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**THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR IN IMPLEMENTING
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE TO BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY**

by

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR IN IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE TO BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Kara L. Plank
Old Dominion University, 2020
Director: Dr. Karen L. Sanzo

The field of education is constantly changing and requires a significant shift in teacher practice. Despite the demands for ongoing professional learning and collaboration, teachers remain resistant to the transition from an autonomous position. Professional learning communities, a particular type of communities of practice, are a common practice for schools to implement with a goal of improving student performance. Despite attempts, this concept proves to be very difficult to implement. The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of existing professional learning communities within the school setting. In addition, this study sought to understand the role of school administrators in implementing and sustaining communities of practice. Factors that succeed and hinder communities of practice are confirmed and extended, in addition to identifying how this concept is related to school improvement and organizational capacity.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

National education reform initiatives have placed increasing pressure on schools to provide students with education to meet the ever-increasing standards. Specifically, students must be engaged in higher-level thinking and critical problem solving. Reform initiatives have also worked to close achievement gaps, where more advantaged children tend to perform better academically than others. The goal is to work collectively to ensure all students are successful with the more advanced curriculum and expectations. Historically, teachers have operated as autonomous professionals delivering a standard curriculum requiring little creativity (Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Hargreaves, 2000). With the increase in state standards and expectations for student success, teachers must continue to develop their own practice and learn to teach differently. When considering factors directly related to school performance, teachers have the largest impact on student learning, with leadership being the second most important factor (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). With teachers being on the forefront, schools must work to build individual and organizational capacity in order to achieve sustainable improvement.

One of the most prevalent action steps to improve teacher competence is to provide professional development opportunities to strengthen teachers' pedagogical knowledge (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). Furthermore, Newmann et al. (2000) argued that individual professional learning is not enough to sustain school improvement, but there must also be a focus on the organizational capacity of the school. Capacity is defined as “ a complex blend of motivation, skill, positive learning, organizational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of

support (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006, p. 1). Newmann et al. (2000) identified the following five factors related to building organizational capacity in schools:

1. Individual teacher knowledge, skills, and expectations
2. School-wide professional community
3. Program coherence; coordinated and focused learning goals and programs
4. Technical resources
5. Effective principal leadership

For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on how school leaders utilize professional learning communities to build organizational capacity by improving individual and collective teacher knowledge, while promoting program coherence within their school.

Communities of practice have become popular in a variety of organizations outside of education to improve overall effectiveness (Wenger, 2006). Communities of practice are defined by Wenger (2006, p.1) as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. Literature supports there are several benefits to communities of practice including, attracting and retaining staff, problem solving, and the transfer of best practice. In the field of education many institutions have adopted the implementation of professional learning communities, a subset of communities of practice, to improve teacher effectiveness and student performance. Stoll et al. (2006) define a professional learning community as “an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils’ learning”. Characteristics of a professional learning community identified by Louis and Kruse (1993) are shared norms or values, collective focus on student learning, collaboration,

reflective dialogue, and deprivatization of practice. Stoll et al. (2006) argue professional learning communities are a vehicle for capacity building that will provide individuals and schools the opportunity to engage in learning that can be sustained over time.

Statement of the Problem

Professional learning communities have been widely accepted in the educational setting to increase collaboration amongst faculty members to challenge the status quo, ultimately improving teacher practice and student performance. The difficulty presents in the actual implementation, as a professional learning community has been viewed as a system to implement and does not consider the time and cultural shift required for effective implementation (Louis, 2006). Historically, professional learning communities have become a prescribed program resulting in “formal learning arrangements” (Printy, 2008, p. 189) created through structuring of teams or external factors. Lave and Wenger’s concept of communities of practice insisted on the natural creation of a community based on a shared vision and goal.

Although the literature notes the importance of leadership in creating a professional learning community, there is little research that supports specific actions leaders can take to create an authentic, sustainable community of practice. In addition, there is little literature supporting how administrators use professional learning communities as a vehicle for building organizational capacity. Stoll and Louis (2007) argued despite all the research on characteristics and development of professional learning communities, they are still extremely difficult to create and sustain.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the nature of professional community and professional learning in the school setting. Learning communities have become

a common strategy to improve teacher practice and ultimately student success. Literature and personal practice support the existence of significant variation in the successfulness of professional learning communities within buildings and even teams. Typically, professional learning communities are implemented as a prescribed program lacking all components of a community of practice. This study sought to understand how schools moved past the “program” and attained an authentic collaborative community. Furthermore, this study sought to understand how professional learning communities develop and operate in general, but also how administrators foster and use them as a vehicle to build organizational capacity for sustained school improvement.

Research Questions

This study was designed to understand the role of school administrators in developing, supporting, and utilizing professional learning communities to build organizational capacity to support improved student performance. The following questions were used to guide this study:

Question How are learning communities developed and sustained in school settings?

- a. What is the role of administrators in cultivating learning communities?
- b. What factors contribute to the success of learning communities? What factors hinder the success of learning communities?
- c. What role do learning communities have in school improvement?

Statement of Significance

Growing demands on the field of education require schools to operate differently to continue to meet the standards for student success. Specifically, administrators must seek to build organizational capacity to sustain improvement and reform initiatives. Senge (2000) argued that professional learning communities provide schools the opportunity to build capacity

within professionals to solve problems as they relate to their practice and ultimately make decisions independently, resulting in sustainable improvement. This qualitative study confirms and extends current research on the impact school administrators have on professional learning communities within their buildings and how they are utilized to build organizational capacity. This study is significant as it has the potential to provide individual school administrators with information related to implementing, fostering, and utilizing professional learning communities effectively. School divisions may also utilize this work to guide professional development opportunities for principals. Principal preparation programs could utilize this information to ensure aspiring leaders are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to build effective communities of practice.

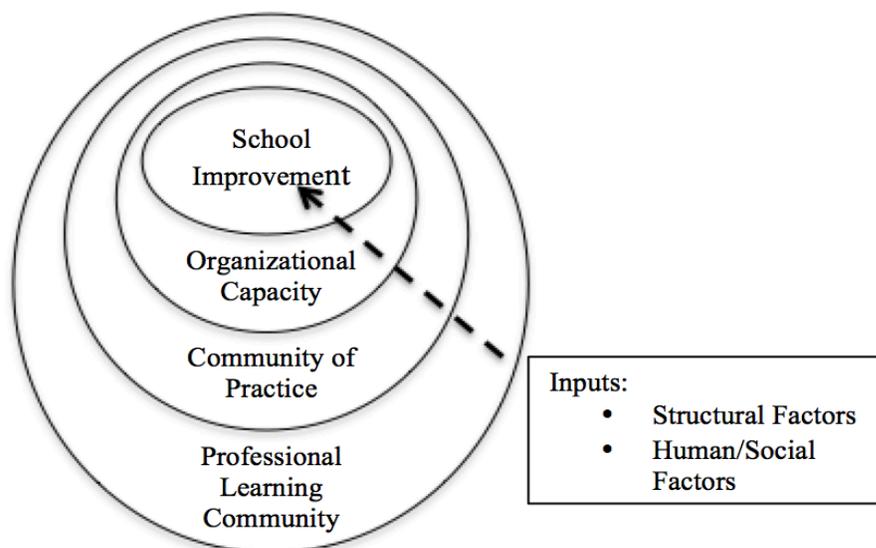
Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study sought to understand how building administrators influence the effectiveness of professional learning communities to not only increase student and teacher performance, but to build overall organizational capacity for sustained improvement. The design of the study provided the researcher the ability to understand how communities of practice develop and evolve in schools. This study explored teacher and administrator perceptions as it related to the development and sustainability of communities of practice.

Specifically, the creation of successful communities of practice to enhance organizational capacity and sustainable school improvement was explored. This concept was studied as a continuum. The continuum began with structural changes to implement a professional learning community as a prescribed program, oftentimes where schools begin. The positive effects on the organization occur when they begin to resemble a community of practice as defined by Wenger (1998). As organizations develop their shared domain and practice, the organizational capacity

of the school will improve and ultimately student achievement. Figure 1 below shows this concept.

Figure 1. The Continuum of Professional Learning for Sustained School Improvement



This conceptual framework was utilized as the basis for understanding how school administrators contribute to successful implementation of communities of practice within their organization.

Review of Methodology

This qualitative study is a multi-site case study aimed at understanding the perspectives of building administrators and teachers on how communities of practice that lead to sustainable school improvement are created and sustained. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) identified this approach as most appropriate when seeking to understand the perspective of participants as it relates to a particular subject. Participants were selected from one school district and include school administrators and teachers from three schools. The primary data source was semi-structured interviews with participants. The selected schools were led by administrators that have established the expectation for schools to operate as professional learning communities.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. Data analysis included open coding to identify common themes related to building and fostering communities of practice for sustainable school improvement. Open coding is defined as “the analytic process by which concepts are identified and developed in terms of their properties and dimensions ” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 74). Each section of the transcript was given a topic. Topics were grouped into common themes with an overarching label applied as they related to the development and sustainability of communities of practice. Data analysis was two-fold, including both within school analysis and between school analysis.

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions are used:

1. *Collaboration* - act of teachers relying on one another to engage in discussions surrounding best practice and the implementation of instructional strategies
2. *Communities of Practice* – groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2006, p. 1)
3. *Professional Learning Communities* - “an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils’ learning” (Stoll et al., 2006, Review of the Literature)
4. *School organizational capacity* - The collective power of an entire faculty to strengthen student performance throughout their school can be summarized as school organizational capacity (Newmann et al., 2000)

Organization of the Study

This is a qualitative study organized into five chapters. This chapter provided a justification for the need to build school capacity for sustained improvement and a brief overview of communities of practice, specifically professional learning communities in education. It also included the statement of the problem and significance of the study. Chapter II provides a literature review on the historically autonomous teaching profession, communities of practice, and the implementation of professional learning communities in schools. Chapter III provides an overview of the research and methodology used, Chapter IV includes results and data analysis, while findings, implications, and recommendations for future research are discussed in Chapter V. References and appendices are also provided.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how professional learning communities develop in the school setting and how they are used to build organizational capacity to improve student performance. This chapter will review three bodies of literature. The evolution of the teaching profession will be reviewed to illustrate the transition of the role of educator from an autonomous profession to a more collaborative approach. This is followed by research from the field of social psychology surrounding the concept of communities of practice in organizations. Literature on professional learning communities, a subset of communities of practice, is reviewed to identify how communities of practice are being implemented in the field of education.

Evolution of the Teaching Profession

Teaching has historically been an autonomous profession, allowing teachers to work in isolation. Dating back to the 1870s, the most common school was the graded school where students of the same age were all taught a standard curriculum in the same classroom. Instructional practices include teacher-focused instruction with minimal student response and monitoring students' behavior and task completion (Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Hargreaves, 2000). Tyack and Tobin (1994) related this "egg-crate" (p. 459) structure of a school to a factory functioning as a result of specific jobs and bureaucratic supervision. In an organization functioning under bureaucratic leadership, teachers complete their assigned tasks and there is little innovation or creativity present. This limits teachers' engagement in informal professional learning with colleagues as the focus is simply on task completion.

Educational reform has placed growing demands on the profession of education. Students are exposed to a more rigorous curriculum and are expected to achieve at higher levels than ever before. Hargreaves (2000) argued teachers are being asked to teach differently and expectations are consistently increasing, causing teachers to have to work more collaboratively to improve practice. Not only have student expectations increased, there has also been a decrease in funding for public education causing teachers to do more with less (Hargreaves, 2000). The traditional bureaucratic structuring of schools is no longer effective in ensuring teachers are provided the appropriate professional learning to be successful and adapt to these changes. The type of professional learning required for individuals to become a teacher and to continuously improve his or her practice is different than previously offered (Hargreaves, 2000). The National Research Council (2000) argued the most effective professional development for teachers is embedded in collaborative work with colleagues focused on reviewing student data, collective decision making for next steps, and reflecting on classroom instructional lessons.

The transition from an autonomous to a collaborative approach to education has not been easy. Teachers are apprehensive to engage in collaborative behaviors for a multitude of reasons including a lack of understanding concerning the positive impact collaboration can have on teacher practice and student achievement (Hargreaves, 2000). Teachers are reluctant to commit the time required to interact with others as they feel independent work is more efficient (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). The structuring of schools leaves little time for teacher collaboration; therefore collaboration is met with resistance, as teachers must sacrifice personal time for these activities. Lastly, teachers take pride in their work, want to prove they can be successful independently, and feel intimidated when practice is deprivatized (Grimmett & Crehan, 1992). In order for schools to continue to improve through improved teacher practice and increased

student achievement, the transition to collaborative work must be successful. Kruse and Louis (1993) argued that in successful school reform, organizations must move away from bureaucratic leadership and instead create norms, values, and expectations that lead to a more horizontal accountability approach. Communities of practice and professional learning communities aim to develop structures that encourage teacher collaboration, shared leadership, and horizontal accountability.

Communities of Practice

Developing communities of practice has become increasingly popular in various organizations to improve employee performance by developing and sharing knowledge. Wenger (2006) defined communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1).

Communities of practice are defined by three characteristics: the domain, community, and practice. Learning is embedded in the social aspect of communities of practice through legitimate peripheral participation as members become experienced and establish their identity with the community.

Components of Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are self-constructed and flexible in operations, but all must have the identifiable components of domain, community, and practice. A community of practice must be grounded in a shared domain negotiated by the participants based on what they identify as important (Wenger, 2006). Personal values and passion drive individuals to become committed to the domain of the community of practice and participant selection. Members choose to participate, as they are interested in gaining knowledge, but also have knowledge relative to the domain to share with other participants. Wenger and Snyder (2000) suggested that full

commitment to the community of practice will not exist unless people feel personally connected to the group's domain and expertise.

The community speaks to the members and the relationships that are developed that allow them to engage in collaborative behaviors that result in shared learning (Snyder & Briggs, 2003; Wegner, 2006). Members of a community of practice are self-selected and participation falls on a continuum of levels of involvement. Participants may operate in the role of community leaders, active participants, or peripheral members (Snyder & Briggs, 2003). Lave and Wegner (1991) utilized the term legitimate peripheral participation to describe the interactions between experienced participants and newcomers. Legitimate peripheral participation is how newcomers integrate into an established community of practice through a desire to learn and commitment to the domain (Lave & Wegner, 1991). As participants become more competent and gain knowledge and skills from the community, they move toward full participation and develop the shared repertoire (Lave & Wegner, 1998).

The final component of a community of practice is the shared practice of the participants. Through the ongoing discussions, problem solving, and sharing of information a community of practice develops a shared practice. This shared practice is inclusive of experiences, techniques, tools, attitudes, routines, vocabulary, and artifacts that represent the combined knowledge base of the community (Allee, 2000; Snyder & Briggs, 2003; Wenger, 2006). Communities of practice develop this shared repertoire of practice through time and ongoing interaction (Wenger, 2006). The community develops a common understanding of beliefs and behaviors they engage in throughout their career.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Communities of practice are grounded in shared practice and knowledge created through interaction and commitment to a shared identity. In this sense, communities of practice are informal learning organizations where participants gain knowledge through ongoing interaction with others. In the context of situated learning theory, learning is defined as

a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practice; the process of changing knowledgeable skill is subsumed in processes of changing identity in and through membership in a community of practitioners; and mastery is an organizational relational characteristic of communities of practice. (Lave, 1991, p. 64)

Members initially engage in a community of practice at the periphery and as they become more competent they move toward full participation. Competence is defined by each community of practice and includes an understanding of the domain, engagement in positive relationships, and the consistent use of resources collected by the community (Wenger, 2006). Therefore, learning is not just the mastery of knowledge, but is developing shared practice and establishing a shared identity within the community of practitioners. Allee (2000) identified conversations, experimentation, and shared experience as an integral part of knowledge acquisition especially when work becomes more complex.

This concept of legitimate peripheral participation is compared to apprenticeships and Lave (1991) specifically utilized the practice of midwifery in Yucatan and participation in Alcoholics Anonymous to illustrate this concept. In Yucatan, newcomers are exposed to the field of midwifery from a young age while accompanying their mother to visits and over time become increasingly more involved in the activities. Eventually through full participation, they become the ones delivering the baby. Lave (1991) utilized the concept of Alcoholics

Anonymous. When a person attends their first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, they are on the peripheral, but through ongoing practice they move to full participation. As participants move toward full participation, they are committed to being a nondrinker and restructure their lives to align to the 12 Steps model of Alcoholics Anonymous. Both of these examples demonstrate how ongoing participation and development of shared practice create competence for newcomers and allow them to become experienced and engage in full participation in the community of practice.

Benefits of Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are becoming increasingly popular in a variety of organizations as a way to improve effectiveness by strengthening organizational capacity. In addition to improving employee practice through shared learning, several other benefits of communities of practice have been identified. Communities of practice serve as a support system to help attract and retain staff, transfer best practice, and solve complex problems. Not only do the individuals of an organization benefit, but the organization benefits from the creation of an informal database of knowledge and effective workers to increase organizational capacity.

Attract and retain staff. The ability to attract and retain quality staff increases as organizations support communities of practice. Snyder and Briggs (2003) argued communities of practice provide employees with a sense of belonging and informal professional learning that are identified as strong predictors for attracting, retaining, and developing quality employees. Newcomers interact with other practitioners, identify with the shared purpose, and ultimately feel more comfortable and welcomed within the context of the larger organization. In their study of seven organizations with established communities of practice, Lesser and Storck (2001) found engagement in a community of practice allowed newcomers to adjust more quickly to organizations in both a technical and cultural manner by connecting them to experts in specific

content areas. As newcomers participate, mentor-mentee relationships are more likely to form to assist newcomers as they navigate their career and the new organization (Lesser & Storck, 2001). Employees sharing experiences and problem solving through story-telling and collaboration increase the collective knowledge of the organization and the individual (Brown & Duguid, 1991). Organizations will benefit from the knowledge sharing and quick assimilation of new employees to their role and responsibility. Brown and Duguid (1991) argued formal training in organizations is not enough as true learning occurs through practice and collaboration with others. True learning occurs by looking not only at the finished task, but also at the process used to accomplish the task (Brown & Duguid, 1991). Individuals benefit from the support provided to them and as they become more competent the likelihood they continue on their career path increases.

Communities of practice not only welcome newcomers into an organization, but also benefit the more experienced workers and increase the levels of staff retention for the organization. American Management Services credited the intentional connection of new hires to established communities of practice for an increase in their retention rates of staff members (Allee, 2000). Specifically, they identified at least seven valuable consultants interested in new opportunities that decided to stay with the company after becoming actively engaged in communities of practice. Communities of practice provided employees with the opportunity to engage in conversation about shared practice, problem solve, and learn from one another. The U.S. Army has utilized this approach to provide company commanders, responsible for up to 250 soldiers, the opportunity to learn the position faster through others' expertise and increase the level of encouragement and support while they navigate this challenging position.

Solve problems. Communities of practice provide members a forum of like-minded people to share and solve problems related to their common work. Snyder & Briggs (2003) argued that employees involved in a community of practice will find complex problems less daunting when they have a support group of similar expertise to collectively problem solve with. Grounded in a common identity and shared understanding, communities of practice engage in effective questioning and advice to help provide the best solution to a problem. Wenger (1998) identified the shared understanding of participants as a strength of communities of practice, as members can effectively communicate through understanding relevancy and usefulness of information. Hewlett-Packard is one company that utilized communities of practice to bridge the gap between product-delivery employees and the software developers. Through ongoing communication, the software developers were able to fix a bug in the current software benefitting the individuals and the organization (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Providing employees with access to a community of practitioners provided them the opportunity to quickly solve problems through dialogue with experts that have previously experienced the same type of dilemma.

Encourage innovation. Communities of practice also provide a safe environment for innovation and creativity to establish new strategies for implementation. In their study of seven organizations, Lesser and Storck (2001) found many employees valued the community of practice for the safe place to share new ideas with others and to fine-tune their new solution to an existing problem. The safe, trusting environment that exists within a community of practice allows members to be vulnerable and open to sharing new ideas that may be scrutinized in an effort to improve them. In one example, Wenger and Snyder (2000) described a pet food manufacturing company where one employee proposed a change in the equipment that was

utilized in the factory. The managers of the company did not support the new idea, but with ongoing support from the community of practice, the new technology was ultimately adopted by the company and benefitted them financially from a reduction in downtime and wasted pet food (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). As innovative approaches are developed they become a part of the shared practice existing within the community of practice.

