear! It is wonderful to be a part of such a reflective group!” Charlotte added, “It was wonderful to be able to share with everyone.” Chad also replied, “Likewise. I thought the conversation was fruitful. I only hear certain perspectives throughout my school day. This was a nice variance on that!” This email thread was validation for me as the facilitator and researcher, but also for those who had shared in the meeting and felt heard by their peers.

In working with and listening to this group of teachers who were both young and in the early years of their teaching careers, I was reminded over and over of the value and knowledge that these less experienced professionals bring to the school culture and our students' education. Their focus on social and emotional wellness for themselves, their peers, and their students was a clear indicator of their empathy and moral compass as educators. Despite being ignored, or worse, age-shamed, for their enthusiasm and compassion, they persisted in developing and celebrating their positive relationships with students. This story acknowledges and amplifies the voices of early career educators and validates them as a source of knowledge and expertise. Those of us who have taught much longer benefit from their perspectives on both pedagogy and mental health and often turn to them for help with navigating technology.

One additional, and perhaps tangential anecdote came out of a staff meeting conducted via Zoom in early June. The school year was nearly over, but our principal scheduled an optional chat on diversity and equity. This was just days after the death of George Floyd at the hands of police and our nearest city was experiencing marches and protests along with much of the country. Our school division is more than 80% white and our middle school faculty, including the administrators, is nearly all white. The purpose of the meeting was to allow staff to share any

concerns they had about our students and how they were processing the recent events. It was a difficult meeting to be a part of as several staff members who spoke up were clearly struggling with their own perspectives and reactions. It was obvious that we were not all on the same page in terms of how we viewed issues such as white privilege or the Black Lives Matter movement. Although I left the meeting frustrated and concerned, I found hope in one thing. Of the staff who spoke up and voiced their thoughts, concerns, and feelings, three of the strongest voices in favor of empathy, equity, and compassion were those of Sally, Carol, and Chad. I'd like to think that our time together in community played a role in their willingness to speak up, even on difficult topics, and in a much larger group with some who might disagree with them or even look down on them for lack of years.

Epilogue, but not ending. Our story continues

In the last two to three weeks of the school year, I conducted a second round of interviews with each participant via Zoom. The interviews allowed each individual to review and describe their school year: their challenges and successes, progress towards the goals they had set for themselves, the support they had received, their perspective on our community of reflective practice, and their hopes and goals going forward. Again, the same themes of relationships surfaced in these interviews as emerged through our year together. The reflections on our time together provided further insight into the participants' experiences with the group and the benefits our community provided. In the following sections, quotes from these interviews are used to further support the findings that answer research question two.

RQ 2: What is the experience of early career teachers participating in a community of reflective practice?

- What benefits does the community provide to the participants?

- How does the community meet professional development expectations of the administration while meeting the needs of the teachers?

The benefits of the community to the participants.

When asked in the end of year interviews to describe our community and what it meant to them, the participants were overwhelmingly positive about the experience and about each other; several called it a “safe space,” and “group therapy”. They described it as an opportunity to develop stronger relationships and support each other in our personal well being and professional practice. Some of the specific benefits that emerged from the end of year interviews are illustrated in the following sections with quotes from the participants about their experiences in the community:

A safe space to vent and share frustrations.

One of the biggest benefits of our community that emerged from the interviews was that the participants trusted each other enough to be open about their concerns and frustrations. They valued the safe space our group provided for them to share and vent.

Sally: “I really enjoyed the group. It was a great place to talk and brainstorm and vent in a productive way.”

Chad: “It was a great sort of safe space to share our frustrations...the teachers did a good job of respecting our rules and responding to each other’s frustrations.”

Sarah: “We needed to be able to vent without worrying about being judged or everyone in the school finding out what we said. It was a safe place and a way to release stress and tensions, let stuff go and get help. It was a place where you allowed us to just talk. You really gave us the opportunity to be open and free and I really appreciated that.”

Group therapy and support.

Not only did the participants feel safe sharing, they saw the value of listening to and supporting each other. They described the group as a kind of therapy.

Charlotte: “Sharing and helping each other through. It was almost like counseling, really.”

Chad: “I really did enjoy that group. I felt it felt more like a group therapy or group think kind of thing.”

Carol: “The group itself was a really nice support. It was lovely. I saw it like a support group. We were there to listen and to talk about our struggles. We struck a pretty good balance between just listening and sharing ideas or suggestions.”

Sarah: “Sometimes I just had something on my mind that I needed to just get out.

Listening to what other people were saying and being able to be that support for them too. Sometimes when you’re having a bad day but you’re able to help someone else who’s in a tough spot, that’s a pick me up too--not just receiving support, but being able to give it too. It often turned into us working together to help each other work through whatever we needed to just let out.”

Erin: “It really helped just hearing the people in that little group talk. It was nice to have that little therapy group at the end of the day and to be able to see them throughout the school day and check in.”

Opportunity to build connections and community with peers in similar situations.

Given that the participants had articulated the importance of relationships and connections for their own well being and that of others, it was not surprising that they also described that as another benefit of participating in our group. For some, the time we spent together in the group translated into stronger connections outside of our meeting times.

Sally: “I really enjoyed the support of the group. I feel like it strengthened the connections that I had with those teachers. When you see them, there’s a sense of calm. What we’re doing is working really well. It’s a great structure. It was super beneficial and helpful.”

Charlotte: “I really liked the group. I felt like it was very helpful to talk to those people who were all newer teachers. Everybody being able to discuss things made me feel like I wasn’t doing anything wrong; we are all having some of the same feelings.”

Chad: “Some of the issues that people brought up I was having too and I didn’t realize they were going through...it was a nice place to share and to establish rapport; to troubleshoot problems and find solutions and compare paths with people who are in similar career places.. We were establishing a mini community within the school. What I felt better about was knowing that the other teachers in the room were going through the same stuff. It was very eye opening how similar of issues we were all having. It was reassuring.”

Sarah: “Having the support group to talk about teacher stresses with other teachers who are potentially facing the same thing with the freedom to say what’s on my mind, with no judgement. I liked the diverse group with younger teachers facing the same things I was facing.”

