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Building a Collaborative Culture in a Middle School: A Case Study

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by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Melissa Olson, who has been a constant support throughout this three and a half year journey. Through many late nights and extremely early mornings of reading and writing, through job changes, and through deaths in the family, the path has been anything but easy. Through all of this you were the one constant, the rock of our family, always there for me and for our two daughters. You've made selfless sacrifices and have encouraged me through every step of our journey together. I love you for all you've sacrificed, and for who you are.

To my two daughters, Janelle and Taylor, whose entire future lies ahead of them, I hope that by watching this process of setting goals, persevering towards your goals, working hard, and having a clear purpose will have a positive influence on you. Thank you for your patience during this time; I look forward to spending much more time with you. I know you have made sacrifices too.

To my parents, Andy and Kathy Olson, for being another source of constant support in my life. You've always been my biggest cheerleaders and support, and this journey has been no different. The love you have for your children and the sacrifices you have made over the years to put me in the best possible position for success has been a source of inspiration. I thank you for all you've done for me.

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ABSTRACT

There is extensive research indicating the importance of teachers working together in teams and in conjunction with school leadership to improve teaching practice and, ultimately, outcomes for students. However, there is little evidence that collaboration is valued in the American school system. Tension pervades in a system that often prescribes a top-down approach to teacher evaluation, fails to provide sufficient time for teachers to collaborate, and unfairly scapegoats teachers for many challenges both within society and the education system itself. It is not surprising that teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate.

Combine these contextual factors with the increasing demands and expectations for the role of the modern-day principal. It becomes clear that a deeper investigation of how a principal can intentionally foster a collaborative culture is needed. As the role of the principal has evolved over the past 20 years, the principal's most important role is being an instructional leader. This responsibility is not possible for one individual: how a principal can create conditions where teachers can work collaboratively to improve the outcomes for the students they serve?

This case study used an action research approach to investigate teachers' perceptions of the impact of three specific interventions: professional learning communities under the guidance of a teacher talent developer, administrator and peer classroom observations and feedback, and comments-only coaching conversations between the principal and teacher following the formal observation process. The study focused on a single, bounded, exemplary unit—a math department at one middle school. Data sources included existing archival documents, focus group interviews for each grade level of math teachers, an individual interview with the teacher

talent developer, individual teacher interviews, and my (the principal) research journal and lived experiences. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method.

The study found that teachers' perceived value in PLC work; they focused on a continuous improvement process of unpacking standards, reviewing student work products and outcomes, and making real-time adjustments to instruction. Building trust and providing time were important to this process. The teacher talent developer was key in facilitating the work of other teachers—creating a safe and professional environment, allowing for vulnerability, asking quality facilitative questions, tailoring facilitation to meet the needs of teachers, and possessing deep content knowledge.

Teachers also valued walkthroughs and feedback from their peers. Teachers felt, however, the tension between 'all the other stuff' they were doing and making the walkthroughs happen. Lastly, providing comments-only feedback and reducing the impact of ratings in formal observations created psychological safety and an atmosphere where teachers felt more comfortable taking risks.

This study has implications for school districts looking to explore creating a teacher evaluation system that serves a more formative function focused on teacher support and growth, as opposed to high-stakes and summative judgment. There are also implications for instructional leadership development at both the administrator and teacher leader level.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

There is extensive literature suggesting that collaboration and collegiality offer a promising path toward teacher improvement. However, legislation over the last 20 years prescribes a top-down approach that leads to teachers experiencing evaluation in a manner which often impedes, sometimes directly contradicting, efforts to establish and maintain a collaborative culture focused on growth and improvement. Beginning with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, federal guidelines for teacher evaluation models shifted to prioritization of student performance results (Reddy et al., 2017). More recently, other federal initiatives including Race to the Top (RTT) in 2009, other non-profit enterprises including the New Teacher Project, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) pioneered evaluation models that combine elements of student performance with classroom observations (Reddy et al., 2017). In practice, high-stakes, top-down teacher evaluation often sends the wrong message to teachers, one that says that their needs to feel supported in their learning and growth are overshadowed by the need of the educational organization to exert control and oversight (Ford, Urick, & Wilson, 2018). In addition, external accountability from levels above that of the teachers—local (including the principal), district, state—causes feelings from teachers, especially experienced teachers, that they are no longer trusted (Hult & Edström, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

In addition to external policy factors previously mentioned, several internal factors add to the challenge that a principal faces in fostering a collaborative culture focused on teacher

learning and growth. Examples include a principal's need for instructional expertise in multiple subject areas, the skill to deliver actionable feedback, the skill of coaching teachers, and the amount of time available to focus on instructional activities. Given these challenges, influenced from both external policy and from internal skill sets, it is necessary to explore the ways in which principals can attempt to leverage practices to foster a collaborative culture focused on teacher improvement and growth.

Purpose of the Study

This study will explore how one middle school in Hillsborough County, Florida, uses collaborative practices to foster teacher learning and growth. Specifically, the study will explore the effects of professional learning communities (PLCs), non-evaluative classroom walkthroughs conducted by both administrator and peer teachers, and coaching conversations following formal classroom observations on improving teacher practice.

The primary research question guiding this study is: how does a principal foster a collaborative culture to support instructional improvement through PLCs, classroom walkthroughs, and reflective coaching conversations? Three sub-questions will guide deeper exploration of the primary question:

- How do professional learning communities foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?
- How do non-evaluative classroom walkthroughs and feedback foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?
- How do comments-only coaching conversations following formal classroom observation foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?

Significance of the Study

Teaching and learning are complex tasks. There are several factors, both internal and external, that influence learning. Yet, one thing we know for certain is that good teachers matter. In fact, Stronge and Hindman (2003) suggest that the single most influential school-based factor on student achievement is the teacher. Darling-Hammond (2010) agrees by stating that substantial evidence suggests that, among all school resources, well-prepared, expert, experienced, teachers are among the most important determinants of student achievement. In addition, the costs of ineffective teaching are enormous and detrimental to kids, having the potential to set their learning back by years. Mendro (1998) further states that "if a student has an ineffective teacher…the negative influence on student achievement may not be fully remediated for up to three years" (p. 258).

Attrition rates among teachers are alarmingly high, and attrition is costly. Thirty percent of new teachers leave the professional within five years (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In addition, according to Darling-Hammond (2010), more recent data from the National Commission of Teaching and America's Future suggest that replacement costs for teachers are now closer to $15,000 for each teacher who leaves the profession, and the national price tag may exceed seven billion annually. Schools and districts with limited budgets would benefit greatly from more effective retention efforts. With a marked decrease in the number of students enrolling in colleges of education, developing and retaining existing teachers becomes an even greater priority. ;

Creating a collaborative culture can play a large role in teacher development efforts and job satisfaction. Although a wide range of conditions matter to teachers, the specific elements

that matter the most to teachers are the social conditions—the school's culture, the principal's leadership, and relationships among colleagues (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). Also, in a 2013 report on turnover in NYC middle schools, researchers found that "turnover was lower in schools where teachers reported that the principal was trusting and supportive of the teaching staff, a knowledgeable instructional leader, an efficient manager, and adept at forming partnerships with external organizations" (Marinell & Coca, 2013, p. 26).

Conceptual Framework

The graphic representation that follows (Figure 1) represents the initial conceptual framework that guided the thinking behind the study. It represents the specific interventions supported by the literature that will be used in the action research orientation of this study. The

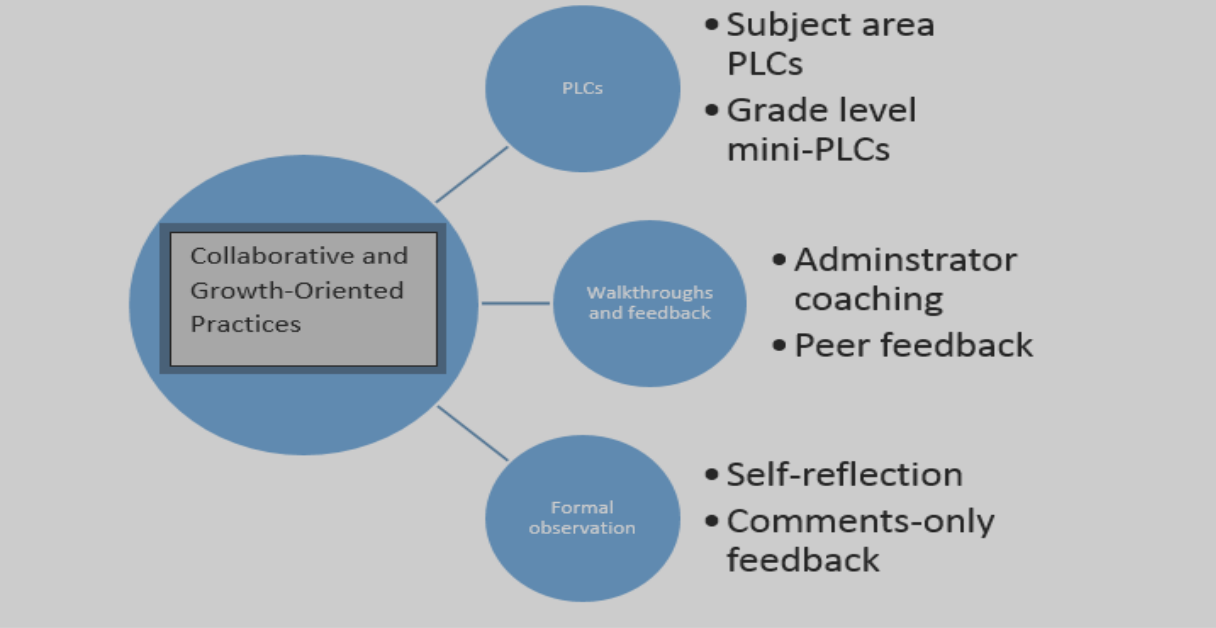

Figure 1. Interventions that support collaborative and growth-oriented practices for instructional improvement.

three key interventions highlighted in the study include professional learning communities, classroom walkthroughs with feedback, and coaching conversations following formal observations.

PLCs operate under the assumption that one of the most important aspects of improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for the teachers. PLCs are an instrument for facilitating enhanced learning, teaching, and leadership capacity at all levels of the education system (Ontario Principals' Council, 2008). PLCs help shift the conversation away from what was taught and more towards what students actually learned. By keeping the focus on student outcomes in a collaborative setting, teachers are likely to improve their practice.

Walkthroughs and feedback on teaching are most effective when observations are short, frequent, and systematic and when feedback is bite-sized, high-leverage, and focused on small changes that can be implemented quickly (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). In addition, Danielson (2012) suggests one way that evaluation serves a more developmental purpose is through professional conversations between teachers and colleagues who observe in their classrooms. Where many schools typically use full-period formal observations that occur annually or semi-annually, a system where walkthroughs and feedback occur on a regular basis, conducted by both administrators and teacher colleagues, is much more likely to lead to instructional improvement.

One of the hallmarks of most teacher evaluation systems in the formal, rated observation. In many cases, after a formal observation, teachers receive scores based on a rubric and comments or feedback providing ideas for next steps to improve instruction. While this is a typical practice, it is ineffective because it mixes up the different functions of feedback. The purpose of ratings is to provide a summative judgment on practice, whereas the purpose of comments or feedback is to help teachers improve their work. In his work on formative

assessment, Dylan William (2015) makes reference to multiple studies showing the benefits of comments-only feedback practices, demonstrating a solid body of research suggesting that garners that are provided with comments-only feedback produce better work and learn more and faster than learners who received comments combined with ratings.

It is my hope that this study continues to help me better understand the impact that these interventions have on the school culture and on teacher practice. It is also my hope that the findings guide and inform my future practice. I recently was transferred to a new school in the middle of the 2018-19 school year, and I plan to take the finding of this study to gain insight on how to construct the optimal professional learning environment in my new setting.

Overview of Research Design

This study will incorporate action research and grounded theory perspectives situated within a case study. Action research is inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders to an organization, but never *to* or *on* them (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Action research is a collaborative process, as emphasized in the following definition by McCutcheon and Jung (1990):

> [Action research is] systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry. The goals of such research are the understanding of practice and the articulation of a rationale or philosophy of practice in order to improve practice. (p. 148)

A case study is useful for understanding what, how, and why questions, and it is also useful when it is important to look at relevant contextual conditions (Yin, 2003). This case study will focus on one particular middle school and one particular department within the school to better understand how a high-performing group of teachers works to improve their practice.

Focusing on case study stems from an interest in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam, 1998). This study will help the reader learn from one particular middle school that has been focused on improving collaboration for the past five years. This study might provide the reader with valuable insights and discoveries relating to how the process of building a collaborative culture evolves over time.

Case studies have several unique features. First, a case study is particularistic, in that it focuses on a particular situation, event, or phenomenon. It is descriptive, meaning that the end product is a rich, thick description of the topic being studied. This study will describe in detail the experiences of teachers and the impact of the interventions on their growth and learning. It is heuristic, meaning that case studies help illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 1998). The sub-questions guiding this study reflect multiple inter-related aspects of collaboration that fit into the larger context of teacher evaluation practices, practices that are guided by the policies of one of the largest districts in the United States. Studying one particular school within this broader context might provide key insights for broader application across a large system.

Stake (1981) goes further in stating that case study knowledge is more concrete and more contextual and that readers of a case study bring their own experiences and understandings to what is being described. In addition, when reading a case, the reader decides what generalizations are able to be made to his/her own unique contexts (p. 36). No two schools and no two contexts are identical, thus developing replicable practices is an unrealistic goal. However, providing a rich description based on concrete actions taken in this study and supported by sufficient data collection and analysis, the reader will be able to gain many insights

into the topic of building a collaborative culture, which can be used to inform his or her decisions as it relates to his or her own particular setting.

Definitions

The following terms are used in the study:

Action research: a systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry. The goals of such research are the understanding of practice and the articulation of a rationale or philosophy of practice, in order to improve practice (McCutcheon & Jung, 1990).

Collaboration: a systematic process in which people work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice, in order to improve individual and collective results. In a PLC, collaboration focuses on the critical questions of learning: What is it we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient? (DuFour & DuFour, 2009).

Collaborative culture: an environment in which staff members work together in interdependent teams that pursue common goals (Eaker & DuFour, 2009).

Feedback: information that is provided to the learner on their progress while they are learning (Wiliam & Leahy, 2015).

Professional learning communities: educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour & DuFour, 2009).

Trust: one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Assumptions

For existing archival data collected, I assume that the recordings are accurate, honest and complete. When collecting evidence through interviews and focus groups, I assume that each participant is telling the truth.

Delimitations

This study has two unique features guiding its focus. First, the three interventions related to the sub-questions guiding this study represent significant shifts from current principal practice in my district. For example, the PLC work in this study is being guided by skilled Teacher Talent Developers (TTDs). This is a role that was piloted in my district two years ago, and as funding decreased this position only exists in a very small percentage of schools. For the second sub-question guiding this study, few schools have an intricate and aligned system where administrators and colleagues provide regular feedback to teachers. And, for the third sub-question guiding this study, my school might be the only school in the district that is abandoning ratings from formal observations while solely focusing on comments and feedback. Focusing on less commonly practiced interventions might provide key insights for a very large district.

Second, the focus of the study is around one PLC within the school. This is a high-performing group that produces unusually high student outcomes. The focus on a high-performing outlier might provide a model for exemplary practice for others to learn from.

Finally, this study is only looking at the one PLC within one middle school situated within one district in the state of Florida. It will not focus on PLCs outside of the math department, and it will not attempt to examine practices outside of the school being studied.

Researcher Educational Background and Perspective

The 2017-18 school year was my 15th year as a public educator and my fifth year as principal at PV. As a leader, fostering a collaborative culture is one of my top priorities because I have seen first-hand the benefits of teamwork through my lived childhood and college experiences as an athlete. As a three-sport high school athlete and a Division 1 baseball player in college, I participated on teams where I was the youngest, most inexperienced player; I participated on teams where I was the best player and assumed a leadership role - and everything in between.

I relate most closely to the constructivist paradigm, believing that realities are different based on the lens of each individual person's lived experience. I think we should strive to embrace multiple perspectives. My family is very diverse—I have two siblings, one niece, and one nephew with disabilities, a bi-racial marriage, and have two bi-racial daughters. Each person's cultural identity is different and worthy of respect.

My work as the principal at PV for the past five years has focused heavily on building collaborative structures, fostering trusting relationships, focusing on teamwork, and creating a sense of urgency to ensure that all students are successful. I find the greatest challenge of this work is fostering the culture where adults trust each other and are willing to take ownership for the success of ALL students. To me, teamwork is the best way to accomplish our goals in the education system. I value and appreciate the role that teachers play in the success of our students. In this era of accountability in schools, I feel that teachers have been unfairly

scapegoated for many societal issues that they did not cause, and as a result I am deeply committed to supporting teachers' growth. This includes exploring ways through which I can leverage the collaborative structures and processes we have established at PV to change my interactions with teachers in the evaluation process and their experiences in that process to be more positive and growth-oriented. To accomplish this, I believe we need to co-construct this experience.

Chapter Summary

This study will examine how a principal's practice can foster a collaborative culture to support instructional improvement, with a specific focus on the practices of professional learning communities, non-evaluative walkthroughs with feedback, and reflective, comments-only coaching conversations following formal classroom observations. Chapter 1 presents the background of the study, statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, significance of the study, conceptual framework, research design, definitions, assumptions, limitations, and researcher background. Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature, including teacher evaluation policy post-NCLB, teacher evaluation in practice, teachers' experiences with evaluation, professional learning communities, relationships and trust, and peer learning and team behaviors. Chapter 3 presents the methods undertaken and the rationale for its appropriateness and usefulness in the study.