Transfer best practice. Organizations often seek to create databases to capture the knowledge generated within them. Communities of practice provide an informal system that is specific to the circumstances that cannot be captured in tangible ways (Wenger, 1998). Lesser and Storck (2001) identified this as “developing and maintaining long-term organizational memory” (p. 832). This was exemplified by a group of 30 nurses in Scotland who partnered with university academics to discuss practice, resulting in a database of best practices developed as a joint project to be widely shared with other practicing nurses (Andrew, Tolson, & Ferguson, 2007). A database that is comprised of best practices saves time for employees. Instead of recreating the wheel, participants turn to the already established toolbox of resources created through on-going interaction with others.

Cultivating Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are informal learning organizations where participants are self-selected based on their identity and passion to gain and share knowledge on a particular topic. Snyder and Briggs (2003) explained that mandated participation will inhibit the success of a professional learning community because trust, shared values, and competence cannot be mandated from the outside. However, there is literature that supports action steps managers can take to help cultivate communities of practice. Wenger and Snyder (2000) encouraged managers to engage in three specific activities to cultivate communities of practice: identify existing

communities of practice, provide infrastructure to support them, and evaluate the effectiveness and value.

Given the voluntary participation in a community of practice, the first step in cultivating them is identifying how they already exist within the organization. Individuals are already relying on each other to improve their expertise in the field. One example of this is a large corporation that decided to merge their service, sales, and repairs departments into one phone number for customers (Wegner, 1998). The managers of this firm realized departments were already informally learning from one another and instituted a learning strategy to capitalize on the existing structure. In turn, the employees gained knowledge in all three areas much faster than if traditional modes of training were provided (Wegner, 1998). Wenger (1998) argued that the knowledge required for companies to be successful already exists in some form, but the challenge is in fostering this into a community of practice.

Not only can leaders identify existing learning groups, but they can also seek individuals that have a desire to improve their expertise and share a common passion. The task is then to identify these employees and help create a community of practice of these members. One gas company, Shell, utilized this approach to cultivate communities of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). One person wanted to create a community of practice and conducted interviews to identify potential members and common challenges and problems as they related to their field (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Lastly, providing employees the opportunities to interact with each other in a professional setting will encourage the voluntary creation of a community of practice. Employees will connect with others in their field through in-person training events or technology discussion databases (Lesser & Storck, 2001). Wenger and Snyder (2000) warned the most

important component in cultivating a community of practice is ensuring all participants value and are committed to the group's shared domain.

Once potential communities of practice have been identified, managers must provide the infrastructure for them to continue to grow. Communities of practice must be provided the time and opportunities to engage in collaborative activities. Wenger (2008) recommended leaders in an organization provide resources to an existing community of practice to ensure its sustainability. These resources included connecting them with experts in the field, funding travel expenses, and designating time for meetings to occur (Wenger, 2008). One organization, American Management Systems, started hiring "thought leaders" to provide access to experts (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The concept of a "thought leader" emerged after the company was challenged by growth and lack of knowledge sharing (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The leaders were nominated by their department to help recruit members and guide the community of practice in their work (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The company also provided funding to support the community's engagement in workshops and conferences (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Lesser and Storck (2001) argued that providing time for the community of practice to grow is required in order for them to become successful. Employees are often reluctant to share best practice with coworkers until a relationship has been developed. Specifically, trust is developed through the sharing of knowledge and development of shared norms and culture, not through structured trust building activities (Lesser & Storck, 2001).

Lastly, communities of practice must be evaluated for effectiveness and consequently valued by the organization. Wenger and Snyder (2000) argued it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of a community of practice through traditional methods, as it is difficult to isolate the work to determine results solely as an outcome from the group. The recommendation is

made to engage in ongoing interviews with members to gain insight on personal accounts of how the community of practice influenced their work (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Sustainability of communities of practice will be positively impacted by the value organizations place on these informal learning groups. Some companies have included participation in communities of practice into their evaluation system and others even offer a reward system. World Bank has acknowledged employee participation in their employee evaluation, but relies on voluntary participation for the formation of the group (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). American Management Systems also acknowledged members through their promotion system and provides employees access to new technology prior to other employees (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). It is noted, Wenger (1998) warned organizations of reward systems since communities of practice should recruit voluntary participants solely on the desire to share knowledge and a shared domain. Leaders in an organization must maintain balance in demonstrating their desire for the work of communities of practice without jeopardizing the organic nature of these knowledge-sharing groups.

Factors that Hinder Communities of Practice

Although managers can positively impact the formation of communities of practice, there are several factors that negatively impact the effectiveness of communities of practice. The first barrier to communities of practice is when leaders do not respect the organic nature of this group and attempt to create them through a specific process or technique employees must engage in (Wenger, 2003). When organizations force the concept of communities of practice and adopt procedural processes, they run the risk of placing too many restraints on the group and then true learning won't occur (Allee, 2000). Even with the organic development of communities of practice, these groups face other challenges to effectiveness. Communities of practice are built

on mutual trust and relationships between people with a shared interest. As they develop, they can also become exclusive which limits their success. When members of a community of practice become too close, this can prevent the acceptance of newcomers to the group resulting in a decrease in the level of innovation and collaboration with outsiders (Li et al., 2009). The lack of newcomers and strong relationships may also result in group think, which will also negatively impact the innovation and creativity that may occur in a highly functioning community of practice (Li, et al., 2009). Despite the limitations to a fully functioning community of practice, Wenger (2003) argued organizations are viewing learning differently and the potential for a change in hierarchical management is promising.

Professional Community: A Particular Type of Community of Practice

Professional learning communities is an approach to communities of practice as a professional learning model adopted by the field of education. With education reform initiatives, schools and teachers have been forced to change their practice to meet the ever-increasing standards for all students to learn. Professional learning communities have been widely adopted throughout institutions as one way of improving teacher performance and ultimately student achievement. A professional learning community is defined as,

an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils' learning (Stoll & Louis, 2007, p. 2).

Louis and Kruse (1993) identified five components of a professional learning community: shared norms or values, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, reflective dialogue, and deprivatization of practice.

A professional learning community must have established norms and values focused on student learning. Established norms and expectations create behavioral guidelines for a professional learning community, but must not be bureaucratically established, but instead collaboratively developed (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999). Teachers will commit to the vision and shared values, producing an informal accountability system that guides the behavior of the members of the learning community (Bryk et al., 1999). Specifically, staff members believe students are capable of learning and acknowledge the impact their teaching has on student success (Hord, 1997). A byproduct of shared norms and values is a collective focus on student learning. Time teachers spend collaborating is focused around instruction and individual student progress, eliminating lessons and activities that will not provide the learning experiences necessary for student growth (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). One study of two high schools operating as professional learning communities, identified one outcome was the focus on “what students were and were not learning, as opposed to just planning what the teacher would teach or what events would happen for students” (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012, p. 28).

A core component of professional learning community is the actual collaboration that occurs to ensure student success while maintaining the collective focus on student learning and alignment to shared norms and values. Little (1990) described collaboration as the act of teachers relying on one another to engage in discussions surrounding best practice and the implementation of instructional strategies. This ongoing collaboration will increase the commitment to the shared vision and the level of trust between faculty members (Louis et al., 1996). Two important components that contribute to the overall level of collaboration are deprivatization of practice and reflective dialogue. Faculty members must be willing to forego the traditional autonomous teaching profession and allow their practice to become public. This

occurs through peer coaching, team teaching, and peer observations (Louis et al., 1996). Lastly, faculty members must engage in reflective dialogue with peers focused on their own personal practice and how it contributes to the overarching goal of student success.

Figure 2 displays the relationship of the five components of a professional learning community in the context of Lave and Wenger's community of practice model.

Figure 2. Relationship Between PLC and Communities of Practice

Domain	Community	Shared Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared values and norms • Collective focus on student learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School teams • Teacher teams • Administrators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration • Reflective dialogue • Deprivatization of practice

Benefits of a Professional Learning Community

Schools that operate as professional learning communities provide a variety of benefits to the faculty members and the students. Research suggests an increase in teachers' self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Organizational learning is a product of an effective professional learning community, which not only improves teacher practice, but also increases student achievement.

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as the "teachers' judgments about their abilities to promote students' learning" (Hoy, 2000, p. 343). In schools with high levels of collective teacher efficacy teachers are more likely to take responsibility for student learning and research suggests there is a positive correlation between teacher efficacy and student performance (Leithwood et al., 2010). Professional learning communities and teachers' self-efficacy are related in two ways. First, literature supports that teachers with increased self-efficacy are more likely to engage in collaborative behaviors, but there is also literature to support how participation in a learning community can increase teachers' self-efficacy. It is also important to

note that teacher self-efficacy is related to job satisfaction and willingness to remain in the profession.

Organizational learning. As schools work to meet the increasing standards of education for all students, faculty must commit to continuous learning as it relates to their practice. Louis (2006) argued that organizational learning is necessary for schools to sustain change as learning cannot be an individual act, but must be created within a social context. Specifically, she argued that teachers identify an area related to their practice and then collaboratively discuss and adopt a new strategy to address the identified problem area. While the goal is organizational learning and change, scholars warned that attention must be given to individuals as that is where change occurs and then impacts the organization as a whole (Hall & Hord, 1987, Fullan, 1993, 1994). In a study of elementary schools in Chicago, Bryck et. al., (1999) found a correlation between organizational learning and teacher turnover. Teachers were administered a rating scale to identify how their community was focused on organizational learning and the results suggested that schools with a higher teacher turnover rate resulted in lower reported scores related to organizational learning.

Improved student performance. The concept of professional learning communities is grounded in a desire to improve student performance through teachers' pedagogical knowledge and teaching practices. Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2006) completed a literature review on 11 studies that examined the impact of professional learning communities on teacher performance and student performance. In all 11 studies, there was a change in professional practice of the teachers and eight of the studies made connections to improved student learning (Vescio et al., 2006). Louis and Marks (1998) found that student achievement was significantly higher in schools with strong professional learning communities, accounting for 85% of the variance in

achievement. It is noted that student achievement varied within schools based on the level of commitment to student learning and the structured work teachers engage in (Vescio et al., 2006).

Contributing Factors

A literature review of professional learning communities identified specific structural and behavioral factors that positively impact the formation and sustainability of a learning community within the educational context. Louis (1994) identified the need for both structural conditions and human and social resources as prerequisites for a professional learning community to emerge and be sustainable.

Structural factors. Structural factors related to the effectiveness of a professional learning community include school size, time for collaboration, and experience of teaching staff. In a study of 248 elementary schools in Chicago, Bryck et al. (1999) found smaller schools (less than 350 students per elementary school) were more likely to engage in collaborative practice. Smaller schools allow for faculty members to have more face-to-face interaction, helping to increase the level of trust necessary for collaborative work (Bryck et al., 1999). Furthermore, the administrator's managerial duties are not as strenuous allowing them the opportunity to engage more frequently with staff members and maintain the role of instructional leader. Although smaller schools are more likely to establish and maintain a professional learning community, Bryck et al. (1999), argued a smaller school does not necessarily constitute a professional learning community and can be dysfunctional, while larger schools have the capacity to function as a learning community with proper components. It is argued that smaller schools are most likely to effectively operate as a professional learning community, but there is research showing school size is a structural factor that can be mitigated through school climate and culture (Little, 1993, Louis, 1994).

Administrators must create structures that provide faculty the opportunity to engage in collaborative work to improve teacher effectiveness. Louis (1994) argued this must be two-fold: time for teaching teams to meet to discuss their specific practice and students and time for the whole school faculty to meet to discuss broader areas of concern and school-wide goals. Teachers are provided time to work collaboratively with colleagues of the same grade level or subject area. Scheduling time for teachers to meet does not necessarily result in improved teacher practice. Mindich and Lieberman (2012) stressed the importance of this time to be utilized for true collegiality and requiring teachers to examine their practice and engage in reflective dialogue. In order for more structured meeting time to positively impact an organization, the staff members involved must shift from a friendly interaction to a constructive critical view and discussion on their practice (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). In a case study of two schools implementing professional learning communities, it was reported that scheduling remained a concern despite administrators' attempts to provide common planning time (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012).

In addition to providing individual teacher teams the opportunity to meet, the administrator must also identify time for the whole faculty to come together to discuss school-wide priorities and areas of concern. Hord (2009) describes how one administrator held meetings in teacher classrooms on a rotating basis to provide teachers the opportunity to see other spaces throughout the building and deprivatize practice.

The experience of staff members has also been identified as positively contributing to the effectiveness of a learning community. A qualitative study of four high schools identified a discrepancy in the effectiveness of two teams during collaborative work time. Szczesiul and Huizenga (2014) identified the most effective team was composed of experienced teachers that

had been working together for three years and created a shared vision and expectations despite the lack of administrator leadership.

Human and social factors. Although literature supports the need for structural components for a professional learning community to thrive, Louis (1994) found in her study of 24 schools that the human and social factors had a more significant impact on the effectiveness of professional learning communities. She continued to argue that although structural changes are easier, without a change in climate there will not be successful change (Louis, 1994). Human and social factors that positively impact the development and sustainability of professional learning communities include an established vision, trust, shared leadership, and accountability. These four factors are the foundation for successful implementation of professional learning communities.

The administrator must establish and explain the vision for the organization and how it relates to the transition to becoming a professional learning community. The development of the vision should include input from staff members to promote buy-in and motivation. Hord (1997) stated a shared vision is a product of individuals consistently sharing their personal vision while developing trusting relationships. Without a clear, concise vision established for the organization, staff members do not understand the purpose of their collegial work and oftentimes is not structured to address established goals. One study of four teacher teams from two high schools revealed the largest frustration for teachers was the lack of vision from the leader, therefore a purpose for their collaborative work was never established (Szczesniul & Huizenga, 2014). In both schools, administrators allocated time for collaborative work and required common assessments, but that simply was not enough to motivate teachers without a specific purpose (Szczesniul & Huizenga, 2014). Printy (2008) warned that administrators must find a

balance between structured collaboration and naturally emerging collaboration more consistent with Wenger's communities of practice term. Scribner, Hager, and Warne (2002) conducted a study on two high schools with starkly different outcomes of a professional learning community. In one school where the administrator allowed professional learning to be driven by external factors (primarily reform policies), the administrator and teachers had a stark difference in perceptions toward teacher learning. The teachers felt their needs were not being considered and their structured learning was limiting their autonomy and the administrator identified teachers as reluctant learners (Scribner et al., 2002). On the contrary, the second high school established a shared vision and belief surrounding student learning. The perceptions of both the teachers and the administrators identified teachers as learners committed to student success and innovation (Scribner et al., 2002). This study suggested that teacher autonomy could have a positive impact on the strength of the professional community, providing administrators with the task of balancing the two (Scribner et al., 2002).

Trust is a prerequisite for effective learning communities to develop. Louis (2006) argued the lack of trust is one element of organizational change that is frequently not addressed by administrators resulting in the inability to establish an efficient and effective professional learning community. Relational trust must be developed not only between teachers, but also in teacher and administrator relationships. Relational trust is established when "each party in a relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role's obligations and holds some expectations about the obligations of the other parties" (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 41). Low levels of relational trust are typically found school-wide, although high levels may be found within small groups of staff members (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). In a study of two high schools, Scribner et al. (2002) identified open decision-making where teachers felt involved in decisions

related to teaching and learning significantly contributed to the development of trust between teachers and administrators. While studying 400 schools in Chicago, Bryk and Schneider (2003) found teachers had more trust within themselves than compared to a teacher-administrator relationship.

When considering teacher-teacher relationships, Lencioni (2002) identified the absence of trust as a factor contributing to a dysfunctional team. Furthermore, he argued without trust, team members will be less likely to own mistakes, ask for help, or provide constructive feedback (Lencioni, 2002). Administrators must work diligently to establish trust with their staff members. Louis (2006) argued teachers will be less likely to support administrator's initiatives when there are low levels of trust. Furthermore, when change initiatives are presented, the level of trust decreases as the status quo is being challenged (Louis, 2006). This supports the need for administrators to establish trust if they are seeking sustainable organizational change.

Administrators must be willing to shift from a bureaucratic approach to leadership and involve staff members in decision-making and provide leadership opportunities. Talbert (2010) argued for professional learning communities to be successful administrators must move from a bureaucratic approach to leadership, but instead utilize professional strategies for change. A bureaucratic approach is aligned to the historical structuring of schools and focuses on "directives and rules, prescribed routines, and sanctions for compliance as ways to promote change" (Talbert, 2010, p. 561), but has proved to be unsuccessful in promoting the cultural shift necessary. The use of professional strategies instead focuses on "tools of decision-making structures, professional expertise and knowledge resources, and leader modeling and feedback" (Talbert, 2010, p. 561), to promote sustainable change through the implementation of a professional learning community. Administrators must find a balance in monitoring the

collaborative work of professional learning communities, but also shifting to a more horizontal accountability as staff members become more comfortable.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to seek to understand the nature of communities of practice in schools and how they improve teacher effectiveness and student achievement while building organizational capacity. In addition, this study was designed to understand the role of school administrators in developing, supporting, and utilizing professional learning communities to build organizational capacity. The following questions were used to guide this study:

- Question** How are learning communities developed and sustained in school settings?
- a. What is the role of administrators in cultivating learning communities?
 - b. What factors contribute to the success of learning communities? What factors hinder the success of learning communities?
 - c. What role do learning communities have in school improvement?

This section includes a description of the research design, including participants, data collection, data analysis, and possible limitations and/or biases.

Research Design

A qualitative research method was selected for this study to validate and extend organizational factors that contribute to teacher collaboration and specifically the administrator's role in promoting a collaborative environment. A qualitative study was selected for this research as the goal is to gain information related to the participants' perceptions related to the development and sustainability of communities of practice. Qualitative research allows the participant to share information related to a complex topic as they see it and the researcher to gather data through interviews and observations within the participant's setting (Bogdan &

Biklen, 2007). Specifically, a multi-site case study was been selected. Yin (2002) defined a case study as appropriate when seeking to study “a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (p. 13). For the purpose of this study, each elementary school is considered a case. Given that the purpose of this study was to learn more about the development and sustainability of communities of practices within an organization through the perspectives of staff members, a case study was determined as appropriate. This approach allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the nature of professional community within the context of each individual site.

Participant Selection

A school district in a mid-Atlantic state was selected for this study. The school district has a student population of approximately 20,000 served within 18 elementary schools, two pre-kindergarten through eight schools, five middle schools, and four high schools. The school district also has a gifted center that services students in third through eighth grade and one pre-kindergarten center. Three elementary schools were selected for this study based on recommendations from division-level staff members. Elementary schools were utilized to minimize confounding factors related to successful implementation of a professional learning community. This provided the researcher the opportunity to focus on the participants’ perspectives of how they develop and function in collaborative learning teams while eliminating structural factors related to school level that are not present in elementary schools.

Administrators that value the importance of teacher collaboration and learning communities led all three schools. Participants included school administrators, teachers, and support staff members. The initial interview at each site was held with the principal, followed by

interviews with the remaining staff members. The teachers and support staff members were selected based on recommendation from the school administrators. Some of the participants were members of the school leadership team, although this was not a requirement and not always the case. Teachers selected were representative of multiple grade levels to understand as many grade level team dynamics as possible. Table 1 below provides demographic information for each participant:

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Position	Years at Current School	Years in Education	Gender
Lion Principal Ann	Principal	5	11	Female
Lion Assistant Principal Sue	Assistant Principal	1	22	Female
Lion Ellen	Teacher	17	17	Female
Lion Donna	Special Education Teacher	5	29	Female
Lion Janet	Teacher	4	5	Female
Lion Michele	Teacher			Female
Lion Karen	Teacher			Female
Tiger Principal Lisa	Principal	5	16	Female
Tiger Assistant Principal Ray	Assistant Principal	3	18	Male
Tiger Melissa	Literacy Support Specialist	5	29	Female
Tiger Lauren	Teacher	6	6	Female
Tiger Lynn	Teacher	7	7	Female
Tiger Kim	Teacher	4	12	Female
Tiger May	Teacher	26	26	Female
Leopard Principal Cathy	Principal	4	13	Female
Leopard Principal Beth	Assistant Principal	3	29	Female
Leopard Kelsey	Math Interventionist	2	17	Female
Leopard Kayla	Reading Specialist	2	13	Female
Leopard Heather	Literacy Support Specialist	4	30	Female
Leopard Irma	Teacher	5	10	Female

Data Collection

A request to conduct research was submitted to the IRB (Internal Revenue Board) at Old Dominion University and authorization was granted. Following the IRB request, a request was submitted to the school division granting permission to conduct research within the division. Once approved, contact was made with two members of the division leadership team to explain the study and seek recommendations for schools to include. The criteria utilized when selected sites included a principal with a commitment to implementing practices related to a professional learning community. It is noted that all sites were identified as functioning at different levels of effectiveness as it relates to professional learning communities. Principals, assistant principals, and select teachers were the primary source of data collection through semi-structured interviews and observations.

