

ARTICLE

Research Assistants' Experiences of Participating in a Partnership Learning Community for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Calls for enhancing student engagement in higher education have offered strong arguments for student-faculty partnerships in teaching and learning. Drawing on a conceptual model of partnership learning communities (PLC), we investigate the experiences of two undergraduate research assistants (co-authors of this paper) who participated in a PLC within a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research study. In this paper, we use data from transcripts of four research conversations occurring over a three-year period. Evidence of research assistants' experiences was co-analyzed using benefits and challenges identified in the literature. Our findings reveal that our PLC helped these research assistants develop student agency and provided opportunities for reflection on learning. We conclude that participating in our PLC helped the two research assistants develop deeper pedagogical relationships amongst themselves and with the faculty partners. Moreover, our study directly contributed to the development of our bachelor of education degree program while ensuring students were partners in that process.

KEYWORDS

partnership learning community, research assistants

In this paper, we investigate the experiences of two undergraduate research assistants (Ashlyn and Ranee) who participated in a partnership learning community (PLC) within a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research study. The SoTL study is part of a longitudinal study focused on designing and implementing high-impact practices across an entire bachelor of education degree program in order to support undergraduate education students in their process of connecting theory and practice. This larger SoTL study provided the opportunity to develop a PLC because the research assistants, Ashlyn and Ranee, were involved as co-researchers in gathering data, analyzing data, and disseminating the results of the SoTL study during the years of their contracts. For the purposes of this co-authored paper, we use transcripts of four research conversations between the researchers

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(Gladys and Kevin) and research assistants (Ashlyn and Rane) that occurred within the PLC as we analyzed the data gathered in the SoTL study. In this context, Ashlyn and Rane are the student partners, the participants, and the co-authors. Our research question is: ***How did the undergraduate research assistants (Ashlyn and Rane) experience a PLC embedded in a SoTL study that focused on the co-design of high-impact practices within courses and school placements of a new bachelor of education degree program?***

To better understand the experiences of the two undergraduate research assistants who participated in a PLC, we present the context of the SoTL research study in which the PLC is embedded.

CONTEXT OF THE SOTL RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY KEVIN AND GLADYS

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has contributed much to our understanding of teaching and learning within post-secondary institutions. Boyer (1990), one of the first scholars in this field, recognizes the significant role teaching has in the academy and proposes that teaching is not a “routine function, tacked on, something almost anyone can do. When defined as scholarship, teaching both educates and entices future scholars” (p. 23). The scholarship of teaching can occur when evidence-based inquiry is shared, is subject to critique, and contributes new knowledge on teaching within a discipline (Hutchings, 2002; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Kreber, 2001). Similar to other SoTL studies (Cambridge, Kaplan, & Suter, 2001; Felten, 2013; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; McKinney, 2004), our evidence-based SoTL research study is systematically focused on student learning.

Our Canadian undergraduate post-secondary institution includes a focus on teaching and learning informed by scholarship in its mission statement, and SoTL research is strongly supported. Our undergraduate students participate in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), one of the largest research projects in North America that considers undergraduate students’ experiences of best educational practices. Like other Canadian universities, our university administrators use the results of this survey to assess academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, collaborative learning, and supportive campus environments. As faculty members and researchers, Kevin and Gladys have drawn on related research using data from NSSE to inform the design of our new bachelor of education degree program. In particular, we used Kuh’s (2008) research that identifies 10 high-impact practices that contribute to higher retention rates, deeper student engagement, and improved student achievement: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning and community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects. Our research is strongly embedded in SoTL because we engage in evidence-based inquiry into our undergraduate students’ experiences of learning and because we implement high-impact practices programmatically within a new Canadian degree program in teacher education. We are using qualitative research methodologies (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994) to investigate the education students’ experiences of high-impact practices and links between theory and practice. The SoTL research project is ongoing and involves 53 participants. Data collected and analyzed includes class assignments and yearly individual interviews.

