

Rejuvenating Teacher Satisfaction: Collective Efficacy and Instructional Transformation

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigated how a district exclusive cohort-based graduate reading program cultivated collective efficacy and, in turn, shaped teachers' self-efficacy, instructional practices, and professional renewal. Twenty-four K–5 teachers completed a yearlong, job-embedded certification program intentionally aligned with district literacy priorities. Quantitative survey data showed increases in teachers' literacy knowledge, leadership confidence, and commitment to evidence-based instruction. Qualitative analyses of focus groups, reflections, and open-ended responses revealed seven themes, including strengthened professional identity, transformation of literacy practice, deeper theoretical understanding, and increased collective efficacy. Teachers also reported improvements in student engagement and literacy growth. Findings illustrate how district–university partnerships and cohort structures can cultivate collaborative learning, foster coherent instructional practices, and support sustainable systemwide improvement.

Key Words

collective efficacy, cohort models, professional development, job-embedded self-efficacy, student outcomes

Introduction

For decades, faculty in Kutztown University's Master of Education in Reading Program, with Reading Specialist certification, has prepared thousands of educators across Pennsylvania. The program has continually evolved in response to shifting participant needs, changing accreditation expectations, and emerging literacy research. Coursework has been aligned with International Literacy Association standards, transitioned to online delivery, and strengthened with research-based literacy practices and feedback from partner districts.

Yet the traditional structure, where candidates enroll individually represent widely varied school contexts and participate at different times, has made it difficult to cultivate collective efficacy. Although teacher self-efficacy can be achieved through traditional coursework, the most powerful impact comes when collective efficacy is promoted through a district wide cohort of aspiring literacy leaders.

This gap became increasingly visible as graduates reported implementing new practices in relative isolation, with limited opportunities for collaboration, feedback, or sustained professional dialogue. Their diverse school settings, from urban to suburban, public to private, made it difficult to maintain instructional momentum or engage in collaborative problem-solving. A new opportunity emerged when leaders from a nearby urban district requested support in preparing a cohort of Reading Specialists who could strengthen literacy instruction across all elementary and middle schools.

This invitation created the conditions to reconceptualize the certification program as a district-embedded cohort intentionally designed to cultivate collective efficacy, shared learning, and coherent instructional improvement.

The literature suggests that such an approach is well warranted. Teacher learning is most powerful when professional development moves beyond transmission-oriented workshops and courses toward job-embedded models that integrate theory, real-time application, and systematic inquiry. Drawing on Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) framework of knowledge for, in, and of practice, Yendol-Hoppey and Dana (2020, 2023) emphasize that meaningful growth occurs when coursework, fieldwork, and reflection take place in context, allowing teachers to blend outside knowledge (research-based pedagogy, university expertise) with inside knowledge (local curricula, instructional routines, district assessments).

Although most PD models emphasize "knowledge for practice," instructional improvement is most robust when teachers can apply, investigate, and refine practices in the context of their everyday classroom work.

This conceptual grounding aligns with research on collective efficacy. Bandura's theoretical work, along with empirical studies by Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000), demonstrates that when educators work toward common goals, engage in shared professional learning, and support one another's practice, student achievement improves. As Goddard et al. noted, schools with high collective efficacy encourage teachers to "act purposefully to enhance student learning" (p. 501).

Additional research affirms that strong teacher collaboration is associated with improved student outcomes (Goddard, Goddard, & Moran, 2007). Guided by this evidence, university faculty and district leaders redesigned the certification program as a cohesive, job-embedded model that integrated coursework, collaboration, and administrative

involvement to build collective efficacy and strengthen literacy practice across the district.

Given the documented link between collective efficacy, teacher motivation, and student learning, this study examined how a district-embedded, cohort-structured certification program shaped teachers' beliefs, instructional practices, and professional renewal. Specifically, we investigated whether participation in a collaborative cohort strengthened collective efficacy and whether increased efficacy supported changes in literacy instruction aligned with the science of reading, responsive teaching, and systemwide instructional coherence.

Using a mixed-methods design, we analyzed survey data, focus group transcripts, written reflections, and archival artifacts to understand how this cohort model influenced teacher learning in a district characterized by wide achievement gaps.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods design to examine the effects of a district-based graduate reading certification program on teacher efficacy, instructional practice, and professional motivation.

Quantitative data provided descriptive evidence of changes in teachers' literacy-related beliefs and self-perceived competence, while qualitative data offered deeper insight into how teachers experienced collaborative learning, applied evidence-based strategies, and engaged with district literacy priorities. Integrating both forms of data allowed for a nuanced understanding of how the cohort model supported teacher learning and contributed to shifts in instructional practice.

