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The Experiences of Cohort Membership in an Alternative Certification Program

by
Roxanne Sanchez

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Education

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Approval Page

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Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Roxanne Sanchez

Name

August 7, 2021

Date

Acknowledgments

From my earliest memories, I have wanted to achieve a doctoral degree, as the culmination of my education. I now see that this is only another of many new beginnings, as I am now tasked with using my knowledge to continue my sacred service. I start then by thanking God, Almighty, the ultimate scholar. I am grateful for the desire, ability, and means of learning. I dedicate my dissertation to my grandparents, who had the wisdom to instill a passion and love of learning in me. They have celebrated me at every stage of life and celebrate with me still. Pipo, Mima, Aby, and Abue, you are forever my North star, thank you. For Mara, my little one in heaven, I love you forever. Be proud, as I am always proud of you. To my parents, Silvia and Enrique, for their support and belief in my abilities and to my sister, Susy, whose faith in me is unwavering. Sister, you are my favorite people. To my husband, Adrian, who is my anchor, my protector, my soul mate, and my partner in all things. I was able to achieve my dreams when you came into my life. To my soul sisters, Yesy and Carm, without whom I could not “live”. To Sam, who guided me at the onset of this process and to Alyssa, who stood by me zoom after zoom, and saw me through to the end. Alyssa, I could not have finished this dream without you. To SQUAD: Jo, Lisa, Keith, Kayla, Wendy and Mo, for carrying me through both the darkest and most wonderful times of my life. Thank you, Mike for the strength of your words and for not letting me quit when I was on the verge. I would like to thank my tribe of women, whose love, strength, and leadership guide me always. Empowered women empower women. Finally, I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Dave and Dr. O. When I first began working with them, I was discouraged and ready to quit. Thank you for getting me back on track and seeing me through. I am forever grateful to all those who have come before me, all who are with me now and all who will come ahead.

Abstract

The Experiences of Cohort Membership in an Alternative Certification Program
Roxanne Sanchez, 2021: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: teacher shortage, alternative certification, cohort, certification, retention

Employing and retaining teachers has been a rising problem affecting employment at school districts. Nationwide school districts have noted high instances of teacher shortages and are finding it more difficult to fill positions with traditionally trained teachers. In the 2019-2020 school year, at a local district in South Florida, it was assessed that 56% of new teachers to the district were of a noneducation background or career changers.

Retention of this subgroup of teachers is pertinent to reducing teacher attrition, specifically within the school districts that most frequently employ them. Certificate expiration, due to not completing their certification requirements within the validity period of the temporary certificate is one noted issue of attrition among this subgroup of new teachers. Therefore, alternative certification programs are an important factor in preparing and retaining teachers. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and examine participants' experience of cohort membership in one specific alternative certification program, MINT 2.0 and how these relate to program completion. Results of the study could provide future program improvements. Wegner's *community of practice* and studies on cohorts served as the theoretical framework and foundation of the study. Using semistructured interviews, this qualitative study explored the experiences of MINT 2.0 program completers.

Results of the study showed that participants noted specific benefits of cohort membership that supported their progression in the program, completion and retention to the district. The results have implications for local, district programs the use of cohort models in various settings.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Employing and retaining teachers has been a rising problem affecting employment at school districts. Nationwide, school districts are noting high instances of teacher shortages and finding it more difficult to fill positions with traditionally trained teachers. In accordance with this fact, it was reported in the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), that universities are also experiencing drastically low numbers of students enrolled in traditional education degree tracks. The problem is two-fold. First, there has been the issue of finding qualified public-school teachers and second has been the issue of retaining them.

Local Problem

In the 2019-2020 school year, at a local district in South Florida, it was assessed that 56% of new teachers to the district were of a noneducation background or career changers (HR Information Technology, personal communication, August 13, 2019). In Florida, teachers on temporary certificates who do not complete their credentialing requirements within the 3-year validity period, are terminated, leading to higher levels of teacher attrition (Miami-Dade County Public Schools [M-DCPS], 2019b). With such a high number of noneducation teachers being employed by this district combined and a low number of alternative certification program completers, the issue of teacher retention then becomes pertinent to Human Resources personnel (C. Caldwell, personal communication, October 20, 2017). Retention of this subgroup of teachers is pertinent to reducing teacher attrition, specifically within the school districts that most frequently employ them. Certificate expiration, due to not completing their certification requirements within the validity period of the temporary certificate, is one noted issue of

attrition among this subgroup of new teachers (Florida Statutes, 2018).

Alternative certification programs are an important factor in preparing and retaining teachers. Some are university-based, referred to as Education Preparation Institutes, but can be costly. Another alternative is the Professional Development Certification Program (PDCP), offered by school districts. In some cases, such as in Miami, Florida, it is free of cost to the teacher and provides job-embedded support. It is the PDCP program that was the focus of this study and how to improve it to support new teachers, not only to stay in the profession, but to flourish as educators. Additional research and focus on alternative certification programs, specifically the school district alternative certification program (PDCP), could assist with program development and enhancements to assist teachers on temporary certificates, complete the requirements to attain professional certification status and retain employment. Additionally, further research into adult learning theory and best practices such as using cohorts and professional learning communities, laid the foundation for this study of the perceptions of cohorts in the MINT 2.0, alternative certification program in one local district.

MINT 2.0: A local Professional Development Certification Program (PDCP)

A new teacher to this local PDCP program is advised of the MINT 2.0 program upon hire through Instructional Staffing. Information regarding this alternative certification program is again presented at New Teacher Orientation, as this is the recommended program for teachers of this local district and is Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) approved. The program was developed to be relevant, and job embedded. It was also designed for teachers to make immediate adjustments to their practice and is free for full-time teachers of record (Miami-Dade County Public Schools,

2020). New teachers are encouraged to enroll in the program in the first 2 years of teaching. This enrollment period serves dual purpose as it is recognized that teachers in their first years are the most fragile and require the most support and the program requires a year and half to complete (Fry & Anderson, 2011). Enrollment in the last year of the validity period is not permitted, as the teacher would not have sufficient time to complete the requirements in time to upgrade to a professional certificate. Teachers will have their Statement of Eligibility reviewed and program eligibility is reviewed by the district certification department.

Teachers then apply to the program and are admitted to the program by cohorts. There are five enrollment opportunities per school year. Once admitted, these teachers, referred to as MINT 2.0 participants or participants, must attend the MINT 2.0 Orientation, with their cohort colleagues, to begin actively taking courses within the program. MINT 2.0 Orientation is the first opportunity that participants have to meet other participants, network and meet with the program coordinator. Program components, coursework and structures are reviewed at orientation and participant next steps are reviewed and confirmed. This process includes registration confirmation of the participants' first two classes (M-DCPS, 2020).

Completion of the program is required for a participant to be eligible to apply for a professional certificate. To be in completion of the MINT 2.0 program means that the following requirements have been completed: completion of all MINT 2.0 coursework, passing scores on the General Knowledge Exam, a Subject Area Exam or demonstration of subject mastery, the Florida Teacher Certification Examination (FTCE) Professional Exam, and mastery of the Educator Accomplished Practices, as evidenced through a

participant's professional portfolio. Upon review of these components, the program coordinator submits a confirmation of completion directly to the FLDOE, via the submission of a CT 132, making the participant eligible to apply and receive a professional certificate (M-DCPS, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

The problem studied was that noneducation background teachers were not completing the credentialing requirements (via a program of study) and therefore were leaving teaching due to forced termination from their schools. Noneducation major teachers should be completing credentialing requirements and be retained on staff; therefore, the issue of retention was the focus of this study.

Evidence of the Existence of the Problem

With so many options and paths which a noneducation major can take, it is very easy for these new teachers to become overwhelmed, lost and discouraged. Furthermore, some take inappropriate classes, at random, thinking that it satisfies their requirements and/or wait to begin the process when their temporary certificates are about to expire. In many cases, teachers become discouraged, take the wrong course and/or do not even bother with the credentialing, therefore allowing their temporary certificates to expire (C. Alvarez, personal communication, May 15, 2020). Upon expiration, the public-school district will terminate the teacher, leading to high levels of teacher attrition and loss of money and time (M-DCPS, 2020). It is, therefore, crucial to explore and identify what factors affect participants who are enrolled in the PDCP program and how those factors can improve, as they may determine the rate of completion of the program and therefore the retention of these teachers.

In the PDCP of study, participants are admitted by term in small cohorts. In these cohorts, participants take their courses together and are tracked in this way to help them make their progress timely and complete the program. This process is new to the program and was originally implemented as a means of keeping it organized.

Participant feedback regarding the cohort style of admittance and program progress led to this inquiry. Some participants reported a significant feeling of support, a sense of shared accountability and felt more able to complete each component of the program through the process of belonging to a cohort. This feedback led to the research of topics, such as collaborative learning in adults and the efficacy of creating cohorts to support program progress and completion.

The Topic

Credentialing is an added requirement for some new teachers with noneducation degrees. However, some of these new teachers are not completing their credentialing requirements, within the validity period of their temporary certificates and are being terminated, adding to the overall rates of new teacher attrition. Alternative certification programs, such as a professional development certification program, which is district-based, are one option completing credentialing requirements. These programs are often fast track, low cost and/or free and can be completed while employed as a teacher. The study and improvement of these programs could be a crucial factor in retaining new teachers, by assisting with the credentialing process. Therefore, it was the topic of this study to explore participant experiences of cohort membership, in one specific district-based alternative certification program and how any positive attributes of cohort membership could assist participants in completing their credentialing and therefore,

remaining employed with the school district.

Background and Justification

Statewide completion rates for alternative certification non-Institute of Higher Education (IHE) programs, as evidenced in the report data posted in 2018 from Title II report, showed low completion rates for alternative certification non-IHE program completers for academic years 2013-2014, 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. For example, only 8% of non-IHE enrollees, were identified as completers in 2013-2014 (Kuenzi, 2018). MINT 2.0 falls under the category of an alternative certification non-IHE program, also known as a *Professional Development Certification program*, as it was referred to by the FLDOE. These figures made it pertinent to district staff to further explore various aspects that may or may not affect program completion. Therefore, this study explored the perceptions of participants in a MINT 2.0 cohort, specifically, how the cohort experience influences a candidate's success within the program, as per their perception on the cohort experience.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

There were no known studies found that explored the perceptions of being part of a cohort, specifically to a PDCP, alternative certification program. Although there had been studies conducted on the topics of adult learning in cohorts and alternative certification programs, the researcher could not find one, specific to the exploration of cohort membership in a local PDCP program.

Audience

The target audience of this study was school district personnel. Specifically, PDCP program coordinators in Florida and nationwide alternative certification program

providers could benefit from this study, as would program developers and coordinators, and education policy makers.

Setting of the Study

This study took place within a local South Florida school district and specifically targeted experiences of the new teachers, had enrolled as participants of the district's alternative certification, Professional Development Certification Program, MINT 2.0. The urban school district in which this study took place, is the fourth largest school district in the nation and has 480 schools, 347,069 students and 17,584 teachers (Miami-Dade County Public Schools [M-DCPS], 2019a; U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). Enrolled in the 2019-2020 school year were 177,341 male students and 169,728 female students. The ethnic composition of the student body in this district identified 6.5% White Non-Hispanic, 19.5% Black Non-Hispanic, 72.2% Hispanic students and 1.8% of students identified as Other (M-DCPS, 2019a). Additionally, 67.8% of students were identified as being on free or reduced-price lunch (M-DCPS, 2019a). Of the 17,584 employed teachers of this district, 7,405 taught Elementary, 5,168 taught Secondary, 4,016 taught Exceptional Student Education, and 995 were identified as teaching Other (M-DCPS, 2019a). Ethnic classification of instructional staff showed that 18.1% were White Non-Hispanic, 25.1% were Black Non-Hispanic, 54.8% were Hispanic and 2.0% identified as Other.

Researcher's Role

The researcher oversees her district's PDCP program called *MINT 2.0*. She submits a yearly report delineating program structures and changes for program approval to the Florida Department of Education. She secures and confirms program approval

from the FLDOE. She manages the daily structures of the program, as well as admits, enrolls, and advises participants. She reviews and confirms that all program requirements have been met for each participant via the submission of a CT 132 form to the Florida Department of Education. This form provides documentation and attestation of program completion, for participants, who are then eligible to apply for a professional certificate.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and examine participants' experience of cohort membership in one specific alternative certification program, MINT 2.0 and how these relate to program completion. Results of the study could develop further exploration into the connection between cohort membership and program completion and provide future program improvements.

Definition of Terms

Technical and operational terms to be used in this study and research are stated and defined below.

Alternative Certification programs provide a quick route to obtain certification while already in a classroom as a teacher (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015).

Career changer is identified as a person with one or more degrees in a specific area, who has left a previous profession and has sought to join the teaching profession as a classroom teacher.

Completers have completed all the program requirements of the MINT 2.0 program and has applied for their Educator Professional Certificate.

M-DCPS is the abbreviation for Miami-Dade County Public Schools. It is the district in which the study took place.

MINT is M-DCPS' Mentoring and Induction for New Teachers program. It has been adopted as school board policy and aligns to the PDCP state statute requirements regarding mentoring and induction for new teachers.

MINT 2.0 is the M-DCPS PDCP program. As of 2020, it had 276 participants enrolled, at different points within the program, all of whom were enrolled as a cohort (Florida Department of Education [FLDOE], 2019b).

Noneducation Major is a recent graduate from an accredited university, holding at least a bachelor's degree in a given area of study.

Professional Development Certification and Education Competency Program (PDCP) is a term given to the district-based alternative certification program and is a teacher preparation program. According to the Florida Department of Education's (2020) alternative certification program, PDCPs are authorized by section 1012.56(8), Florida Statutes.

Professional Certificate is Florida's highest educator certificate; it is valid for five school years and is renewable (Florida Department of Education [FLDOE], 2019a).

Temporary Certificate in Florida, is an initial teaching credential, allowing a person to be hired and placed to teach in a classroom, within Florida, at a local school district (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a); it is valid for 3 years, is nonrenewable, and allows for the professional to complete all the requirements for a Professional Certificate, while teaching full-time (FLDOE, 2019a)

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction, Process, and Development

The process and development of topics of this study began with a broad overview on the status of new teacher shortages, attrition, and explores the options of program improvement as a retention measure. The literature review examined the general state of new teachers, statistics on the factors of new teacher attrition, as well as effective retention factors were established. The review then led to specific information regarding teachers from noneducation backgrounds. The literature review continued through the expansion of one specific alternative certification track, the Professional Development Certification Program (PDCP). More specifically, the structure of the PDCP program of the district studied, MINT 2.0, was described and explored for further research and the purposes of the study.

An expansive review of the literature was used to examine the effect of cohort membership and the use of cohort groups for professional development and certification programs. The defining characteristics of a cohort were identified, and value towards adult learners identified. The researcher then explored the MINT 2.0 cohort model for similarities, differences, and possible shortcomings, as this was the specific focus of the study. Further study of cohorts in adult learning, then led to the exploration of communities of practice. The purpose of this connection was solidified on the foundation of Wegner's Community of Practice, as the study's framework. On this basis, this was a qualitative study, which explored participants' perception of the MINT 2.0 program's cohort model, with implications based on their responses leading to actionable changes that could be made to improve upon the program.

Theoretical Framework: Wegner's Community of Practice

During the 1980s-1990s, Lave and Wenger explored learning as a process of engagement in a community of practice (as cited in Smith, 2019). Their research has been applied to adult learning practices and models by universities, colleges, teacher preparation programs and professional development. It was Wegner's community of practice theory that served as the foundation and theoretical framework for this study.