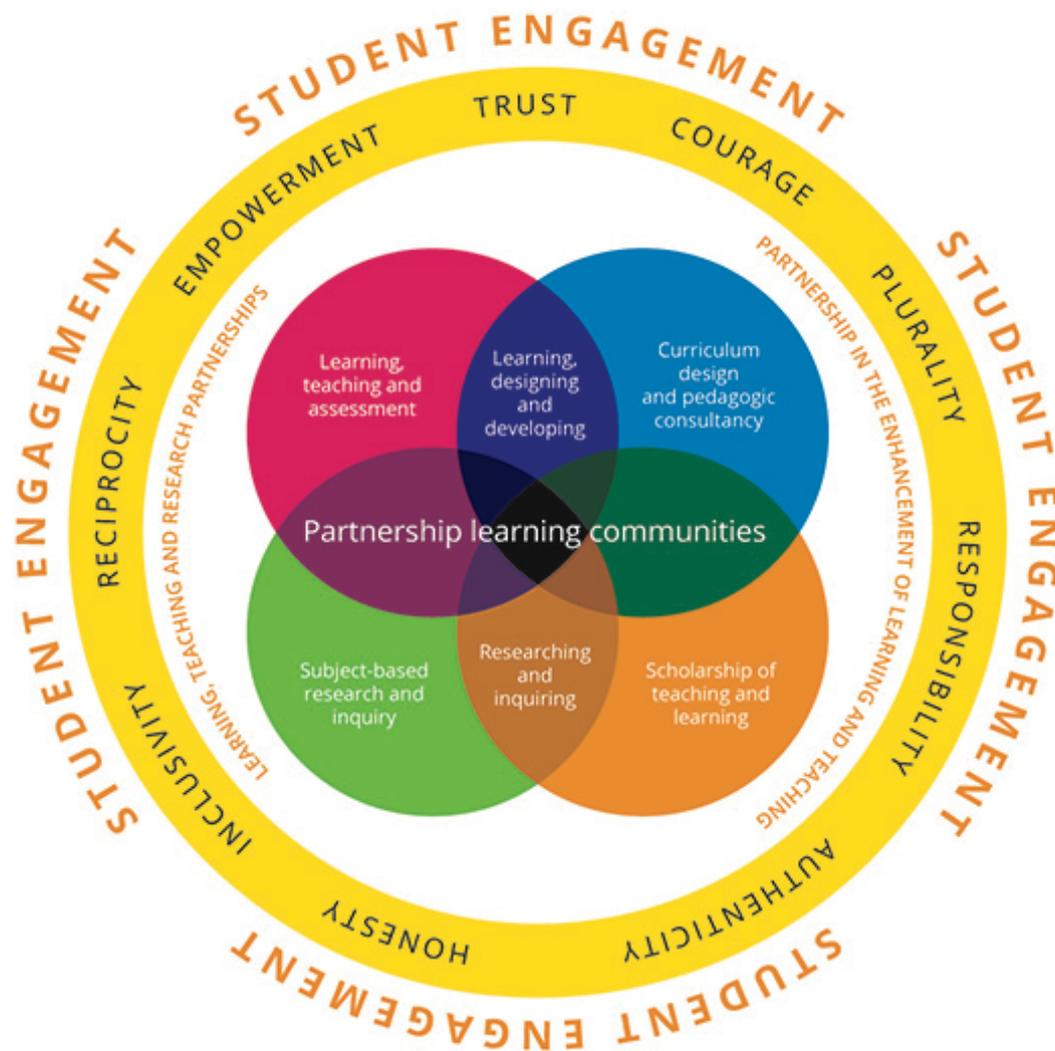
Within this research context, and in response to emerging research in SoTL in the area of student-faculty interaction, we became interested in students as research partners. We noticed that our research assistant, Raneer, was highly engaged in the data analysis and offered unique a perspective through a student lens. During an early-stage conference presentation and the dissemination of research results, she contributed to and shared responsibility for the findings of the study. As faculty researchers, we wanted to better understand her experiences of participating in the conference presentations and invited her to reflect on such experiences during an interview. Her insights prompted us to consider the role of students as research partners. Specifically, we were struck by the consistencies between how she described her experiences and how Healey et al. (2014) describe a PLC as a collaboration with students as partners to create a genuine and inclusive community of practice.