Program context and design

Prior to implementation, university faculty

collaborated with district and school-based administrators to develop an instructional model aligned with district literacy goals, instructional routines, and available resources.

The partnership ensured coherence between coursework and district priorities, while ongoing communication with central office leaders supported consistent implementation.

The redesigned certification program consisted of seven sequential courses delivered over the academic year. Courses were adapted to the district context, enabling teachers to apply theory to practice through structured collaboration, lesson development, and peer problem-solving. District curriculum materials, assessment tools, and instructional resources were embedded into coursework, reinforcing coherence between university instruction and classroom practice.

To reduce barriers to participation, coursework was offered on-site immediately after school or in online formats. Additionally, district professional development days were allocated for course delivery.

These scheduling decisions minimized additional workload beyond the school day and increased accessibility for teachers with family or personal obligations.

Throughout the program, faculty conducted classroom learning walks to observe implementation of literacy practices, provide coaching, and strengthen connections between coursework and teaching.

A midpoint reflection session invited teachers to share successes, identify challenges, and provide feedback on the program. This reflective structure served as a formative checkpoint, deepening learning and enhancing instructional alignment across the cohort.

Participants

The study included 24 teachers representing 15 school buildings—13 elementary schools and 2 middle schools—in a diverse urban district. Participants included three kindergarten teachers, eight first-grade teachers, four second-grade teachers, two third-grade teachers, three fourth-grade teachers, three fifth-grade teachers, and one K–4 resource teacher. All participants completed the full district-embedded certification program, and no attrition occurred. All teachers provided informed consent for participation in the study.

Data collection

Multiple data sources were used to understand the program's impact:

- Pre- and post-program surveys and open-ended responses capturing teacher perceptions of literacy knowledge, leadership confidence, collaboration, and instructional priorities;
- Mid-program discussions documenting formative reflections on learning and implementation; and
- A post-program focus group gathering summative impressions of the cohort experience.

The multi-source dataset supported triangulation and strengthened the study's trustworthiness.

Results

Quantitative findings

Across the eight survey domains, post-program mean scores were equal to or higher than pre-program scores, indicating positive shifts in teachers' literacy-related beliefs, instructional

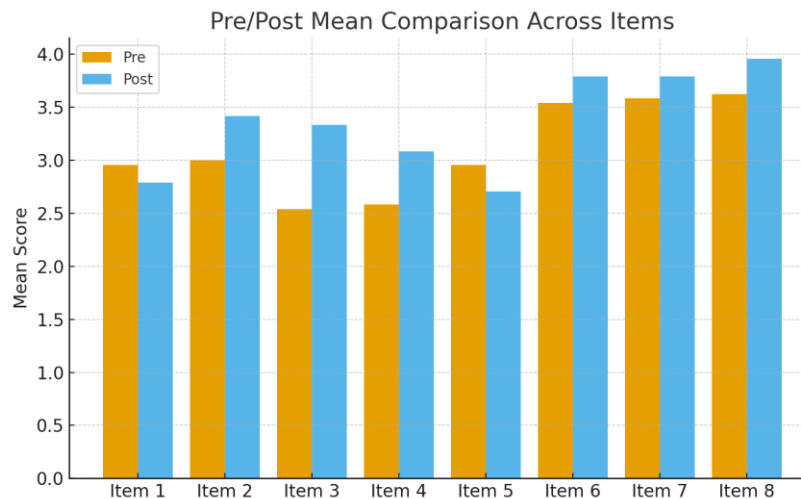
priorities, and sense of leadership. Teachers reported stronger alignment between their beliefs about professional development and their instructional practices (Pre: $M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.50$; Post: $M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.64$), greater confidence in their roles as literacy leaders, and increased understanding of evidence-based literacy instruction.

Teachers also endorsed the heightened importance of integrating independent reading and writing into daily instruction. For example, beliefs regarding the importance of writing instruction increased from $M = 3.63$ ($SD = 0.63$) to $M = 3.96$ ($SD = 0.20$).

Because individual respondents could not be matched across administrations, inferential statistical tests were not possible; however, descriptive trends show consistent upward movement across most domains. These findings correspond with research showing that district-embedded professional development strengthens teacher self-efficacy, instructional coherence, and implementation of evidence-based practices (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Notably, one item—perceived importance of allocating extended time for standardized test preparation—decreased slightly post-program. This shift may reflect teachers' recalibrated instructional priorities, favoring research-aligned literacy practices over test-driven approaches, consistent with Afflerbach's (2022) caution against overemphasizing test preparation at the expense of comprehensive literacy development.