Erin: “I really enjoyed that group and I feel like, looking back, I was very quiet in those meetings, but that’s what I needed--a group of people who were also in the same position I was in and just being able to hear the same same situations and feel that I wasn’t alone.”

A chance to hear different perspectives.

Although the participants were all considered early career teachers, they came from very different backgrounds and taught different grades and subject matter. It became clear in our meetings that they appreciated the diverse perspectives and experiences that each brought to the group and this was discussed by several of them in their end of year interviews.

Sally: “It was really eye opening to hear others’ perspectives.”

Carol: “I was so appreciative to hear other perspectives...in a community that was very supportive...I appreciated the opportunity to be a little more aware and widen my perspective.”

Sarah: “Hearing what others are going through, that was a huge eye opener to find out we all have our own stressors.”

Relevant to early career teachers’ needs and concerns.

One of the common critiques of some professional development is that it can be very prescribed and often mandated in a top down fashion by those in administrative roles. Although I structured most of our meetings with a protocol, the topics of discussion came from issues the participants suggested that we address. In addition, because they were all at similar points in their career, they felt comfortable bringing up questions or concerns that might not have emerged in conventional faculty meetings.

Charlotte: “We talked about questions that don’t come in up faculty meetings or [professional development] because it only really affects new teachers. In a group like this, you can ask that stuff. It was a good place to meet and see how people feel and get their take and get ideas that I can try differently. It was super helpful to me.”

Chad: “What we talked about was different from what teachers usually complain about in that kind of hallway chat. We had time to elaborate on big level issues.”

Erin: “It provided an open environment for us to brainstorm and problem solve.”

Sarah: “You let us pick the topics each meeting so it was relevant to what was going on for us. And we always had the option to be flexible about what we talked about.”

As these quotes, anecdotes, and reflections illustrate, the teachers participating in the group found benefit in participating in the group as a means of support in their professional practice. Each one made clear both in their individual interviews and group discussions that they prioritized relationships with students and peers and believed that supporting their students’ social and emotional wellness was a critical component of their role as educators. These shared values and commitment to community helped us begin to build a close knit group where we all felt safe to both listen and be heard.

Research question two asked about the experiences of early career teachers with a community of reflective practice, its benefits, and how it met their needs. Through this community, the participants, including myself, found a safe space to vent when we were frustrated, to be excited about our students and their progress, to be heard, to listen to each other, and to problem solve together around our professional practice. Each member of the group described at least once, if not over and over, their belief in the importance of relationships with both students and peers, and this group gave us the opportunity to develop relationships with each other built on trust and common experiences.

How the community met professional development expectations.

Research question two also asked how the community met the professional development expectations of the administration while meeting the needs of the teachers. When I approached the school and school division administrators about not only conducting the study within the school, but finding a way for the group members to earn professional development credit for

their participation, I was met with enthusiasm. I had to submit a proposal for the group as a professional learning community that was aligned with the existing professional development goals of the school division for improving and supporting instructional practices. I was granted approval for it to count as the required school level professional development for the participants and it was included in the list of options that teachers in the school could choose from. Other professional development options included book clubs, peer observations and reflections, and collegial sharing opportunities. The seven teachers who participated all year earned full credit for their in-school professional development requirements. Those seven and two others who were eligible have the opportunity to continue meeting the next school year to once again meet their school level professional development goals.

In answering research question two, the data demonstrated the value of our group as both professional development and as a means of support for early career teachers. The participants found value in the safe space to not only share their own concerns and frustrations, but to hear the perspectives of others. They appreciated the opportunity to build rapport with peers experiencing similar situations and to troubleshoot together to develop solutions. Relationships and community are critical for the personal well being and professional development of teachers, especially those in their early career as they learn to navigate the pressures and demands of teaching. This study supports the role of a group like ours as means of support for early career teachers through reflective community.

Other findings--what the participants cared about.

What also emerged from the data were themes that continue to be important as we move forward with our group. From the initial interviews, in the group meetings, and through the final interviews, the early career teachers who were participating were adamant that their students'

social and emotional well being was the most important thing to them as teachers. This was not only explicitly stated, but demonstrated through the issues they wanted to discuss. Once we transitioned to emergency virtual learning, I quickly realized that this commitment was paying off as several of the group were faring better than colleagues who had prioritized behavior compliance and academic standards at the expense of building relationships. Sally and Erin explained it this way:

Sally: “In focusing on that (SEL), it totally changes the dynamic in the classroom. The kids respect us because of those conversations we’re having. We validate how they’re feeling and it impacts the content too because they’re way more engaged and they want to learn. It was a huge success. You know my main thing is social emotional!”

Erin: “I think one thing I’ll always remember was my relationships with my students. Coming into the school year, I knew that was something I needed to develop before worrying about the teaching. The relationships with my students--they are the reason I come to work every day. When school closed down I was heartbroken. That was really hard for me. But some of the students I assumed I didn’t have a close relationship with, it’s grown as we’ve stayed in touch by messaging and Zoom. I needed that communication with them.”

They also described the importance of relationships and building community with peers as part of their own personal and professional wellbeing. At the end of the year, most of them referenced the importance of the support they got from their colleagues both within the group and in the faculty as a whole.

Chad: “I think, this year, I’ve really leaned on coworkers more than ever for social emotional supports. And I’ve realized the importance of establishing relationships that

extend beyond just work talk. I have a couple of people at this school who I can trust with important details in my life and that's new. They've been able to help me get through some stuff."

Carol: "I've always been very appreciative of the teachers I work with, but this year, we leaned on each other in a different way. There was a higher need for us to support each other. Everything from emotional support to thinking outside of the box and sharing creative ideas for what's working in the classroom."

Erin: "I would like to acknowledge that I'm a very lucky first year teacher. I felt so welcomed by my special education team and my sixth grade team. Everybody in my grad school cohort was teaching all over the state and they just don't have the kind of support I have. I was even able to help support the others in my cohort. I always had someone there to help, I just had to learn to ask for what I needed and be brave enough to ask."