While involving students as research partners is suggested as one of the five principles of good practice in SoTL (Felten, 2013), engaging students in SoTL research is rare as students are usually the subjects of research conducted by faculty members. In addition, there are few studies that examine the experiences of students working with faculty members on SoTL projects (Healey et al., 2014). The research we present in this paper explores the experiences of two research assistants participating in a PLC and was conducted by two faculty members and two student partners. The research is strongly embedded in the SoTL study described above.

STUDENTS AS PARTNERS IN A PARTNERSHIP LEARNING COMMUNITY

Healey et al. (2014) present a model of Partnership Learning Communities (PLCs) that is focused on collaborative research projects with students and faculty. They believe that such collaboration is most successful when it is reciprocal and suggest that creating a true partnership involving co-learning, co-inquiring, co-developing, co-designing, and co-creating can have many benefits for both students and professors. In order to best develop reciprocal relationships where student researchers are deeply invested, students should be active participants in the learning process, and faculty partners should emphasize that the partnership is a process of engagement, not a product. Drawing from the literature on Students as Partners, Healey et al. identify authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility as values that underpin their conceptual model. Their model has been adapted in the framework (see Fig. 1) published by The Higher Education Academy (2015).

Figure 1: Students as Partners in a partnership learning community (The Higher Education Academy, 2015).



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Researchers have found that students benefit in many ways when participating in PLCs. Mihans, Long, and Felten (2008) suggest that extensive student growth and sustained engagement occurs when students are given opportunities to work on research on topics that are directly related to them. Healey et al. (2014) found that by including student researchers in partnerships that value authenticity, inclusivity, and reciprocity, students are more likely to remain engaged and embrace the perspectives of and learning opportunities from those around them. They suggest that through learning, teaching, and assessment, students are actively engaged in their personal learning as a type of partner. It is through these and extended opportunities for partnership with professors, when “students are given a significant amount of autonomy, independence, and choice” (p. 3), that heightened engagement is developed. In many cases, “partnership raises awareness of the implicit

assumptions—about each other, and about the nature of teaching and learning” (p. 12), which further engages students and promotes investment in their own learning and future experiences. Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011) agree that having an active and participatory role in research about their learning enhances student commitment and engagement. They suggest that when students begin critically analyzing what they are learning, they are likely to further investigate who the learning is for, resulting in personal growth and development. This shift from passivity to agency encourages students to reflect metacognitively on their development. These researchers found that in working collaboratively with faculty, students gain the opportunity to obtain a deeper understanding of learning. By removing themselves from the direct experiences of learning and metacognitively reflecting on their learning experiences and practices, students are better able to understand and articulate their needs and the needs of their peers. Furthermore, Bovill et al. suggest that the unique opportunity for students to work with faculty inspires students to further invest in their learning, and again, promotes engagement. This collaborative process challenges students to think critically about their own processes and promotes metacognition surrounding learning and teaching styles. This direct impact upon students’ personal understandings has the potential to not only allow students to shape their own future learning experiences at a metacognitive level, but also to provide valuable feedback to professors.

Participating in PLCs offers many benefits for professors. Mihans et al. (2008) suggest that once students have become comfortable working with and contributing to discussions with professors, they provide strong insight and are personally attached to the research. These researchers propose that as a research project involving students as partners progresses and rapport is built between the student researchers and faculty, a community of trust is strengthened and professors become more comfortable trusting the opinions of student researchers, who prove to have valuable contributions. Felten et al. (2013) suggest that “partnerships in curriculum development, teaching, and SoTL provide powerful opportunities for students and faculty to collaborate in the creation of new disciplinary, institutional, and pedagogic knowledge” (p. 1). Through faculty-student partnerships, the nature of the classroom can be altered and additional confidence can be built. Bovill et al. (2011) propose that when “staff engage in dialogue with students and one another about learning expectations, pedagogical rationales are clarified” (p. 5), and a better course or program can be developed.