The primary source of data collection was interviews with current school administrators and teachers at schools that identify as a professional learning communities. Interviews were used to gather “descriptive data in the subjects’ own words” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.103) regarding the concept of communities of practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) recommend semi-structured interviews as this will provide the researcher some flexibility in the questioning and the ability to ask follow up questions without compromising the cohesiveness of all data collection. Each participant received a letter explaining the purpose of the interview and a commitment to confidentiality of all information was shared. The interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes to one hour each. Interviews explored participants’ understanding of the components of a professional learning community and community of practice, specific activities staff members engage in, descriptions of how they work together, factors that contribute to a successful learning

community, and potential factors that hinder the implementation. All interviews were recorded with a handheld device and transcribed to ensure accuracy.

The interview data was supplemented by observations at each site. Observations were utilized to confirm the reported actions and the interaction and working relationships of staff members. A variety of observations were completed and included leadership team meetings, staff meetings, and grade level team meetings. The purpose of the observations was to experience the interactions between staff members, as well as the how the administrator interacted with staff members. In addition, any documents related to learning communities or school vision were collected and analyzed to support emergent themes from interviews and observations.

Participant Confidentiality

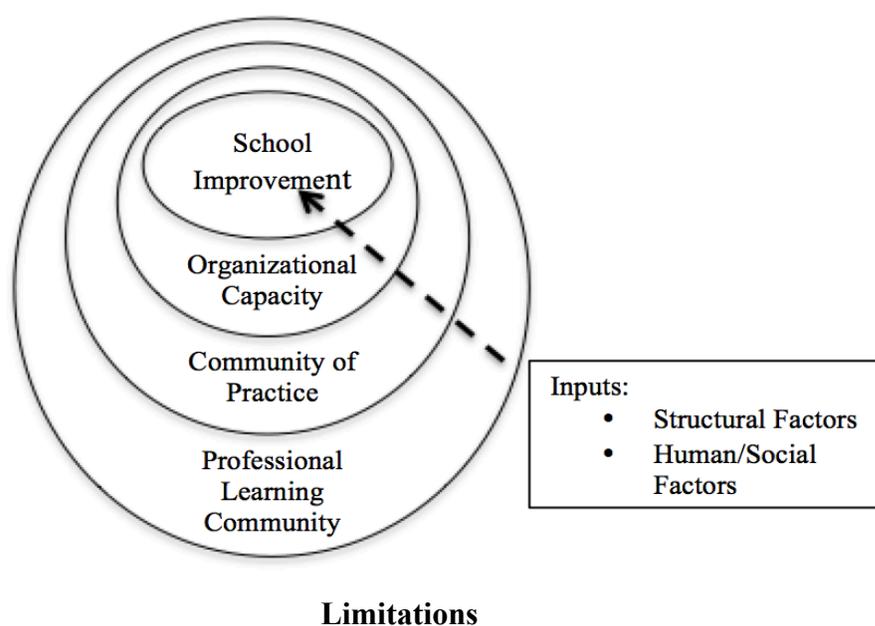
Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were assured of the confidentiality of all results at the onset of the research. They were provided a consent form committing to the confidentiality of the research prior to beginning the interview. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to be utilized throughout the data collection and data analysis. Identifying information was removed from transcripts and was not utilized in the analysis of the results. All data was password-protected and kept in a locked room in the researcher's home.

Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were utilized to gain the perspectives of participants. Interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. The grounded theory method drove the data analysis process. Open coding is “the part of analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of data” (Strauss and Corbin,

p. 62, 1990). The initial step included conceptualizing the data by giving each section of the transcript and field notes a label (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Throughout the process, the researcher identified similarities and differences and questioned the data, while challenging their own assumptions about the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The data was then coded to identify common themes related to organizational factors that contribute to professional learning communities and behaviors of the administrator as they relate to fostering and sustaining teacher learning for improved student success. Analysis included identification of themes within each site, as well as, between sites. The conceptual framework (Figure 3) will be utilized to organize the identified themes and commonalities.

Figure 3. The Continuum of Professional Learning for Sustained School Improvement



This study sought to understand how the school administrator develops and supports professional learning communities in a school context. Specifically, the role of the school administrator was studied to identify specific activities they engage in to lead a learning community, challenges that prevent successful implementation, and how they utilize a

professional learning community as a vehicle to build organizational capacity. The primary limitation is that other factors that could influence collaboration were not controlled for. For example, the length of time the principal and teachers have been at the school and on the current grade level could impact the level of collaboration. In addition to the number of years staff members have been working together, years of experience in general may impact levels of collaboration. Lastly, the semi-structured interviews could possibly lead interviewees to provide information that is expected, not necessarily true actions.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

With education reform comes the need for changes in teaching practice. Historically, teachers have operated as autonomous practitioners, but as standards change the need for teacher collaboration increases. Professional learning communities, a subset of communities of practice, have been adopted by schools to improve teacher collaboration and student achievement. Professional learning communities have often been implemented as a prescribed program, limiting the organic collaboration aligned to communities of practice.

The purpose of this research was to identify the nature of professional community and professional learning in the school setting. This focus included analysis of factors that contributed to the creation of communities of practice and factors that hinder the development and sustainability. The study also explored how communities of practice were used to build organizational capacity. The following research questions were explored:

Question How are learning communities developed and sustained in school settings?

- a. What is the role of administrators in cultivating learning communities?
- b. What factors contribute to the success of learning communities? What factors hinder the success of learning communities?
- c. What role do learning communities have in school improvement?

This chapter is organized into four sections. The first three sections outline the within-site findings for each school. The final section presents common findings between all three sites.

Within-Case Analysis

Lion School

The Lion school is a fully accredited school serving approximately 400 students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. The student population is comprised of 62% African Americans, 19% white, 11% two or more races, and 6% Hispanic, and 2% other. Fifty-two percent of all students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The principal is entering her fifth year as principal, with all five years being served at the Lion school. Throughout her five years, she has had four different assistant principals, with her current one serving her first year at the Lion school. The teaching staff is considered experienced with all members being certified and working within their field. The Lion school is a fully accredited elementary school with an experienced staff and little teacher turnover.

Analysis of student assessment data over the last three years suggests there has been a slight decline in reading scores. State accreditation data includes the opportunity for students to be calculated into the pass rate for demonstrating significant progress, where the Every Student Succeeds Act does not include this. For the sake of this study, both reporting options will be considered. In the area of reading, the Lion school has seen a decline in student achievement data, while remaining accredited by the state. The state accreditation has declined from 79% passing to 76% passing over the last three years. Every Student Succeeds Act also shows a decline from 79% to 70%. In the area of mathematics and science, the Lion school has shown an increase in student performance. State accreditation for mathematics reports a pass rate of 84%, while Every Student Succeeds Act reports a pass rate of 75. In the area of Science, state accreditation has seen a ten percentage point pass rate, increasing to 87% passing. The Every Student Succeed Act also notes an increase from 79% to 83%. Although there is a decline in the reading scores, the Lion school is still meeting the state expectations and is just slightly below the federal expectation. They are exceeding the expectations in all other subject areas.

The importance of professional learning and collaboration is acknowledged throughout the research, although it is noted the team appears to participate in surface level activities while striving to maintain their autonomy. It is evident that the administrative team at the Lion school values the notion of a professional learning community despite the undertones of competition and presence of negative interpersonal relationships. Data analysis reviewed four primary themes related to the development and sustainability of a community of practice. The teams do engage in a myriad of collaborative efforts to include formal and informal meetings and peer observations. The second theme is an overwhelming sense of competitiveness amongst colleagues resulting in “egos” that prevent true collaboration and drive a desire to maintain autonomy. Teachers present with poor interpersonal skills and conflicts in personalities that have a negative impact on the effectiveness of teacher work teams. Lastly, although administrators understand the value of teacher leaders, this is a developing concept at the time of the research. The following sections provide background information for each participant and then discuss each of the identified themes in depth.

Participants

Lion Ann. Lion Ann is currently serving her fifth year as principal at the Lion school. She started her career in education as a middle school social studies teacher and remembers always wanting to be a teacher. As a classroom teacher she found herself in a multitude of leadership roles to include serving on the leadership team, student activities coordinator, social studies instructional leader, and summer school coordinator. A transition to an administrative role seemed like the logical next step for her. She served as assistant principal for three years at two different sites. While describing a professional learning community she states her

understanding has evolved as it was originally presented as a prescribed program, but now is a “very natural” process.

Lion Sue. Lion Sue is currently serving in her second year as an assistant principal with this being her first year at the Lion school. She has been in education for a total of 22 years serving as a classroom teacher, an instructional specialist, and a technology specialist. She credits her mother for instilling a passion for education in her as she served in the profession for 39 years as a teacher and administrator. She defines a professional learning community as “educators and administrators working together collaboratively with research based practices to achieve positive student outcomes.” She also discusses the need for teachers to take accountability for their work and must be willing to be coached throughout the process of the work.

Lion Ellen. Lion Ellen has been working at the Lion school for 17 years. She began her career in education as an instructional assistant and transitioned to a classroom teacher after six years. She credits her first principal as the driving force in her decision to return to school to get her teaching license. She continued to explain that the principal made arrangements with the school division to ensure she could do her student teaching while continuing to work. While describing a professional learning community she argues that although teachers typically work within their grade level, a true professional learning community includes vertical articulation to ensure student success.

Lion Donna. Lion Donna is a special education teacher at the Lion school. She has been at the Lion school for five years with all prior experience being in a private school setting. She has taught in a self-contained classroom, which she describes as the hardest position because you do not necessarily belong to a team and opportunities to work with others are limited. As the

inclusion teacher she works with a variety of general education classroom teachers. Throughout her interview there is evidence of a passion to help all students and ensure they are successful. She believes learning and working with others is critical for this to occur.

Lion Janet. Lion Janet is currently in her fifth year as a classroom teacher, with the last four being served at the Lion school. She states she has taught third and fourth grade and switches frequently. She describes this as “an advantage” to ensure she does not get into a “rut”. Her decision to enter education was made early in life and she states she never considered another profession. When describing a professional learning community, Lion Janet speaks to the informal conversations between team members to share ideas, brainstorm, and reflect on instructional practice. She does note that this is “hard” and depends on the people you work with.

Lion Michele. Lion Michele is currently a third grade teacher at the Lion school. She was previously an instructional assistant that received the opportunity to participate in a division wide cohort for elementary education licensure. In addition to serving on the school leadership team, she is also the math instructional leader for the Lion school. As the instructional leader, she participates in division-level meetings with the mathematics department and serves as the liaison between the school and mathematics department. When describing a professional learning community, she primarily focused on the need for new teachers to have access to a “seasoned” teacher to help them learn.

Lion Karen. Lion Karen is currently a fourth grade teacher at the Lion school. She has been teaching for eight years although it is noted she previously served as an instructional assistant. All eight years of her teaching experience have been at the Lion school in fourth grade. She has had a variety of teammates over the years and is currently working on a two-

person team. She states her commitment to helping children “become their best” was her driving motivation in entering the field of education. Lion Karen’s definition of professional learning community was inclusive of instructional specialists and teachers with a focus on sharing best practices and strategies to “reach the students” in different ways.

A Myriad of Collaborative Efforts

Lion Elementary engages in a variety of collaborative efforts, both structured and unstructured. Grade level teams meet bi-weekly for 90 minutes in what the school calls collaborative learning team meetings. The focus of these meetings is primarily analysis of student data and development of a plan for student interventions. Principal Ann describes these meetings as “constantly evolving” and admits that she has taken various approaches to make this time more effective. Although she has received training on a “prescribed program model” of professional learning community, she admits that as an administrator she has tried a “very strict agenda” and it was “too confining.” In order to be able to discuss a variety of topics they now have a “very loose agenda” and the focus of the meeting is driven by the calendar or students’ needs. She reports that the development of the agenda is “very natural” and states “anyone could put a topic on the table”. It is noted the teachers view this collaborative learning time as driven by the principal or reading specialist and rely on them to provide the topics for discussion.

Principal Ann attends the collaborative learning team meetings consistently for all grade levels. She reports she “can’t let that go” as it provides her the opportunity to “learn her teachers and students.” Lion Janet has been on multiple teams at the Lion school and stated the role of Principal Ann in these meetings varied based on the functionality of the team. She stated that with a lower functioning team Principal Ann served as the facilitator and guided the discussion, but with a higher functioning team she was “more hands off”. Lion Janet viewed the

collaborative learning team meeting on a lower functioning team as an opportunity for each individual teacher to share data and information with the administration versus a time for them to share with each other. It is noted she did identify the fact they were departmentalized by content area a barrier to reflective dialogue because the others would view her subject area as “her piece”. Teachers credit Principal Ann for having a positive impact on the meeting time stating, “they don’t make us feel uncomfortable or inferior” and although there are difficult conversations and areas of weakness “they don’t make us feel like we’ve done everything wrong and we can’t do our jobs.” Lion Janet stated that although Principal Ann primarily served as the facilitator for meetings, she also contributed ideas or suggestions for improvement.

Prior to the current school year, teams have not been required to designate a specific time to plan collaboratively for upcoming lessons. Lion Sue stated that outside of the designated 90-minute collaborative learning team meetings teachers are rarely seen planning together, but instead tend to work independently. She continued to say, “I would love to see more of them working together to discuss and share strategies they use in their classes that are working instead of just waiting for that PLC meeting to collaborate”. She stated that if teachers had discussion regarding teacher pedagogy prior to teaching a unit this could eliminate some of the discrepancies in data where one class may outperform another class.

Although additional planning outside of the collaborative learning team was not required, the assumption was made that teacher teams planned collectively. When it became evident this was not the case, administration implemented a mandatory 45-minute grade level planning time weekly. Lion Karen explained that Principal Ann had “learned that teams don’t get together and plan like we’re supposed to” and implemented the mandatory planning time because “she understands how important it is.” During her explanation of the implementation of planning

times, she states Principal Ann said, “You have to do it now. I don’t care if you want to, you’re going to do it.”

The mandated planning time did result in grade levels sitting down together, but did not necessarily improve collaboration. Lion Karen stated that although this time was set aside to plan and discuss teacher pedagogy and strategy this does not always occur due to lack of preparation by teachers. She continued to state that preparation is a hindrance to utilizing this time effectively, but also notes that teacher disposition may contribute as “people are used to doing their own thing and just want to do what they want to do.” Lion Ellen also noted “stubbornness” largely prevents collaboration because people are “stuck in their ways” and are not open to new ideas or strategies.

Lion Michele explains her team’s weekly planning as an opportunity for the team to review the division-wide curriculum and resources, download activities, and print and prepare resources. She mentioned how the division-wide curriculum “does an outstanding job of giving teachers pretty much everything they need to teach”, so this time is mainly spent on preparation of materials. It is evident teachers do not value conversation related to pedagogy, instructional delivery, or unpacking the curriculum standards. She describes herself as liking to “provide, help, and give”. When asked to describe the most effective use of weekly team planning at the Lion school, Lion Sue stated that it is primarily sharing of resources, but there is not any “deep planning.”

The Lion school also provided the opportunity for peer observations. The observations were voluntary and focused on teacher language, specifically looking for positive teacher language. Teachers had the opportunity to sign up for a member of the climate team to come into their classroom to observe and then meet for a feedback conference. The climate team

consisted of classroom teachers, resource teachers, and a school counselor. Volunteers were allowed to pick which member of the climate team they would like to come into their classroom. Lion Ann stated that the sign up displayed evidence that teachers felt more comfortable with certain people than others as there was a “clear person” they were willing to open their classroom up to. A classroom observation was completed and then a follow up conference to provide feedback. Teachers were provided the option for secondary support, but none of them requested additional support. Lion Ann stated that only four teachers signed up for the peer observation and three of them were master teachers. During reflection with the leadership team it became apparent that this process did not include the teachers that would have benefited from the support. The intent of the leadership team is to continue with peer observations with a variety of themes and requiring teachers to at least sign up for one.

Competition Prevents Collaboration

Across several grade levels, it became apparent that staff members were in competition with each other resulting in a reluctance to share best practice to improve performance for all students. As teachers at the Lion school strive to out perform their colleagues, some of those that are high performers have developed a sense of “arrogance” and an “ego”. Lion Sue identified “negative condescending attitudes of arrogant teachers” as the largest barrier to the development of a professional learning community at the Lion school. Despite her belief that teachers should have ownership of all children and their success, she notes that most teachers believe if their individual class is successful, then they are successful. Lion Michele remembered working on a difficult team. She credited a difference in student performance for the tension between herself and one teammate. Lion Michele remembers her students would outperform the other class and

“it was like a competition.” She continued to state, “I didn’t like that I’m being made to feel a certain way when I worked my you know what off for them.”

The administrative team identified the importance of selecting positive team members to serve on the leadership team as they help drive the work of the building. When considering leadership team members Lion Sue stated that one member was overly confident with this position and could be doing more damage than good as a teacher leader. Lion Sue describes her as “very immature and just thinks everybody is at fault and she doesn’t understand why nobody understands her giftedness.” She continued to identify this person as “very arrogant” and discussed how the leadership team has had to revisit her position as a teacher leader with additional responsibilities. Lion Ann states she has been “coaching teachers to be coaches” in hopes this will influence the way feedback is given to peers. Her goal is to develop “coach-like language” to help improve teacher practice in a non-threatening way instead of teacher leaders “telling” others what to do and potentially coming across as arrogant. Lion Sue acknowledges individual success, but sees the goal as helping all teachers become master teachers through a professional learning community. During the interview she stated,

“a lot of our veterans have a lot of positive gains with their students and their data, but they talk down to their team members that might not be functioning at their level, that to me is the worst. You’re supposed to be willing to help others grow versus point out that someone can’t do something or is incapable, and these are their words, of doing certain things.”

Not only were competition and arrogance identified as a barrier to successful collaboration, there were also instances when participants displayed these traits throughout the interviews. During the interview with Lion Michele there were several instances when she

exhibited tones of arrogance and self-pride. While discussing her switch from fourth grade to third grade, Lion Michele remembers the conversation with her administrator at the time. She states he told her, “I need somebody in third grade who is hardcore and just going to put the pedal to the metal with them. And that was me and I totally agree with that.” During a conversation with a new teacher she helped mentor she remembers telling the new teacher she would be successful if she went to a new school. The teacher stated there wouldn’t be a “Michele” there, but Lion Michele took pride in this and responded to the teacher with “You’re going to turn into a Michele, you know, you could be me.”

While discussing a previous team that did not collaborate well, Lion Janet credited this to their performance and level of competency being below hers. She continued to describe herself as being “very much on my A game” and the other two “on the not so effective side”. Lion Janet’s willingness to work together and openness to new ideas is absent “if I don’t feel like you are on you’re a game or if you are constantly just dropping the ball. That might be fine for you in your classroom, but as a team it doesn’t work.” She also stated she had received formal training on the facets of trust and identifies competence is a prerequisite for her building trusting relationships.

Another example of an arrogant attitude came from Lion Ellen when describing her current teammate. Last year there was a team of three teachers and they were departmentalized by content area. Lion Ellen states she helped the third teacher plan for Social Studies instruction and therefore her current teammate felt left out. Lion Ellen exhibited a sense of arrogance when she stated “I’m the curriculum instructional leader for Social Studies, plus I wrote the curriculum for the district.” This alone does not exude arrogance until she later stated,

We would meet and we talk about Social Studies and then she'd get upset because she felt left out. But you're not teaching Social Studies and you don't have the curriculum background like I did to help her. So feeling left out, feeling jealous, that type of thing. I'm like, you can sit in if you want, but it's not gonna help."

This description made it clear that Lion Ellen believed she was more competent in this area in comparison and did not see the value in collaborating as a team.

Although some participants displayed with a competitive nature and an overwhelming sense of self-confidence, others identified this as a barrier to working collaboratively with colleagues. While describing her fondest memory of a team and collaboration, Lion Karen stated,

We felt like a team, like we were together and it was not a competition. We were together and looking at ideas that would help you know, all the kids. There were no egos that were attached and people weren't in competition with one another, that kind of attitude really puts a damper on collaboration.