Table 1

Pre/Post Mean Comparison Across Items

Overall, the quantitative findings suggest that the cohort model contributed to meaningful shifts in teacher confidence, knowledge, and literacy-related beliefs.

Qualitative findings

Focus group transcripts, open-ended survey responses and the focus group discussion were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team, consisting of two coders, engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Initial open codes were generated inductively, with *in vivo* codes drawn directly from participants' language (Saldaña, 2021). Each coder independently identified *in vivo* codes before meeting to reach consensus.

Next, the coders worked independently to cluster these codes into broader categories through second-cycle axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Afterward, they met again to

compare results and finalize consensus on the categories. From these categories, the researchers developed overarching themes that represented both shared and divergent experiences of teachers participating in the district-based cohort model.

To enhance trustworthiness, two participants were invited to conduct member checking. They were given access to the *in vivo* codes, category groupings, and emergent themes, and asked to review and indicate agreement with the analysis. Both participants confirmed 100% agreement with the identified groupings and themes.

Once initial themes were developed within each dataset, the researchers engaged in a cross-data comparison process. Codes and categories from both sources were reviewed side by side to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence. Themes that overlapped conceptually were merged into

unified categories, while those unique to a particular source were retained as subthemes. Through iterative discussion, a shared thematic framework was finalized, representing integrated insights across both data sources. This process allowed the survey data to provide confirmatory evidence and breadth, while the focus group data deepened understanding through illustrative examples and elaboration.

The final themes therefore reflect a synthesis of patterns evident across both forms of qualitative evidence.

Thematic analysis across all qualitative datasets yielded seven integrated themes that represent teachers' collective experiences in the district-based literacy cohort. Open-ended survey responses provided broad confirmation of recurring patterns, while focus group data offered elaboration and depth. Together, these themes illustrate how contextualized professional learning promoted instructional renewal, collaboration, and sustained impact on teaching and learning.

Integrated themes

Seven themes emerged from the analysis, illustrating how contextualized professional learning promoted instructional renewal, collaboration, and sustained impact on teaching and learning.

Theme 1: Professional Renewal and Reignited Passion for Teaching

Teachers described the cohort experience as a professional “reset” that revived their commitment to teaching. Participants noted feeling reenergized, supported, and intellectually challenged. Survey responses highlighted motivations for joining, such as professional growth and graduate credentialing, while focus groups expanded this into emotional and intellectual rejuvenation.

The program fostered both pragmatic and affective renewal among educators. As one participant described, “It was almost like we were student teaching all over again—trying new techniques, sharing ideas, supporting one another.” This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that teachers' sense of belonging within a professional community sustains motivation and commitment to instructional improvement (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004).

Theme 2: Transformation of Instructional Literacy Practices

Participants reported substantial changes in classroom literacy instruction. They adopted explicit, evidence-based strategies; integrated reading, writing, and oral language; and applied new frameworks such as the ISA lesson template. Teachers described greater intentionality, coherence, and instructional precision, aligning with survey descriptions of “meaningful instruction” as integrated, student-centered literacy experiences.

Theme 3: Deepened Theoretical Understanding and Commitment to the Science of Reading

The program strengthened teachers' theoretical understanding of literacy development, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and writing. Participants emphasized gaining clarity in the “why” behind instruction and reported renewed adherence to the science of reading (Graham & Harris, 2020; Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021). Survey responses framed literacy as both foundational and equitable, while focus groups illustrated how this understanding translated into practice.

Theme 4: Collective Professional Learning and Supportive Cohort Community

Cross-school collaboration reduced

professional isolation and strengthened teachers' sense of belonging. Participants valued working toward shared goals and learning alongside peers facing similar challenges.

The cohort served as a community of practice that enhanced problem-solving, encouraged risk-taking, and fostered trust (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Focus group narratives vividly described the emotional and instructional benefits of this networked community.

Theme 5: Leadership Development and Collective Efficacy

Teachers increasingly saw themselves as literacy leaders capable of influencing schoolwide practice. They supported colleagues, shared expertise, and felt empowered to advocate for effective instruction. Surveys suggested that teachers wanted to enhance their impact, and focus group data provided evidence of leadership, mentoring, and initiative-taking. These experiences reflect Bandura's (1997) concept of collective efficacy, in which shared action strengthens professional agency.

Theme 6: Student Engagement and Literacy Growth

Teachers attributed observable student gains to their professional learning. Students demonstrated increased writing stamina, stronger reading comprehension, and deeper engagement with literacy activities. Survey data referenced assessment use and engagement as evidence of meaningful instruction, while focus group narratives supplied rich examples of improved student outcomes and joy in literacy learning. Although formal student data were not available, teachers' accounts suggested that instructional shifts contributed to meaningful improvements in student achievement.