There is strong evidence that participating in PLCs is beneficial to both students and professors. In creating their model for PLCs, Healey et al. (2014a) recommend creating experiences in which students are consulted and involved as participants and partners. They identify four main ways of engaging in partnerships: subject-based research and inquiry; curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy; learning, teaching, and assessment; and the practices of SoTL (see Fig. 1). Two of these are relevant to our research: first, curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy and second, the practices of SoTL.

As students engage in collaborative research, there are often opportunities to assist in reconstructive or supplemental curriculum design. Bovill et al. (2011) look specifically at the potential advantages of including students as co-creators of both course design and curricula. They argue that “although much educational development focuses on pedagogical technique, course design might be the most important barrier to quality teaching and learning in higher education” (p. 4). Mihans et al. (2008) investigate the importance of

student-assisted curriculum design in redeveloping a course that is unsuccessful, and the likelihood of regaining and maintaining success as a result of student input. In their research, they found that the students were more likely to focus on the practical, while the professors preferred a theory-based approach. In exploring this discrepancy between student learning preferences and the required curricular materials, the professors and students were able to develop a program that satisfied the needs of both, while still accounting for diverse learners. This personal engagement from the students presented a unique lens through which to view the process of curricular design.

At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, student research and partnerships with faculty play an important role in promoting student engagement and personal investment in learning. In working within SoTL, a level of personal and intellectual commitment is required, and as a result, students involved in the research often undergo significant growth and deep personal reflection (Allin, 2014). Opportunities for students to collaborate with their professors provides a unique means for students to gain a deeper understanding of topics either outside or within their personal fields of study. The relationship between student researchers and faculty working directly within their own personal academic fields is particularly impactful, as the experience provides students with a sense of autonomy and fosters a deeper relationship and commitment to the research itself. For student researchers, the importance of exploring areas of personal interest or significance has greater meaning and influence on personal learning and understanding (Healey et al., 2014a).

SoTL provides opportunities for students and faculty to engage in and collaborate on research projects with one another at a reciprocal level (Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, n.d.). Felten et al. (2013) and Allin (2014) discuss the collaborative nature of SoTL and the transformative potential it offers for both student and professor researchers. Students have been better able to share their personal feedback on specific programs and practices, which has led to better programmatic insight as a result of SoTL.

While research about the benefits of PLCs seems promising, Allin (2014) cautions that reciprocal relationships can be hard to build and require a cultural change in academic settings. She questions whether or not true collaboration can be achieved as a result of the role of influence within the post-secondary system. In undertaking research with professors, she believes that students are at risk of being less valued. In addition, students themselves may struggle with the influence of power within research relationships as the professors with whom they are working may also be responsible for grading their work or reviewing their ideas. Engaging students as partners seems to be a complex endeavor. In this paper, we co-investigated the experiences of two undergraduate research assistants, Ashlyn and Raneé, as they participated in a PLC focused on the co-design of high-impact practices within a new degree program. Drawing on the literature on student experiences in PLCs, we attended to the benefits of student growth, sustained engagement, agency, personal investment in learning, and increased opportunities for metacognition. We also were interested to know if the challenges noted in the literature involving power relationships and an exclusive emphasis on practice were experienced by Ashlyn and Raneé. Qualitative methodology was used to provide insight into the experiences of our two student-partner participants.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodologies (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and specifically case study methods (see Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013), were used to investigate experiences of two research assistants who participated in a PLC; these two research assistants are also co-authors of this paper. Raneer, a student in the second year of the program, joined the research team in 2013 as a research assistant and was involved in the longitudinal SoTL study of a cohort of students in the first year of the program. Raneer remained part of the team until the completion of her degree in 2016. Ashlyn, a student in a subsequent cohort of students, has participated as a member of the research team since 2015. Beginning in 2013, we, the two lead faculty researchers and the two student researchers, engaged in bi-weekly collaborative research conversations and recorded and kept research notes about our experiences.