When asked to identify what prevents successfully collaborating with others, she again mentioned competition suggesting this is a frequent theme with her colleagues.

I don't know if it's competitiveness or if it's a self-esteem kind of thing. We're not really ever listening to one another. We're just more involved in our own heads. You've got to get out of your own head and your own ego.

As a special education inclusion teacher, Lion Donna expressed her desire to work with others to ensure all students were successful. She continued that some general education teachers take ownership of all students, including those with disabilities, while others assign responsibility of students with disabilities to her.

Driven by competition and the desire to outperform colleagues, teachers expressed their desire to maintain their autonomy and not become overly uniformed. During her description of a professional learning community, Lion Michele argued

It's okay if somebody wants to do something differently than what you want to do.

That's why your name is on the outside of the classroom. You have to accept that not every teacher is going to do the same thing, you know, and the same way that you do.

Lion Sue stated that this sense of privacy prevents teachers from sharing best practice with each other and accepting a collective responsibility for all students within the building. The goal during collaborative learning team meetings is to review student data, identify student interventions, but also to identify gaps in teacher practice. When a gap is identified teachers are expected to share how a concept was taught or if there was a specific strategy. When reflecting on this time she states "I don't know if they are being completely open with what they use as they just want to keep some things to themselves."

This sense of isolation and withholding best practice was evident during instructional conversations, but also trickled into other topics such as classroom management or organization of the classroom. This is evidenced by Lion Ellen's account of frequent conversations with her teammate. She states, "I try to make her understand you don't have to be me. I do something. You don't necessarily have to do it you know. That's something that I try to make her understand." She continued to give an example related to how she had decided to utilize tables instead of student desks this year. Her teammate stated she was going to use desks because she had tried tables and it did not work for her. Lion Ellen stated her response was, "Okay, that's great. You use your desks, you don't have to use tables like I do." Throughout the interview there was a negative connotation frequently present regarding teacher collaboration and sharing

of ideas. Her final statement before moving on to the next question, “If it’s something that I can do and I feel like it’s something I want to do then I’ll do it, but if she can’t, then she can’t” exemplifies this.

Although participants often withheld strategies or limited conversations related to instructional practice, there was evidence of a desire to assist new teachers improve their practice. Teachers with experience often are resistant to learning from one another, but they do want to support novice teachers. When fondly describing the most successful team she has worked on, Lion Karen contributed the effectiveness of this to the fact she was working with a brand new teacher. While working as her mentor she was “teaching her the ropes of being there”, but ultimately realized the new teacher was a wealth of knowledge and the learning was reciprocal.

Lion Michele describes the best team as one that is composed of a variety of experience so “a seasoned teacher, been around the block a little bit, is able to help somebody who has not been.” This conversation was limited to the assistance she could provide to the new teacher, but there was no value placed on the desire of improving her own craft. Lion Michele reports when she has a question or is seeking support she reaches out to division level staff in lieu of her teammates limiting learning from one another. Although she is not open to feedback from her teammates, she did describe how she enjoys working with new teachers. She continued to describe how she received a great amount of joy from watching new teachers grow and improve because of her help. Although teachers report assisting new teachers as they transition into the profession and organization, the administrative team feels this is an area for improvement. Lion Sue argues that when it comes to new teachers, veteran teachers should be “open to sharing what

works for you as a master teacher because you want everybody to grow and this is not a competition”.

Personalities Matter

The effectiveness of collaboration at different grade levels was influenced by the personalities of the teammates. Lion Donna works with multiple general education teachers in the inclusion setting and she admits that some working relationships are better than others depending on the teacher’s personality and willingness to collaborate. Throughout the interviews it was evident that a successful team was defined as staff members that enjoyed being around each other and had fun together, not necessarily with a focus on student learning. When asked to describe the most successful team, Lion Sue described one team where all participants are “bubbly, energetic, and fun” and they often “make each other laugh and brighten one another’s day.” She continued to state that she felt if one member was moved to another school or grade level then the remaining members would follow because of the commitment they have to each other. Although this was her description of the most successful team she admitted it was more surface level collaboration. She stated she sees them sharing resources and there is a willingness to offer assistance, but there is no “deep planning”. When describing her current team, Lion Michelle mimicked these characteristics of a successful team. She describes them as “really good” and continues to discuss how they joke with each other and “when you can joke about things, I just think you’re a good team like that.”

Conflict between team members was often mentioned as a result of conflicting personality types. Lion Michele described a team she worked on where she felt like she was in the middle of the other two teammates, as “one did not like the other”. She stated they had different teaching styles and reported one of them would ask her not to share resources with the

third teacher. This resistance to sharing all resources and strategies for the betterment of the students was rooted in negative interpersonal relationships between staff members. Lion Michele continued to state “it’s hard to be in the middle of adults like that because I’m 51. I don’t have time for drama like that. That’s middle school, so not very professional.” Lion Ellen highlighted a conflict of personalities on her team of three stating one of the teachers “was very jealous because I had a lot in common with the other teacher and she felt left out.” She continued to state that this led to a “very rough” school year and frequent disagreements.

Lion Ann also highlighted a lack of professionalism amongst teachers. She stated that some teachers are unable to set their differences aside to make decisions that are best for children. One team in particular frequently engaged in “immature childish behavior” such as slamming doors, feeling left out, yelling, speaking disrespectfully, and feeling as if someone is judging you. Despite several mediations she admits it did not improve and she had to uphold standards of professionalism through the teacher evaluation system.

Lion Ann notes that as teacher’s stress levels increase, interpersonal relationships are negatively impacted. To combat this, the administrators are involved in working with employees to develop communication skills more conducive to successful collaboration. This includes having individual conversations to help teachers become reflective in how they are being perceived by their colleagues. It is noted some are more receptive to this assistance than others. Lion Ann states she has individual conferences with teachers to discuss how individual teachers communicate, understanding colleagues personalities, and understanding others’ communication styles. She provided a scenario to exemplify these conversations,

When they say this, do they really mean it the way you are taking it. When so and so is upset, she tends to talk louder. When so and so is upset, she actually stops talking and goes to her room. When you are upset you cry.

Lion Ann states that she knows her teachers, but works hard for them to understand each other and take this into consideration when working collaboratively. In addition to individual conferences, she also provided team building opportunities during weekly grade level meetings and bi-weekly collaborative learning team meetings. She admits because of the lack of interpersonal relationships, this was a grade level she pushed more of a “prescribed program to draw out conversation.”

Lion Janet stated she has worked with a team where she did not feel “safe” due to individual teacher’s feelings and this resulted in her not wanting to share or speak. She continued despite “not meaning to obviously hurt anybody’s feelings, but it would be taken kind of that way” resulting in an “immediate shutdown” preventing any further collaboration. During the interview she prided herself on being a good communicator after receiving specific professional development for teacher leaders. Lion Karen illuminated this idea of “shutdown” and admitted to retreating and not sharing ideas or strategies with colleagues as they were often rejected or not received well by her colleagues. She continued that she fears rejection and ultimately did not feel “safe” sharing ideas.

“You have to not be scared that somebody’s gonna reject what you have to say.

Rejection. Nobody likes. But if you completely shut off and say I’m just not sharing anymore, then you just sort of limit what you can actually learn from others. I think people go through sort of phases where they get to that. I’m not sharing, forget it.

Especially after maybe they’ve been rejected and their feelings are still sort of tender

from that. They go through this space where they're like, forget it. I'm not sharing anything. And then, you know, slowly you might work your way back to the, you know, let me try this again."

Lion Ellen notes a lack of respect between colleagues is the largest barrier to working collaboratively. She elaborated on this notion of respect and tying it to the willingness to be open to new ideas, listening to others, and not "judging" them. She continued that developing respectful relationships is difficult, but shared her opinion on how they are developed.

Listening is probably the best way. Listening to other people and not judging them.

That's probably the best way to earn it. You know, don't jump to conclusions. You give things a chance before you say no to new ideas. Be open, you know, before you say no.

Don't say no before you even see it or try it. Don't shoot it down.

Lion Karen also warns that once trust has been broken it is difficult to restore, specifically when you have worked with the person for a while and are "in that cycle of behavior." Personal relationships and compatibility of personalities on teams appear to drive the effectiveness of teacher collaboration. It is noted that significant value is placed on the ability of teams to get along with each other despite if they engage in the specific work of sharing best practice to improve teacher and student performance.

Building Teacher Leaders to Build Capacity

Throughout the interviews, there is an overwhelming sense of relying on the building administrator to lead the work within the building. Lion Karen admits that when administration gets called away from a team meeting, the productivity decreases because without the administrator they do not have an established agenda. Despite the desire to develop shared leadership, this is in the early stages of development. Lion Janet states that they are "definitely

trying” and “that’s the direction we are headed, but it’s a slow process.” She explained at her previous school she did not know who was on the leadership team because they were not visible teachers leaders, and although there is work to do at Lion school, “at least I know who is on the leadership team here.”

Administration is currently attempting to build capacity with the school leadership team by providing them with more responsibility and opportunities to share with staff members. Leadership team members have led professional development opportunities at staff meetings and planned evening events for families. Principal Ann determines the topics of professional development opportunities, but then responsibility is shared with teacher leaders to disperse the information with other staff members. Once topics have been identified, the team then determines if it should be done whole group or small group and identifies the best teacher leader to present the material based on their knowledge base and proficiency in that area. Members of the leadership team all spoke to the attempts of shared leadership through teacher-led professional development. On the contrary, the teachers that did not serve on the leadership team viewed the administrator as the primary person responsible for disseminating information and providing introductions to new initiatives. After attempting to list members of the leadership team with uncertainty, Lion Karen states,

I don’t know what they do. I know who to talk to if I need something. But as far as them doing anything else, as far as leading a PD or anything, I don’t really see that as much. I don’t think so anyway. Not that I can recall.

The reading specialist also attends grade level planning meetings to assist in facilitation of discussion and sharing of resources and strategies. It is noted that although the intent is for

her to work as a teacher leader to build capacity in staff, Lion Karen states she believes she attends the meetings to “report back and let the administration know how our meeting went.”

Lion Ann states that a goal of hers is to build the capacity within the staff and increase the level of horizontal accountability. She gives several examples to support the need to improve in this area. Specifically, she speaks to teams that have a “weaker link and the two stronger ones tend to take the lead and not so much pull the other one up in true collaboration, but more tell the other one what to do.” One example was of a team where one teacher did all of the planning and she questions the ability of the second one to be successful if this resource was not available to her. She continued that although they worked together it was not true collaboration and definitely did not focus on building capacity, as she wasn’t sure “she could stand on her own.” A second example was at a different grade level where one teacher consistently does not meet progressing monitoring deadlines. Instead of providing assistance and coaching, the other two teachers would do the work for her. Principal Ann admits “doing it for someone is not sustainable, but building them up is sustainable.”

Through honest conversations with teacher leaders and developing leadership and communication skills, Principal Ann hopes to increase the level of horizontal accountability among staff members. Lion Janet serves as the climate and culture coach within her building. This role requires her to support teachers within their classrooms regarding classroom management, relationships, and the learning environment. Lion Janet admitted to needing additional support in the area of coaching teachers within her building when adjustments need to be made.

You want to be tactful and you don't want to hurt anybody's feelings, but at the same time, if some adjustments do need to be made, I just feel like it's a very sensitive topic.

I'm not there yet. Some more training. Yes please.

The leadership team and each specific grade level develop group norms. Principal Ann states she is frequently having conversations regarding the power of norms is not just having them written on paper, but also holding each other accountable.

Tiger School

The Tiger school is a fully accredited Title I school serving approximately 420 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, with 46% of them eligible for free or reduced lunch. Student demographics reveal 71% African American, 12% White, 9% Hispanic, 6% two or more races, and 2% other. It is noted upon the principal's arrival to Tiger School they were denied accreditation as they did not meet the state benchmarks. They are consistently showing improvement and are currently accredited without conditions. All teachers in the school are certified and working within their field, with six percent considered inexperienced according to the state's Department of Education.

An analysis of student performance data was completed utilizing both state accreditation pass rates and Every Student Succeeds Act pass rates. In the area of reading, the Tiger school has seen a decline in student achievement data, while remaining accredited by the state. The state accreditation has declined from 77% passing to 67% passing over the last three years. Every Student Succeeds Act also shows a decline from 73% to 57%. In the area of mathematics, the Tiger school shows an increase in state accreditation pass rates, improving from 77 percent to 78% of students passing. The Every Student Succeeds Act suggests a slight decline from 74% to 72% passing. In the area of Science, the pass rate has decreased from 81% to 66% over the last

three years when analyzing state accreditation standards. The Every Student Succeeds Act also suggests a 23-percentage point decrease in the area of science with the most recent year reported as 62% passing. Although the Tiger school remains accredited by the state, there is evidence of a decline in all content areas. .

An analysis of the data revealed three thematic categories related to the development and sustainability of a community of practice. The three categories included a myriad of structured collaborative efforts, the significant impact of social factors in comparison to structural factors on communities of practice, and utilizing teacher leaders to build organizational capacity.

Participants

Tiger Lisa. Principal Lisa is currently in her fifth year as principal, with all being served at the Tiger school. She has had two assistant principals during her five years, with her current assistant principal serving his third year. Principal Lisa notes that she has always had a passion for helping people which was a driving force in her choosing a profession in education. She described her journey from classroom teacher to administrator as a natural progression. Principal Lisa stated,

“I’m passionate for lower grades, but once I got more into the classroom role I always saw myself as like that leader, wanting to help. I helped kids and now I just kind of wanted to help teachers. So that is how my role of helping and collaborating and serving other people evolved into being a principal.”

Principal Lisa takes pride in her ability to develop a professional learning community as she received formal training as a classroom teacher and “knows what it should look like”. She describes a professional learning community as “A community where you foster collaboration

and everybody is a part of it. Everybody has their roles defined and everybody knows what it is that they're supposed to be working towards with that common goal.”

Tiger Ray. Tiger Ray is currently in his third year as an assistant principal, with all three being served at Tiger school. Initially Tiger Ray did not enter college with the intent of entering the field of education. As his music major evolved and the opportunity was presented for him to receive his master's degree by adding an additional year, he decided to pursue music education. He does acknowledge working with children was always a passion he had, mostly through coaching and working at camps. It is noted his teaching experience was in another division and administration was not a personal goal of his initially. He credits his transition into administration to leaders he worked under that encouraged him and ultimately his wife that pursued her administrative credentials with him. He describes his transition into administration as “intimidating” since he was a music teacher without elementary education training and had so much to learn as it related to instruction. He describes a professional learning community as the opportunity for teacher leaders to “step out there and lead”, gain perspective from all levels, and “facilitate their ideas and thoughts”.

Tiger Melissa. Tiger Melissa has been in education for 29 years serving as a teacher and literacy coach. She is currently serving her fifth year as a literacy coach at Tiger school and is a member on the school leadership team. Education was a second career for Tiger Melissa as she previously worked at a bank as a loan officer. She remembers being “just so not happy” and returned to school to get her elementary education degree. As a literacy coach she acknowledges you take on many tasks unrelated to your position to include discipline, but she has a commitment to coaching teachers in the area of literacy. Tiger Melissa has received formal training related to professional learning communities and the DuFour model and describes it as

“really just building the climate and culture of the building”. She also describes herself as a learner seeking more opportunities to learn from others as she is often viewed as the expert in her current role.

Tiger Lauren. Tiger Lauren is a fifth grade teacher currently in her sixth year at the Tiger school. In addition to serving as the team leader and member of the school leadership team, she has just completed the school leadership cohort and received her administrative credentials. Tiger Lauren describes her path into education as “on a whim”. As an undergraduate student with an undeclared major, she reports education being what made “sense” and feeling like “this is what I need to do”. During her effort to describe a professional learning community she fondly describes a team she worked with a few years ago noting, “we shared everything, the good the bad, the ugly, it didn’t matter. We shared it and we tried to problem solve together”.

Tiger Lynn. Tiger Lynn is a current kindergarten teacher at the Tiger school serving her seventh year as a teacher. She is a career switcher becoming a teacher after serving in the military. Once getting out of the military she began substitute teaching and ultimately going back to school to finish her elementary education degree. Although elementary education was not always her career choice, she does note that she always worked with children through tutoring, babysitting, and teaching at Vacation Bible School at her church. She is currently the kindergarten lead teacher and serves on the school leadership team. Tiger Lynn’s description of a professional learning community was primarily focused on the frequency of team meetings and a description for how the team plans for instruction.

Tiger Kim. Tiger Kim is currently in her twelfth year of education and fourth year serving as a reading interventionist at Tiger school. She states she took some time off of

teaching after she had children, but had to return for financial reasons. In addition to attending grade level team meetings to discuss student data and instruction, she serves as a member of the school leadership team. As the reading interventionist she reports having more flexibility and often being that person that others lean on. This provides her the opportunity to “have the ear of both sides of the building” as she also works closely with the administrative team.

Tiger Mary. Tiger Mary is currently in her 26th year of teaching within the same school division. She serves as the team lead for second grade and is a member of the school leadership team. When describing a professional learning community she states,

I like the collaboration. I like doing all of that because I think it makes life a lot easier and more interesting because I'm an older teacher so I am open to the younger teachers giving me ideas. I'm not one of those that know how to do everything. I'm always looking for new ideas.

A Myriad of Collaborative Efforts

A variety of collaborative efforts emerged at Tiger Elementary. There appeared to be a continuum of formality as collaboration ranged from structured formal time to informal meetings and learning as well. When questioned about time for teacher collaboration, Tiger Principal Lisa joked, “they would probably say we meet too much.” Specifically, the school noted having 90-minute grade level collaborative learning team meetings bi-weekly reserved strictly for data analysis, including analysis of student work. Tiger Principal Lisa explained this included “looking at data samples, finding gaps in instruction, and planning for intervention.” Teachers are responsible for selecting an assessment, collecting the data, and submitting to administration two days prior to the scheduled meeting. During the collaborative learning team meeting, teachers sort student work samples into exemplars, medium level, and below grade level. They

review student work focusing on the below grade level samples to identify specific gaps in learning and plan intervention for the identified students. Tiger Principal Lisa identifies this as a skill that had to be taught through professional development and modeling the process prior to noting it “is a fine tuned machine and they can do it on their own now.” Tiger Melissa confirms, “it was a slow process at first, but it is really phenomenal.” The primary focus of these meetings is to analyze student performance, identify students in need of intervention, and specific gaps in their learning.

Grade level teams also meet twice weekly for grade level planning for instruction. One day is reserved for grade levels to meet with the math support specialist and the other is reserved for the literacy support specialist. The intent of both 45-minute planning periods is to focus on planning for tier one instruction. There is a discrepancy in the effectiveness of this time as noted in the transcriptions. Tiger Kim identified a lack of conversation about content often leads to teachers not being fully prepared to implement a lesson. She stated,

We become too departmentalized to the point of not necessarily I’m teaching just math, but departmentalized in lesson planning and people aren’t owning the lesson plan. It’s a whole lot harder for me to know exactly what I’m supposed to be teaching in reading if I didn’t look at those, if I wasn’t a part of making that plan and, or I don’t take the time to go and look at it before I stand in front of students. They don’t talk about it. I mean, I get why teachers want to do that because lesson planning is cumbersome and overwhelming in some ways, but you now, it still has to be conversation before it’s really on paper.

During initial description of the grade level planning meetings, Tiger Lynn stated, “We meet together in one of our rooms and discuss different activities we are going to do and give each

other ideas.” After confirming the conversation was confidential, Tiger Lynn proceeded to confirm this notion of departmentalizing lesson plans by stating, “None of that happens. I know the curriculum like the back of my hand, so I write our Language Arts lesson plans.” A consistent thread throughout the interviews supported that planning meetings were an opportunity for teachers to share resources, but they rarely engaged in conversation related to instructional delivery or teacher pedagogy.

This is further supported by Tiger Melissa’s description in the need to shift from departmentalized lesson planning to individual lesson planning for the future year.

They just check their box. I’ve done my plans for the week, but they don’t own those plans. And you know, if you write the plans, you own the lesson and your lesson is going to be great, you’re excited to teach it because you’ve written it and you know it. But if you’re reading as you go along, it’s awkward pauses. That’s when your behavior happens and when you’re not comfortable and you’re not excited to teach it. That shows in your delivery as well.