According to Wenger's research, communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain (Smith, 2019). Membership in a community of practice is defined by containing three elements, which are domain, community, and practice. Domain refers to a shared interest and membership implies commitment to this domain. Community members join in and engage in activities, process, information, and support of the learning and/or expansion of the domain. Practice refers to the idea that members of the community of practice are practitioners, who go through shared experience and shared practices (of application) (Smith, 2019). In continuation with Wenger's research (as cited in Smith, 2019), it was identified that communities of practice can be formal and organized, very fluid and information, visual or invisible and with several practical applications. "Communities of Practice" as a term is relatively new and has found a niche in educator practice and professional development, as a means of study to improve practice and performance (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Benefits to participating in a community of practice are varied. Research shows that participation in a community of practice gives participants a sense of belonging, connection, and building of memories (Smith, 2019). Further research has shown that

participation in a community of practice facilitates collaboration, a sense of learning amongst the adults in the group and may also promote a deep reflective approach to learning (Carruth & Field, 2016). Research specific to educators in a community of practice found that as a specific niche, teachers need to reflect on practice, design activities and reflect on the results of their application. Their concern for their clients (i.e., students), implies that what teachers do together (study/learn) should improve their ability to serve students (Levine, 2010). Levine's (2010) research, specific to professional learning communities, shows that professional learning communities emerge when teachers work together to improve their own professionalism and opportunities for student learnings. His research also shows that emergence of these learning communities occurs when teachers work together to improve their own professionalism and opportunities for student learning. Finally, his research suggests further study specific to teachers entering the profession (Levine, 2010).

Cohorts can be considered a formalized and intentional community of practice and have both historically been popular in higher education and adult education programs. A cohort is created intentionally as a tool to improve member learning and progress in a program but can also occur in a natural or informal manner, among a group of learners (Imel, 2002). Formalized cohorts, such as those created by institutions of higher education or adult learners, are intentionally developed for a variety of reasons and benefits explored further in the review of the literature.

The attributes of a cohort are broad, as they can vary in design. According to Pemberton and Akkary (2010), educational cohort models are: "purposefully grouped students entering and pursuing a program of study together, characterized by social and

cultural processes, shared experiences and interactions, collective efforts and mutual commitment to an educational goal” (p. 179). Cohorts can be specially designed to meet the needs of participants. For example, a cohort can be structured and closed, in which participants are admitted as an identified group, provided with specific coursework and a set timeframe in which to take and complete the courses (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). Cohort models can also be designed to be more flexible, such as an open-cohort model, while others still can be altogether naturally emergent among a group of adult learners (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). Others still can be a blend of models, such as one developed with a common schedule of three or four courses, in which students followed the courses in a sequence. Students in the blended cohort design could choose to remain together for the entire sequence of rotating on a semester basis, starting a new cohort each semester (Ross et al., 2016). It is perhaps this flexibility and variation in design that adds to the benefits of using this practice as a learning model.

Cohorts have been used since the early 1980s and now include use in teacher education programs and even teacher preparation programs (Knorr, 2012). The use of cohort models in education is popular in the U.S., UK, and Canada as well (Bista & Cox, 2014). Not only is the use of cohorts popular, but research also shows that there are many benefits to participation in one. Identified benefits for cohort participation include enriching member learning, improved academic performance, reduced sense of loneliness, psychological support, networking for career, increased program delivery efficacy and enrollment benefits (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). A foundational, yet rich study, cited over 68 times, found that participation in cohorts provided opportunities for membership and provided social-emotional support for group learners (Hasinoff &

Mandzuk, 2005). In the area of education, cohorts have been utilized to group interns, novice teachers and adult learners. The use of cohorts in both traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs has also gained popularity (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). Use of cohorts has been implemented to support educational programs in which retention and completion rates have posed challenges to improve overall retention and completion (Eaton, 2018; Pemberton & Akkary, 2010; Ross et al., 2016).

In response to this shortage, state education departments allow for school districts to hire noneducation majors to fill the gap of teacher shortages. These teachers are identified as persons with a degree in a content area, with enough college credits in the specific subject to be eligible to receive a temporary certification. While on temporary certificate, the candidate is then eligible to apply and secure employment as a teacher. Both teacher tracks will be discussed, and their respective challenges will be explored and compared with a focus on the additional requirements that a noneducation teacher will experience on a temporary certificate must complete in order to attain a professional teaching certificate and remain employed. Additional credentialing requirements and alternative certification tracks available for noneducation teachers, that may be taken to meet the requirements on the Statement of Eligibility, will be explained.

Noneducation majors are provided with an emergency or temporary certificate in order to begin teaching (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). In Florida, specifically, these individuals are issued a 3-year temporary teaching certificate, with which they are then able to apply to and work as a teacher, at local school districts. Once issued a temporary certificate, they will have the span of the temporary certificate, to complete specific certification requirements. There are three main routes by which noneducation

majors can meet their credentialing requirements which are, through a traditional institution of higher education program (IHE), through an Alternative IHE based program or through an Alternative non-IHE based program. Forty-seven states, including the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands have state-approved alternative certification programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). States such as California, Florida, and New York have adopted various alternative certification methods, or programs to “quickly place teachers in high needs schools” (Evans, 2014, p. 32). Among the nation there are five top teacher-producing states. Specific to Alternative non IHE programs, the leading states are Texas, New Jersey, Louisiana, Georgia and Florida. Florida is ranked 5 on this list, having 3% of teachers credentialed via an alternative non IHE program, which is the state of focus for this study (US Department of Education, 2016a). This hiring option assists with the first issue of employing teachers. The statistics on program completion, however shed a different light on the aspect of retention.

According to the 2018 Title II Reports National Teacher Preparation Data, enrollment into alternative certification non-IHE programs in Florida has been rising steadily since 2013. In the 2013-2014 academic year teacher enrollment into these programs was recorded at 1,086 teachers. The numbers steadily increased as evidenced in the 2016-2017 report (the last report published to date) which recorded 2,361 teachers enrolled in alternative certification programs in Florida. Completion rates, however, are an area of concern, as evidenced in the report data published in 2018 from the same Title II report, which shows that there were very low percentages of alternative certification non-IHE program completers for academic years 2013-2014, 2014-2015 and 2015-2016.

An important consideration is that these teachers must meet the credentialing requirement to remain employed within the span of 3-year Temporary Certificate, while meeting the challenges of teaching day-to-day (M-DCPS, 2020). Not only are these teachers learning a new craft, but they are also held to the same standards as traditionally trained teachers in terms of expectations and evaluation. They are expected to meet their professional responsibilities with little or no previous training, while completing the requirements to obtain their professional certificate. Noneducation teachers are however, required to hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree and pass the subject area exam in the certifiable thereby implying an understanding of a subject. However, with the added responsibilities of student management, pedagogy and theory application, areas of studies in which most noneducation majors lack, they do face additional struggles (Redding & Smith, 2016). The issue of supporting their credentialing process is now a focus. The rise in this need for teachers has also led to a rise in the need for alternative certification programs that provide thorough training in a job-embedded way, with additional support to assist the teacher in completing the program successfully.

History of Alternative Certification in the U.S.

Since 2015, this topic of nationwide teacher shortages has been making headlines. According to Sutcher et al. (2016), after years of layoffs from the recession of 2007, teaching opportunities became available at a rate for which there were not enough qualified teachers to fill required positions. Factors such new education state statutes defining class sizes, teacher certification requirements, additional requirements to teacher qualifications, student population growth and high levels of teacher attrition, have all been cited as cause(s) for the shortage, in addition to reduces interest by young graduates

to study education (Buchanan et al., 2013; Church et al., 2014; Hudson, 2012; Ingersoll et al., 2012). As a solution to these shortages many state governors have adopted statutes allowing for emergency teacher employment via the issuance of temporary certificates. The number of teachers on temporary certificates has been rising steadily nationwide and more specifically to local school districts where the study takes place, in the last three years from 42% in 2016 to 56% in 2019 (HR Information Technology, personal communication, August 13, 2019).

Many State educational leaders have embraced the practice of employing noneducation majors, via the state statutes signed into practice. These statutes allow for noneducation majors with sufficient college credit to receive an emergency license or temporary certificates, as it is referred to in Florida (Florida Statutes, 2018). These teachers on temporary are filling positions at a high rate, as noted in the data of one local district, which employs more than 46% of the teacher workforce with noneducation majors on temporary certificates (M-DCPS, 2020). Identifying the alternative certification tracks those teachers on temporary certificates utilize to meet their requirements is pertinent to school district staff who are working directly with new teachers to support them in their practice and reduce attrition (Dotres, personal communication, February 17, 2017). More specifically, if the completion of credentialing requirements is an issue, then further study into the school district alternative certification program and participant perceptions on program structures, such as the implementation of cohorts, could provide insights into new teacher needs for program completion.

New Teachers: Shortages and Attrition

Teacher shortages have been affecting the hiring state of nationwide districts since 2015 (NCES, 2017). This shortage was pronounced at that time due to four specific factors including a decline in teacher preparation program enrollment, pupil-teacher ratios, high student enrollment and high teacher attrition (Sutcher et al., 2016). The current data at the time also showed that this demand for teachers rose after the Great Recession, as numbers of school-age students rose. In accordance with the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), it was predicted that the population of school-age students would increase by 3 million students by 2020. Additionally, school district leaders who are in the process of reopening special area classes, electives and programs that had been previously cut because of lack of funding, would need to recruit an additional 145,000 teachers to fill these positions. The increase in need for teachers is compounded by statutes requiring that class-size amendments are met, and that student teacher ratio remained “small.” And, although class size ratios are determined by state and interpreted local districts, these ratios are difficult to implement with the current teacher workforce status. The next area that magnifies this shortage is data from American College Test (as cited in Aragon, 2016), which found that fewer high school graduates are interested in pursuing degrees in education and/or careers teachings. ACT data also shows the percent of graduate interest dropped from 15% in 2010 to 12% in 2014, which is a minimal drop, when combined with a drop-in teacher preparation program enrollment, can begin to show a trend and more pronounced situation in regards to teacher shortages (Aragon, 2016). Enrollment in teacher preparation programs began to decline in 2008-2009, when there was a recorded enrollment of 719,081 and continued

to drop consistently as noted in 2013-2014, when enrollment at 465,536 (Aragon, 2016).

The most currently available data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) report shows the drop-in enrollment when only 455,947 would-be teachers were enrolled in teacher preparation programs in the 2017-2018 year. Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) stated that data is incomplete, as the results of their research surmises that teacher shortages are neither new nor an actual issue across the field of education. Their research compares the teacher shortage crisis to a “leaky bucket” situation in which there are specific subject-areas where the shortage is experienced, in subject areas such as Math, Science/STEM and Special Education. They also note that there is not a shortage of teachers, rather a shortage of teachers that want to teach versus working in higher-paying jobs. Regardless of the subject, specialty area or the reason behind teachers not wanting to teach, this is an issue faced by instructional staffing personnel at many local school districts nationwide. In 2010-2011, 68% of schools nationwide reported having at least one teacher vacancy. In addition to this, in 2011-2012, 15% of schools nationwide reported at least one vacancy in a “hard to staff” position (Aragon, 2016).

It has been established that teacher shortages are a problem affecting school district staff who are trying to fill vacant positions with qualified teachers. One longitudinal study, conducted from 2007 through 2012, reviewed a 5-year trend. Findings showed that 10% of teachers who began in the 2007-08 school year, did not teach in the following school year, 12% did not teach in the 2009-10 school year, 15% did not teach in 2010-11 and 17% did not teach in 2011-12 (Gray & Taie, 2015). Phillips (2015), a leading researcher on the topic of new teacher attrition and retention, states that in the first 5 years of teaching, close to half of newly employed teachers will have either

transferred schools or left the teaching profession altogether. This was also researched and confirmed by Ingersoll et al., 2017. The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) estimated that one-third of all new teachers leave the field in their first year and close to 46% leave within their first 5 years. Garcia and Weiss (2019) found that 13.8% of public-school teachers are either leaving their current schools or the field altogether. Ingersoll et al. (2017) found that there is a “revolving door of teacher turnover that can cost school districts \$2.2 billion each year” (p. 2). In addition to the cost factor, teacher attrition affects student learning gains, teacher morale and leads to an overall negative reputation towards teaching as a profession (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Important to this research is developing a clear idea and understanding of the causes of teacher attrition and what are some possible retention factors that can assist in keeping teachers. Kena et al. (2016) found that common reasons for attrition include personal life factors make for 23% of teacher attrition, school factors 23%, assignment and class factors 5% and salary 4% of teacher attrition factors. More specific research provides additional insight into the reasons behind new teacher attrition, by providing ranking to the factors of attrition. The research by Podolsky et al. (2016), found that the number one reason new teachers cited for leaving the profession was inadequate preparation, followed by lack of support, challenging work conditions, dissatisfaction with compensation, better job opportunities and finally, personal reasons. Inadequate preparation will be further explored as the literature builds the foundation for this study.

To further understand what inadequate preparation may refer to, a brief explanation of the different tracks that individuals may take to gain teacher credentialing and employment needs to be provided. As the tracks for teacher preparation and training

are explored, it should be noted that the U.S. Department of Education (2016a) Title II Report, defines a teacher preparation program as follows:

as a state-approved course of study the completion of which signifies that an enrollee has met all the state's educational requirements, or training requirements, or both, for an initial credential to teach in the state's elementary, middle, or secondary schools. A teacher preparation program may be either a traditional program or an alternative program, as defined by the state and may be offered with or outside of an Institute of Higher Education (IHE). (p. xiii)

Traditional teacher programs refer to an education course of study at a college or university. These programs serve undergraduate students and generally lead to a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Some of these programs are designed to lead to a teaching credential, embedded into the program as such, so that the student graduates with both a degree and the teaching credential (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Others, however, provide program completers with a degree, but not automatically a teaching credential. Graduates of this version of the program, will then have to meet the additional credentialing requirements. Alternative teacher preparation programs serve candidates who have been granted emergency or temporary certificates and can practice as a teacher of record, while working towards attaining their teacher credentialing. These programs can be IHE-based alternative certification programs or not IHE-based providers. Under programs considered not IHE-based programs are PDCP, which are developed and provided by individual school districts, with the approval of state departments of education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

Traditionally trained teachers receive direct instruction and preparation in educational theory, pedagogy, and practical application. Traditional programs of study include topics and application of child and adolescent psychology and best teacher practices. Additionally, topics of study may include strategies on how to instruct students who are speakers of other languages and students with special needs (Florida Statutes, 2018). Some programs require class observation hours and/or a practicum or internship, in which teacher candidates observe and/or work directly and under the guidance of a master teacher. Although the program of study will vary by program, they will leave the program having completed a basic program of study in education. Therefore, they will enter the classroom setting with a foundation in educational studies.

By comparison, alternatively certified teachers enter the classroom having acquired a bachelor's degree in a subject area and having been issued an emergency or temporary certificate based on the number of credits on a specific subject matter. These teachers may or may not have any background or experience in education, with students or in a classroom. In some cases, these teachers will be setting foot in a classroom for the first time ever, on the first day of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

History of Teacher Preparation, Inception of Alternative Certification Programs

Alternative certification has existed as a track for teacher preparation in the U.S. for over 35 years (Etheredge, 2015). However, to establish the importance of alternative certification for teacher preparation, it is important to understand the historical aspect of how these programs were developed and came to be. Alternative certification programs have provided the United States with over 500,000 teachers, since 2004-2005, continuing in an upward trend that is supported by both national and local data (Etheredge, 2015).

Formal teacher preparation, as first recorded, began by the Jesuits in the mid-1500s, in Europe, according to McGucken (1932, as cited in Etheredge, 2015). In the early history of the U.S., up until 1789, local entities were responsible for qualifying teachers. Training was not necessarily formalized and/or required. Local entities made the decisions based on need, which varied by communities. In the 1800s the local control of licensing was turned over to state agencies, according to LaBue (1960, as cited in Etheredge, 2015). Teaching positions were given mostly to young men, who were working towards continuing their education or young single women, at the time. Turnover was high, as young women would often leave their positions upon marrying. In the late 1800s, early teacher colleges began to emerge, as departments of education took control of the licensing of teachers (Etheredge, 2015).