CHAPTER TWO:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to better understand the ways in which a principal might build a collaborative culture to foster teacher professional learning and growth. In recent years, many districts and schools across the United States have been creating and implementing radically new and innovative systems to evaluate teachers. Marzano (2012) points to two key failings of past evaluation systems as the driver of these changes: (1) past systems have done a poor job recognizing differences between effective and ineffective teachers; and (2) teacher evaluation systems have not sufficiently improved teacher practice. A study in 2008 of my home district of Hillsborough County, Florida, highlights this issue: a review of teacher evaluations found that over 99% of our 12,000 teachers were rated either satisfactory or outstanding, with close to half of high school teachers receiving perfect scores (von Frank, 2011). Danielson (2012) points to several flaws of past systems, such as outmoded evaluative criteria often in the form of a checklist; simple evaluative comments like needs improvement, satisfactory, and outstanding; inconsistencies among evaluators; and one-way, top-down communication.

This review of literature is organized around three key themes: teacher evaluation policy (i.e., narrative regarding what *should* happen in evaluation); teacher evaluation practice (the processes involved and the challenges that arise in practice); and teachers' experiences with evaluation (how teachers feel and what teachers say about evaluation). The review will begin with a brief discussion of the narrative context of teacher evaluation post-No Child Left Behind,

moving to a discussion of challenges that arise in practice as principals and teachers attempt to mitigate the tension caused by a system designed for two important purposes: teacher accountability (judging performance, ensuring quality) and teacher growth (learning and development). It concludes with sections describing research on professional learning communities, the importance of trust in forming a collaborative culture, and the significance of peer learning.

Teacher Evaluation Post-NCLB

The No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 mandated that states develop tests to measure student achievement in reading and mathematics, administering these tests annually in grades 3-8 and once again in high school. This marked a new era in state-level testing and assessment-based accountability policies (Close, Amrein-Beardsley, & Collins, 2018). In 2009, Race to the Top (RTT), a federal grant competition, provided incentives for states to incorporate measures of student achievement and growth into evaluations of teacher effectiveness. As a result, many states began using Value Added Measures (VAM) scores to evaluate teacher impact on student growth. In 2014, 40 states and the District Columbia (80% of the states) were using, piloting, or customizing some iteration of VAM (Close et al., 2018).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) became law in 2015, giving states more authority and autonomy to lessen the role of high-stakes testing. Close et al. (2018) analyzed ESSA plans and found that while many states continue to use large-scale student tests, greater control at the local level is leading to some signs of change. Some changes include redefining student growth as something other than a high-stakes test and moving away from high-stakes consequences and toward formative rather than summative assessments. A growing trend across

state ESSA plans is language about supporting teachers by stressing formative feedback and de-emphasizing summative evaluations with high stakes consequences.

Teacher Evaluation Policy Narrative in NCLB

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2001. NCLB represented a shift in policy from goals of equality of opportunity to goals more geared towards equality of student achievement (Gilles, 2015). In order for states to receive federal funding, they were required by NCLB to develop curriculum standards, create student assessments, and report achievement by subgroups of students as identified by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other factors. In terms of teacher effectiveness and teacher quality, NCLB required state and local leaders to ensure that teachers were "highly qualified," defined generally based on teacher credentials (Palardy & Rumberger, 2008).

Teacher Evaluation Policy Narrative in Race to the Top

In another example representing the expanded role of the federal government in education policy, Race to the Top (RTTT) was introduced by the Obama administration as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. A competitive grant program to state education agencies, RTTT introduced a new emphasis for ensuring teacher quality. Among other requirements, RTTT funds were expected to develop methods for evaluating teachers defining effectiveness not on credentials, but on student achievement results (Gilles, 2015). Emphasizing standards and assessments, data on student growth was expected to be a significant factor in the evaluation of teachers. Two of the most important accomplishments of RTTT are the generation of state student-data systems and the adoption of common academic standards and assessments (McGuinn, 2012).

Teacher Evaluation Policy Narrative in ESSA

In 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act, marking a shift in the involvement of the federal government in teacher evaluation (Sawchuk, 2016). One of the key highlights from the law is that it does not require states to set up teacher evaluation systems based in significant part on student test scores, which was a key requirement in previous federal policy. Previous policy focus on student test scores as a hallmark to teacher evaluation systems proved to be extremely unpopular with teachers, leading to over a dozen lawsuits and helping to fuel a testing "opt out" movement among parents in many states (Sawchuk, 2016). While ESSA has essentially loosened the reigns of teacher evaluation influence at the federal level and given more autonomy back to individual states, teacher evaluation policies have been set into law in 42 states and the District of Columbia, and most states will need to rewrite legislation to see a significant change in teacher evaluation practice (Sawchuk, 2016).

Teacher Evaluation in Florida

Section 1012.34 of the Florida Statutes (FLA. STAT. § 314.14(3), 2016) describes how teacher evaluation occurs in practice. The procedures governing teacher evaluation systems are the responsibility of each district superintendent and subject to the approval of the Department of Education. Among the general requirements for each school district's teacher evaluation system include that the system be designed to support effective instruction and student learning growth, with results of evaluation used to develop school improvement plans to identify professional development, and to include ways to examine performance data from multiple sources.

The two major sources of data for teacher evaluation criteria include the annual performance of students and teacher instructional practice. The statutes specify that at least one-third of teacher evaluation must be based upon the performance of students assigned to the

teacher's classroom, and at least one-third based on instructional practice. Classroom observation is specifically mentioned within the instructional practice section of the statutes, stating that classroom observation criteria must include indicators from the Florida Educator Accomplished Practices adopted by the State Board of Education.

Teacher Evaluation in Hillsborough County

RTTT galvanized numerous private-sector players in the name of reform, and among those was the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (McGuinn, 2012). The Gates Foundation invested a substantial amount of private dollars in support and extension of RTTT reform efforts. The School District of Hillsborough County (SDHC) was among the beneficiaries of Gates funding, receiving a total of $81 million as part of the Intensive Partnerships for Effective Teaching (IP) initiative that launched during the 2009-10 school year (Stecher et al.,2018). This initiative, named Empowering Effective Teachers (EET) by the district, has a large influence on current teacher evaluation practices in the district.

Current district teacher evaluation processes were developed during the onset of the IP initiative, with slight modifications occurring since its inception in 2009-10. In current district practice, student achievement data (value-added measures) composes 40% of teacher evaluation, with principal evaluation constituting the remaining 60% of teacher evaluation scores. HCPS uses a rubric based on the 22 components of practice from Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teaching* and emphasizes formal and informal classroom observation as the foundation for the principal component of evaluation scores. As outlined in the district's teacher evaluation handbook, formal observations are defined as announced observations that encompass an entire teaching period, whereas informal observations are unannounced and focus on a smaller part of

the Danielson framework. Ratings and feedback are posted in the district's talent management system.

Teachers' Experiences with Evaluation

Teachers' experiences with evaluation have been influenced by the nature of high stakes observations, VAM scores, and the general top down feel of the evaluation process.

High Stakes Observations

The modern-day principal's time to dedicate to instructional leadership is a major barrier to successful implementation of teacher evaluation efforts, as many leaders have difficulty finding time to conduct frequent classrooms visits coupled with feedback to support teacher growth (Derrington, 2011; Ramirez, Clouse, & Davis, 2014). As a result, teachers may view evaluation as a high-stakes, high-stress experience**,** which can interfere with the development of trusting relationships between principal and teachers (Kelley & Maslow, 2012).

In addition, because of the infrequency of observations, the times when administrators enter the classroom for observations can feel like "gotcha" moments as administrators almost never see what routinely occurs in classrooms (Almy, 2011). Teaching is a variable activity, as no two lessons are exactly the same. It is very common for a teacher to modify the same lesson taught during the course of one day, making modifications based on earlier experiences. The reliability of teacher ratings in evaluation decreases significantly with frequency of observation (Wiliam, 2016).

Teachers regularly report additional negative consequences of external evaluations. In a qualitative study consisting of questionnaires and interviews with teachers, Hult and Edstrom (2016) report that teachers perceived that external evaluations make their work less creative, autonomous, and discretionary, often leading to increasing mistrust. Teachers stressed that, to

improve the quality in schools, change must be bottom-up, not top-down. Teachers also reported that external evaluations take up too much of their time, result in no action or next steps, and have an overall negative influence on practice.

VAM

The passing of No Child Left Behind was aimed at holding teachers and schools accountable for student achievement. As a result, many states included value-added measures as a key component of teacher evaluation. Studies have raised questions about the validity, reliability, and potential biases associated with value-add calculations. Harris (2009) points to research showing that typical value-added measures are biased in middle and high school because of student tracking. Rothstein (2008) worries that test score gains are biased because students are not randomly assigned to teachers. It is not uncommon for some teachers' classrooms to be treated as a dumping ground for challenging students. Other issues with value-added data include the fact that most results are provided months after the end-of-year summative assessments, data ranks teachers but provides little information about how and why a teacher can improve practice, and data are generally very limited in utility in supporting teachers' growth and development (Curtis & Wiener, 2012).

Darling-Hammond (2013) suggests that value-added measures can produce large variations in teacher ratings because state tests have a low ceiling and a high floor. She also points out that many teachers' ratings fluctuate significantly from year to year. In a separate study, RAND researchers examined whether giving students different tests would lead to different conclusions about teacher effectiveness. Depending on which test was used, RAND researchers found large differences in teacher effectiveness. The researchers concluded that extreme caution should be used in interpreting the meaning of results from these tests (David,

2010). In addition, there is always a degree of variability in a student's results on a test. No measurement is perfectly accurate, and students have good days and bad days (Wiliam, 2016).

Close, Amerien-Beardsley, and Collins (2018) note that VAM models are notoriously unreliable (a teacher labeled as adding value has a 25-50% chance to be labeled as subtracting value the following year); invalid (weak evidence that teachers that post high growth are effective using other criteria); nontransparent (teachers and administrators don't understand the models); unfair (only teachers in math and language arts with pre- and post- test data are held accountable); and loaded with measurement errors.

It is no surprise that evaluation systems are perceived as perfunctory and narrowly focused on compliance, existing primarily as a tool for ensuring bureaucratic accountability (Kelley & Maslow, 2012; Kraft & Gilmore, 2016). In a study conducted with teachers in New York City, Jennings and Pallas (2016) learned that no teacher entirely understood the basic principles of how VAM scores were established. In addition, no teacher believed VAM scores would help improve practice. Yet, student growth measures continue to be a major component of teacher evaluation across the United States. Distrust pervades the system that places such a high emphasis on scores that are questionable at best.

Top Down Feel

Teachers' experiences with evaluation will be significantly affected by the lens through which the principal views the overarching purpose of evaluation. This is illustrated in a case study conducted by Tuytens and Devos (2014a) in which they set out to find which skills and actions were used by school leaders during implementation of a new evaluation system. They found that in schools where teachers had a positive perception of the evaluation system, leaders

stressed the goals of the system to be about teacher development. In contrast, where leaders stressed accountability, teachers had negative perceptions of the evaluation system.

Often, teacher evaluation systems do not lead to changes in teacher practice. A study was conducted by Donaldson (2012) in which the researcher interviewed over 92 teachers and administrators in a northeastern, urban school district about their views on their evaluation system. Two of Donaldson's conclusions were that the program seemed more successful in increasing accountability than in changing teacher practice and that teachers did not report changing their practice as a result of the evaluations.

In a recent study, Reddy et al. (2017) examined the attitudes and beliefs of teachers regarding evaluation in New Jersey and found that teachers' overall experience was neither positive nor negative. Teachers in this study identified collaborative communication and evaluation feedback as the most helpful aspects of the system. In a separate longitudinal study from 2001 to 2003, Milanowski and Heneman (2001) saw no improvement from teachers' original perception that their evaluation system neither helped nor hurt their practice. After two years, the researchers asked the same questions to teachers and found no improvement in teacher beliefs.

Problems of Practice

Principals play a critical role in implementing evaluation policy and practices at the school level, and principals themselves face challenges with implementation. Among the challenges that arise for principals are their strengths in the skill set needed for evaluation, time, and teacher ownership of professional growth.

Evaluation Skills

Instructional expertise. Principals lack content knowledge to skillfully evaluate teachers across all disciplines (Kelley & Maslow, 2012). This often results in teachers receiving generic feedback that may or may not lead to improved practice.

Communication (delivering feedback). Providing feedback for growth presents several challenges in practice. First, feedback does not occur frequently enough, if at all. In a recent study titled *The Widget Effect*, Weisberg et al. (2009) identified a lack of feedback as the primary problem with teacher supervision and evaluation systems. The authors found that "nearly three of four teachers went through the evaluation process but received no specific feedback about how to improve their performance" (p. 78). The study found that 74% of all teachers and 57% of new teachers (non-tenured) reported that they received no feedback on their summative evaluations. Next, when teachers do receive feedback, it tends to be accompanied with ratings connected to an observation rubric. However, research suggests that feedback falls on deaf ears when combined with numerical ratings (Wiliam, 2011). A study of 6th grade students showed that adding a numeric score to written comments wiped out the benefits of the comments. Without feedback, or feedback coupled with ratings, it is not surprising that few teachers report that evaluation is useful to them (Donaldson, Woulfin, & LeChasseur, 2016).

Kraft and Gilmour (2016) conducted a study in which they interviewed 24 principals in an urban district to understand whether principals felt as though they were able to promote teacher development as evaluators. While these principals reported some positives about their evaluations systems, such as the common language provided by the new rubric, teachers having a more active role in evaluation, and a positive perceived shift in the culture around teacher evaluation, several challenges emerged from the study. First, because of the expanded role of

principals, feedback conversations were often brief and infrequent. Second, providing feedback outside of the principal's area of expertise proved to be challenging. Third, because of a lack of training in how to deliver feedback, principals in the study reported that their feedback mostly focused on ratings and on positive reinforcement.

Coaching. Administrator observations of teachers is a key practice in most teacher evaluation systems. The post-observation conversations that ensue following an observation offer a promising opportunity for teachers to engage in key learning behaviors such as self-assessment and reflection. Sartain, Stoelinga, and Brown (2011), however, found that the quality of conversations between administrators and teachers during post-conferences could be improved, as they were often dominated by principal talk and lower-level reflective questions. The study was conducted as part of a two-year study of Chicago's Excellence in Teaching pilot. Additionally, studies of principal-led debriefs from observation conferences suggest that principals sometimes allow large parts of these meetings to focus on non-instructional issues and often send mixed messages to teachers about their performance (Donaldson et al., 2016).

Coaching feedback centers on agreed-upon standards of practice (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016; Danielson, 2012). Coaching conversations can be the vehicle for improving teacher practice. In a qualitative study conducted by Kelley and Maslow (2012), they examined ways in which evaluation provides formative feedback to teachers. They found that strong cultures of teacher collaboration and strong relationships with administrators helped create conditions where feedback was more likely to be used by teachers.

For an evaluation system designed to improve teacher practice, the principal must have several skills. These include the ability to rate teachers accurately, facilitate teachers' own self-reflection, provide specific, actionable feedback, and communicate feedback effectively (Curtis

& Wiener, 2012; Kraft & Gilmour, 2016). When observations are conducted with more frequency and accompanied with bite-sized, actionable feedback, teaching practice is more likely to improve (Almy, 2011; Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Milanowski & Heneman, 2001; Taylor & Tyler, 2012).

Time

Principal time to focus on instruction. Derrington and Campbell (2015) investigated concerns and supports needed for principals implementing a new system for teacher evaluation. Through their interviews with principals, they found that time requirements of the evaluation system taxed principals' resources, taking time away from other essential duties. As a result of these time constraints, principals often had to rush through evaluations in order to meet the other demands of the job.

Principals might be able to overcome some of the time challenges by working collaboratively with teacher teams. In a case study, Brandon, Hollweck, Donlevy, and Whalen (2018) investigated the ways in which exemplary principals in three high-performing Canadian provinces overcame challenges to teacher evaluation. Their two major findings were: (1) principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders who work collaboratively within teams effectively strengthen teaching and leadership practices toward improved success; and (2) the establishment of reciprocal relationships with veteran teachers built on trust and a shared moral purpose to support all students was essential.

Teacher time to collaborate. Collaboration is essential for teacher growth and development (Derrington, 2011; Tuytens & Devos, 2014). Emphasis on collaboration within teacher evaluation is illustrated quite clearly in countries outside of the United States. In many high-performing school systems across the world, incentives exist to promote collaboration. For

example, a mentor teacher in Shanghai is held accountable for how well they mentor a new teacher, the teaching practices of a new teacher, and the new teacher's students. Similarly, in Singapore teachers' participation in collaborative lesson groups and the quality of their mentorship is a major consideration in their evaluation and in opportunities for promotion (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016). Yet, compared to other high-performing countries, there is little evidence in U.S. policy suggesting that collaboration is valued. For example, one of the most popular frameworks for teacher evaluation in the U.S. is the Charlotte Danielson *Framework for Teaching* (2007). This framework contains a total of 22 components, and of the 22 components only two specifically refer to collaboration.

Teacher Ownership of Professional Growth

Just as students need to be actively involved and empowered as partners in classroom assessments, teachers need to be actively involved and empowered as leaders in the formative use of tools that will be used for their own summative evaluation (Mielke & Frontier, 2012). Self-assessments and goal-setting are promising ways for teachers to take a more active role in teacher evaluation (Curtis & Wiener, 2012). By defining their needs and interests, teachers can guide evaluators to provide them with more relevant and meaningful feedback to support their growth.

Professional Learning Communities

When policy makers identify teacher evaluation as a school improvement tool, much attention is given to the importance of collegiality and collaborative relationships. Cooperation and knowledge-sharing are the hallmarks of high-performing schools (Jensen et al., 2016; Kelley & Maslow, 2012). Professional learning communities (PLCs) have emerged in recent years as one of the most effective and promising strategies to improve schools (Kelley & Maslow, 2012).