Tiger Melissa continues to explain that administration is aware of this gap in the effectiveness of collaborative planning. In effort to combat departmentalizing of lesson plans, they intend to develop a new lesson plan template each teacher will be required to complete. In addition, grade level planning time will shift to planning for small group instruction, as teachers will need to differentiate for individual students eliminating the ability to share lesson plans.

The Tiger school also reported engaging in school-wide collaborative efforts through collaborative mini teams. Collaborative mini teams were implemented recently to increase school-wide collaboration as a result of staff survey results indicating staff wanted opportunities to meet with others outside of their grade level. Tiger Principal stated the survey results

indicated the building was often split between primary grades (kindergarten through second) and upper elementary (third through fifth grades). As a result, collaborative mini teams were proposed to the school leadership team and administration solicited leaders for the teams. Principal Lisa described the selection of leaders as “really interesting to see the ones who decided they wanted to step up and do that versus the ones that I thought, like our natural go-tos.” Once leaders were selected, all remaining staff members were assigned a team through a “blind sort” resulting in heterogeneous teams.

Collaborative mini teams meet once a month and are given topics predetermined by the school leadership team. Sample topics provided were student retention, student behavioral expectations, teacher self care, and morale boosting activities to positively impact the culture of the building. Tiger Lynn appreciated the opportunity to work with her collaborative mini team as “they were not people that I would normally speak to because they were from, you know, different grade levels, different you know.” Tiger school provides a myriad of structured collaborative time dedicated to a cohesive goal of student success. In addition, having predetermined goals for structured collaborative time provided a roadmap for all participants.

Commitment to Shared Goal

Throughout the interviews it was very evident the participants had a shared vision and commitment to serving the students of Tiger Elementary. The overarching goal of putting kids first was evident, but there were also smaller goals reiterated throughout the interviews. The overwhelming sense of commitment to students was evident not only in the conversation regarding their current work, but was also a driving force in why each participant selected a career in education. While describing the Tiger school, the principal explained the staff had selected core values of collaboration, positive relationships, and high expectations that “drive

what we do, what we commit to”. Principal Tiger Lisa reports consciously modeling these expectations through assisting in after school events, providing student interventions, assisting in cafeteria clean up, or vacuuming. Her commitment to collaboration was highlighted by her belief that regardless of your role or title, “we’re all here for the kids and that’s our common goal”.

Staff members credited Principal Tiger Lisa for establishing a clear vision and expectations for the school. Tiger Ray stated that the principal was highly influential in the development of the learning community as she sets the tone and vision. He continues to say that the established vision has been well received by the staff and they are now “in a position where it can kind of run itself.” Tiger Melissa reiterates this by saying:

I think honestly this is a dream school to work at. I’ve worked at many and I think it is top down too. I think that both of our administrators are very positive. They are clear in their expectations. They really don’t deviate from that.

Tiger Lauren also describes the role of teacher leaders in ensuring the shared vision and expectations are clear at the team level for teachers. She describes her role as the team lead is to establish the expectations at the beginning of the year for all members, to include task completion, commitment to each other, and commitment to students. She describes successful teams as “the ones that can literally be left by themselves to do it and know that it’s going to get done.”

In addition to the overall commitment to children driving the work at the Tiger school, it is noted there is also a specific goal for individual meetings. Grade level teams meet for a 90-minute collaborative team meeting bi-weekly. Teams, support specialists, and administrators are responsible for developing an agenda prior to each meeting. The agenda determines the focus of

the specific meeting and informs team members what preparations must be done to effectively participate in the meeting. It is noted one standard component of the agenda was a 25-minute data review where they analyzed “what were they supposed to learn, what did they learn, and where are the gaps”. The one variation was which piece of data teachers would bring to each meeting. It is reported that the data must be turned into Principal Lisa two days in advance as an accountability measure to ensure teachers are prepared.

Employees often present with personal challenges, both related and unrelated to the profession, which may have a negative impact on their commitment to the shared vision of an organization. Personal challenges included lack of familiarity with the curriculum, behavioral challenges, teacher burn out, illness, or death in the family. Although personal challenges will always be present, Tiger Ray says “it’s just a matter of how they internalize these things and how are they able to overcome and work with each other to overcome their challenges.”

Social Factors Trump Structure

The Tiger school has designated 90 minutes weekly for grade level instructional planning and an additional 90 minutes bi-weekly for analysis of student data. In addition, the whole faculty meets three times a month and engages in a variety of professional learning collectively in addition to having mixed grade level collaborative mini teams. Principal Lisa has dedicated time for a variety of collaborative efforts to minimize the barrier of structural factors, but it is evident social factors continue to be a large influence on the organic nature of communities of practice. Although a few structural factors were noted, it is evident that participants identified social factors as more contributory than structural factors when discussing the effectiveness of teacher collaboration and community. This section identifies subsections of social factors that emerged through data analysis.

Trust. Trust was identified as a prerequisite for successful teaming at Tiger Elementary school. Trusting relationships were noted at the teacher-teacher level and teacher-administrator level. All teachers and support staff members reported having trusting relationships with administrators. These relationships provided teachers the opportunity to engage in shared decision-making, discuss problems as they arose, and provide feedback to administrators. When discussing administrators in general, Tiger Kim acknowledges that “everyone has their opinion on leaders, you know your flaws become glaringly obvious very quickly and people like to point them out to each other.” She continues to state there is an overarching feeling in the building that Principal Lisa is approachable and teachers and support staff feel comfortable discussing topics of concern with her. One grade level team ability groups students for reading and writing instruction. The teacher was excited to share this process during the interview and proudly announces that not all grade levels can do this, but the principal stated she “totally had faith in them”. She also discusses how there is the opportunity for teachers to provide feedback to the administrators describing Principal Lisa as

She’s always the kind of principal that if something’s not going to work, we can adjust it. You know, it’s not like it’s set in stone. I think when you have that approach and telling you, you know what you’re going to do and saying it it’s not right, we’ll adjust it to the way we’ve done. I think that makes a big difference.

On the contrary, participants remembered previous administrators and the negative impact they have on the climate of the building and teacher relationships. Tiger May has worked under at least eight principals at the Tiger school and states principals drive the climate of the building.

It does make a difference because a lot of times principals will add extra stress that you don't really need. And if you have extra stress, then sometimes it causes animosity between people. Even if you do get along, sometimes principals will say things that they really shouldn't and then it just kind of causes problems. So I think the climate of the school and the climate of your team does make a big difference with your principals.

Tiger Kim identifies a correlation between teacher-teacher trust and teacher-administrator trust stating, "when people feel like they can speak with the admin, then they feel like they can speak with each other."

Data analysis presented a need for a trusting relationship between not only administrators and teachers, but also between teachers. Tiger Lauren argues the biggest contributing factor to successful teaming is trust between teachers. She continues:

If there's not that trust, then it's never going to work. If you don't trust the people who you're around and trust that at the end of the day they support you, it's never going to work no matter what because they're always going to hide something. You're never going to be that true honest. Like, I have no idea what I'm doing. Please help. You're never going to have that true conversation if you don't have trust behind it.

Openness. Openness was a prevalent topic throughout the interviews. Openness included willingness to hear different perspectives and try new ideas, as well as, willingness to communicate openly and respectfully with each other. Principal Tiger Lisa identifies open and honest communication as an integral component in a professional learning community and teacher collaboration. As the instructional leader of the building, she models this behavior through conversations with employees and assisting in mediation when necessary. When conflict arises, her initial step is to encourage the two parties involved to discuss the concern

prior to her intervention. Tiger Lynn reiterates the need for open communication and describes her approach to handling conflict.

If I notice that maybe there is something, I will talk to you one on one about it. If there's something, I know, me personally, I will say, "Hey you know, I noticed that when I said this, it might have come off this way. That wasn't my intention, let's talk about what I was saying.

While describing her first team experience, Tiger Lynn remembers feeling left out at times as two of her colleagues had worked together for many years. While arguing the need to set feelings aside, Tiger Lynn stated,

I think as teachers, we've got to set that aside. Sometimes it's a very emotional job. It's very, we put our heart and soul into it, but we also have to understand that sometimes it's a business. It's a business of getting these guys prepared. You know, we are training them to do better, to be better.

The importance of removing personal feelings and focusing on the job at hand was reiterated by Tiger Lauren. Her team's commitment to children drove their interactions and practice. Tiger Lauren fondly remembered a highly functioning team:

It was all laid out on the table for us to look at and analyze because at the end of the day it was about our kids. It wasn't about hurting each others' feelings, hiding anything. It was just how do we make kids better and how do we as professionals make ourselves better for our kids.

Tiger Kim notes open and honest communication is key to ultimately doing what is best for the students, but also realizes the difficulty this presents. She argues that respectful communication

leads to adjustments that improve student performance while noting, “We all have feelings. You can’t just check your feelings at the door.”

In addition to open and honest communication, there must be a willingness to discuss teacher practice and maintain a growth mindset. Tiger Lynn stated that although she is very familiar with the kindergarten curriculum, she does seek help from special education teachers. As the inclusion teacher, there are times where special education students are in her classroom without additional support. She reports frequent conversations with special education teachers to seek guidance in particular behaviors or difficulties she is seeing within her classroom. When she was on a highly collaborative team, Tiger Lauren reports relying on her teammates to problem solve and reflect on her own practice within the classroom. She describes her current team not being as open and willing to work together and share ideas and practice. She elaborated by identifying a relationship between student data and the effectiveness of collaboration.

Everything was the same and it reflects in data. The year that I had a solid PLC, all of our data was exactly the same. Like yes, numbers were slightly different. Some person is at 75 and one person is at 70, but we either consistently soared together or we consistently failed together because everything was talked about. Then this year one of us is up here and one of us is down here and there were never really times where those conversations happened of, okay what are you doing differently that I’m not doing and what am I doing differently that you’re not doing?

Tiger May describes a less than positive memory of a team member stating, “It didn’t matter what we said, we were wrong. She knew what she was doing and it didn’t matter.”

Tiger Lynn describes the importance of openness to new ideas and perspectives, although it may be difficult at times.

Be willing to listen to other people's ideas and being willing to continue to learn. I think, and this is human nature, we like things a certain way. We're set in our ways and we may become experts, but it's always nice to see things through a new perspective.

Tiger Ray continues to support the need for openness while discussing growth mindset for teachers:

I will always go back to the positive mindset of the people in the group. When you have someone who's positive, when they're ready to accept what they don't know and then they're ready to grow, that growth mindset, I think the sky is the limit.

Teachers with a vulnerable and open personality allow for new perspectives to be seen and honest conversations regarding practice to be shared.

Teacher efficacy and intrinsic motivation. Structural factors, commitment to shared goal, and social factors impact the development of organic communities of practice, but it is also revealed that there is a component concerning the natural intrinsic motivation of teachers. When asked to describe a highly functioning team Tiger Ray states, "It's just the energy they bring. They're excited. They are just as excited to learn as the kids are." He notes that individuals may have this "energy", but when all team members bring the same energy "it's like the energy magnifies. It's all positive energy and it's a beautiful thing."

Teachers that are committed to the success of students and improving student practice are more likely to come prepared to meetings. When asked to describe a highly successful team, Principal Lisa states, "the most successful team brings the things that they're asked to bring." Tiger Melissa describes a sense of horizontal accountability driven by the intrinsically motivated teachers and trusting relationships. She stated, "I guess they trust each other. They hold each other accountable and everybody shows up with what they need to have in order to make it

successful. Those who come prepared their team holds them to that.” Principal Lisa justifies the need for assigned roles, assigned tasks, and clear expectations in order to ensure teachers are prepared and “everyone is bringing something, everyone is contributing.”

Accessibility to resources. The one structural factor that presented during the interviews was accessibility to resources, specifically time and money. Tiger Lynn stated when collaborating with others, it is important to consider individual’s time and financial budgets. She elaborated while discussing a unit involving baking of bread and how her teammates did not have the same resources and were not able to participate. Not only was the baking of bread a constraint, but also discussed other materials including a crockpot, applesauce ingredients, and popsicle sticks. In addition to materials and resources, she noted that some people might not have the time to dedicate to certain tasks.

Tiger Kim reported time constraints prevent the deprivatization of practice within a school setting. She stated that teachers typically rely on support staff or administration for assistance, as it is difficult for classroom teachers to assist outside of planning for instruction. Specifically, she notes, “You’re not in their classroom, you don’t see what’s going on. All you’re doing is hearing what they are saying or possibly hearing what an evaluator is saying.” She also continues that she feels it is important to “show teachers”, not just tell them. She continued with an example of when she had the opportunity to work with a teacher that started mid-year.

I planned for her small groups (reading) for the first month. I told her what I needed her to do was sit next to me and watch me teach small group, like watch how I do this. Then it was okay now it’s you; I’m going to go over here.

In conclusion, although structural factors were mentioned as barriers, the majority of these are controlled through systems and structure implemented by administration. The social factors are noted as having a larger impact on the effectiveness of learning communities.

Teacher Leaders and Organizational Capacity

Teacher leaders describe the support staff (math and reading specialists), but also grade level lead teachers that serve on the school leadership team. Principal Tiger Lisa identifies a correlation between the strength of a teacher leader and the strength of a team. While discussing the shared repertoire of the building and the need for strong teacher leaders she states:

No matter who is in there, this is how we do things. That's a struggle because you have strong leaders in different grade levels that will sustain that no matter if you're there or not. But then you have other grade levels that will talk about other things and get completely off topic and not focused, but you just have to make sure that the leaders that you have, that you know that you're building capacity, have the same mission and vision that you do, and you just consistently articulate that to them.

When discussing the effectiveness of team meetings, Tiger Melissa mentions that teachers are not always on task and respond differently when an administrator is present in the meetings. She reflects that four out of the six grade levels "are going to show up and do the right thing". Tiger Kim also notes a difference in the focus of meetings when administrators are present and crediting two teams for effectively leading themselves. While reflecting on one grade level she describes the teacher leader as "the kindest person you've ever met, but not a take charge person at all" resulting in frequent, unproductive, and off-task meetings.

Tiger Principal Lisa described the value of teacher leaders in her work, "When they're not in front of you, you can trust that they're delivering the message that you want them to

deliver.” She also states that as an administrator, you have to “allow them to lead” and include them in decision making to ensure they see the value in the work. Tiger Ray describes providing the leadership team the opportunity to lead and ensuring the administrators do not appear to have all the answers. He views the administrator’s role as a facilitator of teachers’ ideas and thoughts while considering all perspectives.

It is noted that it is important to find a strong teacher leader without the person becoming too overbearing in his or her approach. The role of the team lead is to carry the vision and mission throughout the daily work, but also facilitating discussion amongst teachers, not doing the work for them. In some instances at Tiger school the teacher leaders have been identified as having a “strong personality” and taking away from the collaboration at the grade level.

Legitimate peripheral participation. There was evidence of legitimate peripheral participation as new staff members were integrated into the school and the existing systems. Tiger Lauren fondly remembered when a new teacher entered her team and stated, “She was brand new to teaching. So we really tried to just take her under our wing and say, this is what we do and this is how we officially do it.” Prior to the new teacher entering the team Tiger Lauren and the other teammate had worked together previously and had established shared repertoire and expectations. She stated they would always meet to complete tasks together and ensure the new teacher understood the curriculum and expectations. She described a collective effort to “build that community of fifth grade together so she didn’t ever feel left out.”

Tiger Kim remembers when she moved to the state and was the new member to a team. She stated, “They just kind of worked me into their system. It was already a system they had in place, but it just worked long before planning together was an expectation.” Tiger Kim credited her teammates for teaching her the curriculum during her first year as she would “rely more on

their knowledge than actually looking through the curriculum guides.” As she became more familiar and comfortable and she would make adjustments, but relied heavily on them initially. Tiger Lynn mentions integrating a new teacher onto her team and noted, “she was very good about asking questions and coming to me.” In all three accounts, the teachers valued the current systems in place and made a conscious effort to integrate new staff members into the existing community.

This notion of legitimate peripheral participation and integration into the established community extends to all staff members, including the assistant principal. At the time of the interview, Tiger Ray had just completed his second year as assistant principal and reports following the principal’s footsteps and questions his ability to add anything to this study that she did not already share. He shared that despite his education, his book knowledge did not prepare him for the practical application and he “felt very green” initially. He also noted that despite his internship opportunity he is working to learn the division and school expectations as “not everything happened the way it does here.” Tiger Ray states that he initially was more an observer than participant or facilitator during teacher team meetings. He reports, “There’s a lot of times in those meetings I don’t say a lot because I’m learning. I’m learning as they are talking, I’m learning.” He also acknowledges how teachers utilize collaborative time to incorporate new staff members into the existing community. He describes this as “a beautiful thing to see how they automatically reach out and take the new teachers under their wings.” He reports that although one of the teachers was not new to teaching, but new to the division this was important so she could learn how things are done here at the division and school level.

Tiger Lynn serves as a mentor and teacher leader within the building now, but she also described her first year when she did not feel welcomed. She taught on a four-person team

where two teachers had worked together for a while and would go out to dinner to complete lesson planning. She was not included and describes thinking, “Okay, I’m a stranger here.” The fourth teacher connected with her and Tiger Lynn admits this connection has positively impacted her success as a teacher. Tiger Lynn’s belief that “As a teacher in general, I think we need to find that person who does encourage us and who does help us.” drives her work as a teacher leader and mentor.

Leopard School

The Leopard school is a fully accredited Title I school serving approximately 375 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The student population is comprised of 46% African American, 33% white, 13% two or more races, 8% Hispanic, with 48% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. The current principal has served in this role for four years, all of which have been served at the Leopard school. During this time she has worked with two assistant principals, although the last three years have been with the current assistant principal. The majority of her staff (96.6%) is certified and working within their field of certification. According to the state’s Department of Education, 6.9% of teachers are considered inexperienced.

In the area of reading, the Leopard school has seen a decline in student achievement data, while remaining accredited by the state. The state accreditation has declined from 79% passing to 72% passing over the last three years. Every Student Succeeds Act also shows a decline from 76% to 65%. In the area of mathematics, state accreditation reports an increase from 79% to 83% passing, while the Every Student Succeeds Act suggests a slight decline from 78% to 76%. In the area of science, the Leopard school has increased the state accreditation pass rate from 71% to 75%, but a decline in the Every Student Succeeds Act pass rate from 74% to 71%.

Overall, the Leopard school continues to meet state standards and remain accredited despite the decline in reading scores.

Data analysis of interviews and observation at the Leopard school revealed high levels of collaboration and evidence of a professional learning community. Throughout the analysis, it emerged that the Leopard school is transitioning from a hierarchical leadership approach and instead attempting to build capacity through the use of teacher leaders. Data analysis revealed evidence of the staff deprivatizing their practice through a myriad of collaborative efforts. The second category identified was the importance of trusting relationships. The final theme that emerged through data analysis was that although teachers are open to the deprivatization of practice, they rely heavily on administration to lead the work.

Participants.

Leopard Cathy. Leopard Cathy is serving her fourth year as principal of the Leopard school. She previously taught third grade and served as an assistant principal for two years. She remembers wanting to be a classroom teacher since she was in second or third grade herself, but never thought about administration. Her principal saw leadership qualities in her and convinced her to apply for the leadership cohort program offered through the division. She remembers serving in any leadership roles to include grade level chair and the school leadership team. She describes a professional learning community as “a group collaborating around a shared goal”. She continues to discuss how she would like to see this occur more organically and not be seen as an isolated event.

Leopard Beth. Leopard Beth is currently serving her 29th year in education with the last ten being served in an assistant principal role. She has been an assistant principal at the Leopard school for the last three years. Her decision to enter education was influenced by her desire to

help other people and experience working with children at her church. In her current position she states that not only can she help children on a daily basis, but she can also help adults. She continues to describe her job as “fun” when she gets to help her coworkers. She describes a professional learning community as “a group of educators coming together to learn and grow”.

Leopard Kelsey. Leopard Kelsey reports always wanting to be a teacher. She began her career as a fourth grade teacher where she taught for eight years. She transitioned to a math interventionist position and is currently in her 17th year of education. The last two years as a math interventionist have been served at the Leopard school although she has worked at four schools over the past nine years. She stated throughout these years she has seen a wide variety of functionality of professional learning communities. In describing the highest functioning professional learning community, Leopard Kelsey argues that each teacher must feel responsible for their own classroom, seek assistance to become better, and be willing to help others be the best for their classroom.

Leopard Kayla. Leopard Kayla is currently in her 13th year of education with the last two being served as a reading specialist at the Leopard school. All 13 years have been served in the same school division. She states that education has always been her career choice. While describing a professional learning community she states that you must include “everyone within the building”. She continues that this group takes “ownership of the building and learning as a whole”.