The first noted teacher shortage occurred in the U.S. occurred during World War II, when many leaving for war also left their teaching positions behind. The shortage continued into the 1940s and 1950s, when the shortages would finally result in the first emergency teaching certificates granted (Studebaker, 1944, as cited in Etheredge, 2015). In 1957 with the launch of *Sputnik*, the U.S. refocused its efforts surrounding education and therefore teacher preparation overall. At this point, states began requiring teachers to be college graduates and complete a predetermined set of education courses to be eligible for teacher state certification (Etheredge, 2015).

It was not until 1983, that education officials in the state of New Jersey developed the first alternative certification program, Provisional Teacher Program. Their idea was to target qualified individuals by requiring a bachelor's degree and a passing score on a subject area exam (Etheredge, 2015). In this way, it was modeled after traditional

teaching programs and was not intended to replace the traditional teaching track. The program worked in much the same way that alternative certification programs still do today, in which professionals enter the classroom immediately and receive the support of a qualified mentor. The purpose of the development of the program was to avoid further teacher shortages and reduce the amount of emergency certificates being issued.

Other states, such as California, Texas, and Connecticut, soon began offering alternative certification programs for teachers. The goal now included attracting well-educated professionals to teach (Etheredge, 2015). The passing of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which required a “highly qualified” teacher in every classroom by the 2005-2006, academic school year, led to concerns that traditional education programs would not be able to train and produce qualified teachers to fill classrooms (Etheredge, 2015). State education officials, again turned to exploring and providing alternative certification options, to avoid additional teacher shortages.

The development of teacher preparation programs continues to evolve with the times and needs, which vary from state to state, and with the overall goal of improving education and eliminating teacher shortages. In 2004, in the state of Florida, the first Education Preparation Institutes were developed, which were intended to target mid-career professionals to become teachers (Etheredge, 2015). By 2014, alternative certification programs and tracks were available in 47 states (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). In states such as California, Texas, and Florida, there has been effort put into alternative certification programs to attract and employ teachers. In the 2016 Title II published report, data showed that Texas, New York, and Florida ranked in the top 3 highest states to enroll teachers in Alternative, IHE-based certification programs.

Texas, North Carolina, and New Jersey ranked top 3 in enrollment of teachers in alternative, not IHE-based, certification programs (NCES, 2017). In Florida, state statute has continued to evolve, as it is now required that school districts provide a job-embedded alternative certification options in the form of PDCPs, hosted and offered at the local level (Florida Statutes, 2018).

Reasons New Teachers Choose the Alternative Certification Route

Another important aspect of understanding alternative certification programs and the teachers who chose to take this track, was to consider the pros and cons that have long been debated regarding alternative certification. Proponents of alternative certification programs have always argued that this method of certifying teachers reduces attrition by decreasing shortages (Fry & Anderson, 2011). This has been a seminal argument and the main purpose of alternative certification programs since its inception and throughout the development of such programs for teacher preparation. The issue of filling U.S. school classroom with a highly qualified teacher, in compliance with NCLB, was also resolved by the use of alternative certified teachers, as programs require the participants to pass a subject area exam in order to be considered to receive an emergency or temporary certificate, as a one of the minimum requirements (Florida Department of Education, 2019; Fry & Anderson, 2011).

Value of Alternative Certification Programs

Alternative certification programs are designed so that professionals enter the classroom immediately, which also helps to fill and place teachers in high needs schools (Evans, 2014). As mentioned by Etheredge (2015), people who take this route to teaching are often qualified and experienced professionals. Alternative certification programs

ultimately provide these incoming professionals with the flexibility to work, while meeting their credentialing requirements, while also reducing teacher shortages and diversifying the education workforce (Etheredge, 2015; Evans, 2014). These professionals, with previous work and life experience are experts in their specified field, as they must hold a bachelor's degree and have a minimum number of content coursework in order to be eligible to receive a temporary teaching certificate in a specific subject-area (Dotres, J., personal communication, February 17, 2017). These programs support and appeal to the working adult, whereas traditional programs require completion before being able to secure employment and often require a long and unpaid internship (Hilsabeck et al., 2014).

Alternative certification programs are managed locally, school districts have latitude over the control of program development (McDaniels, E. personal communication, April 3, 2018). This includes flexibility in ensuring that content and pedagogy are relevant, job-embedded, and innovative, when compared to traditional teacher preparation programs (McBrayer & Melton, 2018). Finally, professionals can be hired and begin working immediately and simultaneously work on their credentials, all while earning a full salary and having access to benefits. According to Miami-Dade County's instructional staffing staff (M. Gonzalez, personal communication, November 14, 2019), this has been cited among applicants and new hires as an additional benefit to the alternative certification pathway.

Opposition to Alternative Certification Programs

In contrast to the seemingly obvious benefits of alternative certification programs, there are those in the field of education who voice strong and valid concerns about

preparing teachers through these means. Many fear that this fast-track to teaching de-professionalizes teachers and degrades the profession, while possibly leading to further emergency licensing (Etheredge, 2015; Friedrich, 2014). These educators voice that this track for certification is merely a band-aid to a much larger national problem, directly tied to how little teachers are compensated and valued as a professional. Additional concerns with alternative certification programs include that programs of study are inconsistent and, in some cases, lack rigor and quality (Etheredge, 2015). A final and perhaps most important concern, is that alternatively certified teachers with their lack of pedagogical knowledge or background in child psychology and learning, may hinder student learning (McBrayer & Melton, 2018). Although valid arguments can be made for both the benefits and detriments of alternative certification programs, the statistics on the volume of educators who have joined the field of education, via these programs clearly shows that as these numbers rise, attention and focus should be placed on the improvement and development of alternative certification programs.

Alternative Certification Teachers: Solution to Teacher Shortage

In accordance with the data trend, alternative certification programs have become more commonplace as a pathway to the classroom, it is important to review the data showing what track potential teacher candidates are choosing and to consider why as well (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). According to Redding and Smith (2016) alternative certification programs are, “now commonplace in the credentialing of new teachers” (p. 1). NCES (2017) recorded that 25% of teachers were entering the education profession by some alternative means. By 2014, the U.S. Department of Education (2019) Title II report reflected that 30% of teachers entering the field were doing so through an

alternative pathway. Furthermore, the report also showed 49-50% declines in enrollment to traditional teacher preparation programs, consistently since 2010. An example used by Camera (2019), provides a concrete visual of the state of traditional teacher programs. In 2013-2014, 23 Oklahoma universities graduated 2,400 students from traditional teacher preparation programs, and the school district approved 190 emergency certificates. In stark contrast, in the 2018-2019, the same 23 universities graduated 1,200 students from traditional preparation programs whereas the school district had approved 3,000 emergency certificates (Camera, 2019). These data are consistent nation-wide, as states are finding that more and more teachers are choosing to enter the field of education via alternative pathways. Texas reported that 48% of new teachers choose an alternative pathway, New Jersey reported 11% and Florida reported that 4% of the state's teaching workforce is alternatively certified (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). This trend is also visible at the local level. Through the instructional staffing department of one large school district, Florida collected data from new hires, asking if they were on a Temporary Certificate, which would be synonymous with being on an alternative certification track. In 2016-2017, 43% of new hires self-reported as being on a temporary certificate. The following school year, the percentage rose to 46%. In the most recent review of the survey for the 2018-2019 school year, 56% of new teacher hires were on a temporary certificate; that is, alternative pathway to certification (M-DCPS, 2020). These statistics lead to question what difference exists between traditional and alternative programs that are leading to more candidates down the alternative pathway.

Comparison of Traditional Versus Alternative Certification Pathways

Traditional teacher preparation programs often refer to undergraduate or master's programs in education, which lead to licensure and often attract recent graduates pursuing a degree in education. Within these programs of study are specific education, content, and pedagogy coursework, which prepare candidates to teach in a classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). Traditional programs require admissions through application and the meeting of basic requirements, such as a minimum grade point average (GPA). Through the admissions process, programs can be more selective of candidates, which can also affect enrollment numbers (Friedrich, 2014). Traditional programs also have the added requirement of field experience hours, in addition to student teaching or internship, which is unpaid. In Friedrich (2014) requirements for conferral of the degree often requires the taking and passing of state-required exams, in addition to the successful completion of coursework and internship. Traditional programs can take 2-4 years to complete, and the student is not often employed as a teacher until completion of the full program.

In contrast, alternative certification programs are mostly post-baccalaureate programs, and tend to attract individuals who already hold a bachelor's degree and/or persons who may already be in the workforce and are looking to switch careers (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). Interested persons apply directly through their state's department of education. Upon review of their degree and course of study, they are issued a Statement of Eligibility or Temporary Certificate, with which they can directly apply to the school district and secure almost immediate employment. The teacher will then be eligible for full-time teacher pay and benefits, as well as have an allocated period for

which to meet the requirements of the Statement of Eligibility. These requirements may include state testing and education/pedagogical coursework (Florida Department of Education, 2019). On average, eligibility or the temporary certificate is valid for 3 years, during which the teacher can work, while completing the minimum requirements to earn a professional certificate. In contrast to traditional teacher preparation programs, alternative certification programs, for the most part do not have minimum requirements, other than being a full-time teacher of record, can be completed in as quickly as 6 months, are a lot less costly and do not require field hours or an internship, as this is embedded into their already existing job, as on the job training (Friedrich, 2014; M-DCPS, 2020; Warner et al., 2013). Due to these factors the alternative certification pathway may be more lucrative and attainable, which may be a possible reason for its rise in popularity. Finally, for the alternative certification pathway, there are various options from which to choose from, making the process individualized to meet the working adults' needs. Alternative certification pathways included IHEs, private or nonprofit, local education agencies, state education agencies, as well as private partnerships (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). Options also range from entirely free to more costly, depending on the institution offering it, also adding to the benefits that many individuals see with taking an alternative pathway to teach.

Teaching in Florida via an Alternative Certification Pathway

Different departments of education have different requirements for individuals to teach, which vary by state. However, 49 out of the 50 states do offer an option for alternative licensure (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). In this section, the tracks, and options of one specific state, Florida are summarized..

There are two types of certificates issued by the Florida Department of Education. A professional certificate is the highest education certification. It can be attained traditionally, via a 4-year college degree in education or it can be attained via an alternative pathway. The alternative certification pathway in Florida, begins with a temporary certificate. A temporary certificate is valid for 3 years, from the time of issuance and is nonrenewable. Additionally, the issuance of a temporary certificate allows the individual time to meet the requirements for a professional certificate, while teaching full-time (Florida Department of Education, 2019). Requirement for the issuance of a temporary certificate begin by an individual applying to teach in Florida. Along with a completed application, they must hold a bachelor's degree and demonstrate mastery of a subject area. This can be demonstrated either by passing a subject area exam or meeting subject specialization (i.e., a degree in that subject). A statement of eligibility is then issued, with which an individual can then apply with a school district for employment. The statement of eligibility delineates what the individual is eligible to teach, by subject, and what requirements must be met to upgrade to a professional certificate. This information includes exams, professional work experience, Professional Educator Competencies (PEC) and coursework. Coursework is not specified by title, rather they are general descriptions of topics that must be mastered. Upon being hired and fingerprints confirmed, a temporary certificate is then issued, and the 3-year validity period begins (Florida Department of Education, 2020). There are 11 alternative certification tracks for a teacher to attain their Professional Certificate, approved by the FLDOE (McDaniels, personal communication, April 3, 2018). A teacher wishing to remain in the teaching profession as a classroom teacher beyond the 3-year mark, must

complete the requirements of the Statement of Eligibility, either by individually meeting the requirements or via one of the tracks to attain a Professional Certificate. In Florida, an expired temporary certificate will lead to termination.

The PDCP is one of the 11 tracks, which is offered directly by the school district (FLDOE, 2020). In Florida, each school district is required to offer a PDCP. While some districts opt to adopt the FLDOE-developed version, other districts opt to write their own and submit for FLDOE approval. M-DCPS's district staff opts to write and submit their own version of a PDCP program, called MINT 2.0, for state approval (M-DCPS, 2020). MINT 2.0 is fully approved by the FLDOE and was the program of focus for this study.

Challenges for Alternative Certification Teachers

Although the alternative certification route may be more streamlined and flexible to allow for teachers to work while completing their requirements, it is not without its own set of challenges. Some research shows that alternative teachers are more likely than traditionally certified teachers to leave the profession (Redding & Smith, 2016). There are studies that provide some reasoning as to why there is a high alternative certification teacher turnover. Some research cites that alternative certification teachers come into the field with a mindset that teaching is temporary (Daniels et al., 2011). For career changers the ease of switching careers makes it just as easy to switch back or out when a more lucrative or convenient opportunity presents itself. These two examples are cited as a lack of commitment to the field (Daniels et al., 2011; Redding & Smith, 2016). It is also noted that alternatively certified teachers, sometimes experience a "collision of cultures", when they first enter the teaching workforce (Fry & Anderson, 2011), as they have not been through the traditional training that requires field hours and an internship. Fry and

Anderson (2011) noted that alternatively certified teachers struggle to adjust to the school climate, when coming from other professions, as well. Finally, and most relevant to this study, is research that shows that alternative-certification teachers struggle and experience difficulty in completing their required coursework for the professional certificate, while teaching (Warner et al., 2013). This specific point, as it relates to the alternative certification programs, has value in further exploration, especially since alternative certification programs can be updated and modified regularly to keep up with the needs of new teachers (DeBartolo et al., 2014). These data, reflecting the increase in alternative certified teachers and the needs they must complete a credentialing program, leads to implications for teacher research for preparation program improvement that is actionable, contextualized, nuanced and formative (DeMonte & Coggshall, 2018). Quality of program and consideration for their design also requires further research, specifically by identifying what constitutes program exemplars to ensure teacher preparation and certification success (McBrayer & Melton, 2018).

Suggested Methodologies Based on the Literature

Many of the authors whose work was reviewed in this chapter studied this topic using qualitative methods. In 2011, Cuddapah and Clayton conducted a qualitative study in this area, explored a new teacher cohort and their professional development experience, and analyzed the observation data through the lens of Wenger's community of practice as the learning framework. Another study, which focused on cohort-based doctoral programs, assessed student perceptions, including student reflections pertaining to a cohort model and utilized open-ended, survey responses to draw conclusions and make recommendations for the development of future cohort models (Bista & Cox,

2014). Ross et al. (2016) used the results of student interviews with members of a cohort to identify implications and best strategies in the development of a cohort, to build a strong sense of community and positive group dynamic. Finally, Eaton (2018) explored the impacts of cohort membership on professional practice for teachers throughout the alternative certification program and through internship. By conducting three focus group interviews, for this qualitative, exploratory case study, the findings concluded that participants claimed to have deeper learning experiences, cohort membership allowed time for reflection and that participants did co-construct knowledge that went beyond the coursework (Eaton, 2018). In alignment with these previous studies, this research will utilize a phenomenological approach to explore the perceptions of participants in the MINT 2.0, (alternative certification program), of their experience in the cohort.

Summary

Since 2015, national teacher shortages have been an area of concern and topic of study for education policy makers, education government agencies and local school districts administrators and staff, who most directly experience the impact of these shortages. As a solution to shortages, state, and local agency officials in many states, including Florida, have adopted statutes and made allowances for the issuance of emergency or temporary teaching certificates. This option has led to an influx of out of area professionals entering the field of education to fill open teaching positions. These career-changers or noneducation majors on an emergency or temporary certificate, choosing or hoping to remain in their teaching position, must fulfill the requirements of their eligibility, to upgrade to a professional certificate, within their validity period. Important to both the professional and to school administrators, who employ them there

has since been a rise in alternative certification programs. These programs are approved by the pertaining state department of education, while tailoring to the full-time working adult. These programs have therefore gained popularity as a long-term solution to teacher shortages and potentially powerful retention tools.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and examine participants' experience of cohort membership in one specific alternative certification program, MINT 2.0, and if these relate to program completion. Wegner's *community of practice* and studies on cohorts served as the theoretical framework and foundation of the study. Implications based on data collection could support participant program completion and lead to future programmatic improvements.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. What are the identified experiences of participating in the MINT 2.0 Cohort?
2. How do participants who are retained in the school district describe the tools they identified from within the cohort, that helped retain them?
3. What suggestions can participants recommend to improve the MINT 2.0 cohort experience and make it more effective for retaining teachers?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Chapter 3 begins with the aim and purpose of the study identified and then linked to the selected methodology, which was explained and defended. Participant description and demographic information were presented, along with the identification and support of the selected sampling method. The data-gathering instrument(s) are presented and direct alignment between the tool and the research questions are presented and supported, via the creation of an alignment chart. Procedures are sequentially listed and detailed. Data analysis methods and an explanation of the coding process are detailed. In this chapter ethical considerations, study limitations and threats to validity are described and supported in order to provide transparency and provide overall support of the study.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this phenomenological study was to explore participant experiences, specific to their perception of participating in the alternative certification program, MINT 2.0, cohort, through the lens of Wegner's *Community of Practice*, as a framework (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). The goal of the study was to identify and gain an understanding of which factors of cohort participation were noted as supportive to participant retention.