According to Jensen et al. (2016), across all high-performing international school systems, including Singapore, British Columbia, Shanghai, and Japan, learning communities have emerged as a cornerstone program for effective professional learning. PLCs, as conceptualized by Dufour and Dufour (2009), consist of small teams of teachers that teach common curriculum. In primary grades, teams are often organized by grade level, whereas in secondary schools, teams are typically organized by grade level, subject area teams. The common characteristic of teams at both levels is that they teach the same curriculum.

There is extensive and compelling research supporting the implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) as a strategy for school improvement and reform (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Drucker, 1993; Fullan, 1993; Schmoker, 2004; Senge, 1990; Vescio, Roos, & Adams, 2008). In addition to scholars in the education community, there are several organizations that support the implementation of PLCs, including the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2007), and the National Middle School Association (2003). Other researchers have advocated for the use of PLCs to drive school improvement (Gray & Summers, 2015; Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011).

As defined by the Ontario Principals' Council (2008), PLCs have come to mean "a school environment where teachers work collaboratively in purposely designed groups to improve student achievement within a structure of support provided by the school administrator" (p. 6). DuFour and DuFour (2009) define PLCs as educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Some key attributes of effective PLCs include a focus on results of student learning, shared vision and mission, collaborative culture/teamwork, action

orientation, teacher capacity building, and commitment to continuous improvement (DuFour & DuFour, 2009; Easton, 2008). PLCs operate under the assumption that one of the most important aspects of improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for the teachers and that PLCs are an instrument for facilitating enhanced learning, teaching, and leadership capacity at all levels of the education system (Ontario Principals' Council, 2008).

DuFour and DuFour (2009) are thought leaders in the PLC process, and they cite the systematic monitoring of student learning by teams of teachers using evidence through the creation of common assessments as the most essential component of the PLC process. DuFour and Mattos (2013) further observe:

> …but the most vital support a principal can give these collaborative teams is helping them use evidence of student learning to improve their teaching. When members of a team make the results from their common assessments transparent, analyze those results collectively, and discuss which instructional strategies seem most effective based on actual evidence of student learning, they're using the most powerful catalysts for improving instruction. (p. 36).

DuFour and Mattos (2013) also suggest, contrary to the common evaluation practice of micromanaging instruction through teacher observation by administrators, that the most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning is creating the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a PLC, and by focusing not on individual inspection of teaching but focusing on collective analysis of student learning.

Research supports the impact of PLCs. In a study in which descriptive survey data were collected from over 9,000 teachers in 336 Miami-Dade County schools and district student achievement data were analyzed, Killion (2015) found that (1) high-quality collaboration among

teachers in general and about assessment in particular was associated with increases in their students' performance, as well as increases in their peers' student achievement; (2) teacher collaboration has positive effects on teachers and their students; and (3) schools with instructional teams engaged in better collaboration also had higher achievement gains in reading and math. In a review of 11 studies that focused on the impact of PLCs, Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) found that well-developed PLCs indeed have a positive impact on both teaching practices and student achievement. In a third study, Hughes and Kritsonis (2007) examined 64 schools in Texas that implemented a PLC model. They discovered that over a 3-year period, 90.6% of the PLC schools studied achieved higher math test scores with 42.3% increasing by more than 5 percentile points. It appears that schools that develop a collaborative culture and implement the PLC model show promising results.

Relationships and Trust

Positive relationships and trust form the foundation for collaboration at all levels in the school. Leaders need to know their teachers, so they know when to be critical and when to provide support. Equally important is the teachers' trust in their leader. Changes in teacher practice are unlikely to occur unless the teacher believes that the leader has his/her best interests at heart and that the leader is perceived as credible as a coach (Wiliam, 2016).

In a school setting, there are many subsets of groups of people where trust resides. These groups of people include students, families, teachers, school leadership, and community members. Each group interacts with the others and are interconnected to school life. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) provide a definition of trust: Trust is one party's "willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is a) benevolent, b) reliable, c) competent, d) honest, and e) open" (p 6).

Collaboration and positive interactions among teachers aid in building teacher capacity. Collaboration and trust are reciprocal processes; they depend upon and foster one another. Greater collaboration holds the possibility of fostering greater trust as partners have experience with one another over time and have opportunities to witness the benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness of their partners. Putnam (1993) referred to this accumulation of collective trust as 'social capital' and treated it as a very real asset that accrued in communities that had such trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

Teamwork among people is crucial for growth and success (Mirvis, Ayas, & Roth, 2003). Much research in school turnaround literature supports the notion that teamwork and collaboration are essential components in creating working conditions that have great potential to lead to improved student achievement. The most generalized conclusion of the turnaround literature is in the team-building domain: teamwork provides the launching pad for sustainable rejuvenation—a well-orchestrated corporate comeback requires a team of trained people (Goldstein, 1988).

Clausen (1990) emphasizes the same point in the corporate sector: no corporate turnaround or restructuring is the result of one individual working alone. "Success is the result of melding and motivating a team–diverse talents working together with a common purpose to achieve a desired goal" (Clausen, 1990, p 101). Collaborative teams are essential at many levels of a school and an organization. Team building also entails forging functional teams deep in the organization, that is, below the level of top management (Shook, 1990). In particular, successful recovery efforts are often distinguished by "cascading teaming" (Mirvis, Ayis, & Roth, 2003).

Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) link trust and collaboration in their work. Schools in challenging contexts that are improving usually have a climate of collaboration and a

commitment among staff to work together. They further state that high-performing organizations tend to establish high-risk and high-trust cultures.

Trust, the oil that lubricates this engine of collaboration, plays an essential role. While one of the most powerful conditions for realizing initial improvement will be the deprivatization of teachers' instructional practices, successful deprivatization usually depends on the development or recovery of trusting relations among teachers and between teachers and administrators (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010).

Social trust is significant in education. In their modern classic *Trust in Schools*, Tony Bryk and Beverly Schneider (2003) demonstrate that among public schools in Chicago and controlling for variability in student demographics, the schools that reach greater achievement levels have higher levels of trust between teachers and students, parents, administrators, and colleagues—levels that precede the gains in achievement. It's not just a correlation—it's cause and effect. Trust and expertise work hand in hand to produce better results (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Bryk and his colleagues (1999) argued that by far, the strongest facilitator of professional community is social trust among faculty members. When teachers trust and respect each other, a powerful social resource is available for supporting the collaboration, reflective dialogue, and deprivatization characteristics of a professional community.

Even if you firmly believe in the beneficial outcomes of collaboration, you cannot suddenly introduce it, fully developed, into your professional interactions. Only after a period of time in which trust, and subsequently respect, are established can school professionals feel relatively secure in fully exploring collaborative relationships. Once begun, however, those relationships may be strengthened until trust of colleagues becomes one of the most important benefits of collaboration. This scenario describes the emergence of trust: at the outset, enough

trust must be present for professionals to be willing to begin the activity, but with successful experiences the trust grows. Conversely, trust is most fragile when a collaborative relationship is relatively new (Friend & Cook, 2000).

Principal's Role in Trust Formation

The principal plays a vital role in fostering trust and collaboration at school, and it is essential to support the work of teacher growth and development (Milanowski & Heneman, 2001). More recent work suggests that school leaders are in potentially powerful positions for shaping *conditions* that make such teacher behaviors possible within the schoolhouse (Kochanek, 2005). The principal and school leadership set the tone for the building and are key people in establishing the culture on a school campus.

The principal supports trust-building among teachers in numerous ways. By creating the conditions in the school that de-privatize teacher practice or creating opportunities or settings that engage teachers in "reciprocal helping relationships" or in joint problem solving, principals take important steps in fostering trust between teachers (Cosner, 2009). Principals support trust formation between teachers by shaping a cooperative culture, creating time and structures that support collaboration, establishing norms for interaction, intervening to help resolve conflicts or to enforce norms of behavior, and improving the conflict resolution skills of teachers (Cosner, 2009).

Shaping a cooperative culture. Principals are the primary drivers of school culture. Their words and actions set the tone across the campus and serve as a compass to guide teachers in their interactions with each other. Some character traits exhibited by principals can serve to foster trust with staff members. For example, for principals to earn the trust of their teachers, they must conduct themselves with authenticity and integrity (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy,

1998). Principals that are open and those that share their heart build trust. It is important for principals to share their humanity, or show their human side, with their teachers, and likewise, be willing to take responsibility for mistakes. Additionally, principals that exhibit a collegial leadership style, in which the leader is perceived to be approachable and open to the ideas of others, has been linked to greater faculty trust in the principal. Providing individualized support, which is part of developing people, also builds trust when leaders "1) recognize and acknowledge the vulnerabilities of their staff, and 2) listen to the personal needs of staff members and assist as much as possible to reconcile those needs with a clear vision for the school" (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010, p 134).

Another way in which principals shape a cooperative culture is by creating opportunities for teachers to engage in low-risk interactions. Structuring interactions around lower risk topics or issues before higher risk topics is important in this regard (Cosner, 2009). Principals can promote low-risk interactions. Kochanek (2005) provides several examples of how principals can accomplish this, including engaging in small, successful activities, promoting small-group interaction, using daily social interaction to ease vulnerabilities, and planning special social events. As relationships develop among teachers and leaders through these low-risk interactions, it paves the way to more high-risk exchanges that occur within more formal structures.

Creating time and structures that support collaboration. Once formal structures are created, principals can earn trust by extending trust to teachers. Principals build trust by creating time and establishing structures to support working together in teams. Professional learning communities (PLCs), where teams of teachers work together to examine instructional practices, analyze formative student achievement data, and determine courses of action to support student learning, offer a promising structure to support interaction and build trust. DuFour & Eaker

(2009) highlight four essential questions that guide the work of PLCs: 1) what do we want our students to learn? 2) how will we know when they learn it? 3) how will we respond when students do not learn? and 4) how will we extend the learning of students that have demonstrated mastery? Principals that establish their schools as professional learning communities effectively set the table for teachers to be trusted to make informed decisions about student learning. Within this tight structure, principals win the trust of their faculty through their willingness to extend trust, which becomes evident through the openness of communication and in decision making (Van Meale, Forsyth, & VanHoutte, 2014). This combination of creating decision-making structures and granting discretion in instructional decisions that rely on teacher expertise to the teachers themselves offers a powerful method of trust-building between a principal and his/her teachers.

Low-risk interactions, as described previously, not only promote trust but also set the stage for further high-risk interactions. Kochanek (2005) cites examples of high-risk interactions to include implementing formal structures of complex interaction, developing a school mission, pursuing a plan of strategic action, and shifting control from administrators to teachers. As collaboration enters some of these high-risk areas, trust is vital to the success of these interactions. For example, within a formal PLC structure, teachers must be vulnerable enough to share their struggles with their colleagues, in order to support their students. Teachers may have to share the results of common assessments with their peers. Teachers may be asked to observe their peers and offer feedback, and vice versa. These types of high-risk interactions, which might take place in a high-functioning PLC, are unlikely to occur in the absence of trust.

Establishing norms for interaction. As teacher interaction within established structures increases and improves, so does the opportunity to build trust, especially when behavioral norms

are established and adhered to by both the principal and the teachers. Generally, overall principal behavior that builds trust includes showing teachers that you care about them, offering support and encouragement, celebrating successes, and modeling appropriate behavior. Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) suggest that leaders can engender trust through the following behaviors:

- showing respect for individual members of the staff, demonstrating concern about their personal feelings and needs, maintaining an open door policy, and valuing staff opinions,
- sponsoring meaningful professional development,
- providing appropriate models of both desired practices and appropriate values,
- encouraging teachers to network with others who are facing similar challenges in order to learn from their experiences,
- structuring the school to allow for collaborative work among staff (p. 245)

Separately, Brewster and Railsback (2003) suggest the following behaviors to strengthen principal-teacher trust: demonstrate personal integrity, show that you care, be accessible, model effective communication, involve staff in decision making, celebrate experimentation and support risk, express value for dissenting views, reduce teachers' sense of vulnerability, ensure that teachers have basic resources, and be prepared to replace ineffective teachers.

Within the formal structures created by a trustworthy leader, team norms support trust development. Van Meale, Forsyth, and Van Houtte (2014) note that trust developed on the teams as they established group norms, followed through on commitments, and fulfilled individual assignments. Almost every team described developing group norms as being vital to trust. Team norms included being respectful, coming prepared, sticking to time limits, offering

opinions, staying on topic, maintaining confidentiality, and completing assignments (Van Meale, Forsyth, & VanHoutte, 2014).

Intervening to help resolve conflict or enforce norms of behavior. Support and accountability are two sides of the same coin. As structures are put in place to support collaboration and as norms of behavior are established to guide interactions within these structures, principals play a vital role in ensuring that conflict is productive and that norms of behavior are adhered to. Kochanek (2005) cites two critical barriers to collegial trust being divisive personalities and incompetent teachers. Teachers in these two areas should be removed by principals, acting as leaders work to assemble a faculty that is generally respectful, caring, and competent (Cosner, 2009). Since teacher removal is not always a quick process, especially for more experienced and tenured teachers, ideally a principal's hiring practices help successfully identify teachers that are able to collaborate effectively. When this is not the case, having regular conversations with teachers as conflict occurs will most likely be necessary to maintain trusting relationships. Regular coaching conversations between the principal and teacher, including more modeling from the principal, may improve the situation. Principals are presented with the challenge of promoting trusting relationships with teachers while at the same time not tolerating incompetence. While working to build trustworthiness with teachers on campus, the principal must remove any teachers that are grossly incompetent. Other teachers and parents not only have difficulty forming trusting relationships with incompetent teachers, but they also question the competence and intentions of the school leadership that allows incompetent teachers to remain (Kochanek, 2005).

Improving the conflict resolution skills of teachers. Conflict is an inevitable by-product of collaboration. As teachers learn how to handle conflict in a productive manner,

conflict becomes an asset to working together. When opposing views are valued and respected, it often can lead to better group decisions. Principals set the example by modeling ways to resolve conflicts, and they do this one conversation at a time. Setting a positive example is not a task to be flaunted by principals, it is more a matter of leading *quietly* to earn the trust and cooperation of the faculty. Principals who lead quietly are soft on people and hard on projects. They combine personal humility—exercising restraint and modesty—with tenacity and determination to see that the requisite professional tasks of educating students are accomplished and accomplished well (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Tschannen-Moran (2014) elaborates on this thought: "part of the art of trustworthy leadership is the ability to speak hard truths in a way that communicates caring as well as valuing the other person and the relationship" (p. 256). Principals can support improving the conflict resolution skills of teachers by modeling, and by observing group interactions and providing coaching and feedback to teachers and teacher leaders.

Peer Learning and Team Behaviors

According to Darling-Hammond (2013), researchers found that peer learning among small groups of teachers was the most powerful predictor of increased student achievement over time. In another study, Darling-Hammond points out that over 90% of the nation's teachers report that their colleagues contribute to their teaching effectiveness. "Contrary to the factory model system designed for isolated teachers to work alone in different spots on the assembly line, education is a team sport" (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 94). In addition, Danielson (2012) suggests one way that evaluation serves a more developmental purpose is through professional conversations between teachers and colleagues who observe in their classrooms.

Other empirical research supports the power of peer mentoring, coaching, and collaboration. Ford, Urick, and Wilson (2018) set out to study the relationship between supportive teacher evaluation experiences and teacher job satisfaction. In their analysis of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), they found that while principals can leverage their general expertise to provide quality feedback, fellow teachers are more likely to be able to provide more frequent, subject-specific support. This study reinforces the power of peer support to aid in teacher learning and growth.

Trust lays the foundation for critical team learning behaviors to exist and thrive. Trust between colleagues contributes to what Edmondson, Kramer, and Cook (2004) call psychological safety, defined as "individuals' perceptions about the consequences of interpersonal risks in their work environment" (p. 241). Edmondson et al. argued that individuals who feel psychological safety are more likely to engage in five important team learning behaviors, including feedback seeking, help seeking, speaking up about concerns and mistakes, innovation, and boundary spanning. These team behaviors help to create conditions to support learning in work groups and are expounded in the upcoming sections.

Feedback seeking. Some barriers to collaboration mentioned by Tschannen-Moran (2001) include the reluctance to give up autonomy and the fear of exposing oneself to possible scrutiny of peers. Trusting relationships among teachers can help alleviate this fear.

Roger Schwarz (2013) provides a framework that includes techniques asking for giving and receiving feedback. The first of his framework's eight mutual learning behaviors is to "state your views and ask genuine questions" (p. 59). Elements of this strategy include raising your curiosity, not lowering your passion, and ensuring that your questions are genuine. When someone offers up information during an interaction, responding by asking genuine questions to

learn more and receive feedback from that person opens the door to new learning, while simultaneously creating more trust. "When you accept a person's gift (feedback)—no matter how terribly wrapped—and respond with curiosity and compassion, you're giving a gift in return. In short, you are creating a safe space to talk about things that really matter. Creating this type of trust is priceless" (Schwarz, 2013, pp. 95).

Help seeking. We all need help at one time or another. It could be a teacher new to the profession. It could be an experienced teacher working with a challenging demographic shift in the student population. It could be a highly effective teacher trying out a new strategy in the classroom. High levels of trust and vulnerability are required for help-seeking behaviors to occur. Used to working in the famously isolated cultures of elementary schools, teachers participating in the de-privatization process feel much more vulnerable to other adults within and external to their schools than ever before. Such vulnerability is likely to be functional in environments containing trust, but highly threatening to those who are uncertain about how much their colleagues can be trusted to be supportive and helpful rather than critical and competitive. This is further endorsement for the importance of a trust-building agenda for leaders in the early stages of school turnaround (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010).