For the purposes of this paper, the data included transcripts of four research conversations between the researchers (Gladys and Kevin) and research assistants (Ashlyn and Raneer). Evidence of the two student partners' experiences was analyzed using benefits and challenges identified in the literature. Specifically, we attended to emerging themes that related to student growth, sustained engagement, personal investment in learning, agency, increased opportunities for metacognition, power relationships, and an emphasis on practice. Consistent with analysis methods identified by Patton (2002) and Strauss (1987), the transcripts were first coded individually by Gladys and Ashlyn according to emerging themes that related to our research focus on participation in a PLC. Then, our co-constructed academic and professional conference notes and individual research notes were used to refine the interpretations as all members of the PLC reviewed the analysis, collaboratively adjusted the codes, and wrote findings together. Several themes emerged in the data that provided insight into benefits and challenges: developing student agency, developing relationships, and providing opportunities for reflection.

FINDINGS

In our analysis, we focused on student growth, sustained engagement, personal investment in learning, agency, increased opportunities for metacognition, power relationships, and an emphasis on practice. Our key findings of this case study were that our PLC helped research assistants to develop student agency, to develop relationships with the researchers, and provided opportunities for reflection on learning.

Developing student agency

Research on Students as Partners suggests that student agency is a key part of PLCs (Felten, 2013; Healey et al., 2014, 2016.). Three strategies were identified as contributing to the development of student agency for Ashlyn and Raneer: understanding the SoTL research context, understanding the research literature, and contributing to knowledge. At the beginning of their involvement in the SoTL project, Ashlyn and Raneer were each asked to read the data previously collected. It was evident that this process provided them with a deep understanding of the study and that they were able to make strong contributions to the analysis of the data. For example, Raneer commented on high-impact practices in the interview data:

With the fourth-year [students], there have been two things that have come up a lot,

the first one being, again, the seminars because we were asking them about the seminars. There is theory and practice but there is also that community of practice piece in there as well because they are talking about how that gave them a certain space where they are allowed to realize that they are not alone and learn from each other's experiences.

Links between data across the years were made by all four authors and conversations about such connections fostered a common understanding of the research. All authors were familiar with the data and were able to bring various perspectives to the data analysis. Indeed, a distributed expertise emerged as the authors had different experiences while gathering data. Ranee had conducted the interviews in a specific year and was able to offer insights about the data because of her robust understanding of it:

I think [the use of seminars] is really important. Okay, so this is what I have been trying to wrap my head around a little bit too because I am going to go back to second years and I am more familiar with that data, obviously.

One strength that both Ashlyn and Ranee had was the ability to provide specific examples of findings that contributed to the SoTL data analysis, as shown by how Ranee remembered participants' experiences: "I just thought it was so perfect about [how the seminars became] that challenging piece because the title to her journal entry was, 'Am I Closed-Minded?,' and she came out of a seminar going, 'Wow, I am closed-minded.'"

In joining and participating in the SoTL research project, Ashlyn and Ranee not only gained a deeper understanding of the data, but also became more comfortable in personally identifying with the literature. Through interpretation of the acquired data and ongoing conversations, Ranee identified an increased ability to make meaning of readings that may have previously been without context:

I have been doing a lot of reading on identity and the different identities that student teachers experience between being in university and being in the schools. . . . there is a disconnect between these two identities because they are not really talked about. . . . there are three different identities that students teachers need to develop over time.