Qualitative Research Approach

This was a qualitative study, which aligned directly with the aim and purpose of the study, as it was the exploration of a perceived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of the qualitative method was the most appropriate and allowed for the understanding of "the very nature of the thing," (p. 368) from the perspective and direct

words of the people experiencing it (van Manen, 2017). Through this study, it was also the researcher's goal to elicit tacit knowledge and subjective understandings, which was achieved through qualitative studies. Qualitative research methods provide the balance of both the structure and flexibility needed to build a rapport with participants and facilitate rich, deep conversations which provide the appropriate platform by which to hear of the experience, in the voice of the persons that have lived it. Qualitative research is a method that empowers its participants and opens the door for more relevant and real responses to the researchers' questions, which will "increase the understanding" of the individual's lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Specifically, this was a phenomenological study, as the researcher sought to understand the essence of the participants' lived experience, from their own words and expressions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This selection was made with thought and conscious review of all qualitative options. The researcher specifically selected phenomenology, as she was seeking to learn about individuals' conscious experiences in the MINT 2.0 cohort, from a 1st person point of view, versus a case study where a specific case is examined. The empowering of the participants, by providing them a platform on which their own voice, thoughts, and details regarding their experiences, was the key to understanding how they constructed their reality. It is through their conscious expressions of their lived perceptions, that a researcher gained a true, realistic learning of the phenomenon (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2016).

Historically, phenomenology has drawn from philosophy, psychology and education and has been utilized to study several individuals experiencing a phenomenon, but not entirely limited to a specific case. In studying the lived experiences of several

individuals, the researcher could identify and find common meaning in these experiences (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2016). The definition and historical use of phenomenology strengthens the rationale for its use, as the research design for this study, where the lived experiences of participants of the MINT 2.0 cohort were explored, through semi-structured interviews, and understood through the lens of Wegner's *Community of Practice* (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Participants

Purposeful sampling, which is used in qualitative research to identify and select participants with specific experiences to the phenomenon being studied, was used. This allowed the researcher to gain insight from a very specific group to gain an understanding of their experience. Therefore, in recruitment of study participants there were very specific criteria used to ensure the appropriate identification and selection of participants, who are especially experienced with the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2016).

Specifically, the researcher used criterion sampling, which is most used in implementation research and involves reviewing and studying all available cases (Palinkas et al., 2016). Criterion sampling ensured that all study participants had participated in MINT 2.0 cohort membership, which will provided first-hand information regarding the experience. By ensuring that participants met the criteria, the researcher ensured that the experiences were specific to cohort membership in the MINT 2.0 program. Again, this assisted the researcher in synthesizing the research findings to construct a comprehensive understanding of the experience and ensure methodological rigor (Suri, 2011).

The criteria for the sample of this study included program participants who were enrolled in a cohort, at the time of admittance and as evidenced by cohort attendance to the MINT 2.0 Orientation. Eligible study participants had previously completed the MINT 2.0 program and had received their professional certificate, via program completion, as confirmed by the submission of a CT 132 form to the Florida Department of Education. Furthermore, they had completed a minimum of 3 years of teaching and were still employed with the district of study.

According to Padilla (2003), the number of participants in phenomenology could be 1, while Polkinghorne (1998) said participation can be as large a sample as 325, and Dukes (1984) recommended 3-10 participants (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend a range of 5-25 interviews and note that by the 7th-8th interview, repetition would begin to be evident. Therefore, to ensure rich insight to the experience of cohort membership in the MINT 2.0 program and to develop a deep understanding of the experience, the researcher interviewed 11 participants for this study.

Recruitment

Candidates for participation in this study were identified from the list of MINT 2.0 program completers from 2018, 2019, and 2020. From these years, there were a total of 215 completers. In 2018, there were 36 completers, in 2019, there were 85 completers and in 2020, there were 92 completers. This group of completers consists of 70 male, 141 female and two gender unspecified individuals. Recruitment for study participants took place over a 2-week period. Once criteria for eligibility was confirmed, potential participants were sent an initial email, which informed them of the study, participation opportunity, and provided participation requirements (i.e., partake in a confidential one-

to-one interview, via Zoom, for up to 1 hour). From all volunteers, a list was created, and a number assigned. Using a random-number generation app, the program then selected the 11 participants who participated in the study. This reduced any potential selection bias. These randomly selected 11 participants, then received a second email with all study details and the informed consent form. Participation was completely optional, and participants could choose to accept, decline, or not respond to the email. Participants who had clarifying questions or concerns, were informed that they could email the researcher. The researcher also provided the option of scheduling a call or brief Zoom meeting to address any questions or concerns regarding participation in the study. Only one participant replied with a clarifying question regarding whether or not the interview could be held on a Saturday, to which the researcher replied that it could in accordance with what worked best for the participants' schedule needs. The researcher sent a follow up email notification a week after the initial communication to provide ample opportunity for participation in the study. See Appendix A for initial and informed consent email.

Data Collection Tools

When conducting a qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher is considered an instrument of data collection. Qualitative study, such as phenomenology, requires reflection, both before and during the research process, interpretation, and construction of meaning, in which they may provide context and understanding for readers (Sutton & Austin, 2015). As a tool, the researcher used semi-structured interviewing to facilitate and probe the participants on their personal experiences of cohort membership in the MINT 2.0 program. Interviewing, in general, is the most common data collection method in qualitative studies (Jamshed, 2014). Semi-structured

interviews are formally scheduled interviews between the interviewer and participant are best used when there will be one opportunity to meet, as it allows for in-depth one-to-one communication and conversation (Jamshed, 2014). The researcher developed and utilized an interview guide/protocol found in Appendix B, which ensured that specifically developed questions were covered, while encouraging the participant to take the lead and the conversation to flow.

The focus remained on exploring the experience of the phenomenon, using the interview protocol to prompt conversation, while allowing space in the process for open, two-way dialog, which was participant led and directed. Semi-structured interviews allowed for the natural development of honest candid conversation and responses, as it provided participants the freedom of full expression, of their own thoughts, in their own words (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The use of semi-structured interviews perfectly married the need for the structure to ask specific questions that led to the genuine expressions of the experienced phenomenon. In this way, the researcher was able to learn from the answers that participants provide and construct meaning from what was shared. In alignment with the aim of this study, semi-structured interviews were therefore, in the researcher's opinion, the most appropriate tool to truly explore and understand the lived experiences of cohort membership in the MINT 2.0 program.

Data for this study was collected by the researcher from semi-structured interviews. Individual interviews took place via the Zoom platform and were up to 1 hour to prevent participant fatigue. Interviews were recorded using the Zoom recording feature, which were saved and emailed directly and only to the researcher. The researcher was prepared to interview 11 participants. The researcher provided participants with

flexible interview scheduling to facilitate participation. The researcher also developed and used an interview protocol to guide the interaction and conversation with participants, to assist in building rapport and to engage participants in rich conversation.

Interview Questions

In preparation for the interviewing process, interview questions were developed and aligned to the research questions of the study. Questions were open-ended and ordered to guide the conversation yet allow for the natural flow of conversation, as the interviewing process is, a social interaction (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Warren & Karner, 2015). Interview questions were also peer-reviewed by the Executive Director of new teacher support, a local expert in the field, for the local school district for refinement and alignment to the research questions. Edits were made accordingly.

Interview protocols should be developed and utilized with the purpose of comprehensively and concisely guiding the interview process. They serve as a tool to keep the focus and maximize the time spent with the participant, while still allowing for open, natural expression and progression (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview protocol was developed to support and guide the interviewing process (Creswell, & Poth, 2018). See Appendix B.

The research questions that guided this were developed based on research on the study of cohorts and in alignment with the theoretical framework of Wegner's community of practice. The interview questions were developed and aligned directly to the research questions. See Appendix C for a copy of this alignment.

Procedures

The researcher began by applying to the IRB of the school district where the study took place concurrently with an application to the IRB office of Nova Southeastern University. Upon receiving IRB approval from both institutions, the researcher then began review of the MINT 2.0 completers database from completion years 2018, 2019, and 2020. Potential participants were sent an initial email, which informed them of the study, participation opportunity, and provided participation requirements (i.e., partake in a confidential one-to-one interview, via Zoom, that could last up to 1 hour). The 11 randomly selected participants then receive a second email with all study details and the informed consent form. Informed consent was secured via their confirmation email response. Full disclosure of the researcher's role in the study and purpose/goals with the data findings was provided both at the time of IRB submission and to participants, as this study was for the purpose of learning and understanding their experiences. Known risks and/or expected benefits associated with study participation were presented (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants were invited to participate in the study based on the set sample criteria. Participants who did not meet the criteria were removed from the list. The database was emailed to ITS services for employment verification and email information (1-week turnaround). From this list an email distribution list was created and labeled, "M2.0StudyDatabase." The researcher then began the recruitment process. Recruitment spanned a 2-week period. An initial contact email was drafted and included greetings, study information, invitation to participate and steps to confirm participation. There was maximum of 11 participants interviewed due to the time and depth required in an

interview. Participant selection was determined via a randomizing app. A second follow up email was sent the following week to all potential participants. Interested participants were emailed consent to participate in the study. See Appendix A for initial and informed consent email. Email responses were reviewed and sorted by confirming participation, declining participation and other. The researcher replied to each email and provided next steps to confirmed participants. Next steps included scheduling the interview date and time, as well as providing the Zoom link for the interview session, as well as suggestions for a comfortable and successful interview experience, such as securing a quiet space, testing the device they plan on using for the interview, downloading the Zoom application, etc. A reminder email was sent the day before the interview to ensure availability.

In preparation for each individual interview session, the researcher printed and prepared an interview protocol form for each participant, for her own use and notes during the interview. Interview questions were reviewed and practiced. The researcher scheduled a mock interview with a colleague to practice the use of technology, review the interview protocol and practice asking questions and listening for responses, while taking notes. The researcher also created a desktop folder, on her password protected device, to store all interview recordings.

For each interview the researcher allocated up to an hour, which included preparation time. Before each interview she prepared two devices (one as a back), by logging on and activating the meeting session to test lighting, sound and recording features. The researcher opened each meeting 5-10 minutes prior to the scheduled interview time. Upon arrival, each participant was greeted and thanked. They were

reminded that the interview was recorded and completely confidential. The researcher requested recording confirmation and then clicked to begin the Zoom recording feature and began the interview protocol.

Upon completion of each interview, the researcher set aside 10-15 minutes to add to her interview notes, impressions, thoughts, and insights gained from the interviews. The interview recording was transcribed and sent to participants. Participants had a week to provide any feedback, insights, omissions, or deletions. The researcher offered to set up 15-minute follow up zooms for all participants who had any questions, concerns or for clarifying questions. The researcher then began the data analysis process, which is delineated in the following section.

Data Analysis

According to Moustakas, in phenomenology, there are specific and structured methods for data analysis (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, for this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher followed the phenomenological analysis and representation guide provided by Creswell and Poth (2018), as guide. The researcher began this process by describing their own personal experiences with the phenomenon using epoche. This provided a release of any personal feelings or opinions regarding the phenomenon and then allowed for the space to shift their full attention and focus to the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher began to manage and organize the data. Transcripts were secured and stored. Each transcript was reviewed for accuracy, typos and/or the removal of any identifying information. The researcher conducted a dry read to familiarize herself with the each transcript and read for a general understanding. Aliases were assigned, and

analysis of the transcripts were done by hand (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the next phase of data analysis, the researcher read and memo-ed the transcripts, color coded, took notes and highlighted phrases and words. From these emergent ideas, the researcher identified initial codes and then described and classified these into groups. The researcher then revisited the grouped the codes to identify for frequency. She gave each group a title to assist her with making meaning of each group and then compared these to the research questions. She assigned each group to one of the research questions. She re-read each group and further reduced the codes to themes and identified patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From these patterns, the researchers made/wrote significant statements, which were developed into units of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The categories that emerged will be related, analyzed, and compared through the lens of Wegner's community of practice. From this analysis, the researcher then generated a textural description of what happened, developed a structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced, and then expressed the essence of the cohort membership experience that MINT 2.0 participants was, in the composite description (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, the researcher represented and displayed the data to finalize the data analysis report.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations should vary depending on the study being conducted, according to Creswell and Poth (2018). The researcher must minimize the risk of harm to participants, obtain informed consent, protect participant anonymity, avoid deceptive practices, and provide participants the right to withdraw from the study at any time. To meet ethical considerations, the researcher first sought and obtained permission from both

pertaining institutional review boards (the school district in which the study took place and the university), which ensured ethical design practices. The researcher then emailed potential participants with an invitation to participate in this completely optional study. All study parameters, goals and requirements were shared. The nature and purpose of the study were provided, as was a detailed explanation of what participation in the study would entail and the option to withdraw at any time during the study. Participants were provided with the option to respond if they wanted to participate or have additional questions, reply to decline, or not reply at all. To protect the anonymity of each participant of the study, pseudonyms were used to protect privacy. All data materials were secured and only the researcher had access to them. Data, in all forms, were placed in a secured password protected computer and/or in a locked cabinet. All research materials will be destroyed after 3 years (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, all participants were emailed a copy of their interview transcripts for review and were given 1 week to provide any feedback or make any edits, in order to ensure accuracy and transparency.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in a qualitative study is presented under the terms of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Elo et al., 2014). Assurance of validity for qualitative research is found in the detail and rigor of the research design. Credibility is defined as confidence in the truth of the findings and that begs that “the researcher to clearly link the research study's findings with reality in order to demonstrate the truth of the research study's findings” (Statistics Solutions, 2021, p. 1). Credibility was established in this study through member checking, providing transcripts of interview recordings to participants for review and peer debriefing. Additionally, the researcher will share a summary of findings with participants and a group of district peers. Dependability, which refers to the stability of

the findings over time, was established by recording interviews to prevent data loss and by having direct discussions about the data with committee members (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transferability was established when reporting on how the data findings can be applicable to other contexts, participants, or situations (Statistics Solutions, 2021). Transferability for this study was established through a thick description of the findings in Chapter 4.

Confirmability, which establishes that the data findings came directly from the data collected and analyzed. To establish confirmability, the researcher explicitly explained the characteristics of the study group, provided an extensive explanation of the researcher's role and provided support and sound reasoning for the selection of methodology, data collection tools and data analysis processes. Additionally, interview questions were expert reviewed and transcripts and direct quotes were provided in chapter 4, as part of data analysis.

Potential Research Bias

As the researcher, her own preparation and experience as a novice teacher could not have been more different than that of a MINT 2.0 participant. Firstly, the researcher studied and received her degree in Special Education, took part in two internships and had multiple years in the field in semi-structured classroom settings before taking on her own classroom. Her experience biased her beliefs to consider that universities and colleges of education were the epitome of teacher preparation. The researcher also had personal experiences with cohort membership, specifically during her master's program. She was admitted to her master's program of study as part of a formalized cohort model, where participants took all classes together and progressed in the program, until completion/graduation as a group. This experience had both benefits and drawbacks. Working collaboratively with other students provided a safe, social environment that was fun and interactive. Studying with other students who were also working adults with

families was beneficial, in that we could relate to one another and provide each other support.