Speaking up about concerns and mistakes. Groups with purpose that are based on trust also learn more. They get better at their work. *Social capital* refers to how the quantity and quality of interactions and social relationships among people affects their access to knowledge and information; their senses of expectation, obligation, and trust; and how far they are likely to adhere to the same norms or codes of behavior (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Bryk and Schneider (2002) cite factors that create high levels of social capital. A high degree of interconnectedness among individuals makes it easier for members to communicate.

This closure facilitates correction of any miscommunications that if left unaddressed, could lead over time to interpersonal rifts. Second, the presence of dense relational ties makes it easier not only to communicate basic information, but also to articulate mutual expectations among various parties and to ascertain whether or not individuals are actually meeting their respective obligations. This property of a social network is described as *trustworthiness*. Networks with high levels of trustworthiness maintain socially desirable norms and sanction unacceptable actions.

Innovation. Teams where psychological safety exists are more likely to take risks and experience the motivation necessary to introduce change initiatives. In planning for change, two essential components of the planning process are having teachers and teams of teachers contribute to the development of the plan, and having a principal that pushes for plan implementation. Broad teacher participation in planning is not common, leading to a "general lack of ownership of the plans and little evidence that the plan is internalized" (Murphy & Meyers, 2007, p. 295). Again, we see the importance of trust to support group innovation. Collegial trust is crucial because it facilitates conversations about instructional reform among local educators. Trust is also essential for genuine collaboration among educators, enabling them to work together to develop a shared understanding of the reforms (Cosner, 2009).

Innovation is closely connected to a high level of relational trust among teams. Given the privacy of classroom practice, successful change efforts depend heavily on the voluntary initiative and good will of school staff. The presence of high relational trust increases the likelihood of broad-based, high-quality implementation of new improvement efforts. Trustworthiness across the organization helps coordinate meaningful collective action (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Boundary spanning. Boundary spanning, or crossing the boundaries of one's social group, supports learning and teacher growth. Team building entails forging functional teams deep in the organization, that is, below the level of top management (Shook, 1990). In particular, successful recovery efforts are often distinguished by "cascading teaming" (Mirvis, Ayis, & Roth, 2003). Collective action, such as problem solving and decision making, that requires the contribution of all group members, is more productively addressed when trust exists between members of the collective (Putnam, 1993).

Summary

The literature review describes some of the contextual factors that contribute to the complexity of challenges facing a principal in building a collaborative school culture focused on teacher growth and development. Policy reform efforts set the stage for changes in teacher evaluation practices in school sites. No Child Left Behind emphasized a focus on student achievement results for all subgroups of students. Race to the Top incentivized states to develop robust teacher evaluation systems based on standardized test scores. The Every Student Succeeds Act has given more power back to the states in defining teacher evaluation. These reform policies influence policy and practice at both the state and local level. The result of reform policy, coupled with evaluation practices carried out by building principals, directly impact the ways in which teachers experience evaluation. Without the efforts of a skilled and intentional principal, these combined factors have the potential to work together in ways which discourage collaboration, rather than foster it.

The school principal is the key actor in implementing teacher evaluation policy. Since the inception of NCLB, the primary role of the principal has seen a dramatic shift towards instructional leadership. This literature review presents some of the critical challenges that arise

as a result of this shift in job definition and the subsequent skills needed by a principal to effectively support the work of instructional leadership.

The review concludes with discussion around the benefits of creating a collaborative culture and some of the essential components and strategies that support collaborative work. Examples include implementation of PLCs, the importance of positive relationships built on a foundation of trust, and peer learning.

Chapter 3 describes the methods that will be employed in this study and the rationale for its usefulness for the study.

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODS

This study explored how one middle school in Hillsborough County, Florida, used collaborative practices to foster teacher learning and growth. Specifically, the study explored the impacts of professional learning communities (PLCs), non-evaluative classroom walkthroughs (both administrator and peer teachers), and reflective coaching conversations following formal classroom observation.

Research Design

This is a case study, guided by elements of action research. Data were collected using existing documents and artifacts, classroom observations, and teacher interviews. The primary research question guiding this study is: how does a principal foster a collaborative culture to support instructional improvement through PLCs, classroom walkthroughs, and reflective coaching conversations? Three secondary questions guided deeper exploration of the primary question:

- How do professional learning communities foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?
- How do non-evaluative classroom walkthroughs and feedback foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?
- How do reflective coaching conversations following formal classroom observation foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?

Theoretical Framework

This study incorporated action research within a case study. Action research is inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders to an organization, but never *to* or *on* them (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Action research is a collaborative process, as emphasized in the following definition by McCutcheon and Jung (1990):

> [Action research is] systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry. The goals of such research are the understanding of practice and the articulation of a rationale or philosophy of practice in order to improve practice. (p. 148)

Additionally, Feldman provides this definition of action research:

> Action research happens when people are involved in researching their own practice in order to improve it and to come to a better understanding of their practice situations. It is action because they act within the systems that they are trying to improve and understand. It is research because it is systematic, critical inquiry made public." (Feldman, Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2018, p. 11)

As a practicing principal who is "in the work," action research is a logical framework to pursue. There are some key features of action research that pertain to this study. Action research is carried out by people directly concerned with the social situation that is being researched (Feldman et al., 2018). Action research starts from practical questions that derive from normal, day-to-day practice and that are compatible with values in the workplace. Most teachers place a high value on healthy, productive relationships with both their principal and colleagues.

Collaborating with others is another key feature and a long-term goal of action research. Some benefits of collaboration in action research include enhancing the creative potential of the group, stimulating abilities to investigate a situation, and mobilizing human resources to solve problems (Feldman et al., 2018).

Perhaps the most relevant aspect of action research that pertains to this study is the cyclical nature of the work. As Feldman et al. (2018) state: "to be a good action researcher you need to learn to reflect on what you do, speculate on the possible implications of every situation, and generate theories to be tested in action." Action research is an iterative process that combines theory with practice, through both reflection and action planning.

A case study is useful for understanding what, how, and why questions. It is also useful when it is important to look at relevant contextual conditions (Yin, 2003). A case study stems from an interest in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam, 1998).

Case studies have several unique features. First, a case study is particularistic, in that it focuses on a particular situation, event, or phenomenon. It can suggest to the reader what to do or what not to do in a similar situation (Merriam, 1998). It can examine a specific instance but illuminate a general problem. A case study is descriptive, meaning that the end-product is a rich, thick description of the topic being studied. It can illustrate the complexities of a given situation and can show the influence of personalities on an issue. It can also include vivid material such as quotations and interviews. A case study is heuristic, meaning that it helps illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon studied. It can also explain the reasons for a problem, the background of a situation, what happened, and why. It can explain why an innovation worked or why it did not (Merriam, 1998). Stake (1981) goes further in stating that case study

knowledge is more concrete and more contextual, so readers of a case study bring their own experiences and understandings to what is being described. In addition, when reading a case, the reader decides what generalizations are applicable to his/her own unique context.

A case study is an intensive analysis of an individual unit or a bounded system. For this study, the unit is defined as a single department (the math department) within a single middle school. There are different approaches to selecting a case. These include selecting the typical, the exemplary or model, or the unusual or unique. The math department at Progress Village represents an exemplary or model team. First, the team of eight teachers has remained intact for over three years. Of the eight teachers, seven were consistently rated in the highest category (highly effective) based on teacher evaluation scores. There has been consistent leadership in the department, including both the subject area leader (SAL) and the teacher talent developer (TTD). Both the SAL and the TTD are among the highest-rated teachers in both the school and the district. Student achievement data have shown a steady increase over the past three years. The department as a group has initiated more collaboration over the years, and the teachers generally appear to genuinely like each other.

Case study is particularly useful if you are interested in process. Case studies help us understand processes of events, projects, programs and discover characteristics of the context that can shed light on an issue (Merriam, 1998). This is a study focusing on multiple collaborative processes that are part of the instructional support system for teachers at Progress Village. These processes have gone through multiple iterations over the past three years. These iterations were the result of listening to feedback from teachers and attempting to improve the conditions for collaboration and the usefulness of each intervention as it relates to teacher

professional growth and instructional improvement. A brief overview of the interventions that were the focus of this study is provided next.

PLCs

During 2016-17 and 2017-18, PLCs met twice per month as an entire department (all grades 6, 7, and 8) and were led by a subject area leader, who was a full-time teacher. Feedback from teachers indicated a preference to meet more frequently and in smaller, grade level groups. So, in 2018-19 the master schedule was designed to provide common planning time, allowing grade level content teams (grade 6, grade 7, and grade 8 separately) to meet during the school day. In addition, a Teacher Talent Developer (TTD) position was used exclusively to provide facilitation to each grade level PLC. This position provided consistency in PLC implementation across grade levels.

Non-evaluative Walkthroughs

During the 2016-17 school year, Progress Village non-evaluative walkthroughs were conducted by administrators. Specific 'look-fors' were captured in the form of a yes/no checklist, and these data were aggregated and used to identify global trends and plan school-wide professional learning opportunities. Feedback from teachers indicated a desire for more specific and individualized feedback. In the 2017-18 school year, administrators and teachers both conducted 10-minute walkthroughs, using an individual written feedback form. Teachers received a one-time training in August 2017 and were expected to conduct at least one walkthrough each month. While this occurred with some consistency, feedback from teachers indicated the need for more group practice, and the need to receive more training on how to craft effective written feedback. As a result, in 2018-19, administrators and teachers conducted joint walkthroughs of open classrooms twice per month. Teachers practiced writing feedback with

each other, and they also received coaching from administrators, in an effort to improve the effectiveness of the feedback provided by teachers who were observing to teachers being observed.

Formal Observations

The district-approved process for conducting rated formal observations was used in 2016-17 ad 2017-18. Formal and informal observations were conducted by administrators, and evaluative ratings were posted within five business days following the observation. A post-conference with the administrator and teacher followed every formal observation. In a typical post-conference, the administrator provided, or told, the teacher what areas of strength were and what areas of growth were. Because these evaluative ratings typically count heavily in a teacher's final evaluation for the school year, teachers have a tendency to become hyper-focused on the ratings, which often compromises their commitment to other growth-oriented professional development activities. In an effort to mitigate this impact, ratings were not provided by administrators during the 2018-19 school year. In addition, the post-conference conversation between the administrator and teacher was more focused on teachers' own insights, perceived areas of growth, and self-identified next steps.

Setting

This study took place in the Hillsborough County Public School district. I have worked in the district for the past 15 years and am familiar with the policies and practices of the district. From April 2018 through November 2018, I was principal of Progress Village Middle Magnet School of the Arts (PV). Building a collaborative culture was the focus of my tenure as principal.

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS)

The eighth largest school district in the nation with nearly 218,000 students, HCPS is the largest employer in Hillsborough County, which is situated in the Tampa Bay area of Florida. The district has more than 308 school sites, including 142 K-5 elementary schools, 43 middle schools, 27 high schools, 5 K-8 schools, 4 career centers, and 49 charter schools (SDHC, 2018). The district's student population is culturally diverse—35.40% Hispanic, 33.42% White, 21.13% Black, 5.63% Multi-Racial, and 4.21% Asian. Of the students in the district 60.62% are classified as economically disadvantaged.

Beginning in the 2009-10 school year, HCPS was one of three school districts and four charter management organizations to participate in the Intensive Partnership for Effective Teaching (IP) initiative (named by the district as Empowering Effective Teachers, or EET). Designed and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, this initiative was a multi-year effort to dramatically improve student outcomes by increasing students' access to effective teaching (SDHC RAND Gates Report, 2018). HCPS received a total of $81 million for the project. EET signified a drastic shift in district policy and practices for teacher evaluation.

Prior to the EET initiative, teacher evaluation was based entirely on classroom observation. For experienced teachers, typically one observation was conducted every three years. Observations were conducted using a rubric based on the Florida Educator Accomplished Practices (FEAP). At the time the grant was awarded, HCPS was already in the process of developing a new rubric for teacher evaluation based on the 22 components of Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teaching* (2007). HCPS had also developed assessments to measure student learning in every subject in every grade.

During the initial year of grant implementation, 2010-11, the two major sources for teacher evaluation consisted of direct observation of how teachers teach using the Danielson rubric and value-added measures (VAM) based on state standardized test scores or district-generated test scores. Observations contributed to approximately 60% of the total evaluation score, with VAM scores contributing to the other 40%. From the 2010-11 school year until the 2015-16 school year, observations were conducted by site administrators and either a peer evaluator (for experienced teachers) or a swap mentor (for novice teachers). Each respective group's evaluation was weighted at 30%, aggregating to a total of 60%. Beginning in 2016-17, administrators became the sole conductors of observations, and thus the weight of administrator observations became 60% of a teacher's evaluation score. Under the current system in HCPS, every teacher is observed at least twice per school year.

Progress Village Magnet School of the Arts

This case focuses on Progress Village Middle Magnet School of the Arts (PV), one of 43 middle schools in the district. PV is located in the city of Tampa, Florida in the community of Progress Village. Progress Village was Tampa's first low-income housing suburb. It was planned as a neighborhood for low-income residents outside the city limits of Tampa. PV, located on the southern edge of Progress Village, opened as a neighborhood school in 1964 and converted to a full magnet school in 2001. As a magnet school, PV has a specialized theme—visual arts, performing arts, and communication. As a result, PV offers unique electives typically not offered at traditional schools, all focused on supporting and enhancing the magnet theme. All middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in the district are eligible to apply to attend PV, and the district uses a pure lottery system to select prospective students and offer them spots at the school. A lottery system provides an equal opportunity for all students to

attend because by definition the system randomly selects student applicants based on the number of available seats, as specified by the building principal. The student population is approximately 950 students, and the ethnicity is diverse—33% Black, 32% White, 26% Hispanic, 7% Multi Racial, and 2% Asian. Approximately 60% of the student population is classified as economically disadvantaged.

In the 2012-13 school year, the year preceding my tenure at PV, the school received a B grade under the state of Florida's School Accountability Report. PV received an A grade for both the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years. As assessments changed based on the newly-adopted Florida Standards, PV received a B grade for the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years. In the current year (2017-18) PV received an A grade.

Collaborative structures and processes. Multiple structures and processes exist at PV to support teacher collaboration. The first and most important structure is content-specific professional learning communities (PLCs). These teams consist of teachers that share a common subject area (i.e., math, science, etc.). Led by department subject area leaders (SALs), the focus of these teams is to deepen their understanding of content standards, develop common assessments to measure student learning, and create implementation plans in response to real-time student achievement data analysis. Subject PLC's meet formally monthly as an entire department.

In addition, the master schedule provides for common planning time for each grade-level content area, and grade level content teams meet weekly in mini-PLCs to delve deeper into the work. The work in weekly mini-PLCs is facilitated by teacher talent developers (TTDs). TTDs are teacher leaders that teach for half of the day and are provided released time for the other half of the day. A TTD's role is to provide job-embedded supports to teachers in a coaching

capacity. Examples of job-embedded supports include conducting individual coaching cycles, collaborative planning meetings with both individual teachers or teacher teams, modeling and co-teaching of lessons, reflective conversations based on classroom observations, supports in analyzing formative assessment data, creating action plans in response to data analysis, and support in deconstructing standards to better understand what the standards look like in practice. TTDs work in tandem with SALs and administrators to provide a comprehensive system of support for all teachers in their respective departments.

A second PLC structure at PV is study groups. Newly formed and piloted during the 2017-18 school year, these teams consist of randomly-assigned heterogeneous groups of teachers. The purpose of study groups in 2017-18 was to provide a forum for teachers to strengthen their learning around our school-wide focus of building formative assessment systems in each classroom. Study groups met monthly to deepen learning around strategies such as writing purposeful learning targets, checking for understanding, and providing formative feedback to students. Study group facilitators rotated each month as a method of distributing teacher leadership and capitalizing on existing teacher strengths. Built into study groups was an expectation that teachers would observe at least one other teacher monthly to provide feedback to each other. This collaborative structure was well-received by the teachers and continued in the 2018-19 school year. The topic of focus of each group, however, varied, as teachers were given the opportunity to select a specific topic of choice to study as a group.

Our administrative staff, consisting of two assistant principals and myself, is instrumental in supporting these collaborative teams. For content PLCs, each administrator is assigned specific groups to work closely with in a coaching role. For example, I worked with the math department, one assistant principal is assigned language arts and reading departments, and our

other assistant principal is assigned social studies and science departments. As supporting administrators, we regularly attend PLCs and mini-PLC's to learn alongside teachers. We also conduct short, frequent, non-evaluative walkthroughs in teachers' classrooms to provide verbal and/or written feedback on a regular basis. Feedback to teachers is typically related to one of three topics: 1) feedback related to our school-wide focus of creating a classroom formative assessment system, 2) feedback related to a specific teacher-selected pedagogical technique, or 3) a teacher request for feedback related to an instructional strategy being implemented in the current unit of instruction.

Feedback related to school-wide instructional focus. Our school-wide instructional focus is on every classroom having a formative assessment system. Based on the work of Dylan Wiliam (2011), we have established three key look-for's: having a clear, standards-based learning target, collecting evidence of learning, and providing feedback the moves learning forward. Using these three formative assessment look-for's, teachers are provided feedback on whether or not these elements were observed during a walkthrough via a yes/no checklist. Teachers may also be provided with a written descriptive example of an observed look-for, and they may be provided with a suggestion or a thought-provoking question on how to move their practice forward. Our administrative team uses this format as a default format when conducting classroom walkthroughs.