Theme 7: Conditions Necessary for Sustaining Change

Participants identified structural supports—principal involvement, protected collaboration time, and alignment with district initiatives—as essential for maintaining progress. Teachers emphasized that administrative visibility and engagement would further strengthen program outcomes. This emphasis on leadership mirrors research indicating that school administrators play a critical role in sustaining teacher learning and reform implementation (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Triangulation and Integrated Summary of Findings

When considered together, the four data sources provide converging evidence that the cohort-based model functioned as both a professional learning community and a catalyst for educational renewal.

Quantitative improvements in teachers' confidence and literacy knowledge were mirrored in qualitative accounts of motivation, collaboration, and instructional transformation. Through shared learning experiences, teachers developed a collective sense of efficacy that fueled professional enthusiasm and translated into improved instructional practices and student literacy growth. In essence, the cohort model demonstrated that when teacher learning is situated within a collaborative, research-informed, contextually relevant framework, it cultivates the collective capacity necessary to sustain meaningful instructional change.

Taken together, the open-ended survey responses, reflection data, and focus group findings illustrate that the graduate reading certification program strengthened teachers' sense of professional efficacy and deepened their knowledge of research-based practices.

For example, when reflecting on a research-based lesson format introduced in the program, one teacher shared: “The ISA lesson plan template was the best thing that I learned. This is being dramatic, but the best thing that has ever happened to me because it gave me something to follow for those kids that was explicit and direct and meaningful to them.” This sense of clarity and structure was echoed by another teacher, who explained: “This is the very first year that I felt like I had a really good, clear picture of how to effectively teach my kids to become writers.”

These comments mirror the quantitative gains in teachers’ confidence and highlight their increased ability to implement and reflect on research-based literacy strategies. Teachers described more deliberate use of instructional frameworks and expressed greater confidence in their roles as literacy leaders.

At the same time, some beliefs and practices—such as a commitment to independent reading and writing—remained consistently high throughout the program, suggesting these values were strongly held prior to participation. The combination of stable commitments and emerging growth indicates that the program reinforced existing strengths while also fostering new areas of professional development.

Teachers also linked their professional growth to noticeable improvements in student outcomes. Although quantitative student data were unavailable (due to district restrictions), qualitative reflections suggested that instructional shifts contributed to measurable learning gains.

As one teacher noted: “Their accuracy and their retell growth was amazing.” Another observed: “We saw the same thing, a lot of growth in writing.” Perhaps most strikingly, a teacher recounted: “So my principal

commented when she looked at that data, ‘Wow, you could see there’s a lot of growth going on.’”

Together, these reflections suggest that the program not only shaped teachers’ professional practice but also contributed to meaningful improvements in student achievement, as recognized by both teachers and school leaders.

Findings across quantitative and qualitative data sources collectively illustrate that the district-based cohort model fostered a powerful cycle of teacher learning, collective efficacy, and professional renewal.

Integration of survey data, open-ended responses, midpoint reflections, and focus group transcripts revealed a consistent trajectory: as teachers deepened their understanding of evidence-based literacy practices and engaged collaboratively with colleagues, their professional confidence and motivation increased, leading to measurable growth in both instructional quality and student literacy engagement.

This finding suggests districts would benefit more from engaging teachers in cohort-based advanced credentialing programs than isolated programming, which seldom fosters the collaborative culture and distributed leadership structures that drive lasting instructional improvement across schools.

Discussion

If collective bargaining agreements require districts to reimburse teachers for graduate coursework, then districts have a unique opportunity to maximize the return on this investment. Rather than leaving teachers to select random courses that may not align with district priorities or classroom realities, school leaders can intentionally support participation

in opportunities that bring educators together in shared learning.

By organizing district-based cohorts, teachers not only benefit from financial reimbursement but also from the collaborative power of working alongside colleagues, administrators, and instructional specialists who understand the specific context in which they teach. This structure allows immediate application of theory to practice, ongoing reflection, and continuous refinement of instructional strategies supported and institutionalized within the district.

Ultimately, district-based graduate programs can transform professional learning from an individual obligation into a collective endeavor that strengthens teacher practice, fosters professional efficacy, and advances district goals.

When coursework is purposefully aligned with district initiatives—such as literacy improvement or the science of reading—teachers are better equipped to implement evidence-based practices, administrators are better positioned to support and monitor change, and students benefit from more coherent and consistent instruction.

In short, if districts are already investing in teacher graduate education, structuring these opportunities collaboratively and contextually ensures the investment yields the highest possible impact: empowered teachers, aligned practices, and improved student outcomes.