The researcher identified some personally experienced some drawbacks, found in the very same social aspects that were also beneficial. Forced group projects, finding time to meet with consideration to everyone's schedules and having to interact with the same group weekly, as well as not being able to progress past the cohort timeline, were some of the negative aspects that the researcher experienced in their own cohort membership experience. Overall, however, the researcher had a positive outlook on cohort membership as a support for adult learners.

In her role as the MINT 2.0 program coordinator, the researcher's bias towards teacher preparation was directly challenged, as she was hired and tasked to rebrand, add rigor, and revamp all areas of the program, which is an alternative certification. From her previous experience and stemming from the need to organize participants and the enrollment process, the use of cohort enrollment was implemented. Given that MINT 2.0 participants were taking university level courses for their credentialing, the researcher mirrored and applied her own experiences to the development of program parameters.

Upon reflection, 5 years had passed since the rebranding of the MINT 2.0 program and there had been very little time or attention spent on exploring the genuine experiences of participants. It was the intention of the researcher to learn about the individual experiences of participants, as they participated in the program. The collected data was purely for the purpose of knowledge and understanding the experience of cohort membership of participants. Data collected may inform and/or affect future program changes or the development of other PDCP programs. However, there was no intention or

option to modify the current program, as it was under approval with the Florida Department of Education and changes cannot be made at that time.

Another potential bias that could affect the study was the researcher's role at the MINT 2.0 program coordinator. In this role, she manages, supports and certifies current participants to the program. Soliciting current participants to partake in the study would have been considered inappropriate and an abuse of the researcher's position and role. In addition, responses from current candidates could have severely skewed or affected as they may have been intimidated by the researcher's role in the program. It is because of this that no current participants were approached regarding this study in any way.

Program completers, who had completed all program requirements, had attained their professional certification, and had no ties in any way to the researcher were approached. The researcher does not evaluate, provide feedback, inform on their practice, or hold any supervisory role over completers, in any capacity. As such, participation in the study was fully optional and voluntary and participants reserved the right to respond or ignore the email sent.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included a small sample size of 11 participant interviews from only one group. Recruitment and scheduling limitations due to COVID-19 restrictions were also a limitation that could have potentially affect this study. There may have also be limitations in the honesty of participant responses due to understanding the questions being asked, ability to express oneself or ability/desire to share their personal experiences. Additionally, due to the uniqueness of the population of this study, the data will not be altogether generalizable to all possible readers, in similar issues.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore participants' experiences of cohort membership in one specific, district based, alternative certification program—MINT 2.0. The role of the researcher was to collect and examine participants' experiences and explore how these relate to program completion. The researcher oversees the school districts' alternative certification program, a Professional Development Certification Program (PDCP), named MINT 2.0. In addition to the daily managements and tracking of participants, the researcher is responsible for ensuring that all program components are in compliance with state statute and the program remains approved. Research into this critical area and track of teacher preparation and credentialing is crucial in exploring program completion, at a means of teacher retention and for potential future programmatic improvements and/or enhancements.

Overview of Study

In current literature, there were no known studies found that explored the experiences of cohort members in PDCP programs, which left gaps in the research. Exploring the experiences of this niche was particularly important as school district administrators find they are employing higher numbers of noneducation majors or career changers to fill the vacancies in classrooms. Statistics published by M-DCPS (2020), reflected that in the 2019-2020 school year 56% of newly hired teachers were non education majors or career changers. These statistics have shown a steady rise in this figure since 2016. Although general research regarding the benefits of cohort membership-based programs does exist, they are based on university and/or higher

education settings (Bista & Cox, 2014; Ross et al., 2016). Little was found or noted about the experiences of cohort membership in a district based PDCP program.

The following three questions guided this qualitative study:

1. What are the identified experiences of participating in the MINT 2.0 Cohort?
2. How do participants, who are retained in the school district, describe the tools they identified from within the cohort, that helped retain them?
3. What suggestions can participants recommend to improve the MINT 2.0 cohort experience and make it more effective for retaining teachers?

Through semi-structured interviews, participants were asked about their cohort experiences in the MINT 2.0 program. During these one-to-one interviews, the researcher engaged the participants in conversation and open-ended questions that allowed for participant voice to be heard. They were also asked to describe what aspects of their experiences were the most beneficial, how these affected their progression in the program and what suggestions they would make for experience improvement. The researcher made a detailed accounting of the data collected, by carefully reviewing each transcript, taking notes, underlining key words and phrases, as well as adding notes and codes to the margins. The paper-and-pencil method is, according to Saldaña (2016), a very natural and intuitive method, while still being organized and providing objectivity. Codes were then further explored to develop categories and identify emerging themes from the data, which were then used to make connections from the lived experiences and general conclusions. By this process, the researcher synthesized the findings to construct a comprehensive understanding of the experience and ensure methodological rigor (Suri, 2011).

Participant Demographics

The participants of this study consisted of 11 teachers from the district of study. All participants had applied and been admitted into the MINT 2.0 program to complete their credentialing requirements. Upon admittance, they were all enrolled into a cohort. All study participants had successfully completed the MINT 2.0 program at the time of their interviews, were all currently employed with the district, and all had at least 3 years of teaching experience. Participant demographics consisted of seven male and four female teachers. All participants had at minimum a bachelor's degree. Three of the participants had masters' degrees, one had a specialist, and one had doctorate degree. All participants were of noneducation backgrounds. Degrees varied and included Business Administration, Engineering and Public Administration, Political Science and International Relations, Industrial Engineering, Social Studies, Art or Fine Arts, Organizational Leadership, Food Science, Biology, and Music. All participants, except one had professional experience in their original field and were career changers. When asked regarding their decision to start or switch careers to education answers varied. Two participants indicated that they had always wanted to teach, one participant stated that they had taught in their country of origin and teaching in the U.S. was a natural fit. One described entering the field of teaching as, "a leap of faith." Two participants cited a family history of educators and therefore feeling the urge to "try" the field. One participant stated that teaching was the first available job that became available upon leaving her previous job while another stated two participants stated that teaching fit with their work/life balance goals. Finally, one participant stated that he went into teaching as a means to "give back".

Table*Participant Demographics*

Name*	Gender	Undergraduate Major	Highest Degree	Professional Certificate Subject-Area	Subject Currently Teaching	MINT 2.0 Completion Year	Years Teaching
PS	Male	Business Administration	Bachelors	MG Math Social Studies Business Ed	U.S. Government Macro Economics Law	2019	6
KM	Male	Engineering & Public Administration	Masters	Math Social Studies	Math	2020	4
GP	Male	Political Science & International Relations	Masters	MG Social Science Math	Grade 7 Math	2018	5
AG	Male	Industrial Engineering	Masters	Math Spanish 6-12 Gifted	Spanish	2018	4
MCM	Female	Social Studies	Bachelors	Social Studies ESE	U.S. History	2019	4
AN	Female	Art	Bachelors	Art Elementary	Grade 1	2019	5
JF	Male	Organizational Leadership	Bachelors	Pre-K-3 Grade	Grade 1	2019	4.5
CT	Female	Food Science	Bachelors	ESOL Mathematics Reading Spanish	Elementary	2019	5
GC	Female	Interdisciplinary Studies	Bachelors	Art Agriculture Biology	Agriscience Biology	2020	4
FL	Male	Performing Arts: Piano	Doctorate	Music	Music	2020	4
KP	Male	Fine Arts	Specialist	Art	Art	2019	5

Note. MG = Middle Grades; ESE = Exceptional Student Education; ESOL = English for Speakers of Other Languages; ED = Education; Pre-K = Pre School thru Kindergarten

*All name codes are pseudonyms

Results for Research Question 1

What are the identified experiences of participating in the MINT 2.0 cohort?

Results from the semi-structured interviews generated three themes related to the identified experiences in participating in the MINT 2.0 cohort. These were: (a) participants identified individual definitions of a cohort, with shared commonalities; (b) participants felt connected to each other; and (c) participants identified additional benefits to cohort membership.

Theme 1: Participants identified individual definitions of a cohort, with shared commonalities

Theme 1 was identified based on the lived experiences reported by participants on the overall experience of partaking in the MINT 2.0 cohort. In the expression of their experiences, a definition of cohort was generated based on what they perceived and experienced a cohort to be. This theme was determined by a compilation of participant responses when asked what they defined a cohort to be. The participants were able to define in their own words, cohort.

Participant FL stated: “Well, as far as I understand it from the program itself, it was just similar to a class, similar to a group, a set group that is going through the same steps together.”

Participant GC simply stated: “A group of people that run through something until completion.”

Participant MCM stated: “Okay. For me, it's working with another person. Collaborating with another teacher.”

Participant CT elaborated by stating: “Well, it was kind of a cycle when you

started the first basic course and then, you continue with the other and the idea is in two years.”

Participant KM described the definition by stating: “A group of people kind of moving together and a support system...support system and moving towards one goal, sometimes somebody may be weak, somebody in the cohort will pick them up. And so that's structure of help moving forward.”

Participant GP stated: “I suppose a cohort would just be the group of people that I took concurrent classes with, more than anything else...but I would define my cohort as the group of people that I saw in my classes, and I communicated with, and I formed study groups.”

Participant PS expressed their definition by stating the following: “I think, it's a story done in specific period of time.”

Furthermore, Participant AN defined cohort as: “Cohort. Community, networking, a resource, for sure.”

Whereas Participant AD: “I think it's very important, mostly because the teacher collaboration, when the teacher support each other and plan together.”

Participant KP stated: “So for me, cohort it's pretty much a group of individuals who are going through phenomena at the same time, whether it be an educational phenomenon, whether it be a personal life phenomenon. It's just a group of individuals who bond together through a shared or similar experience.”

Finally, Participant JF stated: “For me, it's a family. To me it's like a family, helping each other, getting through hard and soft an easy times, for some people is harder than for others.”

Theme 2: Participants felt connected to each other

Theme 2 was identified by the researcher based on the lived experiences shared by participants on MINT 2.0 cohort membership, which included connecting to other participants, whether in a casual or formalized manner, finding their niche within the group and connecting to others in the cohort which led to develop relationships. A noted level of comfort amongst the peers of the cohort and a sense of belonging due to their shared experiences was also consistent with the findings from the transcripts. The one subtheme (a) participants bonded over common goals, further confirmed the findings as participants expressed connections that were made with at least one other participant, which were strengthened by their shared common goal, identified as either program completion and/or credentialing.

Participant KP stated: "I experienced it. I have a cohort mate I still work with today... there were many times we would bounce stuff off of each other, either a quick phone call... we would stay behind and talk about certain things, get stuff ready.

Participant KP continued by expressing: Again, the fact of having people accessible that I wouldn't have known existed if it weren't for the program. Face time is everything, being able to meet people, spend time with them, get their contact information and know that you can call them on a weekend. Participant KP further expressed the following in comparison with taking a different route: Like I said in the beginning, something about having people go through a similar or shared phenomenon creates a bond. And that bond is something that, like I said, it sticks with you. I remember a lot of my cohort mates...I can reach to them and I know what they're up to or whatever the case may be."

Participant FL stated: "We're not competing against each other. We all want the

same result. So, I scratch your back, you scratch mine. Participant FL also stated: It's definitely placed toward strength in numbers reaction, if that's correct. I really liked that it was the same people for each course and for the longer sessions, I liked that it was the same people. We got to know each other, we got to do things together, we learn from each other. Participant FL continued by sharing: It's a group of people who are just like you and you are all in the same boat and you can help each other, and you can learn from each other."

Participant GC stated: "It was nice having a sort of community of these new peers. I definitely felt like everybody was in the same boat so there's a feeling of belonging, of comradery and always really, not soothing, but comforting. Being able to communicate with others, feeling comfortable communicating with others, the grouping really ... When you enter class, even though you had just taken another course so there are some people from the last class. That's like, "Oh, okay, hey, you're here. We're going to get through it together."

Participant MCM stated: "Sharing experiences, also sharing fears and I realized that we all have common challenges. I was not alone on the boat. I think we all wanted to be done with it because we had a common goal."

Participant CT stated: "Well, you feel comfortable and you are trying to organizing yourself so you can take the next together...At least when you know somebody, even if they are not with you...So just have somebody at your same level or with the same experience helps you to don't feel alone."

On the other hand, Participant KM stated: "I did meet people along the way and you know what, I met them accidentally and they helped."

Whereas, Participant GP stated: “I was apathetic at first about the idea of being enrolled with teachers who taught so many other materials for different grade levels, because I was really looking forward to the idea of, "Okay, I want to connect with peers that teach in the same age group that I do, or the same subject that I do," because I wanted to grow off of them professionally in that way.”

In contrast, Participant PS expressed: “I didn't feel like that being together really, I didn't feel it like that. In some of the classes, yeah. You, meet people repeatedly and you get kind of, not even friends, acquaintances... However, Participant PS further expressed: There were people that I met and that is part of being in the group probably. There were some people that I met in different classes and at the end ... Again, I would not say that we were friends, but at least we knew each other and that was a big benefit because we were able to work together. So, when we met again in a specific class, ‘Okay, I know you, I know that you're reliable, that you are serious about it. Let's work together and let's help each other.’ So that was a benefit, really. Okay, that was a benefit.”

Participant PS later stated: “Now that I'm thinking, the people that I connected more with, were people either taught or were teaching middle school or high school and in one class in particular.”

Participant AN stated: “To me, it was just good to see the same people and kind of like getting a chance actually to even do a further out reach, like, okay, worked with this with these people for this class.”

Participant AG further expressed: “Yes, because, as I say, the interaction with the group is not just when we build relationships between teachers, we just not give advices, we built relationships...so they were sharing a lot of those stuff. As I say, sometimes we

feel confident in someone like us, that we know what they are going through, that we're going through the same...but we put a lot of the stuff together supporting each other.”

Finally Participant JF stated: “Having somebody to call when in doubt. Being able to work with someone to come up with your assignments and just sitting in a group of people. We sat at the same table every night, the same group. In each class because you had the same group. So it got to a point where if one brought a sandwich, we'd share it or whatever, because we just got out from work. Some people drove from the South, some people drove from the North. So it was, like I said, it becomes like a big family.”

Theme 3: Participants identified specific benefits to cohort membership

Theme 3 was identified by the researcher based on the lived experiences reported by participants on cohort benefits and positive experiences identified within cohort participation. Benefits identified from the transcripts included engagement with other participants, dividing up workload, improvement in the quality of work/product produced, motivation, an understanding of the system and additional resources, which included networking opportunities. Participant opinion of the cohort experience, was expressed in their own words, included support, help, valuable and beneficial. The two subthemes (a) participants identified specific benefits to cohort membership and (b) participants had definite opinions regarding their experience, were found to be consistent with the transcripts of the former MINT 2.0 participants interviewed for this study.

Participant KP stated: “So you're getting a whole idea of the system as an organism, how the parts come together. So that's one big benefit that I got personally out of it. And knowing that and having that experience, it also opened my eyes up as far as not only my position in the organism, but potentially what I could offer in the future.

Because of the experience I'm more aware of the overall system. It just enlightened me a little bit more, because it's easy, if you're not in a cohort and you're just going through a certain track that's limited, it's easy to get stuck in your own little bubble. Participant KP further expressed: ...It's beneficial to be in that experience with people who are in the same teaching environments that you're going to be occupying, or are currently occupying. Two, to learn from those who have been doing it.”

Participant MCM also expressed: “I had a very good experience. I had the opportunity to meet people that otherwise I wouldn't talk to them at all, or they would talk to me at all and sometimes I felt that people were very tired because the time and they were coming and there's some people, sometimes they let things go flow, but it's normal. At the end of the day we are all teachers and we all have a sense of "Well, we need to get this done, we're going to do it."