Feedback related to a specific teacher-selected pedagogical technique. Our second school-wide look-for-- collecting evidence of learning--can be accomplished through a variety of strategies, including cla

ssroom discussion, activities, or assignments. For example, a technique that could be used to collect evidence of learning could be a cold call discussion technique. Through a system called #observeme, teachers are encouraged to identify a specific teaching technique that they want to practice over an extended period of time and post this on their classroom door. By making teaching learning goals public, administrators and peers know what each teacher is working on, and feedback opportunities can be tailored to a teacher's specific development goals.

Feedback related to a teacher-specific request. Throughout the school year, teacher teams in mini-PLCs make decisions to try different strategies to support student learning. For example, a team of language arts teachers decided to focus on the use of the gradual release model during a writing unit. In these cases, feedback can be tailored to a strategy identified by the teacher.

Formal classroom observation. This year I was more intentional about making the formal classroom observation process more collaborative than in years past. Historically, each administrator is assigned specific teachers to conduct their formal rated observations. Formal classroom observations consist of a pre-conference, full period observation, and a post-conference. During a typical post-conference, the administrator shares strengths and areas of development from the observed lesson, and determines next steps with the teacher. Evaluator ratings are uploaded into the record-keeping system at conclusion of the cycle.

This year, I modified my process in an effort to be more collaborative with teachers. After completing an observation, I provided teachers with my raw evidence/notes from the observation, absent of any interpretation or evaluation. The post-conference was driven by the teacher's reflections, insights, and goals. Evaluative ratings were not included in the process; instead, the focus was strictly on co-constructed next steps that would likely lead to instructional

improvement. Instead of using ratings from historically "high-stakes" observations, teachers used these observations, combined with artifacts and work from our school's other collaborative structures (PLCs, walkthroughs, etc.), to assemble a learning portfolio. The portfolio, representing overall practice as opposed to individual rated lessons, is presented at the end of the year and used to inform final evaluation ratings based on overall practice and not individual observations.

In addition, I am the sole evaluator for formal rated observations, in order to keep consistency across campus. By relieving this responsibility from the assistant principals, it creates a situation where the two of them are more likely to be perceived by teachers as coaches than evaluators, which could prove to be a key in developing more trusting and collaborative relationships.

Reflexivity Statement and Researcher Bias

The 2017-18 school year was my 15th year as a public educator and my fifth year as principal at PV. As a leader, fostering a collaborative culture is one of my top priorities because I have seen first-hand the benefits of teamwork through my lived childhood and college experiences as an athlete. As a three-sport high school athlete and a Division 1 baseball player in college, I participated on teams where I was the youngest, most inexperienced player. I also participated on teams where I was the best player and assumed a leadership role-and everything in between.

Aware of potential bias towards collaboration, I used a research journal to capture my thoughts, feelings, and reactions in my interactions with participants as I completed this study. I was be mindful of my biases as I selected participants for this study, assuring I included teachers who embraced collaboration to varying degrees. My personal reflections and insights throughout

the research process served as a basis for more generalized understanding and interpretations (Finlay, 2002).

I relate most closely to the constructivist paradigm, believing that realities are different based on the lens of each individual person's lived experience. I think we should strive to embrace multiple perspectives. My family is very diverse—I have two siblings, one niece, and one nephew with disabilities, a bi-racial marriage, and have two bi-racial daughters. Each person's cultural identity is different and worthy of respect.

My work as the principal at PV for the past five years focused heavily on building collaborative structures, fostering trusting relationships, focusing on teamwork, and creating a sense of urgency to ensure that all students are successful. I find the greatest challenge of this work is fostering the culture where adults trust each other and are willing to take ownership for the success of ALL students. To me, teamwork is the best way to accomplish our goals in the education system. I value and appreciate the role that teachers play in the success of our students. In this era of accountability in schools, I feel that teachers have been unfairly scapegoated for many societal issues that they did not cause, and as a result I am deeply committed to supporting teachers' growth. This includes exploring ways through which I can leverage the collaborative structures and processes we have established at PV to change my interactions with teachers in the evaluation process and their experiences in that process to be more positive and growth-oriented. To accomplish this, I believe we need to co-construct this experience.

I was the principal of the school under study until November 2018, when I was reassigned to another school with the district. As the former principal of the school under study, it was important to manage the potential perceived power imbalance between the teacher

participants and me, the researcher. I recognized that when asked, teachers may feel pressure to participate because their former supervisor was asking, and they may be fearful of any consequences of saying 'no'. I disclosed that participation is completely voluntary, that participants could opt out at any time, and I continuously checked with teachers throughout the research process to ensure they were comfortable participating. The study was not discussed with teachers in any setting related to their evaluation, and I reinforced this in my interactions with participants.

I was reassigned to another school and was no longer evaluating the research participants in May 2019. However, I recognized that there may be a remaining power dynamic between teacher and former supervisor, so there was possibility that in lieu of speaking their complete truth, participants may opt to tell me what they think I wanted to hear. Knowing this, I was sure to probe teacher responses for more clarification, elaboration, and details to gain clarity to their responses. In addition, I asked multiple questions relating to any given theme and compared responses from the same teacher to identify any inconsistencies in their responses. Data may be more trustworthy when responses from the same participant are compared for consistency. Discrepancies were discussed with the participant to seek clarification.

Data Collection

There are several moving parts and layers of support that aid in growing and developing teachers. These elements include layers of leadership, team membership, structures, and processes that are interrelated and interdependent. I wanted to capture perspectives from multiple layers within the school (i.e., administrators, teacher leaders, teacher teams, and individual teachers) to understand how each layer impacts others. The bounded unit for this case study was the *math department* within the school.

Data for this study consisted of a combination of archival data/documents, focus group interviews, and individual interviews. A logic diagram is provided (see Figure 2) to represent the proposed flow of activities for the study.

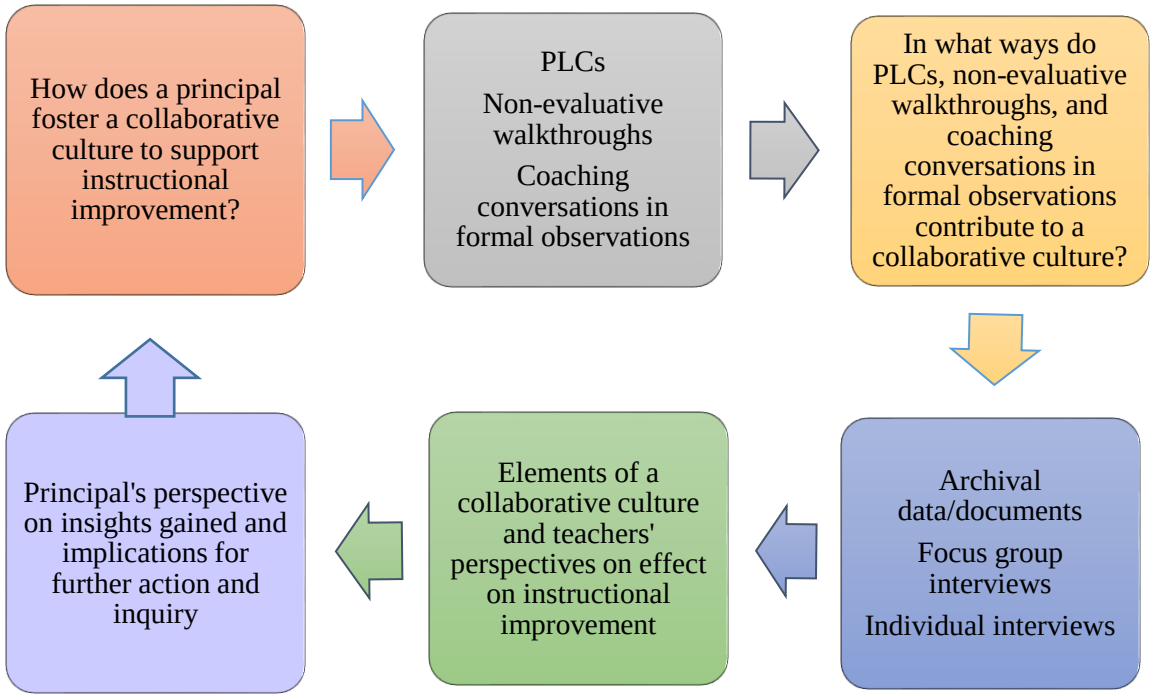

Figure 2. Logic diagram representing the flow of activities for the study.

In this study, I examined how I worked to foster a collaborative culture at Progress Village through three interventions: PLCs, non-evaluative walkthroughs, and coaching conversations in formal observations. I focused on the case of the math department. Both the math department and the school have been engaged in repeated action research cycles where the three specific interventions of the study have been refined and improved over time. The math department represents a group of teachers that appear to embrace collaboration and could be considered an exemplary team. The goal of this study was to gain deeper insight and understanding of the effects of these interventions in fostering a collaborative culture in the math department to support instructional improvement, focusing on the 2017-18 school year. To do

this, I organized and reviewed data/documents that already exist from daily, normal work routines, then a critical friend conducted focus group interviews with each of the grade level mini-PLCs, and finally I conducted individual teacher interviews with the nine teachers that comprise the department.

Archival Data/Documents Embedded in Daily Routines

As Herr and Anderson (2015) discuss, insider action research often feels like no clear beginning, meaning that "it often has been embedded in the problem solving of the practitioner or institution for some time" (p. 99). As such, some archival data/documents were already available that have relevance to my study. Collecting archival data/documents from embedded routines allowed me to get a *broad scan* of the level of engagement and effectiveness of the three interventions that were implemented to foster a collaborative culture and support instructional improvement.

PLCs. PLCs meet monthly, and mini-PLCs meet weekly. Among the data/documents that the PLCs and mini-PLCs maintain during the school year are lesson plan samples, samples of student work, data analysis samples, and implementation plans. Using purposive sampling, I looked at implementation plans from each of the mini-PLCs for 2017-18. The implementation plans are based on teachers' repeated, cyclical analysis of student work and resulting action steps taken. The mini-PLCs organize by grade level—6th, 7th, and 8th grade. In addition, within the 8th grade we have two distinct teams—a pre-algebra team and an algebra team. So, using purposive sampling, I looked at a sample of implementation plans from the math department, organized by the four groups within the department.

Another data source was my records of my work with the math department PLC and mini-PLCs. First, I had my notes from my observations of the PLCs and mini-PLCs. Second, at

the end of the first and third quarters, I met with these teacher teams to discuss each team's progress. At the end of the second quarter, I met with individual teachers to discuss their learning reflections and provide feedback on their learning. During these meetings, I periodically wrote meeting summaries and reflections in my reflective journal.

In addition, I met weekly for two hours with my Assistant Principals (APs) to discuss instruction, and I included in one of these hours the teacher talent developers (TTDs). APs and TTDs provide direct support to PLCs by attending their meetings, facilitating conversations where needed, and providing follow-up coaching throughout the entire school year. My notes from my meetings with my APs and TTDs provided another data source.

All of these archival data/documents assisted me in contextualizing the topics that teachers talked about in the focus groups and individual interviews regarding the PLCs.

Non-evaluative classroom walkthroughs and feedback. Administrators conduct regular, frequent, non-evaluative walkthroughs and provide written, and sometimes verbal, feedback. The goal is to conduct ten walkthroughs per teacher for the year, with each walkthrough lasting 10-15 minutes in length. Each week in our administrative staff meetings, we discuss what we are seeing in classrooms, and each month I reviewed a sample of written feedback that our administrators were providing to teachers. For this study, I reviewed a sample of administrators' written feedback to teachers observed in the math department during 2017-18.

Teachers observed peers with a school-wide expectation to complete one peer observation with feedback monthly beginning in January 2018. After observing their peers, teachers provided written feedback, and the teachers observed wrote a reflection. I reviewed completed teacher walkthrough and reflection documents during my second quarter reflection

meetings with individual teachers. I selected a sample of these documents focusing exclusively on math teachers.

The walkthrough documents helped me to reflect on what teachers were saying in the focus groups and individual interviews, in relation to feedback they received from the walkthroughs and reflective comments they made. This helped me think about instructional decisions and actions teachers were describing in in relation to topics they were discussing in their PLCs.

Feedback reflections from the formal observation process. In the formal observation process, teachers also receive written feedback. After conducting a formal observation, I provided teachers with the raw data from my observation notes. Prior to the post-conference, teachers were expected to reflect on the observed lesson and the raw data from the observation. In the post-conference, teachers talked about what they perceived to be their strengths and areas for growth. Teachers were then encouraged through coaching conversations to establish their next steps and goals for instructional improvement. After the post-conference conversation, I wrote my own notes of my initial impressions of their engagement and reaction to the post-conference. These archival documents provided examples of the feedback teachers received; notes on the teachers' reflections on their observed lessons, strengths, and areas for growth; notes on the coaching conversations; and my observations and reflections on the teachers' engagement in the coaching conversations. Again, I selected examples focusing the math department teachers.

In addition, during the 2017-18 school year teachers were expected to maintain a binder of documents and artifacts that they perceived to chronicle their professional learning. As part of the annual evaluation process, teachers communicated to me their self-evaluations of their

growth and development. I made written notes of my thoughts about their binders and their self-evaluations. I selected examples related to the math department teachers.

The formal observation documents helped me to think about ways in which teachers were making changes in instructional practices and setting goals for professional growth. This also provided me a way to situate the changes they were making in relation to their collaborative planning in the PLCs and in working with the TTD.

Focus Group Interviews

I used a critical friend (the TTD that works in the math department) to conduct focus group interviews with three of the four teacher teams from within our math department. The reason that the fourth team was not be included in this study is because membership changed in the middle of the year due to one of the teachers transferring to another school. The focus group interviews were structured to allow me to compare each group's experiences and perspectives to identify common themes. Comparison of focus groups' responses was important because the groups were exposed to the same school-wide processes and support system, but it is likely that their experiences would be different. I anticipated that structured interviews would be easier for the critical friend to conduct, and as teachers trusted the TTD, I felt teachers would be more open and candid in their responses. See Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Questions.

Individual Interviews

I conducted an individual interview with the math TTD to better understand the experiences from a teacher leader perspective. I used a semi-structured interview format with multiple open-ended questions in order to allow for the participant to take the conversation in ways that her constructed realities might lead her. Having a few pre-scripted questions helped in

guiding the conversation to elicit meaningful data relating to my research questions. See Appendix B: Teacher Talent Developer Interview Questions.

Finally, I conducted individual teacher interviews. I used purposive sampling to identify a total of four teachers to interview. Purposive sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher wants to learn, understand, or gain insight and therefore needs to select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 1998). Patton (1990) argues that "the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in information rich cases for study in depth. Information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposive sampling" (p. 169).

I used two criteria in selecting my sample of teachers to interview. First, I interviewed two exemplary teachers from the math department that appeared to be the most invested in their own learning. For the third and fourth interviews, I selected two additional math teachers that have worked at multiple schools and therefore have been evaluated by a variety of principals within different school-wide systems of support. I felt this sample would provide me with yet another means for comparison. See Appendix C: Teacher Interview Questions.

Research Journal

I am an insider in this action research study; I am "in" the work. As such, I maintained a research journal where my thoughts, feelings, reactions, and impressions were chronicled as data were collected and analyzed. It also contained reflections and understandings that were brought about during the study. The research journal assisted me in keeping a running record of choices and consequences made by myself and others (Herr & Anderson, 2015). It helped me synthesize what was described by participants across the multiple levels of the instructional support system: administrators, TTDs, SALs, PLCs, mini-PLCs, and teachers.

IRB Approval

All data were collected under District and IRB approval (see Appendix D: District Approval of Research and Appendix E: IRB Approval of Research). Prior to conducting any focus group or individual interviews, signed informed consent were collected from each participant, following IRB guidelines (see Appendix F: Participant Letter and Appendix G: Informed Consent). Interviews were recorded, with participant permission, using multiple devices, and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. Recordings were transcribed.

Signed physical copies of the informed consent as well as other physical data that are not the property of the participants or middle school were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the College of Education at USF. Recordings and transcriptions were stored digitally in a Box.com folder per IRB guidelines. After completion of the study, digital and physical data will be retained for 5 years and then permanently deleted from the Box.com folder or shredded and disposed of properly.

Data Analysis

This study used a grounded theory approach to develop theoretical explanations that emerged from the data. The purpose of grounded theory is to create theory that emerges from, or is grounded in, the field (Lichtman, 2013). Grounded theory is described by Charmaz (2006) as the following: "[D]ata form the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct" (p. 2). Two key elements of grounded theory were used in this study: theoretical sampling and saturation, and a specific approach to coding the data.

Theoretical sampling occurs when multiple pieces of data are selected and subsequently analyzed through an iterative process until no new ideas emerge from the data. When no new ideas emerge, the data are said to be saturated (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross, & Rusk, 2007).

The basic strategy for a grounded theory approach to data analysis is to constantly compare data sets (Merriam, 1998). Using the constant comparative method for data analysis, I compared data from one interview, observation, or field notes with data from another interview, observation, or field notes (Lichtman, 2013). These comparisons led to tentative categories that were then compared to each other until a theory gradually emerged. Breaking down the data into digestible chunks was accomplished by using coding, specifically, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Feldman, Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2018; Lichtman, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Connolly (2003) refers to these three phases of coding as generative, interpretive, and theorizing.

Open Coding

Open coding is the beginning of the coding process. Open coding involves categorizing, clustering, and summarizing data. As documents were inspected, observation notes were scanned, and interview transcripts were reviewed, a few words or labels were attached to describe a small passage. This small label is referred to as a code (Feldman et al., 2018). After initial coding, I looked for ways to group codes into broader categories, keeping in mind my research questions as I coded. Open coding occurred as close to data collection as possible, as what I was learning from the coding process is a form of analysis in itself, and it informed my next steps in the research process. Data were coded using each of the research questions.