Sally: "The biggest takeaway was that the people around you are the biggest support. You just can't do this job alone."

Both their prioritization of social and emotional wellness and their collective belief in the necessity of connections and community illustrated the importance of relationships to the participants and drove our discussions throughout the year. These shared values helped us form trusting bonds within our group and reinforced the benefits we found from our time together.

An addendum to my story--a shift in my perspective.

An additional and unexpected, yet significant finding came about through my evolving understanding of my role in the group. Although the stated purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of early career teachers engaged in a community of reflective practice, with myself in the role of facilitator, I had expected to be more explicitly needed and relied on as a

mentor and resource. As part of my position as an instructional coach and veteran teacher, I anticipated developing new means of supporting the participants in their teaching practice and hoped that this support would be one of the benefits they found through the program. In the beginning, I imagined my role would be that of mentor and support staff--facilitating our group discussions, providing support in the classroom, and helping the other participants find the resources they needed. I tried to be transparent, both in writing and with the participants, about my ideas, position, goals, and possible biases in terms of what I thought the early career teachers might need or want for support. I wanted this to be a collaboration where I served to schedule our monthly meetings and solicit their ideas for topics of discussion while we worked together to reflect on our concerns, support each other, and develop solutions to the problems of practice we faced.

I definitely felt some frustration as it became obvious that the participants were not leaning on me for specific supports in their practice. Although I worked with most of them and their classes in an instructional role as we planned and carried out lessons and projects in the Innovation (STEM) Lab, not once did any of them approach me for support, advice, or other assistance outside of our shared lessons and monthly group discussions. This didn't fit my vision and I experienced some tension as I worked through figuring out what this meant for me and my role in the study. This realization was initially disappointing until I used it as a lens through which to better understand the nature of our group, not just as a place for collaborative reflection, but a space for collaborative support that didn't actually depend on me for the relationships being developed.

The understanding that they needed each other more than the advice and help of a veteran teacher old enough to be their mother was both humbling and exciting. What I realized they

needed most from me was the time and space I made possible for them to meet and build relationships that supported each other. Once I accepted this and acknowledged that some part of me was disappointed to be needed differently than I had anticipated, I was excited about what it meant for our group and the relationships being formed. This unexpected turn became an open door into a new understanding of my role both in the study and in my professional practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion

“For us in these times, to even have hope is too abstract, too detached, too spectatorial. Instead we must be a hope, a participant and a force for good.” (West, 2016)

In this chapter, I will review the purpose of my study and my research questions, and discuss the key findings and the significance of the study in the context of both the literature and implications for future practice, policy, and scholarship.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The study was designed to explore the induction experiences of early career teachers and their lived experience as they navigated the challenges of the school year and participated in a community of practice that provided opportunity for collaboration and reflection. The community was developed as a new model of induction support and professional development for early career teachers. The participants met regularly to share their experiences, reflect on their challenges and successes, and collaborate on solutions. Data were collected through interviews and group meetings with the participants and major findings were identified through an iterative process of reviewing audio recordings, field notes, my own reflective journal, and restorying the stories. Using these major findings, a narrative was written to tell the story of the participants’ experiences both as new and early career teachers and as members of the reflective community of practice we called, “Looking for Hope”.

The research questions were:

RQ 1: What is the experience of early career teachers with induction?

- What type(s) of induction did they experience in year one?
- What is their perception of those experiences?

RQ 2: What is the experience of early career teachers participating in a community of reflective practice?

- What benefits does the community provide to the participants?
- How does the community meet professional development expectations of the administration while meeting the needs of the teachers?

Reflections and Recommendations for Our School and School Division

Having spent a year in community with a group of early career teachers in my school, I am excited about the potential for our group to continue working together. The opportunity to share openly about problems of practice and other professional concerns gave us the chance to build trust and learn about our shared values as well as different perspectives on the issues that we discussed. This model of professional development has several important features: it is voluntary, the facilitator is non-administrative and non-evaluative, the participants are all in similar career situations (in this case, their first five years of teaching), the topics of discussion are chosen by the participants, and there is at least a loose protocol to guide the meetings and provide structure for the discussion(s). Because our participants were all early career teachers, this program was designed to serve as a means of support, as a type of long term induction available beyond the first year of teaching. We believe this model is powerful and while designed for early career teachers, could be used by other groups of teachers, regardless of experience.

Our community of practice and the stories that came out of this study generated important findings that can inform similar programs. The participants appreciated the time and space to safely and openly share their experiences, to reflect on problems of practice, and to support each other. They care deeply about social and emotional wellness for themselves, their peers, and their students and are committed to building meaningful relationships with each other and their

students. We would like to continue to develop our community of practice and to find ways to encourage others to form similar reflective groups. As we consider the future of our group, we will be discussing ways to share what we have learned with our colleagues. In addition to our work together, perhaps some of us can help form new groups, creating a web of community within our school.

Given the passion, knowledge, and empathy demonstrated by the participants on many issues, I feel strongly that we should do more to center the voices of our newer teachers and to build their leadership capacity. Too often, schools and school leaders lean on their veteran teachers as leaders while those with less experience are not taken as seriously. Many of our younger teachers are passionate and enthusiastic about their jobs in a way that tends to fade with experience. Perhaps if we harness that excitement and learn from it, the older teachers might reclaim a bit of it and the younger ones might not lose their fire and joy in teaching.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Scholarship

The major findings of the study all focus on the participants' commitment to strong relationships with both peers and students. Relationships were a critical part of both their induction experience in their first year teaching and their experience in the community we formed. Both the value they found in the safe space and support of a community of peers and their explicit prioritization of the social and emotional well being of their students had a foundation in the relationships they worked to cultivate with those around them. There are several implications that come out of these findings. In the following sections, the implications are organized into three sections: induction for early career teachers, reflective community as a safe space and opportunity for professional development, and social and emotional wellness. The implications for induction and community relate directly to the research questions as they

address the participants' experiences with both induction support and the reflective community formed in this study. The third issue, social and emotional wellness, emerged as a priority for the participants in not only their philosophy of teaching, but the topics they chose to focus on and discuss throughout the year. As a result, this issue became central in our group, the connections we formed, and the value we found in our community.