Participant AN stated: “Oh, that community and networking piece, a hundred percent. So being that we saw each other after hours, in the classes, or on the weekends or whatever it might've been. And it was like a casual enough exchange that we could be like, hey, how are you doing? How do you deal with this? Or what's happening at your school? And how do you deal with this and best practices, et cetera. So that was a very excellent resource, like having similar people throughout the program. Participant AN further expressed: And I think it works great because you have that network and essentially that net actually to like catch you, you know, when you need those resources or you need that encouraging piece, or you need that reassurance, I guess you're doing the right thing by doing whatever it is. So I feel like that's a huge benefit.”

Participant AG explained: “We know more people in our district. Now, I just have

relationship with teachers from other schools thanks to the program.”

Participant AG expanded by stating: “I do feel like my coworkers, the person that were in the program with me. We were supporting each other and giving us some of advices, ideas on discussing...basically, daily routines, daily problems that we had in our classes.”

In conclusion, Participant JF stated: “...it became like we got to know each other to the point where when you are false, when you were a good vibes. When knew we had a good day, when we had a bad day, we boost each other up. When somebody had a bad day, we try to boost them up. And we worked very diligently together. I'm trying to think of the word I want to use for that. Camaraderie.”

Results for Research Question 2

How do participants, who are retained in the school district, describe the tools they identified within the cohort, that helped retain them? Three themes were developed from Research Question 2, in relation to what retention tools that supported MINT 2.0 participants in the completion of the program. Themes that were generated were (a) the cohort model is a tool, (b) peer motivation and support was identified as a tool, and (c) collaborative teaching and learning strategies.

Theme 1: The Cohort Model is a Tool

Theme 1, The Cohort Model is a Tool, was identified by the researcher based on the lived experiences reported by participants regarding tools they experienced that retained them. Participants stated that meeting and continuing with the program as a cohort, with a group of peers was beneficial. They also expressed experiences of receiving help with process, program procedures, assignments, and portfolio, all of which

are program components, within the program, from the program coordinator, adjunct professors, and each other.

Participant KP first stated: “When you go through the program, you have certain deadlines or certain things that you have to get done, and we were able to share best practices and learn from each other and help each other through it, so to speak.

Participant KP continued by stating: So I was meeting other teachers before the program. But before that experience, in the school side, you don't really have the opportunity to have someone who is in your field to talk to, to get ideas from, especially as a new teacher. And I think that just helps with teacher attrition as well. You know what I mean? Our teacher attrition, in my humble opinion. Participant KP also expressed: Yeah, it definitely did help, being in the cohort. And the same thing goes for you, what's not challenging for you might be something that another cohort member might find challenging, you can help them.”

Regarding their experience with the adjuncts, Participant KP also expressed: “...(the facilitators)...when I went through, the wealth of knowledge was amazing. And it was warmly delivered, it was something that you can tell that they were passionate about nurturing new teachers. And it's something that they wanted to see, the new teachers successful because they knew their time in the classroom was done, and they wanted to make sure that the things that they learned when they came through the system were still going to be valuable.”

Participant GC expressed: “I'm still signing up for classes, but I felt like I had more guidance in the program than I did if I was doing it on my own.”

Participant FL shared: “There was always people further along than me in the process. So if I was stressing out about whatever, in one of the exams or et cetera, I could count on somebody who'd done it to show me the ropes and be very helpful. And then there was people behind me that I would do the same for, or sometimes, somebody had to miss a session or something and then the next time, one of us would catch the person up. It felt like a real camaraderie in that session because again, I felt there was a lot of empathy going on. Again, we're all trying to do this.”

Participant CT stated: “Sometimes you found people that were teaching your same subject and it was very interesting to share information with them and getting something from them too. I was able to work with other people that were not related to Spanish...So I learned that sometimes you need to be the leader and sometimes you just need to be the follower and you need to adapt with that because you are going to find all type of people in those groups.”

On the other hand, Participant KM stated: “One benefit is, is especially if somebody is probably a little bit ahead of you and they can tell, you they can guide you and direct you as to what you needed to do. But once again, not really paying attention, somebody like me, you don't understand that benefit and the benefit is tremendous.”

Participant KM continued sharing their experience by stating: “If I did not have that help and that influence, I would have been even further behind. Okay. I would have been even further behind.”

Participant AN: “I guess we got to see one another grow, I'd say. We got to see each other grow, I guess, in the weeks that we were attending classes together, for sure.”

Participant JF surmised: “It's a lot of camaraderie there, there really is.”

Theme 2: Peer Motivation and Support was Identified as a Tool

Theme 2 was identified by the researcher based on the lived experiences reported by participants on the tools that helped retain them. Participants expressed that they considered the motivation and support from their peers to be a retention tool. They identified experiencing variety of thought and ideas, experiencing self-growth, seeing the growth of other participants, sharing views from different discipline backgrounds, and the exchange of ideas from other perspectives. Participants also described experiences where they both gave and received support and guidance from one another and considered the experience to be reciprocal. Through their expression of different points of view, techniques, and disciplines, and the community exchange of ideas, subtheme (a) participants provided each other with diverse perspectives, emerged.

Participant KP stated: “Learning from others who are, like I said, going through it or have been in it a little bit longer than you, you just pick up so much. And to me, like I said, personally, to meet it accelerates your growth as an educator at this level.

Participant KP also expressed: They're probably doing the same thing you're doing, they're getting their stuff ready...And just having that ability to reach out.”

Participant MCM stated: “Having always the opportunity to work with other teacher is an opportunity because you realize that there are- I think the best thing that the system of education has is the teachers. So the opportunity to work with other people, and most of them, they are willing to share their knowledge, the things that help you out and you try to help them because you are in the same situation.”

Participant FL expressed: “And got to know their perspective on things. Some were brand new, some had come from another State and had actual experience but they

had to start from the beginning because of the... I was lucky, I think, to land on a diverse cohort most of the time.”

Participant GC stated: “Everyone always different to the table. So there was always a new opinions and hearing other people's stories in class or experiences was also very helpful. So many examples that people give, so many resources that were talked about in class that I remember writing down and I used some of them. So there was a lot you learned from other people's experiences. In the activities you also see how people do certain educational activities different, some of the techniques that they use in class. So there was just a lot of that, sharing of knowledge.”

Participant GC also expressed: “...Definitely a broader perspective...learning from listening of other people's experiences”. Participant GC further shared: “... It helped me want to go to class.” Finally, Participant GC shared: “...There was a student who would text me before we had class to kind of pump me up. Even one day I was so out of it, I was like doing a billion things and I didn't even know that it was the day of class and he texted me. He's like, ‘Hey, don't forget to turn in the homework, to send the homework.’ Yeah, so super helped me.”

On the other hand, Participant MCM stated: “Just the personalities, they made me see things from another perspective. Having different points of view is always good.”

Whereas Participant CT stated: “It let us collaborate in a way, although we were from different schools, different teaching, different levels. And even ideas, sharing methodologies, that sometimes you cannot find in your school because for special areas, you don't have many teachers that can collaborate.”

Participant CT also stated: “Sometimes you make comments and you learn things from them that the way they used to do...because usually, it's like, ‘Okay. We need to do this.’ And they gave you examples. They share their own experience from settings that you really don't know at all, because I don't have a clue how it works in a high school, in a public school high school.”

Participant GP stated: “It was interesting to see just something as simple as how people plan...I'm still not convinced on that, but it was interesting to see the differences. So, my perception shifted 180.”

Participant GP went on to state: “...Different points of view, different mindsets. A plurality of opinion is always richer than the same monochromatic dogma following group.”

Participant AN stated: “Learning how others teach...being given the chance of like seeing someone else perform their professional duty in whatever way...So best practices. That sharing or acquiring best practices from the other participants was great. And finally, Participant AN surmised: So I think everybody benefited just from conversing and exchanging ideas and experiences, for sure.”

Whereas, Participant AG stated: “And even though, when the teachers are not even in your school, sometimes you are more freely to talk about things that happen...I'm more likely not to say that in front of teachers in my school because I don't know what's going to be the repercussion...sharing what happened in the classroom, and receiving a lot of advice and good ideas that have worked on my job.”

Participant JF stated: “You hear experiences from all the different places. It's not just what you think. You hear a lot of different opinions, a lot of different experiences.”

And from there, you can make your own real opinion.” Participant JF also stated: “Knowledge. A lot of knowledge, I pick up a lot of knowledge from things that I didn’t know, because some of these people that were sitting with me had some experience in education.”

Participant AG shared: “Also, we can share those experiences. Right now, probably, I would be teaching Algebra I, for example. I met someone in the program. That person will give me the lesson plans, the materials, everything.”

Theme 3: Collaborative Teaching and Learning Strategies

Collaborative teaching and learning experience with one another, was also an identified learning and retention tool. Participants described their collaborative experiences as a shared experience, exchange of ideas, having a partner, teamwork and/or sharing knowledge, to name a few. They also identified learning from each other, seeing how others experience, process, and utilize new knowledge. They further expressed the value of collaborative learning both in their own professional development and in the identified professional growth seen in each other. Participants identified three specific areas of collaborative learning strategies that they found beneficial as follows: group work, project-based learning, and peer feedback.

Participant FL stated: “Okay, so you read about this part, you read about that part. You read about that part. And then we’ll all tell each other what our parts are about. So, it’s doing a massive amount of work divided into several people.”

Participant MCM stated: “In one of the courses, for example, what we did, you work individually by yourself doing your activity. Then you share with a partner, give feedback and when you get feedback, then you perfected your activity and then that was

the final work. After sharing with the class and putting ideas, I think if it allows you to improve your work, your final work with other ideas.”

Participant AG stated: “Also, some teachers give us the opportunity to show how to use different tools or how we learn from the courses showing ourselves the way that we want to show.”

Participant GC shared: “Whether it's classroom management or it's the we do portion of an activity. I've learned from the group work and from others and resources, so many shared resources.” Participant GC further expressed: “There was so much group work. We had to do like these charts and there was like a person. Then somebody would plan out the, whatever we would write. There was an aspect of drawing in some of them. There was these matching activities or to do a theater activity. It was all based around what we were learning. But it was a lot of hands on that I really enjoyed. It helped also teach me a lot...[they] had us working in teams. Because it really does work.” Participant GC also shared: [The adjunct] ...”from the beginning, had us in groups. The entire class...80% of the class was us doing activities and learning through...There was some bookwork and her talking, but a lot of it was us implementing these things that she was teaching us. We would divide that up among ourselves and then we would have to put it together for everyone else. I learned so much...it was like a double learning experience because I was learning the material, but I was also learning teaching strategies. Which was...so useful as a new teacher.”

Participant FL also shared: “She made it fun because she had us working towards an artifact-based project that had to be in a completely original way of presenting the competency points.”

Participant KM expressed: “I was expecting that somebody would be there, not necessarily to hold my hands, but to, I would have access to at all times, that was certainly met, absolutely met. The structure and the expectations from you guys, and especially, from [the program coordinator] who run the program, you with the consistency and the clarity.” Participant KM further stated: “Maybe you can find a way to plan activities even beyond the classroom.”

Participant MCM also stated: “So peer feedback was, for me, very good and I applied it also into my classroom. I liked the peer feedback a lot. After sharing with the class and putting ideas, I think if it allows you to improve your work, your final work with other ideas.”

Participant CT continued by stating: “Inside that group, we had to subdivide our work to break our work in little pieces as well.”

Participant AN: “I guess we got to see one another grow, I'd say. We got to see each other grow, I guess, in the weeks that we were attending classes together, for sure.”

And, Participant AG further stated: “Because I have learned a lot from other participants that were on, I taught a lot to other participants too. So it was like a bi-dimensional. Like the information was like from me to other participant, and I was getting information too. So they taught me some stuff about technology, some ways how to present a PowerPoint. And then I taught them all the things that I knew, I mean, being an engineer, so how to do things with technology, other are from, let's say the other field.”

Results for Research Question 3

What suggestions can participants recommend to improve the MINT 2.0 cohort experience and make it more effective for retaining teachers? Research Question 3 generated 3 themes based on participant suggestions given to improve the MINT 2.0 cohort experiences and make it more effective in retaining teachers. Themes that were generated were (a) the program is effective, (b) suggested improvements, and (c) innovative ideas for program improvement.

The three themes were found to be consistent with the transcripts of the MINT 2.0 completers, as they noted what tools and recommendations were identified by participants to improve the MINT 2.0 cohort experience and make it more effective in retaining teachers.

Theme 1: The Program is Effective

Theme 1 was identified by the researcher based on the lived experiences reported and expressed by participants as they first identified that there were specific components of the program that were already in place and working well. The overall statements expressed by participants in this section surmise that the program is effective.

Participant KP stated: “I don't know if I would have suggestions in terms of the program itself. For me personally, it was very effective. I wouldn't change the process in the sense, because I feel like everything from the course work to building the portfolio at the very end, I feel like it adds to the overall success of the teacher because you're learning so much. And I think that the timeline, I don't remember the exact timeline off the top of my head, but I think that the timeline was a sufficient amount of time for a teacher to complete it. It wasn't such that one felt pressed or stress, you had ample time to

complete it. Yeah, I think it was a good experience for me.”

Participant FL also stated: “I don't know how it could improve. I'm only seeing it from my perspective, and from my perspective, again, it worked really well. I don't know if for someone else, it didn't. Maybe someone else didn't have a good time, or not a good time but a rewarding experience or didn't thrive or whatever else but me, personally, I thought it worked like a charm. It really did.”

Participant PS stated: “I don't think that not feeling that group cohesion is a bad thing necessarily. As a matter of fact, I think that that feeling that you can go at your own pace.”

Participant JF stated: “To be honest with you, I don't think MINT 2.0 needs any improvement. I think it's the right program for the right people. I think the program is ideal. Participant JF further expressed: The program. Honestly, I was always very positive about the program. So, I would be more one to inspire others to stay in the program.”

Theme 2: Suggested Improvements

Theme 2 was identified by the researcher based on the lived experiences reported by participants on suggestions for program improvements and in what areas of the program these improvements should be made. Participants expressed that program instructors should utilize best adult teaching practice and teach in a facilitative way. They also suggested leveraging the implementation of the cohort model, therefore explicitly providing incoming participants on the uses and benefits of cohort membership. They also suggested providing ideas or examples on how to best leverage cohort membership as a tool. One other suggestion made for program improvement was to align the course

work products to develop the portfolio artifacts while in class, so the portfolio is developed as participants progress through each course.

Participant GC expressed: “I would say follow best teaching practices to teach adults. Just because we're adults doesn't mean we don't get bored.”

Participant GC further expressed: “So facilitative instruction for us is just as useful as it is for kids.”

Participant MCM stated: “Present the evidence that the people is working on the course and also provide the people that are doing the means the help to implement that on the portfolio. So we are all working, during the year and at the end of the year you have your portfolio done, which is basically the things that you have been doing all during the whole MINT 2.0 and you show it.”

On the other hand, Participant KM stated: “If you can somehow get people to understand the benefits of the cohort because you're leveraging others' strengths, things that people have done already, they've figured it out, they know what to do, or they're doing it more effectively, that part of it. And that's important because the course that we're walking as new teachers who did not study education, it's difficult. So, the cohort, it is the key, that is the key, it is the key.”

Participant AG further stated: “Probably I will say, I wasn't trying to link more the lessons that we were just saving on the lessons that we were delivering in our school. So if we were to start some strategies from the class, so probably as a homework. Okay. You have a month to apply one of these strategies in the class and then show it. Portfolio style.”

Finally, Participant JF stated: “The one thing that I might talk about and I'm thinking, I'm trying to register something. Personally, I don't feel there's anything that needs improvement. That's my opinion. However, there's always room for improvement in some areas. I think maybe doing more Saturday schools maybe, than weekdays.”

Theme 3: Innovative Ideas for Program Improvement

Theme 3 was determined from the transcripts of the participants in this study. Participants identified was identified by the researcher based on the lived experiences reported by participants on some suggestions for program improvements that could support teacher retention. In this section, the researcher identified suggestions made by participants that were an add-on or new to the program systems already in place. In other words, this section describes new or innovative ideas to infuse into the program, rather than on suggestions for existing program components. Some innovative participant suggestions included the development and use of subgroups within the cohort model for specific group work, the use of social communication and social platforms and the implementation of a course of study specific to the use of current technologies. Additional suggestions also included hosting informal or social activities in which participants could connect with each other in a more casual setting.