How do professional learning communities foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice? In order to answer this question, I listened for teacher comments related to learning and growth in the PLC structure, specifically the support they received in monthly PLCs or weekly mini-PLC's. I looked for and listened for adjustments teachers made to their

instruction, new strategies attempted in the classroom as a result of collaboration, benefits received from working with colleagues, and challenges that occurred in collaboration.

How do non-evaluative classroom walkthroughs and feedback foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice? In order to answer this question, I listened for connections that teachers made between feedback received from either an administrator or a colleague and their own instructional practices. I also looked and listened for any adjustments or action steps taken by teachers as the result of feedback.

How do reflective coaching conversations following formal classroom observation foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice? In order to answer this question, I looked and listened for any connections teachers made to formal observations and improved practices. I listened for any comments that teachers communicated relating to feeling more empowered or having a greater voice in their own growth. I also listened for a lack of comments regarding feelings of empowerment among teachers.

Axial Coding

Axial coding involves synthesizing categories of codes generated during the open coding process to reveal broader patterns and themes. Moving from open codes, I related the initial codes to one another (Lichtman, 2013).

Lichtman (2013) breaks down the process of data analysis similarly, using a six-step process. The steps used during my analysis are summarized below:

Step 1: Initial coding. An initial code can be a word or phrase used to describe a chunk of text.

Step 2: Revisiting initial coding. Collapse and rename some of the codes, with a focus on removing redundancies, clarifying terms, and renaming synonyms.

Step 3: Developing initial list of categories. Organize codes into categories, using codes as major topics, subsets of categories, or no category at all.

Step 4: Modify initial list based on rereading. Determine which categories are the most important and which categories may be able to be combined, to move towards recognizing the most important concepts or themes.

Step 5: Revisit categories and subcategories. Revisit categories to ensure that the most important themes have been identified.

Step 6: Moving from categories to concepts. Identify key concepts that reflect the meaning I attach to the data collected.

Selective Coding

Lastly, I used selective coding. Selective coding seeks to provide explanation to developing theories that emerge from the data (Smith, 2014).

Following is a summary overview of the research questions, data sources, and data analysis:

Research Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
How do professional learning communities foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?	*PLC archival data/documents *Focus group interviews *TTD interview	*Open, axial, and selective coding
How do non-evaluative classroom walkthroughs and feedback foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?	*#observeme archival documents *individual interviews	*Open, axial, and selective coding
How do reflective coaching conversations following formal classroom observations foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?	*Researcher's notes on coaching conversations with teachers *Teacher reflections and professional learning binders *Individual interviews	*Open, axial, and selective coding

Figure 3. Data sources used and methods of analysis for each research question.

Validation Strategies

Most action research traditions agree on the following goals of action research: the creation of new knowledge, accomplishing action-oriented outcomes, new learning for both the researcher and the participants, relevant results in the local setting, and sound and appropriate research methodology (Herr & Anderson, 2014). With these goals in mind, multiple strategies for validation of findings were used in this study.

Triangulation

Triangulation refers to using a variety of data sources—for example, interviews and archival data/documents—so that one is not limited to only one kind of data source (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Lichtman, 2013; Merriam, 1998). It can also refer to triangulation of participants—for example in my case, a teacher, an assistant principal, or myself (the researcher). It can also come in the form of analyst triangulation—for example a critical friend or member of an action research group (Feldman et al., 2018). For my study, multiple methods were used in data collection, including interviews, focus group interviews, archival documents, informal conversation notes from PLC's, mini-PLCs, staff meetings, and a research journal. In addition, the study also used a critical friend (teacher TTD) to conduct the focus group interviews with individual grade-level PLCs.

Member Checks

Data and my tentative interpretations were taken back to the participants from whom they were derived to determine if the results were plausible (Merriam, 1998). I incorporated member checks during both the data collection and data analysis process by providing interview transcripts, archival data/documents, preliminary findings, etc. to participants for their clarification and feedback.

Peer Examination

I got feedback from multiple colleagues throughout the research process. These individuals served to challenge my assumptions, identify any blind spots that emerged from my own personal biases, and checked for consistency and clarity in my analysis of findings. One peer currently serves as my principal coach in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education I3 grant studying the National Institute of School Leadership's Executive Development Program curriculum, which I participated in last year. I consult with my coach on a regular basis. A second critical friend was my district professional learning liaison, who has been a constant sounding board for me. A third critical friend was a high-performing current assistant principal in my district who is also a close friend. In addition, my dissertation committee members are experts in the field. For example, one of my co-chairs has done extensive work in the field of teacher evaluation, and another committee member is one of the nation's thought leaders in the field of action research.

Time in the Field

This study occurred throughout the 2018-19 school year. The study was built on data from some existing practices at Progress Village and incorporated new data from interviews, focus groups, document collection, etc. Based on the school's 2017-18 TELL survey, 92.2% of teachers responded favorably to the statement "there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect at this school." I was immersed in the work setting until November 2018, and high levels of trust existed in the school; trust continued as relationships developed through repeated interactions during the study.

Rich, Thick Description

I provide detailed description of the setting and context so that readers will be able to determine the transferability of my analysis and conclusions (Tracy, 2010). I also use multiple quotations and examples from my data. Merriam (1998) describes this process as an *audit trail*, where in order for an audit to take place, one must "explain in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry" (p. 207).

Limitations

Trust is the oil that lubricates the engine of collaboration. The methods in this study relied heavily on collaborative relationships built on trust and mutual respect, between teachers and administrators and among teachers themselves. Trust is also fragile and can be compromised, sometimes unintentionally, at any time. I recognize that levels of trust may have fluctuated during the study and may have influenced outcomes of this study.

Power dynamics between administrators and teachers may influence teachers' decisions on whether or not to participate in interviews and focus groups, and the power dynamics may influence what teachers say and how they respond to interview questions. I was aware that my role as the former evaluator of teachers may make some teachers say what they think I want to hear, versus being authentic, open, and honest in sharing their experiences. I tried to reduce this effect by clearly communicating the importance of this study, as well communicating the potential implications in the findings that might directly impact the teachers.

As is common with qualitative studies, findings may or may not be applicable to other school contexts or populations. Data collected were contextualized to Progress Village. Only the reader of this study can determine the extent to which findings are applicable to his/her own context.

Chapter Summary

This chapter situates the study as a case study, guided by elements of action research. The context in which the case study occurred is described, beginning with important elements of the school district and followed by a more detailed description of the collaborative structures and processes at the middle school. Next, data sources are described, including the use of existing archival data/documents embedded in daily routines, focus group interviews, individual interviews, and researcher's anecdotal notes. Data analysis is discussed next, including specific coding techniques associated with the constant comparative method of analysis. Finally, strategies to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data were described.

CHAPTER FOUR:
FINDINGS

This study grew out of my desire to work alongside teachers to establish a collaborative culture in which teachers could learn and grow as professionals. The primary intent of the interventions applied in this study was to create the conditions where teachers can work together, learn and grow together, and impact student achievement in a positive manner. The primary research question guiding this study was: how does a principal foster a collaborative culture to support instructional improvement through PLCs, classroom walkthroughs, and reflective coaching conversations? Three sub-questions guided deeper exploration of the primary question:

- How do professional learning communities foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?
- How do non-evaluative classroom walkthroughs and feedback foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?
- How do comments-only coaching conversations following formal classroom observation foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?

This study was situated in case study and action research. I was a principal actor in the research, serving as principal of the school studied. The math department was selected as the specific case because the department stood out as a model of collaboration. Transcripts from focus groups, transcripts from individual teacher and TTD interviews, and PLC and classroom walkthrough archival documents were analyzed. Findings of the study are presented in relation to the three sub-questions listed previously.

Analysis of PLCs

For the purposes of this study, professional learning communities (PLCs) were defined as educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour & DuFour, 2009).

In order to fully understand the data it is first necessary to describe the context of the school and the history of PLCs as an intervention in this specific school. Of the three interventions pertaining to this study, PLCs have spanned the longest period of time, incurring multiple iterations of action research cycles in an effort to improve the practice and dating back as far to the initial launch of PLCs during the 2013-14 school year.

Prior to my arrival in April 2013, the school had a history of being high-performing, having achieved an "A" rating for nearly ten years. However, beginning in 2010-11, the school began to slightly decline and ultimately dropped to a "B" grade in 2012-13, the year in which I arrived at the school. Upon my arrival, I conducted a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis by engaging in 10-minute individual interviews with teachers and staff members to help me better understand the perceived needs of the school. During these individual interviews, multiple teachers pointed to perceived inequitable disciplinary practices across the campus that disproportionately affected poor and minority students. Upon further investigation, other triangulated data points supported this perception. For example, a list of 18 students who received a principal warning letter in January of that year for the possible loss of their magnet status due to their behavior were 100% minority. In addition, 85% of the students that did not attend the 8th grade end of the year field trip were minority, many of whom stated they could not access the field trip due to the high cost of the admission to the park. In addition, a separate field day activity held on campus as a quarterly incentive revealed another instance

where minority students were disproportionately denied access because of low grades or misbehavior.

After sharing my findings with the faculty and staff and observing their reactions, I reached two important conclusions. First, many teachers were unaware of these circumstances. They were *not using any data to drive decision-making*. While some teachers were initially defensive when confronted with these data, several teachers expressed a sincere desire to examine current practices to make positive change. For the first time, some teachers saw a need for change. Second, *structures and expectations for problem-solving collaboration around student outcomes did not exist*. As a performing-arts magnet school, collaboration existed among arts teachers in planning and coordinating performances. Collaborative structures did not exist, however, to regularly review student work and common assessments, and collaborative structures did not exist to provide opportunities to discuss students that needed more support in order to be successful. It was this context that began the launch of the first action research cycle around PLCs at the beginning of the 2013-14 school year.

Launching PLCs and strengthening teachers' use of data to inform decisions became a priority in the 2013-14 school year. During this year, all PLCs met on the same day, twice a month after school, and were facilitated by the subject area leaders. All three grade levels (grades 6, 7, and 8) met together. The focus of the PLCs was using formative and interim assessment data to inform instruction. Structural changes were also made to the master schedule to provide common daily planning time for teachers who taught the same grade level within the same subject area. While nothing can be mandated during teacher planning time based on the district contract language, this structural change provided an additional opportunity for teachers to collaborate if they chose to do so. By the end of the 2013-14 school year, the existing subject

area leader was removed and replaced with a different leader. This new teacher, who began leading the math department in the 2014-15 school year, evolved into the Teacher Talent Developer (TTD) at the time of this study.

Teacher Leadership and Support

Improvements and adjustments to PLC work occurred throughout subsequent years. One major leadership adjustment began in the 2016-17 school year, when the district piloted a teacher talent developer position (TTD) in fifty of its schools. The TTD unit provided for a half-day of release time for two teacher leaders, with the intent of those teachers being able to provide real-time, on-campus support to any teacher in need. In 2016-17 we used this unit to provide support from one teacher leader (with a language arts background) in language arts and social studies, while using the second teacher leader (with a math background) to provide support in math and science. In an attempt to leverage the power of teacher teams and maximize the impact of the TTDs, these two teacher leaders attempted to facilitate the use of formative assessment data to drive decisions in PLCs. In terms of the math/science TTD, who is a major actor in this study, it proved difficult to facilitate this work in the science department, which was a subject where the TTD had little content knowledge. This lack of science content knowledge lessened the TTD's perceived value, from the perspective of the science teachers. By the 2018-19 school year, we expanded to four TTDs, adding two in the content areas of science and social studies. Each TTD had extensive content knowledge in the subject area that he/she was supporting.

PLC structure. In the initial launch in 2013-2014 and for the first three years of the PLC reform the math department, consisting of eight teachers in grades 6-8, met as one whole group twice per month after school. The PLCs were facilitated by the subject area leader, who was also a full-time teacher. The most significant structural adjustments came through built-in supports in

the master schedule. For example, common planning time by grade level content area (e.g., 6th grade math) became a priority. When the TTD unit was added, the three release time periods coincided with teacher team common planning time, thus providing the opportunity for formal or informal PLCs to be embedded within the school day. By the 2018-19 school year, all three grade levels within the math department met formally once per week during their planning period, despite the fact that this could not be required contractually. Informal conversations about teaching practice were also a regular occurrence.

PLC process. The PLC process became more structured and effective over time. Initial PLC work spanned cycles lasting for an entire unit. Within math, a typical unit lasted 3-4 weeks. In the 2014-15, 2015-16, and 2016-17 school years, teachers would discuss the results of unit tests in PLCs. General minutes were taken by the subject area leader and submitted to administration for review. I would characterize this process as more compliance-driven than an engaging, purposeful activity that teachers valued and took ownership of. Two major hindrances to improving the PLC process became apparent to me during this time. First, there is little time available to build the skills of the teacher leader, who is critical in this work. At the time, subject area leaders were full-time teachers who needed their one period free from students to plan their own individual lessons. Time is needed for a principal to regularly discuss instruction with the content leaders, to plan PLC agendas together, and to coach the subject area leader in their roles as PLC facilitator. This proved difficult to accomplish with the leaders shouldering the burden of a full teaching load. Second, the process as it existed provided little ownership and accountability at the teacher level. Other than minutes submitted by the leaders, there were no explicit products of collaboration expected from teachers, and there was minimal connection to

the teacher's final annual evaluation, which relied heavily on individually rated classroom observations coupled with value-added measures (VAM) based on student test scores.

The addition of the TTD role in 2016-17 promoted improvements to the PLC process because now a teacher leader with deep content knowledge was available to meet more regularly with smaller groups of teachers, prepare documents in advance to facilitate teacher learning, bridge outside resources, document teacher learning within PLCs, and pull data in advance of PLC meetings. Over the summer of 2017, the leadership team developed a PLC formative assessment implementation plan template to be used across the school and to guide the work of PLCs for the 2017-18 school year. This template was based on the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle. Each cycle lasted about eight weeks. As a school-wide practice, each PLC selected one subject area standard based on relevant assessment data and student work analysis. Then strategies were identified to address the standard of focus ("Plan"). During the subsequent weeks, teachers implemented the strategies and best practices they studied in PLCs, while engaging in short cycles of formative assessment ("Do"). During subsequent PLCs, each grade level team reviewed formative data—for example exit tickets or student work samples—to determine next steps ("Check" and "Act").

This standardized form (implementation template) was not embraced by all of the math teachers, nor was the process of selecting one standard to focus on for an eight-week cycle. It was in the context of this resistance that a critical moment occurred in the eyes of both the TTD and some of the math teachers. This will be discussed in an upcoming section.

Buy-in and ownership of the PLC process among math teachers operated at high levels during the fall of 2018. Unit planners, developed by the TTD with extensive input from the math teachers, were commonly used to guide planning conversations. As teachers reviewed test item

specifications, multiple checks for understanding were co-created within a unit and became the fuel for subsequent PLC conversations. Data tracking systems were jointly developed by teams of teachers, and student work became the focus of PLCs. Over the span of these five years, math became an exemplary model PLC.

PLC Topics Discussed

The initial review within the intervention of PLCs revealed topics discussed by teachers. The topic of PLCs was discussed in both the grade level focus group interviews and the individual teacher interviews. Table 1 provides examples of topics that were extracted from the focus group and individual interview transcripts and coded as PLCs.

Table 1

Topics Discussed under the PLC Theme

Theme	**Discussion Topics**
PLCs	• Knowledge of standards • Looking at student work • Regrouping of students with different teachers • Sharing re-teaching ideas • TTD as content expert • Create formative assessments • Identify prerequisite knowledge • Resource sharing • Mini-lessons • TTD open and vulnerable • Exit tickets • Focus on what students learn • Lack of time • Prioritizing standards • TTD trusting relationship • Vulnerability among teachers • Deepen understanding of the standard • Autonomy with guidelines • Flexible • Alignment with evaluation portfolio • Common assessments

A complete listing of all of the excerpts related to this theme is located in Appendix H. A total of 258 examples from focus groups and interview transcripts were coded under the PLC theme, representing 74% percent of the total coding for the study. Subsequent review of the initial coding identified categories that emerged from the data. The categories were then reviewed and collapsed into five sub-themes, which are identified in Table 2.

Table 2

Subthemes in Topics Discussed under the Theme of PLCs

Subtheme	**Examples from Focus Groups and Interviews**
Collaborative standards-based planning	• Deepening understanding of the standard • Based on standards • Conversations about skills needed for success • Surface misconceptions of students • Standards documents completed for the year • Create common assessments as a team
Collaborative data analysis and student work analysis	• Formative assessment practices • Conversations around student learning • Analyze data by skill • Data analysis tools from colleagues • Student data chats • Analyze at a deeper level • Identify breakdown in learning
Modifications and adjustments to instruction	• Idea from colleague about graphic organizer • Idea from colleague about music, rhyme, and dance into lessons • Decisions to move based on data • Conversation to help differentiate • Importance of response to learning • Interleaving—fractions and decimals infused in future lessons
Trust, safety, and vulnerability	• Relationships contribute to success • Trust in leader, able to speak up about concerns • Autonomy with guidelines • Build trust by knowing your people • Build human connections • Willing to listen and be heard • Feel valued • Safe environment • Teammates that are friendly, nonjudgmental, open • Low stakes environment • Trust and vulnerability

Time	• Lack of time • Embed time in workday • Importance of common planning time • Common planning time • Resistance at first due to lack of time

It became apparent through the analysis of focus group and interview transcripts, as well as analysis of PLC artifacts, that the PLC followed a continuous action research cycle of formative assessment, as described by Dylan Wiliam (2011). This is reflected in the first three sub-themes. Additionally, underpinning the cycle is the critical function of trust, safety, and vulnerability. Finally, time emerged as a fifth sub-theme in the data.