Through personal analysis and comparative thinking, Ashlyn was able to recognize that her professional identity was strengthened as she became more familiar with various concepts through coursework, hands-on experiences, and the research. She commented, "I didn't realize at the time, and I think it is interesting because all the pieces are coming together between the research and between all of the classes." These realizations contributed to her investment in the research, as well as her personal pedagogies relating to the field of education. They also fostered Ranee's deeper understanding of how the literature and theory connect directly to current education practices:

Actually a lot of what I was reading was talking about [how those tensions between theory and practice] are necessary because if you are not challenging your belief, often you are just going to fall back and nobody is going to change. Education is

never going to change, everybody is just going to go back and teach the way they were taught or have these sort of unrealistic ideals and going into the realm of actually teaching and kind of being overwhelmed, right?

The SoTL data fostered deeper insight into the perceptions of teacher candidates of their own practice. Prior to the conducted seminars and facilitated discussions, teacher candidates were less cognizant of the influence that their past school history had on their teaching identity. Ranee reflected on the growth that she had seen various teacher candidates undergo:

I kind of guided them—especially with the second years, too —where I was like, “Okay, coming into university you had experiences from K to 12, and so you have some sort of idea of how you want to teach and what sort of teacher you want to be, and oftentimes people our age have been taught in a traditional way. Now we are pushing more student-directed, constructivist, inquiry-based, or whatever it is. How is that playing out in your classroom? Are you actually seeing that?” And so then they actually go, “You know? No.”

Ranee’s reflection fostered a better team understanding of how teacher candidates actively make theory and practice connections. In addition, it helped Ashlyn and Ranee enhance their own self-reflection on their own teaching practices. After hearing about the experiences of the teacher candidates in the study, Ranee reflected that she saw a significant growth in the candidates after participating in the program and through seminars: “They are learning in this different way and they are seeing it in a different way and I feel that they are almost taking on more, as a professional and as an individual.”

In addition to the strong professional identity evident in the SoTL interview data we were analyzing, Ashlyn reflected that her part in the research project played a significant role in helping her form a stronger teacher identity:

I think [being involved in the SoTL study] has helped influence the direction I am going in as a teacher, I think even getting to reflect on it to that room of people, getting to share with them a little bit about how I think it is positively driving my school career was really beneficial.

Through both the coding process of the longitudinal SoTL data and the SoTL interviews conducted with Gladys and Kevin, Ashlyn was better able to understand the important changes that she had undergone as a result of her understanding of community-based opportunities and the programmatic research focused on high-impact practices:

I am very biased in saying that I think our research is important because I believe in it I think it is really important and I think we can change things through the research, I hope, by being able to show [stakeholders] the role [research] plays. . . . I think, assuming that [stakeholders] can see what we are seeing, I think it has the opportunity to make a really, really big difference in the program moving forward.

As the longitudinal SoTL research progressed and changes were implemented in the

program, the impact on the teacher candidates became more significant. As the program grew and changed as a result of feedback gained through the research and interviews, teacher candidates received an increasingly enhanced learning experience. Ashlyn described her learning experience in the context of analyzing the impact of the high-impact practices on teacher candidates' learning:

[The research] is playing a really big role in determining my teaching identity and hopefully [is] helping create . . . [a] group of teachers who have these really passionate ideas, and these really forward ways of wanting to make teaching and learning really personable for the students.

Developing relationships

A second theme in participating in a PLC was the development of strong relationships. Throughout the course of the research, Ashlyn and Raneé identified a strengthening in both their ability to grow as teachers and individuals as a result of the relationships developed through the various research opportunities. In developing a deeper understanding of the themes and perspectives throughout the SoTL research analysis process, they were better able to identify the motivation behind the research and its inherent importance. Ashlyn reflected:

I am able to really relate to [Kevin's] passion. I think it is helping me understand and be more engaged in the science, because I know the roots of his passion and a lot of the things he is talking about . . . from the work that we have done. . . . I find that I relate much more easily to it, which maybe I wouldn't if I didn't have the background.