Induction supports in the first year and beyond.

Induction support for new and early career teachers varies widely across the region, state, country and world. While mentoring is the most common support provided for new teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Goldrick, 2016), most states, including Virginia, do not have formal induction standards in place (Goldrick, 2016). In Virginia, mentoring programs are required for new teachers (Education Accountability and Quality Enhancement Act of 1999); but, along with most other states, Virginia does not fund or require this or other induction supports to continue past the first year of teaching (Goldrick, 2016). Both the data obtained from interviews in this study and that in the literature review demonstrate effective mentoring as a key factor in first year teachers' success and perception of their experience (Goldrick, 2016).

The teachers in this study described developing strong relationships with their colleagues as critical to their success. For those whose mentor taught similar subject matter and/or student groups, this connection was a vital part of that. However, while several of the teachers in the study maintained positive working relationships with their mentors past their first year, the connection was no longer formally supported by the school administration. In the case of teachers who did not have a strong connection with their mentor, this became part of their overall feeling of disconnect within the school, contributing to negative perceptions of their early years' experiences. These findings suggest that mentoring policies need to be strengthened to ensure

well matched and effective mentors who can work with new teachers in collegial relationships that provide both professional support and help build connections within the school community. Based on the teachers in this study, those teachers who do not fit into existing groups and teams by content or grade level need particular attention when being assigned a mentor to help them find their place and the support they need. Crafton and Kaiser (2011) suggest that mentoring relationships can provide more authentic and meaningful support when there is less of an authoritative position by the mentor or when two new teachers are paired together with a mentor and can collaborate with each other.

The literature indicates that first year mentoring alone is not sufficient to support new and early years teachers but that induction should extend beyond the first year and include opportunities to both collaborate with and observe other teachers (Fresko & Alhija, 2015; Glazerman et al., 2010; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Moir, 2003). The implication for policy is that early career teachers need continued support beyond their first year mentor assignment. In this project, I formed a community with seven early years teachers in which we discussed and explored topics of interest and concern to them. The participants overwhelmingly described the experience as a positive one and continued to participate in the community in the following school year. The benefits they described included having the opportunity to make connections with each other and having a safe space to share concerns, frustrations, and goals in an environment of trust and respect where each member could be heard. They appreciated listening to each other's perspectives and valued the chance to find common ground around shared experiences and priorities.

For our school specifically, this model of induction and professional development was successful in its first year and is continuing into its second year for the 2020-2021 school year.

The participants continue to be eager to meet (even when our meetings have to be virtual) and the school district once again approved our group as a professional learning community that meets the local requirements for annual professional development. Moving forward in the 2020-2021 school year, our school system is operating on a hybrid virtual model, with approximately 20% of our students learning from home (and the possibility of a full virtual model at any time due to COVID-19 statistics). Because of this, our group has decided to focus on learning from each other through observations and follow up discussions of our virtual classes. We've each identified goals and topics of interest to focus on and are starting to join each other's virtual classes during our planning blocks to conduct non-evaluative peer observations. Further research is warranted to evaluate the impact and benefits of early years teachers observing each other, especially in a virtual setting. From my experience during the spring and fall of 2020, the younger teachers managed the transition to virtual classrooms much better than their older and more experienced colleagues. This is possibly due to a combination of greater comfort with the technology involved and the tendency of veteran teachers to resist change. In our school, several of the younger teachers have found themselves supporting and encouraging their older peers and moving into leadership roles in the school. Based on this, perhaps more attention should be paid to developing support systems that encourage early career teachers to develop their capacity as teacher leaders.

Reflective community as safe space and professional development opportunity.

All teachers, new and experienced, suffer from the challenges imposed by both the demands of others and the isolation often inherent in the profession. Collaborative professional learning based on inquiry and dialogue offers effective tools and “powerful possibilities for sustained change” (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011, p. 105). Our school and school division don't suffer

from high rates of attrition, however, even for teachers who stay, there can be times when demoralization can become possible (Santoro, 2018). The social support and reflective collaboration of a community of practice can lead to improvements in teacher practice and reduced attrition (Lambreth, 2012; Kennedy, 2016). As we continue to offer more choice for teachers in their own professional development, we should include more opportunities for reflective communities of practice so that they might “do more than survive” (Day & Gu, 2010, p. 127).

We should continue to make space for teachers of all levels of experience to take ownership of their own professional development and be empowered through reflection and collaboration on their own experiences and practice to become knowledge creators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). When provided with safe spaces to discuss and problem solve concerns, new and early career teachers can experience shared authority in their situation and feel supported in taking risks that lead to professional growth (Lambeth, 2012; O’Malley, 2010). Collaborative professional learning communities, where participants “engage in joint inquiry about teaching as a means to shifting practice” (Butler et al., 2004, p. 437) have the potential for developing and sustaining improvement in teacher practice and student outcomes (Stoll et al., 2006). Collaboration between teachers and opportunities to increase agency in their own situation builds collective efficacy through community (Day & Gu, 2010; Stoll et al., 2006).

The community of reflective practice formed through this study was described by the participants as a safe space where we trusted each other enough to be honest about our frustrations and struggles and respected each other enough to listen and collaborate on problem solving. The participants were empowered by this to be willing to discuss issues and explore solutions. The dynamics of power that we navigated as I endeavored to lead from behind and

amplify their voices in the topics of discussion created a balancing act between my role as researcher and that of participant. Hopefully, as we move forward, that model of collaborative leadership will encourage the other participants to step further into leadership roles themselves both in this group and others.

Our group of teachers is still intact and moving forward into the next school year. I would like to see us move into a more explicit action research model. Now that we have built a foundation of trust and community, we can begin to more concretely address and develop solutions to some shared problems of practice (Ado, 2013; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Kemmis (2010) described reflective action research as a transformative and a means toward justice and “less unsustainable ways of living in the world” (p. 423). This is in line with the priorities both lived and spoken by the members of our group to be part of a school “founded on hope, a sense of agency, and a belief that they can continue to make a positive contribution to the learning and achievement of their pupils” (Day & Gu, 2010, p. 139).