Participant KM stated: “I think it would be beneficial too, during the courses, if one of the courses would be to meet up as certain members of the cohort that are in art or certain members in math, reading, meetup with an experienced teacher at the same time and maybe observe them...teaching.”

Participant PS: “Yeah. And maybe the only probably way to improve it, I don't think it's feasible, it's creating subgroups in the group. Like all people that teach high

school, taking the classes together.”

Participant FL similarly expressed: “It if were to be even more specialized but the problem with that is the scheduling obviously...Maybe put the Music teachers together.

Participant FL further expressed: I wish there was another Music teacher around especially with the activities, that we had to come up with a lesson plan. So, I was often on my own. And maybe brainstorming with another Music teacher about classroom management, about lesson planning, about activities, things like that.”

Participant AN stated: “This all exists now and we're all kind of aware of its existence, but something such as teams, or maybe a little, a little less school backed, maybe something a little more social, like, okay, like this is a chat for whatever. I think companies use like Slack and things of the sort. So maybe like a Slack that can be curated by somebody...I feel like there's just so many options for that social slash like networking piece. Participant AN also stated: I'd go back to the point of that informal sharing space. I think that'd be something cool.”

Participant JF suggested: “A nice luncheon somewhere, something very informal, nothing formal, just an informal lunch where everybody goes. And I'm not even saying that the school should have to pay for it. Everybody pays their own lunch, but I'm sure if you just put it out there, a lot of people will go. And, Participant JF further expressed: You meet somewhere and just have a lunch, coffee and donuts or something. Just a little get together where you can talk outside of the spectrum.”

Finally, Participant AG stated: “Also, I would like to the teachers be able to integrate, let's say, more technology...The teacher, we have to learn technology, you have to learn a lot of stuff working with computers. So broadly integrating more technology

inside the program or in the lesson with different tools that teachers control how they work, and then we can learn how to use those tools. And those tools can be reflected then in our classroom. That will be probably a good idea for the program.”

Summary of Results

Several themes emerged from this qualitative study which explored the experiences of cohort membership in an alternative certification program. The data analysis process generated nine critical themes to the research questions. Research Question 1 generated the following themes: (a) participants identified individual definitions of a cohort, with shared commonalities; (b) participants felt connected to each other; and (c) participants identified specific benefits to cohort membership. From the participant transcripts the following subtheme emerged under the theme *participants felt connected to each other*: (a) participants bonded over common goals. Under *participants identified specific benefits of cohort membership*, two subthemes emerged: (a) participants identified additional benefits to cohort membership and (b) participants had specific opinions regarding their experience. Research Question 2 generated the following three themes: (a) the cohort model is a tool, (b) peer motivation and support were identified as tools, and (c) collaborative teaching and learning strategies. From these themes, the following subtheme was identified, under: *peer motivation and support were identified as tools*, (a) participants provided each other with diverse perspectives. Research Question 3 generated three themes which are as follows: (a) the program is effective, (b) suggested improvements, and (c) innovative ideas for program improvement. The thematic categories identified were verified and checked against the transcripts from the one-to-one interviews with participants, as they expressed, in their

own words, their lived experiences. The emergent themes were then compared and checked again to explore the experiences of cohort membership in an alternative certification program and were found to be consistent with participant responses.

The aim of this phenomenological study was to explore participant experiences, specific to their perception of participating in the alternative certification program, MINT 2.0, cohort, through the lens of Wegner's *Community of Practice*, as a framework (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). The goal of the study was to identify and gain an understanding of which factors of cohort participation are noted as supportive to participant retention. Therefore, in chapter 5, the researcher will further discuss the results, conclusions based on those results, implications of the study and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and examine participants' experience of cohort membership in one specific alternative certification program, MINT 2.0 and how these relate to program completion. Results of the study could help to develop further exploration into the connection between cohort membership and program completion and provide future program improvements. The following questions guided the study:

1. What are the identified experiences of participating in the MINT 2.0 Cohort?
2. How do participants, who are retained in the school district, describe the tools they learned or experienced in the cohort, that helped retain them?
3. What suggestions can participants recommend to improve the MINT 2.0 cohort experience and make it more effective for retaining teachers?

In Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion, I reflected on the experiences of the participants through a thorough review of the results and findings. I then expanded on the findings for each research question, supported by the evidence from the participants' own words and provide my own insights, surprise findings and connections made through this review process. The connections between these results in relation to the literature is also detailed and discussed. Finally, recommendations for future studies were made, as are recommendations to enhance or improve local practice.

Elaboration and Interpretation of Results

Research Question 1: What are the identified experiences of participating in the MINT 2.0 cohort?

Among the most interesting findings, when first exploring the answers participants provided in their responses, was that they identified their own varied definitions of what a cohort was to them. Participants had a clear notion that they were enrolled in one as well. This was a particularly interesting finding for the researcher, as detailed description of cohort membership, uses, or function was not explicitly provided to any program participant. Their understanding, definition, or experience of cohort membership came from both past experiences participating in a cohort and/or from membership in the MINT 2.0 cohort. For example, one participant expressed that they had participated in cohort enrollment throughout their educational career, another expressed that he had experienced cohort membership in college and others still had no previous experience with cohort membership. Participants individually defined a cohort as being part of a community, being part of a story, or being part of a family. This particular definition was notable as it was such a personal expression of this definition and implied a deep connection to others in the group, which I found surprising given that this was a cohort model for working adults. As the researcher, I expected to find little or no knowledge of the cohort as an experience. I also had a very vague understanding of how impactful the cohort experience could be as a tool in and of itself, particularly to working adults. I now feel that it is most needed for this setting and this group.

The connection with others within the cohort was the next finding experience expressed by participants. All participants expressed connection with other cohort/program participants. Some connections were expressed as very formalized and

casual, such as colleagues or cohort mates, with the purpose of completing an specific assignment, project, or task. Others described deeper connection with other participants in the cohort, describing friendships, and long-term collegial connections. Some participants in particular expressed that they were still in contact with their former peers and most expressed that even though time had lapsed, they felt comfortable with reaching out to their former colleagues at any given time of need. However, all participants, even those who described a more casual connection, did describe the connection to at least one other person in the cohort. The participants expressed positive attributes to their interactions with other cohort members, including help, support, and motivation received from one another. They also described a sense of camaraderie. Participants experienced a shared bond—a common goal, to “get through this” together. They described motivating each other and that their role in doing so was fluid. In some cases, they were motivated by their peers, while in other they were motivating others, providing guidance, or support. They found “strength in numbers” as one participant described and through this connection with other participants, shared feeling helped and supported, receiving resources, motivation to complete the program, networking opportunities and expressed that these were in some cases directly pertinent to their program completion and also their professional growth. Participants further expressed being part of a cohort was also engaging as a community of learners, in which they worked through the program coursework together, learned with and from each other and helped each other through the program to completion. This finding further supported the connection found among participants within the cohort. Later, in the interviews, this community of learning or collaborative learning was identified as one of the tools that helped retain participants,

which will be further explored in the findings of Research Question 2.

Interestingly, participants also expressed finding benefits beyond program progression or completion. For example, one participant shared that they found the inspiration to pursue other ventures within the district. Another expressed gaining an understanding or knowledge of the district system and roles and contacts within the district that could be utilized as resources. A connection that I made from these findings, is that participants themselves were not only living the experience but were part of each other's lived experiences and how this affected their progression and ultimately completion of the program. These findings led me to assert that the human connection is valuable in all settings (not just in personal lives), including professional and learning settings alike.

Overall, participants also expressed positive feelings towards their experiences within the MINT 2.0 cohort, which was also a surprise to the researcher. I originally had very little expectation about whether participants even had defined experiences within the cohort, so not only did they share their experiences, but they also shared rich information and had strong opinions and perceptions of their lived experiences.

Research Question 2: How do participants, who are retained in the school district, describe the mechanisms/tools, from the cohort, that helped retain them?

Participants first identified the cohort model as a tool. Once again, as the researcher, I found this surprising, as I did not realize that participants had such a depth of perception regarding their cohort enrollment process or if/how they utilized it as a tool within parameters of program progression. Yet, they did. Participants expressed that the cohort experience, connection and use of the model within the MINT 2.0 program

assisted them specifically in two ways. First, they expressed that going through the program as a cohort group assisted them in progressing through the program. Participants expressed that they assisted each other in understanding program steps, course requirements, and with the program content as well. Second, cohort membership supported that they remain and continue in the program to achieve completion. As they found the cohort model and the benefits of connection and collaboration found within it to be amongst the most impactful tools that helped them complete and succeed through the program to completion.

The second tool they identified that supported their retention was their peers. They identified their peers as a resource, a source of help in the form of support, guidance, and motivation. Participants described helping each other with how to apply their learning in their classrooms, how to study for their exams, and with the building of the portfolio. They described also providing each other with motivation and moral support to enroll in classes, attend the sessions, and finish assignments. Participants expressed feeling a sense of belonging and encouragement among each other, which motivated them to continue with the program, even if they were feeling stressed or overwhelmed. In some cases, they described having an conversation or interaction with a peer, that encouraged them to remain in and complete the program.

Participants also shared that from their colleagues they had diversity of thought, which provided them with different strategies, ideas, or ways of doing things both within the program, and in their own classrooms. This diversity led to improvement in the areas of their classroom practice and instruction, which also improved their experience overall. Participants shared that their diverse backgrounds and experiences served to enhance

learning and perspective, and through this provided each other both learning and professional growth.

Collaborative Learning and teaching strategies were also identified as a participant retention tool. Participants expressed that learning together and from each was instrumental in their progress and ultimate retention. Notwithstanding, these strategies also helped them understand and apply the theory and content they were learning. This collaboration then improved their teaching practice and classroom experience both for themselves and for their students. Improved teaching practice and professional growth was a byproduct of this community of practice, which is linked to their retention. Participants experienced collective learning, groupwork, and project-based learning. They identified these as effective teaching strategies, especially for adult learners and expressed that these were important in their development as both the learner and a teacher. They described that reciprocal learning and teaching strategies were particularly important within the program. They were able to divide the work amongst themselves, work more efficiently to complete assignments and use the feedback from one another to make improvements. The participants noted that this method of learning was instrumental in keeping them engaged and motivated during course sessions and that the sense of community and belonging that some felt, also assisted them in getting to each session, in order to complete each course.

Research Question 3: What suggestions can participants recommend to improve the MINT 2.0 cohort experience and make it more effective for retaining teachers?

Among the first and most consistent suggestion that participants made was to capitalize on use of the cohort model. Participants suggested that we teach about it,

explain its benefits, and show participants how to utilize it to assist them with their progress. Regarding program coursework, participants expressed that one powerful way to improve the delivery, understanding and application of both theory and pedagogy, would be to infuse more collaborative learning practices. For example, some participants expressed finding project-based learning to be very effective in helping to develop their understanding and application of specific education concepts. They also described being able to scaffold learning with each other and that peer feedback played a large role in their learning. It was also suggested that course instruction should be mainly interactive, where participants are learning by doing and presenting their learning, soliciting feedback from the instructor and one another. In addition, they suggested having the time to apply the concept, strategy, or activity and then having the opportunity for reflection and follow-up on how it was received in their practice. Participants also detailed that there should be instructional alignment and dedicated time for the development of portfolio artifacts, which is the culminating project for at the completion of the program. They also suggested developing subgroups from within the cohort to pair participants with others who teach their same subject or grade level, to share best practices, develop lesson plans, and discuss their experiences with.

In addition to these course-based suggestions, participants further recommended that more informal, social opportunities be provided for cohort participants. Surprisingly, participants suggested providing opportunities for additional and more in-depth social interactions amongst each other. They suggested hosting informal gatherings, in which they could interact with and get to know one another. Finally, participants suggested the use of communication/social media platforms, such as having a WhatsApp group, a

Facebook or Twitter page to communicate and access program information and each other, on demand.

Relationship of Findings to the Literature

Research Question 1

What are the identified experiences of participating in the MINT 2.0 Cohort? The first experience noted by participant responses was the identification with participation in the MINT 2.0 cohort. Participants all had their own definition of a cohort; however, all definitions, although individual, had a common thread. Cohort membership as they defined it can be summarized as a group that is moving together through a program with a common goal. They confirmed engaging in learning with and from each other, which aligns to Wenger's research on communities of practice. Wenger research shows that these communities formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain (Smith, 2019). In their definitions, participants expressed that within cohort model emerged a learning community of practice. Their experience aligns with Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015), that defined community of practice as containing three elements: domain, community, and practice—all of which were confirmed in the various expressions of participant definitions.

Research also shows that there are benefits, specifically for adult learners of cohort membership. According to the research cohort membership, provides participants a sense of belonging, connection, and building of memories (Smith, 2019). Findings from this study align with the research, as participants confirmed when they expressed feeling they had found their niche, a connection with at least one other participant in the group and that they felt that at any given time, they could reach out to each for support even

now. This is further supported in the research by Carruth and Field (2016), which has shown that participation in a community of practice facilitates collaboration, a sense of learning amongst the adults in the group and may also promote a deep reflective approach to learning. The findings from this study, also align strongly with Levine's (2010) research, which referred specifically to teachers who engaged in a learning community and found that in doing so they improve their own learning, professional growth, and teacher practice.

The benefits of the cohort model identified by the participants of this study also aligns with the research that shows that there are many additional benefits to participation in one. Findings in this study show that participants felt motivated by one another, help with coursework and support, from one another, as they progressed through the program to completion. This also aligns to the research, as identified benefits for cohort participation include enriching member learning, improved academic performance, reduced sense of loneliness, psychological support, networking for career, increased program delivery efficacy and enrollment benefits (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). Seminal research also found that participation in cohorts provided opportunities for membership and provided social-emotional support for group learners (Hasinoff & Mandzuk, 2005).

Research Question 2

How do participants who are retained in the district, describe the tools/mechanisms from the cohort, that helped retain them? Participants identified that the specific tools within the MINT 2.0 program that helped retain them were the following: the cohort model, their peers as a resource and collaborative learning practices. The utilization of the cohort model as a tool has been more recently

implemented to support educational programs in which retention and completion rates have posed challenges to improve overall retention and completion (Eaton, 2018; Pemberton & Akkary, 2010; Ross et al., 2016). With that in mind, the benefit of this implementation, as a tool, is in alignment to one of the benefits that participants most frequently noted—cohort membership. Research shows that cohorts provide an opportunity to belong to a potentially supportive community of persons with similar goals (Ross et al., 2016). Amongst the benefits of cohort membership identified in the research are enrichment of learning, improved academic performance, reduced sense of loneliness, networking and general support (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010), which aligns with the findings of this study as well. In the seminal work by Drago-Severson et al. (2011) it was stated that, “relationships with peers developed in a cohort made the critical difference in learning, emotional and psychological well-being and the ability to broaden perspective” (p. 15). Diversity of perspective was an identified benefit of many of the participants in this study as well. Finally, the research by Pemberton and Akkery (2010), goes on to show that peer relationships in the form of meaningful professional and personal connections are associated with motivation and can therefore be linked to the improvement of retention and completion rates in academic programs.

Delving deeper into the research in respect to collaborative learning, the research by Carruth and Field (2016) shows that collaborative learning in adult classrooms (learning) may promote a deep, reflective approach to learning. Participants of this study described learning with and from each other. They also described being available to bounce ideas from each other, benefitting from the division of workload and finding support in one another in navigating through the program from beginning to completion.

They described their learning being enhanced by the communication, feedback, and perspective of their peers. They expressed seeing marked professional growth in themselves and their practice, as well as seeing it as it evolved in their peers. In studies related to college student, research also found that student motivation toward self-directed learning was also greatly enhance by collaboration, which was also a finding noted in this study (Carruth & Field, 2016).