These realizations helped to strengthen personal investment and connection to the SoTL research. In addition, the themes and relationships developed through the SoTL research analysis prompted Ashlyn and Raneé to reflect on their own personal growth as teachers. Although she did not conduct the participant interviews, Ashlyn discussed how she was able to develop her personal and teaching identity as a result of interacting with teacher candidates' experiences when coding the interviews:

I have seen the growth in these other people. And then taking their growth and their understanding from when they first started their [school placement] and where they [are] now when we conducted these interviews . . . I think that has been really reassuring and help[ed] me feel comfortable, and knowing that definitely the knowledge we have is enough.

Through participating in the SoTL research project and identifying critical information from the recorded transcripts, Ashlyn was able to utilize the developed relationships in order to shape and further her personal experience as a result. In working with Gladys and Kevin, she gained confidence and thrived as a direct result of their ongoing support. Ashlyn discussed with Gladys the gradual shift that she felt in regards to her teacher identity:

You and Raneé have such a strong relationship that it was really reassuring, and it

made me feel really good about working towards having a similar relationship with you and Kevin. She really was able to rely on you, you are such strong mentors for her, so that was really exciting for me to have the prospect of being able to have that and grow towards that. . . . I think it has even been really, really inspiring for me to be able to work with you because I see a lot of the things that are important to you in your teaching. I think it has been a really big help and a big confidence-builder in being able to work with you and being able to see my identity—my teaching identity—grow through your influence.

As a result of these developed relationships gained through the research opportunities, Ashlyn underwent a significant transformation. Moving forward in completing her school placement, she was better able to understand the classroom environment and the importance of the high-impact practices we were implementing. This transformation directly contributed to her attention to the importance of meaningful relationships with partner teachers, supervisors, and her students and her ability to create these relationships. The PLC provided Ashlyn with a unique lens through which she could look at the impact that developing a strong relationship within the classroom can have. Although she had been instructed on the importance of relationships in her courses, it was through working with her professors in the PLC that Ashlyn was able to analyze the direct correlation between strong relationships and the success of teacher candidates in a classroom environment. The PLC also allowed Ashlyn to better understand why the high-impact practices that were being implemented were included and introduced in such ways. Before joining the PLC, Ashlyn struggled to grasp the importance and intentional nature of the incorporation of high-impact practices. Analyzing the research data allowed Ashlyn to guide and shape her own practice as a direct result of the research outcomes and understandings.

Providing opportunities for reflection on learning

A third theme in the data was the strengthening of the PLC when Ashlyn and Raneé were provided with opportunities to reflect on their own learning. One important shift was the development of Ashlyn and Raneé's identities as a result of the SoTL research. After critically analyzing the data, Ashlyn stated, "I feel more prepared in terms of confidence in what I think I am looking for [as a teacher]. . . . I have read and gained from the interviews". This understanding allowed Ashlyn to become comfortable with her identities as both a professional and as a researcher. Through the unique opportunities presented through the SoTL research, such as speaking at conferences, Ashlyn was given an untraditional platform through which to reflect on her experiences:

I think it was really quite validating for my own self-awareness and self-reflection as a teacher to be able to articulate what we are doing, and sharing that experience and sharing my own experience has been valuable in seeing that I am making the deep connections, and I am developing a really specific identity moving forward as a teacher. . . . it is helping me become more comfortable with what I want my time in the classroom to look like.

After spending such a significant amount of time working on the research project,

Ashlyn was able to identify the correlation between these experiences and her growth:

I think that being a researcher for both my teaching and my student identity, it clicks in with both of those, it is quite like a core piece . . . clicking into both of those and influencing both of those identities on their own.

These understandings helped to contribute not only to her perceived and actualized teaching identity, but also helped to shape the values and key learning strategies that she will take into the classroom moving forward.

Ashlyn and Raneé gained many additional understandings and insights that they would not have been able to experience had it not been for their participation in the PLC. In having the opportunity to explore the different aspects of classroom development and experiences through a filtered lens and at a distance, Ashlyn and Raneé were able to better understand which practices and values they most closely identified with. As a result of this, they were able to further their own understanding and were able to identify their growth in learning through their own experiences and the experiences of their peers who were participants in the longitudinal study. Ashlyn identified the deeper understanding that she gained through the research practices:

I think it has been really helpful, especially with looking at our research with the notion of place [community-based learning]. I think that has been extremely helpful for me, and I see that everywhere now. . . . I see that all the time now, whereas I think with our research, without the transcripts and the feedback that I have kind of seen from everyone else, [that] I would have probably missed that.