In the first year that the group met, we had discussed developing peer observations as part of our community of practice. This didn’t happen because of the COVID-19 school closing, but we plan to engage in peer observations to further develop reflective collaboration among the participants. Modeled loosely on the idea of instructional rounds or lesson study, our group can use peer observations to collaboratively examine our practices through inquiry and dialogue (Young et al., 2018). Young et al. reported that pre-service teachers who participated in a lesson study learning community model felt “more confident and/or affirmed by being observed and receiving feedback from peers” (2018, p. 284). The trust and respect we built in our first year should help facilitate this process. In several studies of learning communities, opportunities for

support and transformation through peer observations served to build and strengthen professional communities and build trust (Day & Gu, 2010).

An additional change I would like to see moving forward is around issues of power. Although our group discussions during this study were largely democratic and the topics of discussion were primarily those suggested by the participants or prompted by shared experiences, my role as facilitator still involved setting the protocol and leading the opening discussion as well as ending the meeting. Crafton and Kaiser (2011) addressed concerns about position and power within communities of practice and found more authentic dialogue in groups where there was not an authoritative figure leading the meetings. As our group moves forward and continues to meet and collaborate, I want to move back and relinquish what power I had to others to move into a more equal position. Accomplishing this will require explicit changes to our group organization and discussions about how we will structure our meetings and collaborative work.

This study provides just a glimpse into the strength and power of community as a system of support for early career teachers. “Maxine Greene (1988) wrote about the ‘crisis of silence’ in teaching, where no one dares to question knowledge, fearing retribution.” (Hyatt, 2015, p.95). In 2015, Joana Hyatt addressed the “lack of negotiable spaces for student teachers to resolve problematic situations, myths, cultural differences, and relational aspects of teaching” (p.82). I support her appeal for reflective spaces for teacher candidates to find their voices, ask difficult questions, and engage in community inquiry, but argue that these communal spaces are even more critical for early career teachers who have left the safety of their student teaching and face daily crises behind the closed doors of their own classrooms. As Hyatt argues, “these spaces have the potential to...open up avenues of transparency and transformative practice” (p. 84) in place of

“desperation and disillusion” (p. 92). We need to continue to examine the role and potential of community in supporting, improving, and sustaining the practice of early career teachers.

There have been some studies on early career teachers engaging in action research as a means of authentic professional development (Mitchener & Jackson, 2012; Ado, 2013), but not much longitudinal research on teachers engaged in action research through professional learning communities (Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). Vescio et al. (2008), reviewed ten empirical studies and one multi-site research report on teachers working in learning communities. They found multiple positive outcomes from the professional learning communities, including changes in teaching practices to become more student centered, changes in school culture to become more collaborative, and improvements in student achievement. They suggested several kinds of further study, some of which are relevant here. There is a need for both in depth and long term studies on the changes in teaching practice and student learning. Along with Vescio et al. (2008), I propose developing a longitudinal, in-depth case study that examines outcomes over time for teachers engaged in a collaborative learning community.

Prioritizing social and emotional wellness of students.

This study was designed, in part, to learn about the experiences of a group of early career teachers engaged in developing a community of reflective practice and to determine what, if any, benefit the community provided to them. The participants described the community as a safe space and a place where they could share their concerns and frustrations. Several of them discussed the opportunities the group provided for them to talk about issues that they cared about and to listen as others did the same. One of the issues that came up over and over was that of social and emotional wellness. The participants shared a commitment to supporting their students and each other in this area. Research indicates that collaborative professional development that

addresses issues that are relevant to teachers can be not only effective but empowering and transformative (Day & Gu, 2010; Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Michener & Jackson, 2012). This suggests that groups like ours should operate in such a way that the direction and focus of the group is determined by the participants. This is why the topics we discussed in our meetings were chosen by the group members and driven by our commitment to learn from each other. The topic of social and emotional wellness was definitely the main issue driving our discussions throughout the year, whether the topic at hand was reluctant learners, classroom management, or our discussions about the COVID-19 school closing and virtual learning. Given the shared values in our group around social and emotional wellness, we would advocate for policy and practice changes that support social and emotional learning and provide training for not only ourselves but our colleagues in this area.

The Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020). In the summer of 2020, CASEL released a roadmap for reopening schools after the COVID-19 closings and based it on “four SEL critical practices to foster the competencies and learning environments that students and adults need to reunite, renew, and thrive” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020, July, p. 3). Three of the four practices relate directly to this project and what we as a group want to continue working for: develop relationships and plan for SEL; create space for adults to connect and be supported in both their well being and their professional

development; and create safe, supportive, and equitable classrooms that promote academic and SEL growth for all students.

While many school divisions, including my own, have a commitment to SEL, making it a priority in the classroom can be challenging for those unfamiliar with the principles. Our school employs regular activities (primarily through an online organization called Second Step) with small groups of students in an advisory community setting to address SEL topics such as goal setting strategies, managing relationships and social settings, and managing emotions and reducing stress. The findings of this study support programs such as these to help teachers with a curriculum that explicitly addresses SEL topics. Alzahrani et al. (2019), discussed the importance of positive relationships between teachers and students in developing their social and emotional competence. Children are more likely to engage in positive classroom behaviors when they feel supported by their teachers. From my experience working with colleagues over the past nearly three decades, many of the teachers who complain most about student behaviors are those who are not invested in developing SEL and building relationships. We should continue to provide and require programs and curriculum that prioritize SEL and build a culture of community in our schools.

From my own observations and conversations in recent years, some staff members don't fully buy into the program and may not spend as much time digging into the topics with their advisory groups. Teachers who believe in the importance of SEL seem to not only spend more time on these lessons, but report more positively about the time spent on them with students. I would like to see us utilize some of those who are having positive experiences as leaders in continuing to develop our social and emotional learning curriculum.