Research Question 3

What suggestions can participants recommend to improve the MINT 2.0 cohort experience and make it more effective for retaining teachers? It is valid to say that the utilization and implementation of a cohort model in adult learning program is an efficient tool. The use of the cohort as a tool is noted by participants and is also an area so important, that they have offered suggestions to and recommendations on how to improve it to make it a more effective tool in supporting and retaining other participants. This finding is thoroughly supported in both seminal and current literature on this topic. For example, the seminal work of Imel (2002), identified that a cohort is created intentionally as a tool to improve member learning and progress in a program. Participants also suggested the development of subgroups within the cohort to enhance specific learning opportunities. This is aligned to the research on cohort design, which shows that this flexibility in design is not only feasible it can enhance the personal experience of participant (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010).

Providing additional collaborative learning opportunities was another suggested recommendation for program improvement. Participants consistently expressed suggestions to increase interactive instruction, project-based learning, group work and

reciprocal teaching and learning practices. They expressed that collaborative learning assisted them in not only understanding the content but applying it as well. They also described that collaborative learning allowed for them to reflect on what was going well and what was not working and improve by learning from each other's experiences with application. This is supported by the research of Carruth and Field (2016), who found that to be successful as adult learners, they must have an active role in the creation of knowledge.

Research by Garcia and Weiss (2015) found that an increase in academic and social activities provided more positive view of an institute experience. In their final recommendation, participants suggested providing additional opportunities for informal and social activities/interactions for participants. They also recommended that this could be done via informal meetings, opportunities for networking or conversation, which also aligns with the research.

Implications of Findings

The problem being studied is that noneducation background teachers are not completing the credentialing requirements (via a program of study) and therefore are leaving teaching due to forced termination from their schools. Noneducation-major teachers should be completing credentialing requirements and be retained on staff; therefore, the issue of retention is the focus of this study.

The findings of this study have provided rich insight from persons experiencing these challenges and the credentialing requirements needed to remain in the school district as a teacher. Based on the findings of the study there were implications for the use of cohort models across different settings. The cohort was successfully and easily implemented to a district-based program and could serve many adult learning or

credentialing program. The continued use and development of the cohort model could be extended to all new teachers as part of induction and mentoring as well. Findings in this study also had implications for using the cohort model as a retention tool. Finally, based on the findings of this study, there are implications for the further development of coursework within this type of program(s) utilizing collaborative teaching and learning strategies for increased learning and retention through the support found within the community of learning—project based learning, reciprocal teaching/learning activities, group work and interactive instruction.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations identified in this study were mostly in alignment to those projected and described in Chapter 3. Limitations of this study included a small sample size of 10 participant interviews from only one group. Limitations in the honesty of participant responses due to understanding the questions being asked, ability to express themselves or ability/desire to share their personal experiences, were also found to be true. An additional limitation identified as the study was being conducted was the influence of the researcher as their former coordinator, of what they believed I may have wanted to hear from their responses. Although participants were candid and comfortable enough to share both positive and negative experiences, as evidenced by the responses of the questions regarding their experiences, this component should still be noted as a possible limitation to collecting the most accurate results. Although recruitment and scheduling limitations were challenging, due to COVID-19 restrictions, once scheduled, the use of Zoom as a platform made participants more accessible. They were also able to connect with me and share their insights and responses in a comfortable setting of their choosing, at a time that worked best for them. Due to the uniqueness of the population of

this study, the data was not altogether generalizable to all possible readers, in similar issues. Finally, the results of this study would not be transferable to different settings, such as a rural alternative certification program, a university-based educator program or a traditional education degree program.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on my experience with conducting this study and my own discoveries, I found myself even more interested on the topic of the effects of adult human connection and how it supports learning, professional growth, and program completion (when applicable). I am left curious and wondering what more can be accomplished though the utilization of the cohort model in different settings and for various aspects of the school district system. For example, could the use of a cohort model, of newly hired teachers improve the onboarding experiences, improve teacher growth or improve retention new teacher retention, in general? Another question that came to mind from conducting this study, was to consider how formalized or structured does a cohort have to be in order to be perceived or experienced as effective or beneficial?

From these and other insights gained through reflecting on this study, I would recommend further research in these areas, as well as further study in the areas of cohort and the general experiences of the new teacher experience from within the cohort. I would recommend further exploring existing cohorts for comparison between formal and informal cohort designs, for identified similarities and differences of experiences, and for program efficacy and possible successes or areas of improvement. It would also be curious to explore the cohort experience of participants in the Career and Technical Education alternative certification program, of the district, to explore participant perceptions of their cohort experience, given their vocational (non education)

background. A final recommendation for further research would be to conduct a comparison study between the MINT 2.0 completion rates to those of other district based alternative certification program, in which program systems are reviewed and compared. An exploratory study in this area could also provide further insights into the experiences of participants in each.

Recommendations for Local Practice

Recommendations for local practice and stakeholders originated from two sources. The first was from the words of the participants of the study, through the reflection of their own lived experiences and in their own words. The 2nd was through the connections made by the researcher from the results of the data, from the experiences of the participants and through the lens of her own interpretation of listening the participants and managing the program. Therefore, the recommendations for local practice are compartmentalized into two sections, which are as follows: (a) general recommendations to improve a cohort experience and (b) general recommendations for improvement specific to the district-based alternative certification program.

Regarding recommendations regarding the enhancing the use of the cohort model itself, participants were very clear in that the cohort should be identified as a tool for success, in and of itself. Participant KM best expressed:

You can somehow get people to understand the benefits of the cohort because you're leveraging others' strengths, things that people have done already, they've figured it out, they know what to do, or they're doing it more effectively, that part of it. So, the cohort, it is the key, that is the key, it is the key.

Based on participant direct suggestions and study findings, the continued use of the cohort model upon program enrollment was strongly recommended. It was also suggested

that at the first meeting for new enrolled participants (i.e., program orientation), that participants be introduced to the use of the cohort model by notifying them of their enrollment, identifying and discussing the uses, benefits and resources found by active participation with others in the cohort, including but not limited to helping each other through course progression and completion, project support, division of labor, networking opportunities, mentorship, collaborative opportunities, professional growth and support and additional knowledge of district systems and staff. These findings also generated a suggestion for conducting an “ice breaker” or social activity during a first meeting of the cohort enrollees, to provide opportunity for social interaction and connection. Finally, it was also found that the creation of a live chat and/or use of a social media platform for cohort members, can and would enhance the connection and opportunity for participant collaboration.

In addition to general recommendations for all stakeholders, findings and participant input generated findings specific to MINT 2.0 program improvement. Some of these recommendations included infusing end product (i.e., portfolio) language and formatting into course instruction for that the participant portfolio is completed alongside the completion of the coursework, versus at the end as a culminating project. It was also recommended to have program completers serve as mentors for current participants. A portfolio development course was also recommended in addition to the existing portfolio orientation, already in place. Finally, the development of sub-groups within the cohort, sorted by subject area and/or grade levels was also recommended to enhance specific activities, collaboration opportunities and networking amongst participants.

Summary

The problem being studied was that noneducation background teachers were not completing the credentialing requirements (via a program of study) and therefore were leaving teaching due to forced termination from their schools. Noneducation major teacher should be completing credentialing requirements and be retained on staff, therefore, the issue of retention is the focus of this study.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and examine participants' experience of cohort membership in one specific alternative certification program, MINT 2.0 and how these relate to program completion. Results of the study could develop further exploration into the connection between cohort membership and program completion and provide future program improvements.

Results of the study showed that participants indeed had a clear understanding of cohort membership. Within the cohort experience they noted the importance of specific benefits of cohort membership, such as connection with other participants, motivation, professional growth and support with program progression to completion. They further identified the cohort itself, their peers as a resource both within and outside of the program and collaborative learning as important tools that supported their progression in the program, completion and retention to the district. Finally, they made suggestions for the improvement of the cohort experience, in the area of capitalizing on the utilization of the benefits of the cohort model, the revamping of course delivery to be more interactive, project-based, and reciprocal in teaching and learning style.

The results of this study have strong implications for local, district programs and can be applied across other programs for adult learners. There are implications for the use

of cohort models in various settings. There are also implications for the use of cohort models as a retention and program completion tool, as well as for the use of collaborative teaching and learning strategies for adult learners in varied settings. For this local district, these findings have strong implications for continued use, enhancement, and investment of the cohort model for the alternative certification program. Findings could also drive course delivery strategies to further use collaborative teaching and learning strategies. In conclusion, the findings of this study can be used in this local district for program improvement to increase the retention rates for these new teachers, assisting in the completion of their credentialing, and therefore reducing one of the major causes of teacher attrition.

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Appendix A

Participant Contact Email(s)

Initial Recruitment Email

Hello!

I hope this email finds you well and staying safe.

I am currently a doctoral student at Nova Southeastern University working on and conducting an exploratory study on the experiences of cohort membership that MINT 2.0 participants may have had. This study is for the purpose of gaining insight and knowledge. Findings could lead to future programmatic changes and improvements.

I am specifically contacting program completers, so that I can collect candid, honest and professional data regarding your experiences with cohort membership in the MINT 2.0 program. I would greatly appreciate your feedback and hearing your personal experiences. Participation criteria includes enrollment in a MINT 2.0 cohort, completion of the MINT 2.0 program and current employment with M-DCPS. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You will be provided a copy of the interview transcripts for your review, one week from the date of your interview.

Participation in this study would involve a one-time, Zoom interview, and pseudonyms will be used to protect your confidentiality. The interview should take no more than one hour. Additionally, the date and time for the interview would be entirely at your convenience.

If you would like to participate in this study and/or have any questions regarding the study, please email me at Roxysanchez@dadeschools.net. At that time, I will gladly schedule your time to interview or respond to any of your questions. As a participant of this study, you would be free to drop out of the study at any time.

Again, participation is completely optional. You are under No obligation to partake in this study. However, your insight would be valuable and much appreciated.

Thank you and Kindest Regards,

General Informed Consent Form

NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled

The Experiences of Cohort Membership in an Alternative Certification program

Who is doing this research study?

College: Nova Southeastern University

Principal Investigator: Roxanne Sanchez, Ed.S.

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Dr. David Weintraub

Site Information: Miami Dade County Public Schools

Funding: Unfunded

What is this study about?

The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of cohort membership that MINT 2.0 participants may have had. This study is for the purpose of gaining insight and knowledge. Findings could lead to future programmatic changes and improvements.

Why are you asking me to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this research study because you are a MINT 2.0 program completer, who has had direct experience in participating and completing the MINT 2.0 program. In addition, as a professional educator, you have the ability to communicate effectively and provide insight regarding your personal experiences within the program.

This study will include about 10 MINT 2.0 completers.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?

While you are taking part in this research study, you will partake in one virtual interview, which will take up to one hour and a 15 minute follow-up for clarifying questions.

Research Study Procedures - as a participant, this is what you will be doing:

Participating in a Zoom interview with the researcher, answering questions regarding your experiences of cohort membership in the MINT 2.0 program. There may be a 15 minute follow-up for clarifying questions. You will be provided a copy of your interview transcripts for optional review as well as a summary of the findings at the completion of the study, for your records.

Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?

You have the right to leave this research study at any time or refuse to be in it. If you decide to leave or you do not want to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study before it is over, any information about you that was collected **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study and may be used as a part of the research.

What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form, if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits from being in this research study. We hope the information learned from this study will for the purpose of gaining insight and knowledge. Findings could lead to future programmatic changes and improvements.

Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

How will you keep my information private?

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your privacy. All data materials will be secured and only the researcher will have access to them. Data, in all forms, will be placed in a secured password protected computer and/or in a locked cabinet. This data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution, and any regulatory and granting agencies (if

applicable). If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you.

Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?

This research study involves audio and/or video recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution, and any of the people who gave the researcher money to do the study (if applicable). The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure that the recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to or viewing the recording.

Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?

If you have questions now, feel free to ask. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact:

Roxy Sanchez can be reached at Rmorales@mynsu.nova.edu

Research Participants Rights

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

Nova Southeastern University

(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790

IRB@nova.edu

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

All space below was intentionally left blank.

Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:

- You have read the above information.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research

<u>Adult Signature Section</u>		
I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.		
_____ Printed Name of Participant	_____ Signature of Participant	_____ Date
_____ Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent and Authorization	_____ Signature of Person Obtaining Consent & Authorization	_____ Date

Appendix B
Interview Protocol

Adapted from the sample interview guide by Creswell and Poth, 2018.

Demographics:

Date:

Place/Platform:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Pseudonym:

Phase I: Breaking the Ice and Building Rapport

Greetings and Thank you's for participation

Catch up Questions:

- How have you been since completing the program?
- How has your school year been going?

Phase II: Transparency: Setting the tone for candid conversation

- Share with participant the goal and purpose of the study
- Establish confidentiality and openness in conversation
- Discuss possible research bias: Researcher has no personal ties or preferences to the outcomes other than for the purposes of learning, as the program cannot be altered or modified
- Professional input and honest experiences for the purpose of learning

Phase III: Interview Questions:

Background and Experience in Education:

- What was your bachelor's degree in?
- Tell me about your career history from graduation to now?
- Why/How did you end up in education?
- Tell me about your experience when you first started teaching?
- When did you know that you want to remain in education?
- What led you to that choice?
- How is your experience in education different now?

MINT 2.0 Program:

- What made you decide to take the MINT 2.0 route to complete your credentialing?
- What were some of your expectations of the program?

Cohort Membership:

- What is your definition of a cohort?
- When initially enrolling in MINT 2.0, what was your perception of being admitted along with a group?
- How did that perception change as you progressed through the program coursework?
- What were some identifiable benefits to being enrolled to the program with a group of other participants?
- What benefits of cohort membership did you experience as a participant?
- What about being part of a cohort would you identify as beneficial to your progression in the program?
- How did cohort membership impact you? your ability to complete the program?

- What suggestions would you provide that would improve the MINT 2.0 cohort membership experience?

Wegner's Communities of Practice:

- Tell me about your experience with other participants in the program.
- What were some of the activities you engaged in with other participants?
- What was your experience when working collaboratively with other participants?
- What benefits do you identify from working with other participants in a group?
- In what ways did other participants influence your progress in the program?
- What suggestions would you make to improve collaborative opportunities or engagement in the program?
- Did your colleagues, who were enrolled with you in the MINT 2.0 program, in any way support your completion of the program?
- Do you remain in contact with any of your colleagues who were enrolled with you in the MINT 2.0 program? In what capacity?

Phase III: Interview Closure:

- In general, what were some suggestions you would like to make or share that would guide program improvement?
- Thank you for your time!
- Housekeeping:
 - Transcripts of this interview will be provided to participants via email, for review and feedback; 1 week time for edits and/or omissions
 - Request permission for a 10-15 follow up phone if there are any clarifying questions regarding the interview
 - Yes: _____
 - No: _____

Appendix C

Alignment of Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

	Theoretical Framework	
Research Questions	Cohorts	Wenger's Community of Practice
<p>RQ 1: What are the identified experiences of cohort membership in the MINT 2.0 program?</p>	<p>When initially enrolling in MINT 2.0, what was your perception of being admitted along with a group? How did that perception change as you progressed through the program coursework? How did cohort membership impact you? your ability to complete the program? What was your experience when working collaboratively with other participants? What benefits do you identify from working with other participants in a group? What are your beliefs surrounding collaborative work?</p>	
<p>RQ 2: How do participants, who are retained in the school district, describe the tools they identified within the cohort that helped retain them?</p>	<p>What benefits of cohort membership did you experience as a participant? What about being part of a cohort would you identify as beneficial to your progression in the program? In what ways did other participants influence your progress in the program?</p>	
<p>RQ 3: What suggestions can participants recommend to improve the MINT 2.0 cohort experience and make it more effective for retaining teachers?</p>	<p>What suggestions would you provide that would improve the MINT 2.0 cohort membership experience? What suggestions would you make to improve collaborative opportunities or engagement in the program?</p>	