Leopard Heather. Leopard Heather is currently serving in her 30th year of education and fourth year as a literacy support specialist at the Leopard school. During the interview she admits she didn't really have a drive for education, but her mother suggested she pursue a career as a second grade teacher. She transitioned to a literacy support specialist position four years

ago. In her current position she primarily works with new teachers and serves as an instructional coach. In addition, she is a member of the school leadership team. She stated she wanted to continue to work with children, but the position of classroom teacher had changed over the years (increase in paperwork and “behind the scene things”) therefore she considered new positions. While describing a professional learning community Leopard Heather focused not only on school personnel, but how it is important to include community leaders and organizations. She stated it was important to include everyone to ensure everyone was “on board” and “understands what is going on”.

Leopard Irma. Leopard Irma is currently in her tenth year as a classroom teacher with the last five being a first grade teacher at the Leopard school. She fondly remembers volunteering in a kindergarten classroom for two years as a high school student. This experience drove her desire to pursue a career in education. She is also serving on the school leadership team for the first time this school year. While describing a professional learning community, Leopard Irma states that it includes “everybody who has a role with working with children” and is collaboration to “make sure every child is meeting goals and achieves mastery”.

A Myriad of Collaborative Efforts

The Leopard school staff reports a combination of formal and informal collaborative efforts. The Leopard school has mandatory grade level meetings twice a week for 45 minutes each. One of the meetings is considered a collaborative learning team meeting and focuses primarily on student data. It is noted that this meeting time has evolved over time and under Principal Cathy’s leadership. In previous years, 90 minutes was allocated for the data analysis, but due to scheduling difficulty it was changed to two 45-minute periods. During the 90-minute collaborative learning team meeting the teams had attempted to utilize a prescribed program to

guide analysis of student work samples. This process included analyzing student data samples to identify exemplars, moderate, and below grade level work. The teachers would then have discussion regarding gaps in student learning and develop a plan for intervention. Principal Cathy discussed how they chose to abandon the prescribed program in hopes to develop more organic conversation regarding student performance and teaching practice. Principal Cathy reports,

We tried to do the script and it just didn't work for us. Like it just didn't. So we are trying to get back to just more like leading a discussion about what is it that we're doing, is it working, is it not?

Supporting her desire to forego a prescribed program is her belief in the simplicity of a professional learning community. It is evident that Leopard Cathy values on-going, organic conversations related to instructional practice and student performance.

Leopard Beth and I have been having a lot of conversations lately about kind of like making that process more simple. It was funny. She and I had done an observation together and we came in here and we were like, okay, let's look at the curriculum. What is the assessment they are taking? What is the learning intention? Let's look at these experiences, blah, blah, blah. And it was like, hold on, hold on, we just had a CLT meeting in like 15 minutes. I think sometimes our staff or teachers think it's this big ting when really it's just that organic conversation.

Currently, the primary focus of this collaborative learning team is on tier one instruction utilizing a backwards design model. Teachers review upcoming assessments and intended student learning outcomes to plan for upcoming instructional units. Follow up meetings include analysis of a variety of student data samples to measure effectiveness of instruction and plan for student

intervention when necessary. Types of student data discussed during the interviews include running records, common assessments, and district-level common assessments in the areas of reading and math. While describing the role of the administrative team, Leopard Beth states at the beginning of the year they attended every meeting to establish the expectations to ensure throughout the year “we’re all on the same page about what’s supposed to be happening.”

The second 45-minute weekly meeting is grade level planning for the area of Language Arts. It is noted that some teams have designated a third meeting day for math, but this is not consistent across teams and is voluntary. The effectiveness of team meetings related to lesson planning varied based on team dynamics. Some grade levels departmentalize lesson planning, assigning each teacher a content area to develop lesson plans for. Leopard Kelsey noted when this occurs “it’s pretty ineffective because inevitably that means somebody doesn’t know the material as well as they should.” She continued to discuss given the demand of the profession there is a need for teams to “divide and conquer”, but believes this should be within each subject, not necessarily assigning different subjects to each teacher. When asked to describe a typical grade level planning meeting, Leopard Heather states that the allocated 45 minutes is not long enough to effectively plan a lesson. Therefore, instead of really discussing how to teach a certain skill and strategy teachers typically identify the skill they are planning for and share worksheets. Although it is mandatory for all grade levels to meet for grade level planning, participants did note this looked different depending on the teacher team. Principal Cathy shared,

We have some teams that just operate kind of like I was saying more in that organic world where they’re like, we know we need to get together to plan and they follow that understanding by design model. They do it to a t and then we have other teams where it doesn’t happen, you know, it’s not there.

Ultimately, all participants noted the teams that “gel” best are the ones with a commitment to student success.

Teachers also report informal collaboration on a daily basis. As a first grade teacher, Leopard Irma reports having “on the fly conversations” not just with her grade level, but also with the kindergarten and second grade teams. She reports through “hallway conversations” they discuss grade-specific curriculum, current skills, and individual students. Although these conversations are not held in a formal setting, Leopard Irma states they “get along well” and are also physically close to each other in the building making the collaboration easy. Leopard Beth reports some grade levels meet daily during shared planning time, before school, and after school depending on the team dynamics.

In addition to grade level meetings, the Leopard school provided the opportunity for peer observations. This was in response to a school-wide instructional staff survey where the staff expressed their desire for peer observations. In efforts to present the notion in a non-threatening way, the initial observations were not content based. Class meetings were introduced at the beginning of the year and were the focus of the initial round of peer observations. In addition, teachers were provided the choice to allow teachers into their rooms based on their level of comfort, although all teachers visited other classrooms. The initial peer observations were well received and teachers then conducted content peer observations within their respective grade level. Leopard Beth previously served as a reading teacher that pushed into general education classrooms and credits this experience with understanding the workings of a school outside of your classroom. She explained all of the possibilities from one 10-minute peer observation.

It’s good to see something else. See how your coworkers deal with somebody tapping a pencil. So much happens in that ten minutes. It’s real life. You can learn something

about yourself while you're there also. You're watching them do something, but would that bother me? Would that not bother me? Do I like that? It's just so much information that can happen. Self-reflection happens whether you want it to or not, you're human.

One grade level noted they did observations during the whole group portion of the Language Arts block on a voluntary basis. Leopard Irma reports the team enjoyed the opportunity to visit each other's classrooms and have requested for more opportunity for peer observations. She reports that although there is a significant gap in the years of experience and they utilize the same plans, there are differences in their teaching styles and they can learn from each other.

Trust

Trusting relationships between teachers and teacher and administrators emerged as a theme critical to the development and sustainability of a professional learning community. Leopard Irma remembers her teaching position at her previous school when she did not have trusting relationships with teammates or administration. She describes this as:

I felt like I wasn't supported. It was a period of time when I taught where I felt like I couldn't go to my principal. I felt like I couldn't go to my teammates. I felt like it was just me and all I would do is close my door and teach. And when I had an issue, I couldn't go to anyone. It was a point where I had lost my friends. You know, your teacher friends, the ones that you go to when you've had a rough day? I had lost them. They left the school and I was literally lone wolf there. And I mean I got through the year. It wasn't horrible. It wasn't horrible, but it wore on me. It really did.

When describing a teacher-administrator relationship, she argues it is important for administrators to "understand your staff members. Understand their needs and their wants and their personalities as a person". She notes the trusting relationship she has with her current

principal provides her with confidence and comfort when having conversations regarding her instruction and post-observation conversations. She argues that strained relationships between teachers and administrators make for a “very tense day, a very tense work environment” and negatively impacts how teacher teams work together.

The administrative team at the Leopard school is working diligently to empower teachers and develop a less hierarchical relationship with them. Leopard Beth states she has an open door policy for her teachers and students. She said “I feel good that they feel comfortable coming to us.” She also models vulnerability and openness to learn as she states, “Sometimes they say something and I have no idea. I say, let’s go see, let me ask, let me call somebody else in another school, you know, because two heads are always better than one.” Leopard Heather also credits Principal Cathy with being a “language arts guru” who will frequently attend team meetings to offer assistance regarding the lesson planning and instructional conversations.

In addition to trusting relationships between teachers and administrators, teachers must also trust one another to work effectively together. Throughout the data analysis, trust was connected to teacher competency and openness to discuss teacher pedagogy. Leopard Kelsey believes that when teachers do not value the collaborative time and are not open to discuss and improve teacher practice then other team members begin to lose trust in them.

“We only have this amount of time, so we need to get the blanks filled in. Then you start to lose trust in them. If they bring resources that are not aligned and lazy strategies, then you start to not trust what they have today. If they’re never looking to improve things, then you might lose trust with them. Then you are less likely to speak up and less likely to make suggestions.”

Leopard Kayla also identified a connection between trusting relationships with competency. She stated for teams to be effective all members must not only be knowledgeable about the curriculum, but must also know the needs of their students. With the absence of this knowledge teams will not turn to each other to discuss problems of practice and improve their ability to impact student learning.

Leopard Irma noted how her own insecurities regarding her teaching competency prevented her from developing and maintaining trusting relationships with her teammates. She reflected on her transformation as a teacher stating, “I used to be really insecure about if I was doing things the right way and now I’m so comfortable with my teammates, with everybody.” She reports this has provided her the opportunity to engage in reflective dialogue as it relates to her classroom and has “taken my teaching to a whole other level”. Through trusting relationships with colleagues, she is now able to have honest conversations about what worked well in the classroom, what did not work well, and discussions regarding teaching strategies and related next steps. She remembers “this was not something that we necessarily worked on”, but teachers have trusting relationships and rely on one another when they require support. While describing her current working relationships she defines it as “not fake” and believes they “just got really lucky.”

Reluctant to Lead

Despite the identification of trusting relationships and the deprivatization of practice, teacher leaders are reluctant to lead the work of the building. The staff members at the Leopard school primarily look to the administrative team to serve as the leaders of the building. Teachers consistently reported wanting more guidance from administration regarding their daily work. In addition, teachers resisted challenging the status quo regarding instructional practices. On the

contrary, the administrative team is focused on building capacity within their teachers through shared leadership beginning with the school leadership team. Leopard Beth is adamant that “no one person can do it all” and therefore they are in need of “more people headed toward that same goal with the same vision and knowing what the processes are to get there.” The administrative team has identified an effective school leadership team as the foundation for developing a shared leadership approach. Leopard Cathy states they strategically selected members for the school leadership team that not only had the desire to serve in this capacity, but also had leadership skills. She describes the conversation she had with each teacher selected to serve on the school leadership team.

Number one, would you be willing? Number two, you bought into the work and your data shows it and nobody can argue with what you did. You get it. So, I need you to be my voice on that team to guide the work.

During a school leadership team meeting all teachers were asked to identify a leader they admired and discuss specific traits they had. Principal Cathy reiterated that not only were they teachers, but they were also leaders. She discussed the need for them to champion the work of the school learning plan and have an active role in analyzing the data and developing action steps. It is evident she is committed to building capacity within the staff and developing leaders, although this is in the development phase at the time of the interviews.

Leopard Beth also spoke to the strategic selection of teachers to serve on the school leadership team. She spoke to how they are attempting to build capacity in members that display leadership qualities so “they see themselves as leaders. Sometimes people are leaders and they don’t realize it.” She continued to stress the importance of ensuring the correct people are selected for the team to drive the vision and work of the school.

You want representation across the grade levels, but you still need to be mindful who's in that room you know. They have to share with the staff. They have to live it. They're going to hear something that we might not hear and they need to be able to speak to it, you know, say well this is why or maybe not, that kind of thing.

One way they are seeking to provide teacher leaders with more responsibility is through providing professional development to the staff. Leopard Beth states oftentimes teachers will attend a professional development, but do not necessarily share with the whole staff so this is an area they are trying to pursue. In addition, highlighting teacher success and providing the opportunity for teachers to share experiences as it relates to school-wide initiatives.

Data analysis revealed a discrepancy in the amount of structure and guidance teachers reported wanting from administrators versus the desire from administrators for the work to develop more organically. Discussion of teacher practice, challenging the status quo, and truly collaborating presents as a compliance to administrative directive versus an intrinsic desire to collaborate and improve practice. Principal Cathy shared her opinion on the need for a learning community to be organic conversations and not an isolated event.

I think sometimes our staff or teacher they think it's this big thing when really it's just organic conversation. What's our end goal? What are we doing to get there and how are we going to measure it along the way? We should always be a PLC. It not you know something that just happens on one day of the week. It should be a continuous thing.

In addition to attempting to develop a more organic community of practice, there has also been an effort to increase teacher ownership of this time. In previous years the teams typically depended on administrators or content specialists to guide the meetings. Principal Cathy states,

We're there to be a member of the team and we still struggle with that because I feel like they're always looking to us you know. And I'm like, hold on, at this table, we're on a level playing field like you, this is just a conversation.

Leopard Kelsey contradicts this mindset as a teacher leader.

I do think you need strong leaders to kind of, I mean, I know when you have admin and stuff at CLT, like a lot of times they are trying to be more like observers or participants. But, I do think you kind of need them to, you know, like guide the process. Especially when you have teams that aren't following the process.

Currently, the school leadership team representative is responsible for creating the grade level agenda and ensuring the meeting runs smoothly. If administrators attend they are simply participants and not facilitators of the meeting. Principal Cathy states that at times administration will determine what topics will go on the agenda, but primarily it is the responsible of the teacher teams to develop the focus for the meetings. The difficulty in shifting ownership from administration to teachers is evident as Leopard Kayla identified the administrators as being responsible for identifying topics for the meeting. Despite the intent to increase teacher ownership of the meeting agenda, Principal Cathy notes that this is not always effective and is an area in need of improvement. Leopard Heather witnesses the struggle of this transition as a teacher leader stating, "When CLTs are moderated by a third party, whether it's administration, the reading specialist, or whoever, I think it flows a little bit better because it's not the chief making all the decisions." She describes "the chief" as an over-bearing team member that takes over and potentially silences other members of the team from sharing ideas.

Leopard Heather remembers being asked to support a teacher in the area of Language Arts as a coach. The teacher would frequently avoid or reschedule meetings and was not

receptive of the support she was asked to provide. She reported going to Principal Cathy and stating, “I’m wasting my time here. She obviously doesn’t want to hear what I have to say and I don’t know what we can do or say to change her mind.” Despite this report to the principal, she is no longer working with that teacher, as the coaching support was not a directive from administration. This did not align with her belief that “we are here for the students and we want them to be successful learners. She continued that she felt “maybe if administrators were a little more authoritative, instead of a friend” teachers would be required to participate in opportunities for improvement and ultimately change their practice.

Leopard Kelsey also reports being asked to support two different teams in the area of mathematics. She reports one team in particular often presents with resistance to support and new ideas. Although the administrators asked her to support this team she reports, “It seems like I always end up with third grade without an administrator. I don’t know if I just feel that way. I don’t know that it happens as often as it feels.” While attempting to introduce a new small group lesson plan template she reports it “a little bit awkward” and “kind of difficult” to “guide a conversation they aren’t really wanting to have.” She felt an administrator’s presence would have assisted her in this area as “I’m not their boss, like I really am just another teacher.” Ultimately the conversation ended with an email stating, “well if the boss doesn’t like it then I guess she’ll tell you that” and she continued with her frustration stating, “like I can’t because to me it didn’t meet my criteria, but they don’t actually care what my criteria is because I’m not the one who looks at their lesson plans.”

Leopard Kayla noted there is a lack of teacher follow-through with certain tasks related to action steps in the school improvement plan. She noted she will reiterate the expectation and provide additional support to teachers related to the next step although she is not always sure if it

is a gap in practice or if teachers choose not to engage as they lack buy-in to the idea. One example of this she provided was the use of running records to monitor students' reading progress. Teachers are required to periodically conduct this assessment and then bring examples with them to a collaborative learning team meeting for data analysis. She states despite this being the expectation for a couple of years, some teachers do not come prepared to meetings and they are not able to continue with the agenda if they did not bring the completed assessments. She also stated that when they do bring them it is an act of compliance to an administrative directive, "not necessarily because they should be guiding our instruction." She states they continue to provide teachers with the rationale behind this action step and hope they eventually buy in and the momentum picks up.

The reluctance to lead is also evident in terms of initiating new staff members and providing mentorship opportunities to introduce them to the existing systems in place at the Leopard school. Leopard Heather states that part of her position is working with new teachers, but she often has a difficult time understanding her role as it relates to team members and mentors. She continued that during grade level meetings the grade level teachers do not consider the perspective of a new teacher and work to build their capacity.

The grade level teachers know the information. They just don't know what the new teachers need and the new teacher don't know what they need because haven't been in a situation before. So, I've been inquiring and suggesting we come up with a new teacher booklet of some sort that has all of those little things listed that the teacher don't know to ask.

Leopard Kelsey spoke to two teams she worked with and acknowledged a variance in how new teachers were incorporated into the organization. One team she identified as being difficult to work with as a math interventionist did a lackluster job of assisting the new teacher.

There's a lot she seems to be in the dark about. She was a little bit like, nobody told me, you know, like things like comments on grades or progress reports or whatever. She's like, I didn't realize. I didn't know how to do that. I didn't realize that was a thing. Like nobody told me.

This was a stark difference compared to another team with a first year teacher where Leopard Kelsey remembers, "I didn't hear that she had any of those kinds of issues." The cohesiveness of a team contributes to the overall presence of legitimate peripheral participation within an organization.

Throughout the data analysis, participants spoke of the positive relationships between staff members describing the Leopard school as having a "very family feel" with staff that "get along really well." Although there are several positive outcomes related to strong relationships, one pitfall at the Leopard school is a desire not to upset anyone. Oftentimes this limits conversations related to instructional practice. Leopard Beth states that having difficult conversations related to teacher growth and challenging the status quo is an area in need of improvement.

You don't want to be stagnant. Just agree with people because you've been around them a long time. People have been here a while and they don't want to ruffle each other's feathers. They kind of want to stay friends and it's not about that at all. That's part of the growth that needs to happen.

She later discussed teachers' "professional etiquette" and the connection to understanding the purpose and expectations of collaborative time. She continued that teams should hold each other accountable although this is not consistent across grade levels as "some personalities are like that" and then "some people don't like confrontation and that's not just at work, that's just how they live." Leopard Kelsey also noted that there are "dysfunctional teams" that "say yes to everything and then they go in their rooms and do whatever they want anyway." She continued to discuss how the "most functional" team will ask questions, honestly state their opinion, and demonstrate horizontal accountability. She continued to discuss the need for a solution-oriented mindset to ensure you aren't "just pointing out flaws all the time", but actually improving instruction instead of "just sweeping it under the rug" because they are focused simply on task completion. Regarding peer observations, Leopard Beth states that the post-conversation was held at a grade level meeting and highlighted positive things they say because "they're not going to say anything harsh about each other."

Although there is evidence that teacher leaders are reluctant to lead on a daily basis and challenge the status quo, Leopard Cathy is persistent in providing them opportunities to become teacher leaders and engage in shared leadership. She states that she tries to utilize members of her school leadership team to deliver professional development opportunities to the staff. In her opinion, staff members are typically more receptive to the ideas and strategies being shared by colleagues instead of administration. She fondly remembers a mandatory professional development day where leadership team members led break out sessions providing staff members the opportunity to choose which session they would like to attend. This not only highlighted the strengths of leadership team members, but also increased the buy-in from teacher participants on the specific topics. Leopard Beth closed with a statement regarding the need to

continue to grow as a school because “It looks good and it feels good to the people that have a great team, but one great team in a big school. You want more than that, you know?”

Comparative Between-School Analysis

Comparative cross-case data analysis was completed to identify common themes and discrepancies in the implementation and sustainability of communities of practice across the three sites. All three schools are in the same school division and adhere to the same district level expectations. The school division has a division-wide curriculum and a firm expectation that the curriculum is implemented with fidelity in all schools. The Tiger school and the Leopard school are designated as Title I schools serving a student population with high rates of economically disadvantaged students. The Title I designation provides funding for additional staffing to include reading and math interventionists and coaches that the Lion school does not have. The principals at all three schools identify professional learning communities and teacher collaboration as integral components to improving student performance, teacher practice, and as a vehicle for building organizational capacity. Despite the common beliefs of administrators the implementation and effectiveness varies by site.