Poulou (2017) surveyed 98 teachers about their own emotional intelligence as well as their students and 308 eleven year old students about their own emotional and/or behavioral difficulties. There was a significant, positive association between teachers' self rated emotional intelligence and their closeness in student-teacher relationships. Teachers' comfort with social and emotional learning was also a factor associated with closeness. Correlations were also found between reported relationship closeness between students and teachers and the students' behavior. "When a classroom climate lacks conflictual relationships, students present less emotional and behavioral difficulties" and see better academic outcomes (p. 86). This is a complicated connection, but those teachers who rely less on compliance and authoritarian control in the classroom and instead prioritize social and emotional well being for both themselves and their students may be more likely to see positive outcomes both in academic achievement and student behavior.

The closing of school buildings due to COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 brought into stark relief the differences between classrooms that prioritized social and emotional wellness and relationships, and those that focused primarily on compliance and academic standards. As classrooms transitioned to emergency versions of virtual and distance learning, those where the teachers had committed time and effort to building relationships stood a better chance of continuing to connect, no matter the setting. Now that schools have reopened in some form, for us, in a hybrid format, the challenge has been to build new relationships with students we see once a week or only via a webcam or on screen icon.

In a pilot study in 2017, Walton and Hibbard found a negative relationship between teachers' time in education and their understanding of children's social and emotional competency. This suggests that early career teachers may be better equipped to not only

understand but to value social and emotional development and wellness in their students. As generational gaps seem to exist in both emotional intelligence as well as willingness and ability to adapt to rapid changes in education, more research is needed to explore how to not only encourage our younger teachers to be confident in their approach to education, but to take leadership roles and share their expertise and enthusiasm. Instead of “age-shaming” a newer teacher, those of us who are considered veterans should acknowledge that we all can learn from each other and make space for new voices. Early years teachers hold insight and expertise that should not be disregarded because of their relative inexperience. Their passion and empathy for their students and each other holds promise for effecting real change and reminding veteran teachers of their own moral purpose. To ignore their input and perspective is to continue to struggle with outdated methods and misplaced priorities that don’t value what really matters—relationships.

Given the rapid and often painful changes in the school system in 2020, we have a lot to unpack and learn about how we have managed and continue to meet the challenges. The school closings due to COVID-19 illuminated the importance of relationships in schools between students and teachers, peers, teachers and administrators. Depending on each other from a distance made it more clear where the weak points are between and among us. We have to examine and explore new ways to develop, strengthen, and maintain connections with individuals and communities even when we might not have ever met in person. It is likely that some students and their families will opt to remain in a virtual school model even as many schools find ways to reopen in person. The teachers in this study found validation for their priorities when the relationships they had built from September to March sustained their virtual classrooms during those final and uncertain months of the 2019-2020 school year. Some

educators will need to reevaluate their philosophies as it has become more painfully obvious in these times that they cling to outdated ideas of what matters and what their role is with learners. Perhaps this crisis can convince those who have resisted making changes and relinquishing “control”. Research is warranted to document changes that may be occurring in school systems that were catalyzed by the COVID-19 closings, even if they had been long needed. Changes like focusing on SEL and ensuring equitable access to resources, both physical and technological, can lead to improved outcomes for our students. For teachers in the early and formative stages of their career, induction supports such as reflective communities that build on shared values and attend to relevant issues including social and emotional learning for both students and staff could be transformative in their professional practice and personal well being.

Conclusions

“The power of narrative and dialogue as contributors to reflective awareness in teachers and students is that they provide opportunities for deepened relations with others and serve as springboards for ethical action” (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 8).

This project has not only told the story of myself and seven early career teachers as we formed a reflective community, but it amplified the participants’ voices to illuminate what matters most to them: relationships. The narrative methodology became a means to explore our stories and compose a new story, our story, together (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Huber et al., 2013). As I met with the group, listened to their stories, and wrote and rewrote our story, it became clear that the key findings in the study were built on the foundation of relationships. The seven teachers who participated with me made it obvious that they genuinely cared for the social and emotional well being of their students, wanted to build strong relationships with them, depended on strong peer relationships, and deeply appreciated the safe space provided by our

group to listen and be heard. None of these findings exist alone, but all center on relationships. In 1993, Kathy Carter wrote about the role of stories in the study of teaching and said, “A story, in other words, is a theory of something. What we tell and how we tell it is a revelation of what we believe” (p. 9). Our story, our theory, reveals the power of relationships in our lives.

In 1991, Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings edited and contributed to Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education. This compilation of essays included a paragraph by Nel Noddings that summed up this project nearly 30 years before I carried it out.

“Schools should become places in which teachers and students live together, talk to each other, reason together, take delight in each other’s company...teachers should be concerned first and foremost with the kind of people their charges are becoming...when schools focus on what really matters in life, the cognitive ends we are now striving toward in such painful and artificial ways will be met as natural culminations of the means we have wisely chosen” (p. 169).

Now, after a year working in community with the other participants, I find both hope and humility in our project. Hope, because these seven young teachers continue to inspire me with their passion and empathy for each other and their students. Humility, because I acknowledge that they need each other far more than they need anything I can provide. Together, we have begun a journey toward transformation. I hope that as we continue to meet and build our relationships and reflective practice, we “may even learn some things about how to live and invent our lives, lessons that can lead us to a more moral and compassionate life (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 94). Moral purposes are not only critical to a sustainable professional practice, but accessing those moral rewards can support us through challenging circumstances (Day & Gu, 2010; Santoro, 2018).

I planned this project as action research on my own practice as an instructional coach and teacher leader. As a group, we plan to move forward with collaborative action research that seeks to deliberately impact our classroom practices and better support each other and our students. “Doing classroom research changes teachers and the teaching profession from the inside out, from the bottom up, through changes in teachers themselves. And therein lies the power” (Bissex & Bullock, 1987, as cited by Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1991, p. 22). Action research is a long term, iterative process, and the work started by this group continues as we work to transform ourselves and our practice. Our next steps begin with developing a system of peer observations to gain more insight into each others’ practice and to support each other through inquiry in our own practice(s). As we collaborate to understand and establish professional practices built on the values that match our philosophies of teaching, we can remain moralized in our work and committed to our profession.