Collaborative standards-based planning. The first theme that emerged from the data was collaborative standards-based planning. Focus group interviews revealed a strong focus on unpacking standards at the outset of units of instruction. For example:

- 7th grade focus group transcript, Page 1,"I like the unpacking, thinking about what I should think about before I actually set the lesson, what skills, what they should come with, sometimes they don't come with them, so maybe thinking about what I should reveal before…"
- 7th grade focus group transcript, Page 1, "…working backwards. Like talking about the potential question, the formatives that we all want them to be able to pass by the time that we finish the unit."
- 7th grade focus group transcript, Page 15, "I think getting together and unpacking units together is a great way to start, having conversations about the standards and what to do, what prerequisites students may need, what are some common mistakes that they might do?"

This theme was also discussed regularly in individual teacher interviews. For example:

- T1, Page 1: "…and once we started tracking everything, being able to talk through, 'okay, here's the standard' and sharing an example of that I was teaching this at a different level. I was teaching kids to, an example would be, I was teaching kids how to calculate standard deviation and the standard only said they needed to know what the standard deviation meant. I was teaching it way above what it needed to be."
- T2, Page 3: "…but those targeted PLCs with the TTD are real things we could use right then and there with our students and that we were creating together to use with our students, based on the standards, and based on specific student needs."
- T3, Page 1: "Our PLC would start with unpacking the unit and having conversations about the skills that students needed and what we could anticipate as common mistakes."

Backwards planning is a common practice in lesson planning for teachers. Approaching this work as a team of teachers provided opportunities to deepen knowledge through conversations, reviewing test item specifications, working practice problems together in PLCs, surfacing misconceptions, sharing resources, and discussing how teachers would approach teaching each unit.

Collaborative data analysis and student work analysis. The second theme that emerged from the data was collaborative data analysis and student work analysis. Teacher teams regularly met to discuss the results of formative checks of understanding that were collaboratively designed by the respective teams. Examples from focus group interviews are:

- 6th grade focus group transcript, Page 5: "I think working through and talking through things, especially when we're looking at how students are performing on things. I think that has made me a better teacher."

- 7th grade focus group transcript, Page 6: "…because we've created those little mini checkpoint and different things like that, and then they, when they're on their tests and quizzes, they're like, hey okay, I remember doing something like, you know, with the checkpoints."
- 8th grade focus group transcript, Page 7: "For me it's coming back to the table after a test and being like 'well I thought I understood what I was teaching, I thought I was teaching it all right, but apparently I was not."

These collaborative conversations focused on evidence of student learning and provided the fuel for extensive teacher reflection and growth. More examples from individual teacher interviews include:

- T3, page 2: "We would have three, four problems, and then they kind of grew on each other and then see what skills they were at. So, if they were good here then we would move on."
- T4, page 2: "I think it helped me to analyze things a little more critically instead of just kind of glossing over and looking at a general view to get more specific on the content and what was coming, what they were learning, what they weren't learning, what was working, what wasn't working, but like where the breakdown was in their learning. So just helping them to analyze it at a deeper level that they had to be able to talk about."
- T5, page 3: "The PLCs made me be more aware of the actual data that I was collecting. I would collect data on my own, but actually making it more meaningful with what I was doing and why I was doing it, and even with coming up with the assessments, you truly had that in mind."

Student work samples and common assessment results allowed teachers to tangibly see and determine what students actually learned. It allowed for deeper examination of criteria for success, and led to rich conversations that drove teachers closer to pinpointing the specific moment where learning broke down for the student. By working through this analysis as a team, the math teachers became more skilled at identifying the root causes of non-learning, which led to the next theme of determining an appropriate response or plan of action.

Modifications and adjustments to instruction. The third theme that emerged from the data was modifications and adjustments to instruction. This is a critical step in the learning process, and this phase marks the starting point to differentiated instruction and response to intervention. Examples from focus group interviews are:

- 7th grade focus group transcript, Page 7: "Well, we were just talking about performance. Because if they're all not doing well on, that's letting us know, okay, we need to either reteach or do a mini-lesson, re-assess."
- 8th grade focus group transcript, Page 6: "I've always done a lot of assessments, but the way I assess has definitely shifted to be more of the immediate feedback so that kids know right away, 'yeah I'm totally lost' versus waiting for me to give them back a paper. Because I am assessing but it's a different way now, where it's more visible."
- 8th grade focus group transcript, Page 7: "…they introduced cards at the door. And they (the students) immediately know, they can't even get in the room unless they get the question right. So then there's immediately coaching after you come back the second time and we're still stuck on what to do. Then with the exit slips, and they complete them immediately, and then we do them up to three times in class, then after that they've

got to come and get that one on one, or I'll pull them one on one to make sure that they can show some mastering of that one skill."

These examples from the focus group interviews demonstrate multiple ways in which the math teachers responded to the data they were getting from formative assessments. Teachers were providing instant feedback, re-teaching, and using entry tickets at the door to for quick assessment of students' learning. What distinguishes formative assessment from summative assessment is that the focus of formative assessment is less about the data, and more are the decisions that are made based on the analysis of the data. It is these subsequent decisions that are made by teachers to make instructional adjustments that makes the process of formative assessment so powerful for assisting students' learning. This response to data is the starting point for other potential school reform initiatives, such as differentiated instruction and response to intervention.

Individual teacher interviews revealed more examples of teacher modifications and adjustments to instruction:

- T3, Page 3: "…and then I broke it into eight different categories and then quarter one, quarter two, formative, and midterm. So then I was able to see individually, where each student needs, and then I use that and then I brought it to the work. And so from January to May the work was based on what the kids needed the most. Geometry was the common theme that they needed to work on."
- T4, Page 10: "…beginning of the year, we always start with fractions and decimals, and they never master it in those first couple of months. But in one of our meetings, Kelli pointed out like we know they are weak in geometry and that's not until the end of the year, but we can work those problems in earlier in the year. So when we're doing

decimals and fractions, work in some geometry problems that we know they're going to see again later, but they can already do some of those now. And then, vice versa, when we go to the geometry unit, making sure we were intentional about putting more decimals and fractions back into those problems so they were continuing to practice it."

- T7, Page 3 discusses ways in which instructional decisions were made to compact curriculum: "But that would be our focus, because we have so many standards in math that there needs to be formatives, but then we can't do a formative for every single thing because there's too many of them. So we'd spend conversations trying to figure out, okay, what's the big idea that they really need to know based on this common assessment, and then based on what's on the mid-term or what's on FSA."

These examples provide evidence that teachers constantly used information learned from common assessment and student work analysis to drive instructional decisions, completing the action learning cycle in PLCs. As data were reviewed in the "check" phase, and decisions and adjustments were made in the "act" phase, teachers effectively begin the cycle again at the "planning" phase. As each new cycle begins, teachers are working smarter because they are using real-time evidence of learning to guide their decisions.

Trust, safety, and vulnerability. While the first three themes deal specifically with the cyclical process of PLCs, the fourth theme that emerged from the data was trust, safety, and vulnerability. Trust is the oil that lubricates the engine of collaboration. Engine oil has a number of vital purposes. It essentially keeps the engine running smoothly. Engines contain many parts which have the potential to rub against each other, creating friction. Oil lubricates the engine parts to reduce friction and help keep the engine running smoothly. Trust serves the same purpose in collaborative work. While oil is not a specific part of the engine, it is vital to its

effective functioning. Likewise, trust is not a specific component of the PLC process, the effectiveness of PLCs is reduced when trust does not exist. Alternatively, when levels of trust are high in PLCs, teachers feel a sense of safety and are more likely to take risks, share struggles by being vulnerable with their colleagues, and seek help and feedback more frequently. Focus group interview examples follow:

- 6th grade focus group interview, Page 6: "I think it is because it was very important for us to have the relationship piece with everybody here so that we feel comfortable to share. When we bring our data we're not like, 'oh, all my kids did great.' We're comfortable to come in and be like, 'oh this class didn't do well.' I feel like this is a very safe space."
- 7th grade focus group interview, Page 7: "Yeah, I mean, I definitely think we all trust each other and we can be honest with each other and open. You know, say what's working, what's not working, and not feel like we're going to be judged."

These statements illustrate the types of high-risk behaviors that teachers are willing to engage in when levels of trust are high. Many PLCs do not reach the level where they are vulnerable enough with each other to admit their struggles and be honest and open. This level of sharing is not likely to occur in the absence of trust.

Similar sentiments were expressed in individual teacher interviews:

- T5, Page 4: "…we just, again, built that trust from working together for so long and just…I felt comfortable enough to go to her and say can you help me with this, or maybe I'm not doing so well with this piece here, do you have any ideas?"
- T3, Page 4: "I think it starts before the school year even begins. You have to…people have to know each other as people before you can put them together to kind of work with

one another. Like I see at school teachers who have never met each other but they connect over Disney World, Harry Potter, you know once you find those things that make people human and those interests—Beyonce, veganism, whatever it is, if you find those common interests that people share and they get a chance to know each other on that level then it's easier to work together. Because they have that, you know it's that human side of things."

- T8, Page 1: "I think collaboration is so hard, because it's just something that human beings have a very hard time with, which is acknowledging their vulnerability. Acknowledging what we don't know."

Teachers' comments suggest the importance of establishing positive relationships, which take time, in order to engage in the high-risk work that collaboration in a PLC requires to be effective. There appears to be value in building trust by first connecting with each other on a human level, as well as engaging in low-risk interactions, like talking about family or interests outside of school.

Time, or lack of time. The fifth and final theme that emerged from the data was time, or lack of time. Of all of the industrialized countries in the world, the United States ranks close to last in terms of the percentage of time teachers spend in front of students (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016). This point was not lost on the teachers that participated in this study. Below are some excerpts from focus group interviews:

- 8th grade focus group interview, Page 13: "And I wonder too, I think about this in so many different perspectives, missed opportunities then for adjustments for next year or even re-teach adjustments because there's just not enough time to have those group conversations around everything."

- 7th grade focus group, Page 12: "Well, I think in the beginning, it's really good to meet every week, but I think there is a point where we all just get overwhelmed with everything else, that there needs to be a break…"

These excerpts illustrate the struggle teachers experienced to find time or prioritize time to collaborate. With less than an hour per day of time away from students, collaboration can often take a back seat to other necessary obligations that teachers must meet, including individual planning, routine paperwork, multiple school and/or district initiatives, team meetings etc. In the case of this particular school of study, arts integration was another competing interest.

Similar sentiments were expressed in individual interviews:

- T1, Page 6: when asked what is needed from administrators to support the work: "Definitely time to be able to meet and carry through the work. Time to unpack all of the data, that was the one thing we never actually got good at."
- T3, Page 10: "…but if we had more free time then I would do it more, because then you would really think about exit tickets and then you could be more present. Like you could do things at a faster rate. Your intervention could be faster."
- T7, Page 4: "I think the biggest challenge was just, because I have the two grade levels, was balancing my time, because I would have multiple meetings in that week versus others that only had one grade level."

These examples describe the cumulative perceived weight on their shoulders and how it can inhibit collaborative work. For example, by contract teachers are allowed to have up to three different preps. One of the excerpts above shows the time challenges of having to collaborate with multiple grade levels (i.e., preps). Additionally, we operate in an education system that

over-tests its students. Teachers see a lot of data, but as one teacher noted, time available to actually 'unpack' and use that data is a challenge.

The Role of Teacher Talent Developer in PLCs

The introduction of the role of teacher talent developer (TTD) at the beginning of the 2016-17 school year and the evolution of this role was a key driver to the perceived success of the math PLCs. The TTD was a well-respected colleague that taught math half of the day, while providing support to each grade level PLC the other half of the day. Focus groups and interviews revealed some key theme in teachers' perceptions of how the role of the TTD impacted their success. Those themes are described in Table 3.

Table 3

Examples of Topics Discussed Related to the Role of Teacher Talent Developer (TTD)

Teacher Talent Developer (TTD) Themes	**Discussion Topics**
Safe and professional environment	• Non-threatening • Feels like support • Open and helpful • Not there to judge me • Build trust through informal interactions—car rider duty
Allow for vulnerability	• TTD trust, close friendship • TTD humility • Trust and modeling vulnerability
Facilitative teaching using questions	• Use of effective questions • TTD asking good questions. Example: How do we take this idea into a lesson? How might we make this into a reteach moment during review? • Jump into a conversation at key points and ask a good question
Customizes learning and lifts teacher voice	• Flexibility • TTD great listener

	• TTD "not telling" • Teacher voice; able to customize solutions • TTD understand people in the department • Adjusting the planning documents based on teacher input • One on one coaching as needed with a new teacher
Deep content knowledge	• Competent • TTD content expert • TTD expert resource provider • TTD standards unpacking documents • TTD track record of success

Safe and professional environment. The first theme related to the role of TTD was being able to create a safe and professional environment. Examples from focus group interviews include the following:

- 8th grade focus group, Page 16: "…yeah. And the people skip being a people person, building those relationships also being understanding of the personalities in your department…
- 8th grade focus group, Page 16: "…then they have to be a people person, and you have to be able to trust what the information that they're bringing, so without that background of proving that they know what they're doing, at least in the classroom from previous years, then it's going to be hard to be in that position because you have no foundation for anybody to believe what comes out of your mouth is valid, or that you've even tried."
- 6th grade focus group, Page 21: "We have to be open and honest and flexible with you when we're speaking so we've always had a good playing field. And even with our interns, you make them feel welcome, so that person has to make those people feel welcome as well.

Trust leads to feelings of safety, which is foundational to effective collaboration. These excerpts show that teachers value the relationships they formed with the TTD, and this positive relationship built safety within the group, leading to higher levels of collaboration. The excerpts show the importance of the TTD establishing human connections, knowing teachers as people first, before collaboration can thrive.

Individual interviews provided the following examples:

- T1 Page 2: "We had a very unique relationship because we had worked together for a few years, and then we developed a really close friendship, realized that we think a lot alike and really supported one another in everything we did so I felt like all these past couple of years when she was teaching we bounced ideas off each other all the time."
- T4 Page 3: "I think partially because of who she is and so her being able to kind of guide us to that point, you know, that she has that non-threatening aura about her. Like I'm here to support you; I'm not here to criticize you. You know, that viewpoint, which I think a lot of times math coaches don't have."

These sample responses from teachers show the importance of leadership having a non-judgmental, open-minded attitude towards collaboration. By being more of a guide in a non-threatening manner, it would suggest that the leader valued the opinions of the teachers, leading to teachers feeling that their voice is valued and respected.

Interview with the TTD provided the examples below:

- Page 5: "Like oh! We've been teaching this, but we totally missed this half of that scenario. And I think as we uncovered these things together, it continued to build our culture. Like 'hey, we're all learning this.' Doesn't matter if I've been teaching 7th grade math for eight years, I missed teaching that…"

- Page 5: “We had car rider duty together. So, we’d sit out there and bullshit every day about how our days went, and then we’d talk to each other about lesson plans. What are you doing tomorrow? And we’d kind of reconnect every day.”

These excerpts illustrate a few important points. First, the TTD took a moment where the teachers missed something important, and, instead of making them feel bad, turned it into a learning moment. She essentially made it acceptable to make mistakes. Secondly, we see how the TTD used informal conversations as well as structured collaboration to reinforce relationships and create safe spaces for professional dialogue about teaching and learning.

Allowing for vulnerability. The second theme for the TTD role was allowing for vulnerability. Excerpts from focus group interviews and individual interviews are highlighted below:

- T5, Page 3: “She’s knowledgeable. She knew her stuff and if she didn’t know something, she wasn’t afraid to say ‘hey, I don’t know but I’ll find something and get back to you’...”
- 7th grade focus group, Page 15: “So it goes back to, I guess that skill, is they have to have that self initiation and that vulnerability to say I’m open to being open. Like, I don’t know this, so I’m going to learn it so I can work with you.”
- T4, Page 3: “Someone that doesn’t think they are the one and only expert. Someone that doesn’t think they are coming in to fix things but they’re coming to support…”

These comments illustrate the perceived value in the TTD being the first to be vulnerable. By showing her own vulnerability first, by admitting the times when she didn’t know something, the TTD essentially gave others permission to be vulnerable as well.

Excerpts from the TTD interview provided the following examples:

- Page 5: “You have to have that level of trust and consistency for it, because I need to know that what I say to you isn’t going to necessarily change. It takes a lot of vulnerability to have this culture of collaboration. If I don’t see that you’re going to do the same thing day in and day out, and I know who you are consistently as a person and as a teacher, that’s not going to be there.”
- Page 6: “You definitely need a leader, whoever it can be, to maximize other people’s personalities. Let me show you vulnerability and then know their strengths. I can pick out what people are comfortable with and highlight that. So they become comfortable with me.”

Here we see how the TTD approached leading and influencing teachers by first getting to know their strengths. She spent time working with teachers in their areas of strength, building trust. Teachers had to be ‘comfortable’ with her before they would be vulnerable with her.

Facilitative teaching using questions. The third theme for the TTD role was facilitative teaching using questions. Skillful facilitators use questions as a method to help someone else think through their own practice. Questions provide a guide to conversation and allowing teachers to arrive at their own conclusions. Excerpts from the interview with the TTD revealed this skill as being essential to helping teachers learn and grow.

- TTD interview, Page 3: “A lot of times we’d just sit and we’d work through the problems and say ‘Hey the kids are going to miss this,’ because most of us have taught long enough that we can go through and anticipate the errors. So we’re like, ‘Well OK, how do we take this into a lesson? How do we make this into a reteach moment when we review? How do we set it up so that they don’t make these mistakes and we get ahead of ourselves and teach them before it’s too late?”

- TTD interview, Page 6: "…so I bring whatever materials we need and then I just try to make sure I ask good questions if I know different strengths."
- TTD interview, Page 7: "I think people perceive it as I don't do much, just sit in my room. But in my mind, I'm always trying to like, "Here's where your curriculum is. Here is where you are going, and here is what I need to ask you."