Collaborative Efforts are Consistent

All three sites reported engaging in a variety of formal and informal collaborative efforts. Grade levels engage in collaborative learning team meetings at each school that are reserved for reviewing student assessment data, determining students in need of intervention, and identifying next steps. Although the reported focus of the meetings is consistent amongst schools, the frequency and duration of these meetings varies. The Lion school holds these meetings bi-weekly for 90 minutes, the Tiger school meets weekly for 75 minutes, and the Leopard school meets weekly for 45 minutes. Analysis revealed the formality and structure of the meeting

varied by site. At the Tiger school, the administration reports the their collaborative learning team meeting as “how we do business around here” although she admits it required a substantial amount of modeling and administration led meetings to establish the expectation. They have a strict agenda that requires teachers to turn student data in ahead of time in preparation for the meeting. At the meeting they review student work samples and sort them as exemplar, moderate, and below standard. The work samples are then reviewed to identify gaps in learning and plan for intervention and reteaching. The principals at the Lion school and the Leopard school report attempting to follow this strict agenda, but abandoning the process as it was too confining and proved ineffective for their staff. The Lion school and the Leopard school both report having fluid agendas that teachers are responsible for developing, although they will also assist in the development when the need presents.

In addition to the collaborative learning team meetings, all three schools reported mandatory weekly meetings for teachers to plan for tier one instruction. All three schools engage in mandatory planning for Language Arts for 45 minutes weekly. At the Tiger school, grade levels are also required to meet weekly to plan for tier one instruction in the area of mathematics. It is also noted that although this mandatory planning time has been the standard at the Tiger school and the Leopard school, this is a new mandate at the Lion school as a result of grade levels not planning together. In addition to the mandatory planning time, some grade levels at each site voluntarily meet more frequently to engage in collaborative lesson planning.

Despite all sites having a mandated grade level planning meeting, the outcome and effectiveness varied based on the team and site. At the Tiger school, all staff members viewed grade level planning as helpful, but the extent of deep planning varied based on the team of teachers. Tiger Lauren reports being on the best team where the teachers all had similar teaching

styles. She reports that they talked about everything and implemented the same lessons in all content areas. Regarding her current team, she states that “there was never really a community” and although they planned together “there was never really a cohesive piece”. Tiger May reports being responsible for the math plans for her grade level, but still working with her grade level to identify additional activities to include. She reports her grade level follows this same procedure for all content areas and works for them. As the Literacy Support Specialist, Tiger Melissa has a different opinion on the effectiveness of grade level planning meetings. She reports that teams typically rely on a teammate with a “strong personality” to come with all of the materials and rarely engage in conversation related to the delivery of the instruction. She also notes that the division-level curriculum provides a wealth of resources for teachers resulting in teachers feeling as if lesson plans are completed for them. She continues to explain a disconnect in planning and implementation as teachers do not internalize the lesson plans and therefore are not prepared to effectively deliver the lessons.

Tiger Kim reiterates this perception of the effectiveness of grade level planning. She also notes that one team member with a strong personality can be misleading from an outsider.

While on the outside it may seem like it’s working because you go into a meeting and it seems like it’s all together and reality, one person has it all together and the others are just being quiet and they’re just letting that person, you know, and then maybe later they’ll pull you aside and say, “Hey, I really don’t know what I’m doing.”

Despite acknowledging the “cumbersome and overwhelming” work that is lesson planning, Tiger Kim argues the departmentalization of lesson planning presents as a problem. When one member of the team creates lesson plans it often eliminates the important conversation and thought process that goes into developing an effective plan. During her reflection of grade level

planning, she states “in my opinion they need to get more into the nitty gritty. Like what are the students doing, not just what is the objective but how are the students going to reach that and talking about that.”

At the Leopard school grade levels plan together, but there is evidence of the effectiveness of this time. Leopard Kelsey reports a gap in implementation of the planned lessons. Specifically, she states teams might agree on lesson plans and instead of discussing concerns, teachers “say yes to everything and then they go to their rooms and do whatever they want anyway.” Leopard Irma supports this notion as she states that although they “follow the same plans, everybody’s style is a little bit different” and although she frequently follows the plans one of her teammates is more “off the fly”. The team identified as the most effective by Leopard Cathy did not demonstrate a gap in implementation of the planned lessons. The team met weekly with the math interventionist and Cathy found this time beneficial to teacher practice and the implementation of lesson plans.

She would kind of teach them and like little mini lessons and they’re like, oh yeah. And it was so awesome because I would go, I would go to those meetings, I would go in their class that day for math and they’re all using that language. They’re all using those strategies.

Leopard Heather identifies the grade level planning meetings as “not as organized” and notes “unfortunately, I feel like some of them get off track.”

The newly mandated grade level planning meetings at the Lion school have been met with resistance from some of the teachers. The teachers at the Lion school have a strong desire to maintain their autonomy and view the mandatory grade level planning as an attempt to create “cookie cutter” teachers. Lion Michele specifically stated that although they share activities

during the planning meeting, it is okay for teachers to do things differently within their own classroom. Lion Ellen also reports the desire to maintain her autonomy when describing grade level planning because “you can’t do everything the same all the time.” This is supported by Lion Sue’s opinion of veteran teachers, “They just want to be in their own little world and left along, to close their door and just do their thing.” Lack of preparation for planning meeting was also identified as a barrier to ensuring these meetings were helpful for the teachers.

Outside of the mandatory grade level meetings, there was evidence of other types of collaboration. The Lion school and the Leopard school reported providing the opportunity for teachers to engage in peer observations. At both sites there was evidence of choice for participants and the primary purpose of the observation was related to climate and culture instead of having an instructional focus. It is noted that one participant at the Leopard school reported having the opportunity to see her colleagues during Language Arts instruction. All three schools have developed school leadership teams to drive the school improvement process. It is noted the Tiger school is the only site reporting intentional mixed-grade level teams to address school wide topics and promote collaboration outside of specific grade levels. Lastly, all three schools reported at least some level of informal collaboration where teachers share resources or informally meet outside of assigned meeting times.

Continuum of Collective Ownership

The three sites demonstrate a continuum of collective ownership as it relates to the overall achievement of the school. In all three sites the administrator is the primary leader in the work related to school improvement, but the level of commitment from staff members varies and is driven by the presence of a shared vision. The evidence of a shared commitment to success for all students varied by site and also within site.

The Tiger school had evidence of a shared commitment to the school's vision and goals and a collective responsibility for the success of all students within the school. In addition to a shared commitment evident in each interview, Principal Lisa also shares the commitments they have made to each other and the school. This is a written document that she frequently refers back to during conversations with teachers. Tiger Ray notes credits Principal Lisa for establishing a clear shared vision for the staff.

It's gotten to the point where expectations have been set. The team leaders, they know what she's looking for and they know the vision. That shared vision and so they're able to kind of take off with it from there.

Teachers gave examples of how this collective ownership of students was conceptualized through practice. Tiger May explained how her grade level ability grouped students for Language Arts and trusted colleagues to teach your homeroom students in the area of reading. She proudly noted that not every grade level could do this because they must be "cohesive" and described her team as "very cohesive" and "fortunate" for that. To further exemplify the notion of collective ownership, she explains that the homeroom teacher and the reading teacher both attend parent-teacher conferences, as "they are all full-time students even if they are just reading students." She continued to note that students proved to be successful and they would continue with the implementation of this model. Tiger Lauren also stated that at one time her grade level was departmentalized and therefore taught all students in the fifth grade. She reported ensuring expectations were aligned across the three classrooms and noted that "we had each other's back the entire year." She reports that data analysis occurs frequently and they utilize this to determine teacher strengths and share instructional strategies and resources.

It is noted that the collective ownership of students is not established without a cohesive team. Tiger May who was excited and proud of her current team quickly changed her demeanor and tone when remembering a team she worked with previously. The team departmentalized for all content areas and it was extremely difficult to have collective ownership of student success. She faults one teacher on the team for the lack of success on this team stating she was not open to suggestions and consistently felt she was right despite student data or input from others. The passion and excitement Tiger May had when discussing her current team was absent and she stated, “we taught what we had to and just kind of dealt with it.”

The notion of a shared vision or commitment to shared ownership was not consistently present at the Lion school or the Leopard school. At the Leopard school, Leopard Kelsey argues there is a balance teachers must find between being responsible for their own classroom and not “push kids off onto somebody else or make teammates more responsible”, but also have a desire to “help their teammates be the best in their own classroom”. She reports as the math interventionist, she has one teacher that wanted her to take all of her lower performing students for the entire math block. This concerned her as she is supposed to be an intervention in addition to core instruction and the classroom teacher was not accepting responsibility for these students. Leopard Irma does describe the success of her current team is related to similar personalities and a shared commitment to the students.

I think the fact that we gelled and we really enjoy each other and we’re all there for the kids and we really have the end goal in mind. I think that really helps us work a little bit better together.

The Lion school has a strong competitive climate resulting in teachers wanting to maintain their autonomy and not accept collective ownership for the learning of all students. There is mention

of one team that departmentalizes by content area and each teacher has all students for their content area. It is noted that they would collectively plan for all the content areas and share responsibility for student success. Despite acknowledging small success, Lion Sue revealed it is a constant struggle to convince teachers that when it comes to accreditation the school's name is on the state report card, not individual teachers.

Student Interventions Versus Teacher Practice

Collaborative learning team meetings occur at all three sites to provide an opportunity to analyze student data. Reportedly, the analysis of student data primarily drives the identification of students requiring intervention and planning for reteaching, with little engagement in reflective dialogue to discuss teacher practice. Leopard Kayla reports the majority of collaborative learning team time is spent reviewing student data and identifying students that might require reteaching or an additional intervention. She reports it would be helpful to get to the point where they utilize the student data as indicative of teacher pedagogy and strategy. Teachers would utilize data to find areas of weakness and contribute it to how it was taught to students, share best practice or strategies that worked, and revise teacher practice in addition to providing additional interventions to students. Leopard Kayla admits that teams very rarely engage in reflective dialogue to drive teacher practice although she admits they would be “powerful conversations.” When considering factors that may hinder the reflective dialogue among teachers her initial response was time, but then expanded revealing a larger barrier to overcome. Leopard Kayla states:

Nobody wants to be told they're not doing something right. Nobody wants to have that.

You know, sometimes fearfulness and the way people carry themselves prevents

everyone from really wanting to sit down and admit that they may have not taught that right.

There is evidence of pockets of reflective dialogue at each site. At the Tiger school, Lauren remembers working with what she called an effective team and remembers when data suggested a large percentage of students were not successful, they would analyze teacher practice.

We would figure out what else we could do. Like that's really when we start sitting down and having conversations and we start going outside of ourselves. So, we are quick to say how can we teach this? What else can we do? There is something we are not doing or not getting because something's wrong with our instruction, not necessarily with the kids.

At the Lion school, Ellen states they utilize this time to analyze data by reviewing student scores and identify who requires reteaching. She continued that this will allow them to adjust pacing to ensure sufficient time is allocated for specific skills. In lieu of reflective dialogue, Ellen states they "just keep rolling with it and teach it until they get it. Basically, you'd hammer it in". Lion Janet does note with a previous team she would rely on one of her colleagues to share math strategies with her when her students were not as successful. Although reflective dialogue is encouraged, Lion Sue notes "sometimes they don't share as much as they should when it comes to their success."

Social Factors Trump Structural

All three sites identified social factors as more contributory to the effectiveness of cultivating successful communities of practice. It is noted that the barrier of time has been mitigated by administration in ensuring there is time set aside to meet as a grade level and whole

school. In addition, there are a variety of structures and systems in place to guide the collaborative work. There was a sense that team members with similar teaching styles and personalities presented as more successful teams. Teammates that “gelled” were more likely to engage in the deprivatization of practice and reflective dialogue. The presence of specific social factors predicted the ability for grade levels to engage in collaborative efforts to improve student and teacher performance. The primary social factors revealed through data analysis include trust, effective communication, and openness to feedback and innovative ideas.

Structural. Administrators are easily able to control structural factors as they relate to creating and sustaining learning communities. All sites have designated meeting times for a variety of purposes. There is an overwhelming sense that as teams are having difficulty working as a learning community, administrators often look to see what additional structure they can put in place to foster the collaboration. Leopard Kelsey confirmed the notion of forced structure to foster collaboration.

You’ll have administrators create templates and create the questions in hopes that it will foster the conversation. But I’ve found that never the case, like they just answered it, they’re filling out the template and then they move in with their time. You know, like if somebody’s not there.

As an administrator, Tiger Lisa confirmed the notion of forced collaboration.

Collaboration was not happening. I thought it was, I mean, I didn’t think it was the best, you know, but I thought it was happening. But it’s not, so we had to carve out time where that collaboration would happen every day, every Tuesday at this time you are going to meet. So just kind of setting next steps and making sure everybody knows what those next steps are.

This is further exemplified by Tiger Melissa when discussing a lack of teacher ownership of lesson plans. She was describing how teachers are not fully prepared to teach lessons because they do not discuss the learning experiences prior to implementation. In attempts to foster the conversation, she states they plan to implement a new lesson plan template that requires teachers to go beyond just “copy and pasting” from the curriculum, but engage in deep planning conversations. Despite administrators attempts at implementing procedural and structural changes, without the presence of the below social factors, the change required does not occur.

Social factors. Trust was a prominent theme at all three sites and was typically connected to the competency of team members. Competency included knowing the curriculum, knowing students, and being prepared for the meeting. Lion Karen described feeling defensive during conversations with her teammates.

Is this person trying to say that I’m not doing the right thing? Is this person saying I don’t know what I’m doing? When those kinds of negative emotions and thoughts start going on in your head, then it doesn’t really leave much room for being open-minded and being trusting of somebody.

In description of her highest performing team, Lion Sue identifies teachers’ competency as a contributing factor. “It was true collaboration. It wasn’t just, you know, about the students in general. It was because they are all capable of teaching math, of teaching language arts, or teaching science and social studies.”

In addition to competency being an integral part of trusting relationships, individuals also noted openness to communication and ideas contributed to the development of trust. Resistance to learning and admitting areas of improvement prove to be barriers to implementation of communities of practice at the Leopard school. Leopard Cathy describes one of her biggest

challenges is her veteran staff that have served in the same role for a lengthy amount of time. She describes that changes in the curriculum requires teachers to be open-minded and willing to learn and change. Leopard Cathy states that teachers that have become complacent in their work need to realize “education has changed, so things should change. There’s always going to be something that you can get better at and being able to say, I don’t know how to do that.” Her more veteran teams are resistant to the new curriculum and do not value the impact collaborative work can have on their practice. Instead they tend to focus on “insignificant hurdles” and “doing what is best for kids tends to get trumped by what the teacher is comfortable with”. Tiger Lynn admits resistance to change is a barrier at the Tiger school also.

We must be willing to listen to other people’s ideas and be willing to continue to learn.

Because I think, and this is human nature, we like things a certain way. We’re set in our ways and we may become experts, but it’s always nice to see things through a new perspective. And if you don’t have people who are willing to do that, that’s where clashing happens.

Leopard Cathy fondly discusses the hard work of her “best team” that is comprised of new teachers, new to grade level teachers, or new to the content teachers. The lack of experience and previous knowledge is noted to be a positive when it comes to teachers’ level of openness.

I guess sometimes it’s better to be ignorant, I don’t mean that in a malicious way, but it’s sometimes better to be ignorant. They didn’t know the curriculum three, four or five years ago. So for them it was like they’re looking at it with fresh eyes and they’re like, alright, this is what we got to do. We’re going to do it, you know, or I don’t know how to do that. Can you show me? So they worked together, they reached out, they sought help when they needed it.

Leopard Kelsey also described her work with this same team. As the math interventionist she met with this team weekly and the focus was on strategies for teaching skills, not necessarily on plans or activities. The teachers found value in this time together and therefore asked her to continue to attend for the upcoming year. It is noted by Leopard Cathy that the data reflected the cohesiveness of the group and they were the highest performing team on end of the year assessments.

The fear of rejection and failure is noted throughout the data analysis as the largest barrier to being vulnerable and open to accepting and sharing new ideas and strategies. While describing her own personal experience of frequently retreating into herself when ideas are shut down, Lion Karen acknowledges, “you might feel like you’re safe, but are you going to learn everything that you could learn. I see it all the time in ways that I would never have thought to teach something.” She continues to state how she frequently reminds herself that she must be “brave” when working with others. Tiger Kim reiterates this notion of being brave stating, “I think it’s a matter of not being afraid. Being open to ideas and suggestions.” Leopard Kelsey stated, “I wonder if it’s just a type of person, like some people don’t have the nerve today to speak up. On a team, I think you have to kind of have somebody willing to try and speak up. But they also can’t just point out flaws all the time, that isn’t helpful.”

Building Capacity Through Teacher Leaders

All three administrators have expressed a desire to utilize the school leadership team to move from a more hierarchical leadership approach to a shared leadership where teacher leaders help guide the work. Administrators at each site noted the importance of strategically selecting members of the school leadership team and building capacity within them to share the responsibility of leading school improvement efforts. Despite providing a variety of

opportunities, there appears to be a gap in implementation as teachers still look to the administrators as the primary driving force of the work. Leopard Kayla reports during the summer the leadership team analyzed student data to develop the school improvement plan. Prior to sharing action steps with the entire faculty the school also engaged in the same data analysis activity to identify areas of weakness. She reports the intent was to increase faculty ownership of the action steps by being “an active part of it versus being told this is what they said we need and then there’s a little bit of ownership.” Anecdotal notes were collected during an observation of this leadership team meeting. During this time, Principal Cathy led the leadership team in a professional development opportunity providing them with skills to be a teacher leader. She also spent some of this time encouraging them to utilize the potential they have as a teacher leader during the upcoming school year.

Administrators at all three sites noted utilizing the school leadership team to facilitate professional development opportunities for staff members. It is noted this provides them the opportunity to champion the work of the school improvement plan and their colleagues are typically more receptive than when it comes from administrators. In addition to providing professional development, administrators at all three sites seek to increase the level of horizontal accountability. Instead of collaborative efforts and instructional practice being an act of compliance to administrator directive, teacher leaders can help champion the work because it is what is going to make students successful. It is noted that teacher leaders are reluctant to lead as they do not want to “ruffle any feathers” of their colleagues.

Reflecting on conversations with the leadership team, Principal Cathy states she frequently tells them, “you guys have to champion this work.” She also notes that part of building capacity with your leadership team is not only selecting the right team members, but

also ensuring “leaders feel like they have the ability to lead.” Principal Cathy notes that a strong teacher leader on each team is important because without one, “if you don’t show up, then nothing is being done.” Despite the team’s efforts, there appears to continue to be a gap in implementation as there is still a struggle with teacher buy-in and willingness to lead the work. Leopard Kelsey described a time she was working with a grade level and discussing how lesson plans are differentiated for small group instruction based on student need. Teachers on this time were resistant to the idea and were not open to her suggestions. She remembers feeling frustrated and stated,

Regardless of what’s best for kids, they just want to do what they want to do. It’s nice for an administrator to be there. She could be the boss to say, well I’m not asking you to write a different lesson plan. I’m asking you to say what you would do different.

Because when I said it, it was like oh well I just give them different review problems.

And I was like, no, like what do you do.

In conclusion, all three sites are working to build capacity within their teacher leaders to drive school improvement efforts, although this is proving to be a difficult transition.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the nature of professional learning communities within the school setting. Specifically, exploring how schools move past the prescribed program of a professional learning community to build organizational capacity and drive school improvement. In addition to identifying factors that contribute to or hinder the development of communities of practice, the role of the administrator is also explored. The administrators at all three sites value the importance of teacher collaboration and have provided systems and structure to allow this to occur. Despite similar attempts, there is a continuum of the success of implementing and sustaining communities of practice. Throughout this chapter, I will summarize the study, discuss the findings, and provide implications for future research and practice.

Summary of the Study

In Chapter 1, I reviewed the need for educators to transition from an autonomous profession to a community of practice focused on building organizational capacity to improve teacher practice and student learning outcomes. This study is significant because historically schools adopt a prescribed program with controlled external factors in hopes of developing a professional learning community (Printy, 2008). Stoll and Louis (2007) argue despite all of the research on characteristics and development of professional learning communities, they are still extremely difficult to create and sustain. This study is designed to answer the following research questions.

Question How are learning communities developed and sustained in school settings?