Both Ashlyn and Raneé identified that the research process was crucial to developing their deep understandings and furthering their teaching identities. As a result of this opportunity to look reflectively at the larger picture and to analyze the trials and successes of their peers, Ashlyn and Raneé gained invaluable understandings. Ashlyn has found that through her peers she has been better able to understand the importance of the high-impact practices and, as a result, has been better prepared moving forward:

I didn't really see it until I had the whole picture at the end. I think that has been really influential for me in preparing me for what I want my [school placement] to look like, as opposed to my other field experiences where they felt kind of separate.

The PLC provided the opportunity for Ashlyn and Raneé to engage in meaningful research and further explore their own interests and values. By working closely with Gladys and Kevin, they were able to develop a rapport. We also considered how these processes and advancements were supported and offer these recommendations:

- Set aside time for bi-weekly meetings.
- Engage in the co-collection and co-analysis of data alongside one another.
- Engage in, document, and analyze research conversations.
- Co-present at academic conferences and in professional contexts.

CONCLUSION

Our findings reveal the complexities of working within faculty-student partnerships. Productive strategies for participating in a PLC emerged through this research as we explicated the processes of developing student agency, developing relationships, and providing opportunities to reflect on personal learning.

The literature identifies student growth, sustained engagement, investment in students' own learning, agency, and increased opportunities for metacognition as benefits for students participating in PLCs. Both Ashlyn and Raneé were impacted by their participation in an engaging experience and an inclusive community. They have had a significant impact on the development of the program and have increased their personal understandings of effective professional practices and pedagogies through this reciprocal partnership.

In this case, the PLC thrived and allowed for meaningful growth for each of the partners. Despite the complexities that Ashlyn and Raneé faced as a result of their simultaneous participation in the bachelor of education program that they were investigating, and their personal investment in the project, they were each able to identify a positive significant shift in their pedagogies and identities as a result of their gained insights. They both found that they were passionate about the project and were better able to build meaningful relationships with faculty research partners. Additionally, they felt that their classroom and programmatic experience had been enriched and their personal pedagogies further developed. Their involvement in the research allowed them to grow significantly outside of the traditional parameters of a university experience.

The involvement of student researchers provided faculty partners with a unique and rich opportunity to strengthen programmatic perspectives through the student lens. The engagement of student partners in a PLC allowed a better understanding of the strengths and challenges of implementing high-impact practices. We conclude that participating in a PLC for learning and teaching in higher education helped the two research assistants develop deeper pedagogical relationships amongst themselves and with the faculty partners. Moreover, our study directly contributed to the development of our bachelor of education program while ensuring students were partners in that process.

This research was successfully reviewed according to Mount Royal University's research ethics committee guidelines.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Gladys Sterenberg is a Professor in the Department of Education at Mount Royal University, Canada. Her program of research is focused on relational ethics and can be described as encompassing three interrelated research interests: mathematics education, Indigenous ways of knowing, and overlapping communities of practice within teacher education.

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Dr. Kevin O'Connor is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education at Mount Royal University, Canada. His current research and publications are based on the synthesis of multi-sensory pedagogy and interdisciplinary curriculum through the integration of experiential and place-based learning, science field studies, and Indigenous education.

Ashlyn Donnelly is a fourth-year undergraduate student in the bachelor of education program with a minor in English at Mount Royal University. She has a strong interest in outdoor education and student literacy and enjoys volunteering with Calgary Reads and the Girl Guides of Canada.

Ranee Drader recently graduated from Mount Royal University with a bachelor of education degree with minors in science and humanities. In addition to her academic pursuits in the area of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, she is interested in outdoor education and working with at-risk youth.

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