The findings of this study highlight how a district-based cohort model of graduate coursework influenced teachers' professional relationships, instructional practices, and beliefs about literacy. Consistent with prior research on teacher professional learning, the cohort model fostered collaboration, renewed professional identity, and supported student-

centered literacy practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020, 2023; Desimone, 2009).

First, teachers emphasized the significance of professional networks that developed across schools. This finding affirms Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice, which suggests that shared learning enhances professional identity and collective efficacy.

The cohort allowed teachers to transcend structural isolation across the district, reinforcing the importance of collaboration in sustaining instructional improvement.

Second, the cohort experience reignited instructional passion and reflective practice, particularly among veteran teachers. This reflects Lieberman and Mace's (2010) findings and aligns with scholarship demonstrating that collaborative, inquiry-oriented professional learning strengthens teacher identity, motivation, and efficacy (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020, 2023; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000).

Teachers described the program as a professional "reset," positioning them to take risks, innovate, and lead within their schools. As a result, teachers felt revitalized, retooled, and supported—an increase in self-efficacy correlated with teacher retention and professional value.

Third, the incorporation of district materials and authentic literacy practices contributed to enhanced student engagement and growth. The emphasis on writing, academic journals, and authentic reading tasks aligns with research on effective literacy instruction (Graham & Perin, 2007; Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021). Teachers' accounts suggest that when coursework is theoretically grounded and practically relevant, it produces

meaningful change in classroom practice and student learning.

Finally, teachers noted the value of district alignment and administrative involvement. While coursework was designed to connect with district resources, participants suggested that principal engagement would further strengthen program impact. This recommendation reflects prior research indicating that school leadership plays a critical role in sustaining teacher learning and reform implementation (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings.

First, the data relied heavily on teacher self-report through surveys, reflections, and focus groups. These perceptions may have been influenced by self-report bias, with participants potentially overstating growth or aligning reflections with perceived program expectations. Without additional data sources such as systematic classroom observations or standardized student outcomes, these perceptions cannot be independently verified.

Second, the study lacked a comparison group of teachers who completed a traditional, non-district-based certification program. The absence of a control group limits the ability to attribute observed changes in teacher beliefs and practices solely to the cohort model. Future research using quasi-experimental or mixed-methods designs could strengthen causal inferences.

Third, the researchers served dual roles as course instructors and program evaluators. Although steps were taken to ensure analytic rigor and consensus coding, this dual role may have introduced bias in interpretation. Participants may also have felt pressure to provide favorable feedback given the power

dynamics inherent in instructor–student relationships.

Fourth, the inability to match pre- and post-survey responses restricted the quantitative analysis to descriptive statistics. More robust analytic techniques will be possible in future work if unique identifiers are used to link responses across time.

Finally, the findings may not be generalizable beyond the district context in which the study occurred. Voluntary participation raises the possibility of selection bias, as teachers who joined the cohort may have been more motivated or professionally engaged than their peers.

Additionally, some positive effects may reflect a Hawthorne effect, wherein participants' awareness of being studied influenced their behavior or attitudes.

Conclusion

The district-based cohort model extended beyond individual teacher learning to foster shared professional identity, collective efficacy, and improved instructional coherence across schools. By situating graduate coursework within the district context, the program strengthened relationships, supported evidence-based literacy practices, and contributed to perceived improvements in student literacy development.

Findings from this study demonstrate that the district-based cohort model uniquely engaged all three forms of teacher knowledge: **for, in, and of practice**, resulting in changes to instructional decision-making, professional identity, and cross-school collaboration.

Coursework provided a coherent foundation of research-based knowledge *for* practice. In addition, job-embedded tasks, learning walks, and real-time application

supported the construction of knowledge *in* practice. Collaborative reflection sessions and inquiry-oriented discussions further enabled teachers to generate knowledge *of* practice, extending learning beyond individual classrooms to influence school- and district-level coherence.

By intentionally braiding together outside knowledge from university partners and inside knowledge grounded in district context, the cohort created a professional learning environment that few traditional PD structures achieve.

These findings underscore the potential of embedded cohort models to strengthen instructional practice, build professional

networks, and contribute to lasting systemwide improvement.

For districts seeking to maximize the impact of required coursework reimbursement, collaborative cohort models offer a powerful pathway. When coursework aligns with district goals, provides authentic and applicable learning experiences, and is supported by administrative engagement, the result is a professional learning community capable of sustaining meaningful instructional change.

The findings suggest that strategically designed district–university partnerships can build system-wide capacity and support long-term improvement in literacy teaching and learning.

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