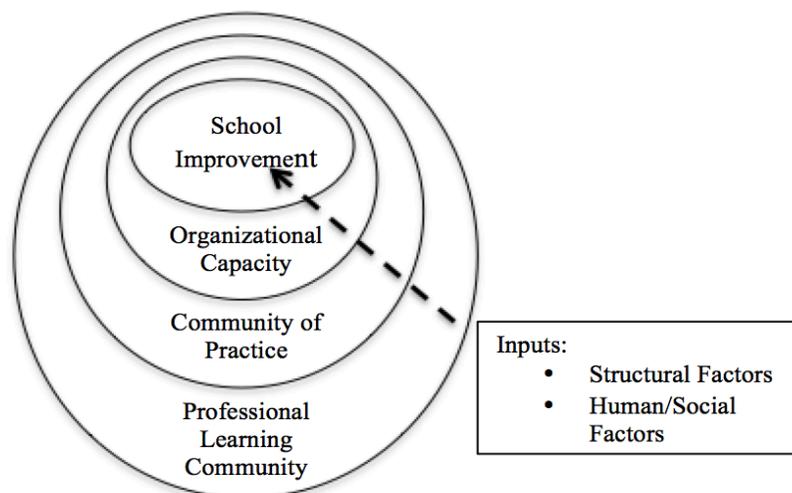
- a. What is the role of administrators in cultivating learning communities?
- b. What factors contribute to the success of learning communities? What factors hinder the success of learning communities?
- c. What role do learning communities have in school improvement?

In Chapter 2, I provide a review of existing literature on Lave and Wenger's concept of communities of practice and the subset of this concept, professional learning community, that has been adopted in the educational setting. A community of practice is defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wegner, 2006, p.1). Communities of practice have been proven to have a positive impact on building capacity within organizations through attracting and retaining staff, increased problem solving skills while encouraging innovative strategies, and transfer of best practice. Communities of practice have three components of a shared domain, community, and practice. The foundation of a community of practice is a shared domain that all participants are personally committed to. In addition to establishing a shared domain, communities of practice are driven by relationships and a shared repertoire of practice amongst the participants.

Professional learning communities are a particular type of communities of practice that have been adopted in the educational setting with a desire to improve teacher practice and student learning outcomes. Professional learning communities are defined by the following five components: shared norms or values, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, reflective dialogue, and deprivatization of practice (Louis & Kruse, 1993). Despite the attempts of school administrators to develop professional learning communities, there are pockets of success due to the cultural shift, beyond structural factors, required. Professional learning

communities are being used as a vehicle for building organizational capacity. Figure shows the conceptual framework developed to show the relationship between these components.

Figure



In Chapter 3, I reviewed the methodology utilized for this study. After receiving permission from the university and the school division, a qualitative study was conducted. In collaboration with division-level administrators, three elementary schools within the division were selected for the study. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with administrators, support staff, and teachers, in addition to, observations. The interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy and anecdotal notes were taken during the observations. Data analysis was completing through open coding and identifying common themes within each site and across the three sites. These findings were discussed in the previous chapter.

Summary of the Findings

The findings of this study were presented in four sections. The first three sections provided the reader with emergent themes from a within-case analysis of each of the three sites. The fourth section was a cross-case analysis of all three sites. Cross-case analysis provides

evidence that despite similar systems and structure, the three sites are operating at different levels as it relates to the continuum described in the conceptual framework. There are pockets of true communities of practice, but the sites are primarily displaying the characteristics of professional learning communities with minimal implementation of all components. It is noted at all three sites, developing a professional learning community began with implementing structural factors and mandating specific activities such as weekly grade level planning. Social factors are much harder to be implemented and controlled by external sources such as administration.

Cultivating Learning Communities

The most simplistic way administrators impact the development and sustainability of communities of practice is by providing the systems and structure to provide the opportunity for them to develop. It was evident in data analysis that when things weren't working regarding teacher collaboration or student achievement, administrators added more structure resulting in a prescribed and forced collaboration. It is noted the site with the most rigid structures and systems moved past the prescribed program and exhibited qualities of a community of practice. It is noted in the literature on communities of practice, Allee (2000) warns managers that placing too many procedural processes in place could have a negative impact on the natural learning between participants. Given that communities of practice potentially already exist in schools, administrators must be careful to not stifle the organic learning with prescribed and structured time for collaboration. School administrators must find a balance in providing the structural factors to allow the development of communities of practice, but also work strategically to ensure social factors are considered.

Structural factors can be controlled by administration, but this does not lend itself to the development and sustainability of communities of practice. Snyder and Briggs (2003) argue that mandated participation in a community of practice prevents success as social factors such as trust and shared values cannot be mandated from the outside. This is evident in this study given similar structures at each of the three sites, but with them functioning at varying levels of success. Trusting relationships between the administrator and teacher were identified as a structural factor contributing to the cultivation and sustainability of communities of practice. Administrators must model vulnerability and openness to develop relationships. Engaging in the daily work with teachers will allow these relationships to develop as trust develops through shared experiences and practice.

A commitment to a shared vision is integral to the cultivation of communities of practice. This shared vision is closely related to the Lave and Wenger's concept of a shared domain in a community of practice. It is important to note the shared domain is driven by the values and passion of individuals within the organization (Wenger, 2006). In the educational setting, this is strongly tied to a commitment to all students and teachers' commitment to ensure success for all. The notion of a shared vision and commitment positively predicted the evidence of collective responsibility for all students. The findings of this study suggest that a commitment to a shared vision was the foundation for establishing collective ownership of students.

One of the three sites, the Tiger school, had an overwhelming sense of a shared commitment to serve all students of the school, which is aligned to the shared vision. The data of this site supported an overall collective responsibility for all students and the willingness to engage in collaborative work. A second site, the Leopard school, did not have an overall shared vision emerge from the data analysis, but there was some evidence of a shared commitment in

some interviews. It is noted there are pockets of collective ownership depending on the grade level and team. At the Lion school, competition prevailed and limited any type of collective ownership for all student learning. It is noted that all three schools have written team norms and expectations for staff members, but with the absence of a commitment to a shared vision they do not come to fruition.

Succeeding and Hindering Learning Communities

A variety of factors prevailed as contributing to and hindering the development, sustainability, and success of learning communities. Trust was a prevailing theme at all three sites. The presence of trust was strongly related to the development and sustainability of communities of practice, whereas the absence of trust prevented the effectiveness of these learning communities. Lencioni (2002) argued that a lack of trust will prevent teams from engaging in reflective dialogue, providing feedback, and asking for assistance. Participants assign different meanings to trust and place value on different aspects of this complex concept. This study suggests competency was the largest contributing factor in developing and sustaining trusting relationships. Competency includes an understanding of the curriculum, knowing students, and being prepared for meetings.

Competency is closely connected to openness to new ideas. If a person does not view a colleague as competent in their role, they will be less likely to be open to suggestions or new strategies shared by this colleague. A lack of trust based on beliefs regarding competency was the number one reason for individuals reverting to the autonomous professional not engaging in collaborative learning and dialogue. Ensuring staff members are provided the opportunity for growth through professional development will increase the competency of all staff members. As competency increases, staff members will naturally begin to trust each other through shared

practice. This is closely related to the notion of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1998). As participants of a community become more competent they move toward full participation in a community of practice. Wenger (2006) argues competency is defined by the existing community of practice and is dependent on a commitment to the shared domain, positive relationships, and development and use of the shared resources. With the lack of trust through competency, participants or newcomers will be less likely to be integrated into existing communities of practice within the organization.

Literature suggests professional learning communities have a positive impact on student performance and result in improved teacher practice (Vescio et al., 2006, Louis & Marks, 1998). This study suggests a new relationship between student performance and the development and sustainability of professional learning communities. The findings of this research suggest a correlation between current student performance and the nature of a learning community. As the student data suggests a need for change, teachers are more willing to engage in collaborative efforts and professional community. This relationship is supported by the continuum of student data at the three sites and their functionality as a learning community.

The Lion school is a relatively high-performing school that has consistently met the state benchmarks for accreditation and is consistently maintaining, if not improving in all subject areas. It is noted the Lion school is also low functioning when it comes to a professional learning community as they combat competition and the privatization of practice. Despite the administrators' attempts to implement a learning community through mandatory meetings and a prescribed program, the teaching staff remains autonomous for the most part. Hargreaves (2000) noted teachers do not see the value working collaboratively has on teacher performance and student performance, often leading to resistance. This suggests the staff does not see a need to

change current practice and therefore does not value the difference a learning community could make to their teaching pedagogy. Unfortunately, this does not improve instruction for all students and the lower-performing students will continue to not achieve student performance benchmarks.

The Leopard school's student data suggests strengths in the area of math and science, but a decline in the area of reading. The Leopard school displays some components of a learning community and pockets of collaboration aligned to a community of practice. It is evident in this case that the experience of teachers is strongly related to the willingness to engage in deprivatizing practice and reflective dialogue. It is noted the demographics of the student population changed approximately 8 years ago, increasing the percentage of students that receive free and reduced lunch. The teaching staff that is resistant to professional learning and changing teacher practice have been at the Leopard school for years prior to the change in the student population. This is aligned and supported by the literature as it relates to factors that hinder communities of practice. Li et al. (2009) noted that strong relationships may have a negative impact on the productivity of a community of practice. Teams may be reluctant to accept newcomers and have the potential to develop group think which limits innovation and change (Li et al., 2009). As student needs change the school must learn to teach differently to meet the needs of all students. The transition to a learning community is occurring and warranted, but full commitment from all staff continues to be an area of improvement.

Student data at the Tiger school suggests a decline in all content areas over the last three years. The urgency of improving student performance drives the practice of all staff members there. The administrative team has initiated mandated meetings and a prescribed program to establish a learning community. Teachers have bought into the importance of analyzing student

performance and discussing teacher pedagogy to continue to improve. The presence of an overall shared commitment to a vision of improving learning for all students is noted at this site. Wenger and Snyder (2000) noted an employee would not be a full participant in a community of practice if they do not feel personally connected to the domain. At the Tiger school, all members have high levels of intrinsic motivation and are dedicated to the success of all students. This shared domain provides the foundation as to which the school has developed a community of practice. As they seek to reverse the downward trend, they must rely on one another to deprivatize practice and engage in reflective dialogue to meet the needs of all students. This site operates as a learning community most aligned to the components of a community of practice.

Learning Communities and School Improvement

Learning communities have the potential to largely impact school improvement through changes in teacher practice and student learning. The current level of functioning of the professional learning community at each site limits the conversations to student data and planning for student interventions. The component of reflective dialogue and how teacher practice impacts student success is rarely evident during the study. Louis et al. (1996) identified peer coaching, team teaching, and peer observations as activities that contribute to the effectiveness of teacher learning. In addition, Little (1990) argued teacher collaboration must be focused on discussing best practice and the implementation of teaching strategies. When teachers become vulnerable and are willing to have these conversations, school improvement is more likely to occur.

Administrators have all designated specific meeting times for grade levels, but the effectiveness of this time varies by site and between grade levels within each site. Mindich and Lieberman (2012) argued this time must be utilized for examining teacher practice with a critical

lens. Although this did not occur frequently, there is evidence of reflective dialogue. For example, at the Tiger school Lauren discussed a team where they consistently utilized student data to not only identify students in need of intervention, but to also analyze teacher practice. Areas of concern provided teachers with the opportunity to reflect on how the skill was taught and make adjustments to their delivery of instruction. She credits this practice for an increase in student achievement. This is also evident at the Leopard school. One team at this site was described as focusing on teacher practice in addition to student achievement and Principal Cathy notes they were the highest performing team in terms of student achievement data.

In order for true school improvement to occur, staff members must be willing to engage in the reflective dialogue and be open to innovative strategies to ensure student achievement. This concept is aligned to the work of Brown and Duguid (1991). Brown and Duguid (1991) argued that true learning occurs through ongoing collaboration and analyzing not just the finished product, but also the process used to get there. In order for teachers to move to a focus on teacher practice and student performance, they must engage in reflective dialogue. Meaningful, reflective conversations are necessary for teachers to truly learn a new approach and improve teacher practice.

School leadership teams are utilized at all three sites to build capacity within the staff and drive school improvement efforts. It is noted while schools are still functioning as a “prescribed program” and not an organic community of practice, the ability to build organizational capacity is limited. The administrators at each school are seeking to increase horizontal accountability and engage in shared leadership, but with the absence of trusting relationships this is difficult to accomplish. Talbert (2010) argues trusting relationships are developed through the use of professional strategies such as decision-making, knowledge, and modeling leadership skills, not

through mandating specific tasks. To increase the effective leadership of teacher leaders, administrators must engage in the use of these strategies. As relationships form and teacher leaders receive professional development as it relates to effective communication and leadership, the organization will continue to progress to a true community of practice.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study provide implications for teacher and administrator preparation programs, current school administrators, and researchers. Given that conflict resolution and communication between teaching staff presented as a large barrier to the implementation and sustainability of communities of practice, teacher preparation programs should examine how they develop these skills in future teachers. In addition to the pedagogy and content-related courses, teacher preparation programs should include exposure to discussing student data samples, engaging in reflective dialogue, and sharing best practice. In addition, ensuring teacher candidates are provided a variety of opportunities to engage in collaborative work as it relates to planning for student instruction will increase their ability to collaborate within a team setting.

In addition to teacher preparation programs, administrator preparation programs would also benefit from course work related to managing conflict resolution with teachers, but also related to developing organizational capacity within their schools. Providing administrators with an understanding related to not only the initial development, but also the growth of learning communities through the continuum will allow them to properly plan and make adjustments at different stages of the development process.

Current school administrators could benefit from the findings in this study. Current administrators should also identify pockets of communities of practice within their school and take this into consideration when placement changes are made. For example, if a team is

operating at high levels of success with trusting relationships, allow the team to remain together instead of making grade level changes. It was evident throughout the data analysis that although current teams were not necessarily considered highly functioning, participants had served on an effective team at some point in their career. As much as possible, administrators should protect these teams and work to sustain and grow them.

Given the large influence of social factors in the development of communities of practice, principals and administrators should take into consideration teacher personalities, teaching styles, and teacher strengths when developing teaming arrangements. The importance of administrator-teacher trust and teacher-teacher trust support the need for intentional trust building and candid conversation as it relates to Hoy & Tschannen-Moran's (1999) five faces of trust. The five faces of trust include benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). All five faces of trust were identified within the findings, but they presented in a hierarchy of importance and were prioritized differently by staff members.

Providing staff members the opportunity to learn the five faces of trust and discuss the significance to each individual will provide a basis for developing trusting relationships. Although this will provide a basis for understanding individual's values, it is through the sharing of knowledge that shared values will be developed and ultimately trusting relationships (Lesser & Storck, 2001). In addition to grade level teams, administrators should provide opportunities for heterogeneous groups to discuss teacher pedagogy and non-curriculum topics. Administrators must also provide continuous job-embedded professional development as it relates to effective communication, conflict resolution, and leadership skills.

Recommendation for Research

The findings of this study suggest the need for additional research as it relates to how administrators impact the growth of professional learning communities into self-sufficient communities of practice that build organizational capacity. Literature provides suggestions and specific actions administrators can do during the initial development, but does not provide a tiered approach, as the development of a community of practice is a progression through specific stages. As a learning community evolves, the transition should be away from a prescribed program with specific structures in place. Research as it relates to the concept of growing communities of practice would be beneficial to not only school administrators, but also managers outside of education.

Existing literature suggests professional learning communities have a positive impact on student achievement data, although there is no research supporting how current achievement data may impact the development of a learning community. This study suggests a correlation between student achievement data and the strength of a learning community. This study suggests when students are meeting academic performance standards; staff members do not necessarily see a need for improving instructional practice. As student performance demands a change in practice, teachers are more likely to voluntarily engage in a learning community and participate in reflective dialogue with colleagues. Additional research related to how student performance is connected to how staff members value and commit to a learning community would add to the existing literature.

Lastly, this study suggests despite administrators' efforts to utilize teacher leaders to assist in guiding the work of school improvement, teachers are somewhat resistant to lead. There is little research that suggests how professional learning communities build organizational capacity through teacher leaders. Research regarding how leadership professional development

and opportunities equip teacher leaders with the skills necessary to guide the work of school improvement would be beneficial. For example, identifying what leadership training teacher leaders have been provided and how that impacts the professional learning community through shared leadership.

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations with the design of this study. It was the decision to limit the study to three elementary schools within one school division. The selection of elementary schools was made to control for structural factors that may differ simply because of the level of school. It is also noted the three schools were within the same division. This provided consistency in the division-level expectations for structures and systems in place and also controlled for professional development opportunities for administrators and teaching staff as it relates to professional learning communities. As the researcher, I am employed as an administrator within the school division selected for the study. Confidentiality agreements were provided for each staff member to ensure honest discussion regarding the site. In addition, personal biases and opinions were not shared during the interviews.

Concluding Thoughts

As a school administrator, I am consistently immersed in the changing standards and expectations for our students. It is imperative for educators to commit to being lifelong learners and open to collaboration to drive school improvement. With that being said, I work hard to develop collaborative opportunities for my staff members to plan collectively, analyze student data, share best practice, and learn from experts. Despite the structural attempts to foster a community of learners, there are some grade levels that are more successful than others. A

community of practice, or professional learning community, is a daunting task and requires time and patience to develop and sustain.

Trusting relationships take time to build and are primarily built through a shared commitment and shared practice. The more teams work together, learn to trust each other, and develop a shared repertoire the more likely they are to continue to move through the progression resulting in an organic community of practice and school improvement. Teacher personalities and teaching styles should be considered when developing teams and support must be differentiated based on where the community of learners falls on a continuum. In conclusion, learning communities are not a program you can put into place, but instead a marathon of discussion, training, and work that will ultimately result in school improvement.

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Appendix A

Teacher Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose the field of education?
2. How would you describe a professional learning community?
3. Have you had any training related to professional learning communities?
4. How do you and your colleagues work together? What does collaboration typically look like?
5. What is the frequency of your collaboration?
6. What factors do you think are most important to successful collaboration?
7. What are the challenges to working with your colleagues?
8. How do leaders (teacher leaders or administrators) impact the professional learning community?
9. How are school initiatives typically introduced at your school?
10. How is data used to guide instruction?

Principal Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose the field of education?
2. How would you describe a professional learning community?
3. Have you had any training related to professional learning communities?
4. How would you describe the collaboration within your building? What activities do they engage in?
5. What is the frequency of your collaboration?
6. What factors do you think are most important to successful collaboration?
7. What are the challenges that prevent teams from collaborating successfully?
8. How do leaders (teacher leaders or administrators) impact the professional learning community?
9. How are school initiatives typically introduced at your school?

10. How is data used to guide instruction?

Informed Consent Form

TITLE OF STUDY

The Role of the School Administrator in Implementing Communities of Practice to Build Organizational Capacity

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

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PURPOSE OF STUDY

Research supports the positive impact professional learning communities have on student achievement and teacher performance. The difficulty is in the successful implementation of a professional learning community without it becoming a prescribed program. Printy (2008) warns that administrators must find a balance between structured collaboration and naturally emerging collaboration more consistent with Wenger's communities of practice term. Stoll and Louis (2007) argue despite all of the research on characteristics and development of professional learning communities, they are still extremely difficult to create and sustain. Although the literature notes the importance of leadership in creating a professional learning community, there is little research that supports specific actions leaders can take to create an organic, sustainable community of practice. In addition, there is little literature supporting how administrators use professional learning communities as a vehicle for building organizational capacity. This study seeks to understand the perspective of school administrators and teachers on how administrators foster professional learning communities in general, but also how they use them as a vehicle to build organizational capacity for sustained school improvement.

STUDY PROCEDURES

Participants will be asked to participate in one interview lasting approximately 45 minutes – one hour. There may be a follow-up interview of 15-20 minutes if clarification is needed. Also, participants will be observed during grade level meetings or instructional time for one-two hours throughout the duration of the study.

RISKS

There is the risk that some questions may be sensitive to you, resulting in embarrassment or discomfort. You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose. As with any research, there may be risks that have not been identified.

BENEFITS

You will not benefit personally from participation in this study. Ideally, information learned will benefit schools as they seek to develop professional learning communities to improve student success and teacher performance.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of data sources. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants to ensure confidentiality. All data will be password-protected and kept in a locked room in the researcher's home. All data and identifying factors will be maintained for one year after the completion of the study prior to being destroyed.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions about this research study or your participation, please contact Kara McCord (kmcco015@odu.edu or 757-825-4635, Dr. Karen Sanzo (ksanzo@odu.edu or 757-683-6698) or Dr. Laura Chezan, the current chair of the human subjects review committee at 757-683-7055.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