For me, telling the story of my experiences and this project has been an opportunity to bear witness to parts of my story as I find myself “unwilling to dissolve into darkness” (Le Guin, 1980, as cited in Huber et al., 2013, p. 214) in this phase of my professional life. This project has been part of a personal journey toward making sense of the past thirty years and figuring out what parts of myself to carry on with. In telling my story as part of this project, I found myself revisiting parts of my history that I had not really examined before. Toni Morrison once described memoir writing as “a kind of literary archeology: on the basis of some information and a little guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that those remains imply” (as cited in Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 10). There has been more than a little memoir here as I dug through my history, looking for nuggets of truth and treasure.

The last word, for now

“...we may be able to empower the young to create and re-create a common world--and in cherishing it, in renewing it, discover what it signifies to be free” (Greene, 1988, p. 23).

“What gives me hope is that it seems like a lot of the newer teachers are really inspired to teach. They have so much energy. It gives me hope seeing the kind of passion they have entering their careers. You know it's the number one thing that gets kids inspired to learn is knowing you have an energetic and passionate teacher who cares about you. I haven't come across a single teacher my age where I felt like they don't really belong here. It just radiates off of them. And that gives me hope. I've really been inspired by kids my age--teachers doing it for the first time and really enjoying it” (interview with Chad on May 28, 2020).

Me too, Chad. Me too.

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Appendix A

Researcher reflective journal--possible formats

- Narrative--write short descriptions of an event or day
- Structured reflection on a specific situation--respond to specific prompts such as:
 - what happened?
 - how did I respond?
 - why do I think this happened in this way?
 - what could I do differently next time to change the outcome?
- Structured reflection on a specific time frame (such as a week):
 - What went well this week--where did I do my best?
 - What is one place I could have done better?
 - What are my goals for next week?
- Double entry journal:
 - Left column--observations or description of one or more events/situations
 - Right column--responses to that event (can include drawings, questions, as well as descriptions of emotional and verbal responses)

Appendix B

Initial Interview Protocol—To be conducted around or before the beginning of the school year.

This is a combination of specific questions and potential probes to elicit additional information.

The interview will be audio and/or video recorded and notes will be taken during the interview.

This is a semi-structured interview and may vary somewhat based on participant and interviewer

interactions. The goal of this interview is to establish background information on the

participants' history, philosophy of teaching, concerns, goals, prior experience with induction,

and comfort level with participating in a community of practice.

History and personal teacher identity

1. Tell me about why you became a teacher—what led you to this career?
 - a. Your own school experiences
 - b. College--describe teacher preparatory program
 - c. Other work experiences
 - d. Role models
 - e. Motivation
2. How would you describe your personal philosophy of teaching?
 - a. Goals
 - b. Students
 - c. Concerns
3. What gives you hope about education and teaching?

Create a Workline

What are some of the significant events of your teaching career so far--put them on a timeline

(provide paper already set up for this)

4. What is your teaching experience before this year?
 - a. What have been some of your successes?
 - i. Activities/lessons
 - ii. Students
 - iii. personal
 - b. What about challenges—where did you struggle the most?
 - i. Specific example(s)
 - ii. Why?

Support provided

5. What types of induction support did you experience as a new teacher?
 - a. Pre-service week
 - b. Mentoring
 - c. Administration
 - d. Colleagues
6. What supports have you found beneficial?
 - a. How/why have they been helpful?
7. Are there any supports provided that you have found unhelpful or even harmful?
 - a. How/why have they been unhelpful?
8. What do you think could be done to better support new teachers?

This Year

9. Do you have any specific professional goals this year?
10. What is an area of strength that you would like to build on?

Reflective Community of Practice

11. Have you participated in a professional community--a group of teachers who meet to discuss concerns, develop solutions, and evaluate results?
12. What issues would you be interested in addressing through such a community?
13. What concerns do you have about participating in a community of practice?

Appendix C

Community of Practice Meeting Protocols

Much of this is based on ideas and examples in *The Power of Protocols* (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013).

1. Meeting 1, September 2019 (one hour maximum)
 - a. Introductions: name, role, years experience, one sentence reflection on the word ‘community’ (10 minutes)
 - b. Explanation of the goals of the group and answer questions (both as a community of practice and as research for my dissertation project) (5-10 minutes)
 - c. Norm-setting for the group meetings (10 minutes)
 - d. Explanation of use of protocols and today’s protocol (5 minutes)
 - e. Activity: participants review their workline that reflects “remembered experiences of peaks and troughs in their professional lives (Day & Gu, 2010, p. 52) (5 minutes)
 - f. Pair-share: discuss one or two events from your workline with a peer (5 minutes)
 - g. Closing Go-round: 30 seconds each to share what they hope to get out of the group (5 minutes)
2. Meeting 2, November 2019 (one hour maximum)
 - a. Postcard opener: each participant picks from a selection of images and explains how it represents their day/week/month at work (10 minutes)
 - b. Review norms and today’s protocol (5 minutes)
 - c. Tuning protocol: one participant shares a problem or idea and the others respond and discuss (40 minutes)

- i. Presenter shares the problem or idea under development with supporting documents and background information; others do not speak (10 minutes)
 - ii. Response: others share a reaction that is either warm or cool while the presenter does not speak but takes notes of which comments to respond back to (10 minutes)
 1. Warm reactions make notes of the strengths of how the presenter described and/or approaches the problem
 2. Cool reactions focus on problems and may be in the form of questions
 - iii. Reaction: presenter reacts to some/all of the responses to further explain their thinking (others are silent) (5 minutes)
 - iv. Conversation about the problem or idea (10 minutes)
 - v. Debriefing: reflect on the process and how the protocol was useful (5 minutes)
- d. Closing go around: 30 seconds to share an example of growth/success (5 minutes)

Additional meetings will be planned for January, March, and May. The protocols for these will be developed with reflection on the process and participants up to that point.

Appendix D

Final Interview Protocol—This interview will be conducted near the end of the school year.

Participants will have been engaged in a reflective community of practice during that time. This is a combination of specific questions and potential probes to elicit additional information. The interview will be audio and/or video recorded and notes will be taken during the interview. This is a semi-structured interview and may vary somewhat based on participant and interviewer interactions. The goal of this interview is to elicit information on the participants' involvement in a reflective community and how it supported their professional practice and personal well being.

Current status

1. How was your year?
 - a. Students
 - i. Academic
 - ii. Behavioral
 - b. Workload
 - c. Personal life
2. What challenges did you face?
3. What are some of your successes this year?

Workine

4. What, if anything, would you add to your timeline of significant events in your career from this year?

Goals

5. Do you recall what your goal(s) was at the beginning of the year? If so, what was it? (if not--do you want me to remind you?)

6. In what ways have you met that goal(s)?
7. What obstacles have there been to make that goal difficult?

Support

8. What types of support have you had this school year?
9. What has been helpful--in what way?
10. What has been unhelpful--why?

Community of practice

11. You've been participating in a small group community of practice--tell me about that.
 - a. What are the goals of the community?
 - b. What has been your role in the community?
 - c. What usually goes on when you meet?
 - d. What issues has the group worked on?
 - e. How has the community served to support your practice?
 - f. How could the experience be improved to better support you and others?

Moving forward

12. What goals do you have for the next school year?
13. What type(s) of support do you want or need to help achieve those goals?
14. What gives you hope about education and teaching?

Appendix E

Consent Form

RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

STUDY'S TITLE: The experience of early career teachers engaged in a collaborative community of reflective practice as a model of induction and professional development

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the experience of early career teachers with induction and participation in a collaborative community of reflective practice. The goal of this research is to better understand and support early career teachers. The study serves as a dissertation project with VCU's School of Education. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are in your first five years of teaching.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT

If you decide to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form after you have had all your questions answered and understand what will happen to you. Participation in this will involve the following:

- Two interviews: One interview will be conducted at or before the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year and a second near the end of the school year. Each interview should last 45-60 minutes and will be scheduled at a time convenient to you. In the first interview, questions will relate to your thoughts about your experiences as a new teacher. Additional questions will be asked relating to your background, how you came to be a teacher, and what your thoughts are about teaching. The second interview will focus on the events of the school year and your participation in the community of practice. The individual interviews will be recorded and copies as well as researcher notes of these recordings will be provided to each participant for review and accuracy confirmation. No identifying information will be included in either the recordings or the notes.
- Group meetings: Participants will meet every other month for an hour in a reflective and collaborative community of practice. The goals of this group are twofold--to support the participants in their practice and to develop protocols for using this type of group for induction support for new teachers. The meetings will be audio recorded for verification of researcher notes but not transcribed and the recordings will not be published. Researcher notes will not include identifying information.
- Classroom observations: Participants in the group (including the researcher) will conduct peer observations of classroom practice. These observations may be recorded for verification of researcher notes but they will not be transcribed and the recordings will not be published. Researcher notes will not include identifying information.
- Collaborative review of researcher notes and narratives for confirmation as requested.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

It is unlikely that you will experience any risks or discomforts from your participation in this study. However, sometimes talking about personal experiences and thoughts can be difficult, and

you do not have to disclose any information that makes you uncomfortable. You may request to skip questions or stop the interview at any time should you choose to do so. You may also choose to opt out of participating in group discussions or other components of the study if you choose.

BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS

It is possible that the information that you share during the individual interview and/or group discussion may benefit you by increasing your awareness and understanding of your experiences. It is also possible that future programs could be developed to support early career teachers using understanding gained from your interview responses. Participating in the community of practice provides opportunities for professional support and reflection that can improve experiences for you and your students. Your participation in the group will serve to develop a model of induction support and professional development that could support not only yourself but other teachers. The peer observation component has the potential for benefit of improved professional practice to both the observer and the observed teacher.

COSTS

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend in the interview.

COMPENSATION

Participants will be awarded professional development credit for their participation. The peer observations and group participation may be used to meet existing school wide requirements.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Potentially identifiable information about you will be kept separate from notes and recordings of interviews, meetings, and observations. Recordings will be kept by the researcher for verification purposes and may be reviewed by the involved participant(s) upon request. Your name will be replaced by a pseudonym on field notes kept by the researcher. Data is being collected only for research purposes. Access to all data will be limited to the researcher and participants. Signed consent forms will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Since this study is part of dissertation work, findings may be presented at meetings or published in papers, and may inform future research. The study site and participants will be represented with pseudonyms in papers and presentations.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study. Your participation in this study and in each component of this study is strictly voluntary.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, now or in the future contact:

Donia E. Spott
spottde@vcu.edu

OR

Faculty Advisor

Jesse Senechal, PhD

senechaljt@vcu.edu

CONSENT

I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing to in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.

Participant name printed

Participant signature

Date

Appendix F

Recruitment Email Text

I hope you have had a restful summer and are ready for the new school year. As you may know, I'm a Ph.D candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University and am working on my doctoral dissertation. For my research, and as part of my job as an instructional coach at our school, I am forming a reflective community of practice for teachers in their first five years of professional practice. I'm hoping that you will consider taking part in this opportunity for professional collaboration and support.

This is a voluntary program that will be compensated with professional development credit and can help meet your DL421 requirements for 2019-2020. You may choose to participate in any, all, or none of the components of the program. The program will involve the following:

- Individual interviews at the beginning and end of the school year
- Group meetings every other month to reflect together on professional issues that participants are facing
- Peer observations (this meets the DL421 requirements)

I will be using the information from these components to write narratives about the participants' experiences. Pseudonyms will be used for participants and the school in any papers and presentations using the information. Please see the attached consent form for more information.

Please give this some serious thought and let me know if you are interested or if you have any questions about the study. I will be available the teacher work week to talk in person.

Sincerely,

Donia Spott

Appendix G

Table 1

Participant information

Participant pseudonym	Years of teaching experience prior to 2019-2020	Subject(s)	Grade(s)	Other information
Carol	4	History	6	Career switcher
Chad	2	World history, Civics	8	
Charlotte	1	World Languages, French	6, 7	Career switcher
Erin	0	Math	6	Special education
Robert	3	Health and physical education	6, 7, 8	
Sally	2	Math	7	Special education
Sarah	3	Art	6	In masters degree program for special education certification