This theme did not surface from the focus group interviews or the individual teacher interviews. However, the TTD's perception was that skilled questioning led more discussion. It also suggests that questioning enabled teachers to provide their own answers, validating their voices.

Customizing learning and lifting teacher voice. The fourth theme for the TTD role was customizing learning and lifting teacher voice. Like students, adults have different learning styles, preferences, interests, talents, etc. No two teachers are going to learn at the same rate, so it takes a skillful facilitator to be flexible and adjust to meet the needs of each adult learner. Samples from focus group and individual teacher interviews are below:

- T3, Page 9: "She was super, you know, 'cause she was really flexible on views.
- 6th grade focus group, Page 21: "We have to be able to be flexible and be open and honest and flexible with you when we're speaking so we've always had a good playing field."

Flexibility and being able to adjust was a key point made by the TTD. Her perception of a critical turning point in the PLC process came in the spring of 2017-18 school year, when she launched an initiative to help guide the PLC planning with a template design based on teacher input. Prior to this point, the school had adopted a uniform, standardized school-wide form that all departments were expected to use. According to the TTD, this proved to be a barrier to

effective PLC work, and it was not until this form was adjusted that the math teachers' PLC work accelerated.

- TTD interview, Page 2: "I distinctly remember her saying 'I don't know how they're being graded on FSA. I don't know what they want from my kids, and I want them to do better. I want to be a higher level teacher."

This was the point when the TTD developed a different approach to planning, one that was customized to meet the needs of the teachers. She received feedback from the teachers, and they co-created a document that was preferred by all. This process evolved into the 2018-19 school year. When sharing her perspective on the planning process initiated in 2018-19, the TTD noted:

- TTD interview, Page 12: "…they liked to look at the problems, not the words. If standards unpacking is their goal, they wanted to see the math question. They didn't care about the words. So now my forms started with the problems…"

This process of tailoring facilitation based on the needs and wants of the teachers proved to be an effective strategy. Here the TTD gained insight into how the teachers were seeing what they thought they should be doing in 'unpacking' standards. The teachers didn't 'care' about the words of the standards; rather, they cared about the 'math question' or 'problem' the students were being asked to solve. So, the TTD met them where they were and redesigned the planning form they were using. She empowered the teachers to generate their own approach to unpacking standards.

Deep content knowledge. The fifth and final theme for the TTD role was deep content knowledge. Prior to 2018-19 school year, the TTD participant in this study facilitated PLCs in both math and science. In general, the science teachers were not receptive to the support of a TTD with a math background. In 2018-19 we expanded to four TTDs, so that each TTD had

extensive content knowledge in the department in which they facilitated PLCs. This proved to be a good decision. The math teachers provided several examples of how important deep content knowledge was for the TTD role:

- 6th grade focus group, Page 21: "And just being familiar with the content is super important."
- 8th grade focus group, Page 18: "Content knowledge. You've got to know the content."
- T5, Page 3: "She had so many resources. She's knowledgeable. She knew her stuff."

The TTD placed a similar emphasis on the importance of content knowledge.

- TTD interview, Page 3: "We took test item specs, I took different districts that offered out free mock questions, and I compiled it by standard for them."
- TTD interview, Page 6: "I feel like this is where my strengths in terms of I've taught everything…"

These excerpts show that both teachers and the TTD perceived content knowledge included the ability to locate and find existing resources related to content, the experiences of teaching various courses, and knowing and understanding the standards.

Section Summary

Overall, the data revealed some key characteristics of the process followed within PLCs, the importance of trust and safety as a foundation to collaborative work, and specific skills that were important to the success of a teacher leader (TTD) and his/her ability to effective facilitate the learning of teachers in a PLC setting.

The PLC process was characterized by close attention to the continuous improvement, or Plan-Do-Check-Act process. This process is similar to the cyclical nature of action research and can be characterized in this study as following a process where standards were unpacked and

planned for, and also included plans for assessing students. This was followed by the collaborative analysis of student learning, and then decisions and adjustments made by teachers as a result of their analysis of student data. Trust and safety were characterized by building relationships through connecting as human beings first, by being open and honest with each other, and by creating space where mistakes were welcomed and adult learning was part of the process. Lastly, the TTD demonstrated skills that surfaced in the teachers' comments about her work. These included her deep content knowledge and her ability to create a safe environment, ask quality questions, and tailor facilitation of collaboration and interventions teachers were implementing in their classrooms based on her knowledge of the teachers and their needs.

Analysis of Walkthroughs and Feedback

PLCs in the 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16 school years laid the groundwork for collaboration. The math department developed trust and built relationships through this intervention. This led to the next level of collaboration and the second intervention in this study: classroom walkthroughs.

The year of this study, the 2018-19 school year, was the third iteration of walkthroughs and feedback as an intervention designed to foster a collaborative culture to help teachers grow and improve their practice. In 2016-17, classroom walkthroughs were introduced as a way to build school culture. The walkthroughs were scheduled in advance, and multiple teachers participated at the same time. Teacher volunteers were solicited in advance, and the classroom was opened to teachers who volunteered to observe during their planning period. A TTD or other teacher leader would lead the group of observers to the classroom, teachers would watch a ten minute segment of a lesson, and appreciative feedback in the form of a written note was recorded and delivered to the teacher. At the end of the day, all participants were invited to meet

to debrief what was seen, to ask any clarifying questions of the teacher that was observed, and to generally thank each other for participating. This introductory form of classroom walkthroughs proved to be an effective way to begin the practice of peer observations.

The process was revised in 2017-18. In a process later named #observeme, teachers posted on their doors a specific instructional technique or strategy related to our school-wide instructional focus of formative assessment. For example, a teacher might be working on a cold call technique or using wait time as a strategy to allow students time to think before contributing to a classroom conversation. Teachers were expected to conduct at least one ten minute peer observation per month. A form was used across campus where the observing teacher could script notes and complete two sentence starters: 1) I noticed… and 2) I wonder…. The completed feedback form was given to the observed teacher, who would subsequently complete a reflection. Teachers maintained completed peer observation forms in their learning portfolios, which for the first time became part of the end of year evaluation process.

The 2018-19 iteration of a classroom walkthrough continued to be defined as a 10-minute observation of a colleague teaching a lesson. A teacher conducting a walkthrough would visit a colleague and take descriptive notes for 10 minutes. After completing the walkthrough, the observing teacher summarized his/her descriptive notes onto a form that was then given to the teacher observed. The process this year left space for the observing teacher to record as many positive descriptions as possible. Space was also provided where the observing teacher would leave a thought-provoking question designed to push the observed teacher's practice. Upon receiving the form from the observing teacher, the teacher observed would complete his/her own reflection and next steps based on the feedback received.

This process was conducted regularly by individual administrators, by individual teachers, and by groups of administrators and teachers. Teachers were expected to conduct at least one walkthrough with feedback per month, and this was a topic of discussion embedded within the teacher evaluation process. Teachers were coached on the process during the first two months of school, when group observations were conducted. Using the book *Crafting the Feedback Teachers Need and Deserve* by Thomas Van Soelen (2016), evidence collected during the walkthroughs were encouraged to be 100% descriptive. The overall goal of the peer observations was to cause the observed teacher to *think* by offering a thought-provoking question grounded in a rich description of what was seen and heard during the visit and around a topic the teacher specifically asked for feedback on.

The data revealed that teachers had a variety of opinions and preferences as it related to the walkthrough process. Table 4 lists a sample of topics taken from the focus group and individual teacher interviews and coded under the classroom walkthroughs and feedback theme.

Table 4

Topics Discussed under the Theme of Walkthroughs and Feedback

Theme	**Discussion Topics**
Walkthroughs and Feedback	• The "I wonder" questions make me think • Follow up communication with the observer • Clear expectations from administration • Several ideas from colleagues • See different teaching styles; boundary spanning • Specific feedback is effective • Growth mindset • Boundary spanning • Group walkthroughs more effective • Time to debrief with colleagues • Need both strengths and growth • Need more positive feedback with reflections • Observe other subject areas

	• "negative connotation that something must have been wrong" • Need more time to do more walkthroughs • See students in a different setting • Teacher choice; scheduled versus random • "…they definitely have great ideas. To have posters with different questions and then she used sticky notes where the kids would put their answers with feedback on. And so it's a science classroom, it's a different setting, but then I thought 'hey, how can I do that in my classroom'?"

A complete listing of all of the excerpts coded in this theme is located in Appendix I. A total of 57 excerpts were coded 'classroom walkthroughs and feedback' in the focus group and individual teacher interviews, representing 16% of the total coding. Subsequent review of the initial coding identified categories that emerged from the data. The categories were then reviewed and collapsed into four themes, which are identified in Table 5.

Table 5

Subthemes in Topics Discussed under the Theme of Walkthroughs and Feedback

Subtheme	**Examples from Focus Groups and Interviews**
Feedback Preferences	• Some teachers receive feedback as negative • "I wonder" questions make me think • Specific feedback makes it good • Feedback preferred with improvements • Value in appreciative feedback • Not helpful; just a question
Process Preferences	• Follow up communication with observer • Ideas from colleagues • Group discussions with observer afterwards • See students in different settings • Consistently scheduled • Debrief with teacher observed • Teacher choice—scheduled versus random • Conducted with groups of teachers

Teacher Mindset	• Wanted to grow • Trust the mindset • Ideas from colleagues • Growth mindset
Time	• Time to do more walkthroughs • Meeting fatigue • Competes with other responsibilities • Want more walkthroughs

Feedback Preferences

The first subtheme that emerged from the data was feedback preferences. Teachers expressed a variety of preferences related to feedback. Some teachers liked the feedback in the form of a question, while others preferred specific suggestions. Other teachers liked receiving appreciative feedback, while others preferred more frequent feedback. Examples of responses in focus groups and interviews are captured below:

- T5, Page 8: "Just being able to tell me what went well and what they think I could change or do better, or whatever the case may be. Like give me their honest opinion, something that's meaningful, something that I can use and actually think about like, 'Hey, I could do x, y, and z or I could have did it differently this way.'"
- T8, Page 6: "He said it was something he wanted to continue doing, coming to my class and seeing different lessons. He said the storytelling and the connecting with the kids and that experience. He said he couldn't leave. That might be like the best compliment I've ever received about a lesson."
- 6th grade focus group, Page 11: "…just some way to make it (classroom walkthroughs) happen more often."

The feedback teachers received could be characterized as either appreciative (leaving a positive comment), reflective (asking a thought-provoking question), or suggestive (offering a possible next step or strategy). Teachers' perceptions of which type of feedback was most beneficial varied depending on the teacher's personal preference.

Process Preferences

The second subtheme that emerged from the data was process preferences. Teachers generally found value in the process, citing many examples of how they learned something from their experience. Learning appeared to occur in various ways, including ideas gained from watching others teachers teach, collaborative debrief conversations with colleagues after an observation, and collaborative conversations with the observed teacher after the observation. Examples and excerpts from focus group interviews and individual teacher interviews follow:

- T3, Page 14: "They have definitely great ideas. One example is going to Ms. Ventura's classroom and seeing her posters on her mirror. To have posters with different questions and then she used sticky notes where the kids would put their answers on the feedback on."
- T5, Page 9: "…so having that piece of being able to collaborate and talk with other people that were also in there, that kind of helped bring the, 'oh ok okay I didn't see that or I didn't think about that'. So being able to talk about different things or improvement for somebody, I think that was helpful."
- T7, Page 8: "I liked it both ways, because with the random I can do it whenever was good for that person. But then the schedule gave you a larger group to go with and have that conversation. So the conversation we would have after we left the teacher's room would be a great conversation to have with the teacher there."

Overall, teachers appeared to enjoy the peer observation process, learned from watching others teach, and learned from conversations with colleagues following group observations. Seeing what other teachers were actually doing and having conversation about what was done and why were important in helping teachers think about their own classroom practice.

Teacher Mindset

The third subtheme that emerged from the data was teacher mindset. Examples of teacher responses are provided below:

- T1, Page 7: "I would take those reflective questions and figure out how to grow from them. If somebody said 'I wonder how it would like if you did this' I would try that. I felt like that was growth for me and I didn't feel like the question was a bad thing."
- T5, Page 10: "I don't necessarily look at them as negative. I just think if just somebody trying to give me helpful advice or another way of doing whatever it was I was trying to do. Again, I think that's where you got to be open-minded to hearing new ways of doing things."

It appears that the walkthroughs generated questions or advice from the observers. The teachers observed could take the feedback and determine for themselves what they would do with it. This was not perceived as 'negative' and seemed to provide opportunity for teachers to learn and grow.

Time

The fourth subtheme that emerged from the data again was time. Comments related to time follow:

- 6th grade focus group, Page 1: "I liked the walkthroughs, however I feel like we need to do something to make it easier to actually do that more frequently. I think it's just very difficult to get out there and do it with all the other stuff we're doing."
- 6th grade focus group, Page 3: "I feel like getting out there and seeing what other people are doing as where I learned the most, not just hearing about it but actually seeing it was probably the most beneficial for me, and I would just like to be able to make that happen more often."
- 8th grade focus group, Page 11: "…just some way to make it happen more often."

Teachers clearly seemed to value the walkthroughs and the feedback they were getting from their peers. Once again, however, teachers felt the tension between 'all the other stuff' they were doing and making the walkthroughs happen.

Analysis of the Formal Observation Process

The third and final intervention of this study related to a shift in focus in the formal observation process that had been in place in the district for over ten years. Rated observations have long been the most emphasized component of teacher evaluation. While there is slight variation depending on experience and overall effectiveness scores for a teacher, a typical teacher receives one full-period rated formal observation and one 20-minute rated informal observation per year. While multiple factors should be considered for a teacher's final evaluation, in practice most principals rely heavily on the ratings from these few rated observations to determine a teacher's overall ratings for the year.

Two additional contextual factors contribute to teachers experiencing these observations as high-stakes. First, the formal observation process, containing a pre-conference, full period observation, lengthy write-ups, and post-conference, are extremely time-consuming for

administrators, leading to much less frequent classroom visits throughout a school year. Teachers rarely see their administrators outside of these observations. Second, merit pay is connected to teacher evaluation ratings, causing the stakes for observations to be even higher. These factors make the teacher evaluation process feel much more about getting the ratings on one observed lesson than about teacher overall growth and development.

The intervention applied at the beginning of the 2018-19 school year was an attempt to decrease the stress imposed on teachers because of the high stakes involved in ratings of individual lessons. While ratings were still provided because district policy prescribes it, it was clearly communicated to teachers that the ratings would have little to no influence on their final annual evaluation ratings, which would be based on their overall practice. I defined overall practice to emphasize the collaborative aspects of teacher practice, including their engagements in PLCs, classroom walkthroughs, growth, and reflection. The aim of this intervention was to reduce the stress associated with high-stakes, ratings-driven classroom observations. Instead of focusing on the ratings, post-conferences following a formal observation mirrored the process described with the classroom walkthrough intervention. I simply recorded as many descriptive notes as possible in a 10-minute period, coached the teacher in the post-conference, and encouraged reflection and growth.

This intervention was short-lived, as it started in August 2018 and lasted until November 2018, when I was transferred to another school. There are far less data related to this intervention than the previous two. However, it appears that teachers felt safe to take more risks as a result of this intervention.

Table 6

Topics Discussed under the Theme of Formal Observation Process

Theme	**Discussion Topics**
Formal observation process	• Pressure of ratings • Partial picture in observations • Take more risks • Not afraid • Very freeing • Focus on student learning • Not compliance driven any more • Focus on reflection • Honest conversation • Less stress with no ratings • Discussion after observation • Comments help growth • Pushed reflection

Table 6 lists a sample of topics taken from the focus group and individual teacher interviews and coded as formal observations. A complete listing of all of the excerpts coded in this theme is located in Appendix J. A total of 36 examples of formal observations were coded in the focus group and individual teacher interviews were coded under the theme of formal observation process, representing 10% of the total coding.

The subsequent review of the initial coding identified one major category that emerged from the data − psychological safety (see Table 7).

Table 7

Subtheme in Topics Discussed under the Theme of Formal Observation Process

Subtheme	**Examples from Focus Groups and Interviews**
Psychological safety	• Weren't stressed about the scores • Nervous in the past because it was high stakes evaluative • No more pressure to perform on any one given day • Not afraid of trial and error

	• Having freedom to do what is best for kids • Conversations focused on if kids learned, not to check those boxes on a rubric • Non-threatening

Psychological safety

Teachers across the board shared similar sentiments about the revised formal observation process. Like air being slowly released from a balloon, teachers appear to have felt the stress and pressure of high-stakes observations slowly dissipating as a result of this intervention. Examples of comments from focus groups and teacher interviews are provided below:

- T1, Page 8: "In the past I would get real nervous about it, because it was evaluative."
- T2, Page 6: "The ideas really just makes teachers less pressured about that initial day, leading up to it, the during, the after, the subsequent afters and all the other afters when you think about that one moment when it happened. So it just takes the pressure off of that, because you realize that it's just all of this work that you can document those awesome days when no one walks in, and it just takes the pressure off and a lot of people let the pressure get the best of them. And when you take the pressure out of things, and people can truly be themselves and teach how they want to teach, and their students get the best teacher."
- T2, Page 8: "You're not afraid of trial and error. And that it's all part of your personal growth."
- T4, Page 5: "It was just very freeing…having that freedom to do what's best for kids and not feel like you had to fit within these boxes in a rubric. You didn't stress about did I

show this box, which box did I land in? It was more about did the lesson work, did the kids get it, what did the data say? So that's what I mean by it made if safe."

- 6th grade focus group, Page 11: "….now we can have a more honest conversation."
- 6th grade focus group, Page 3: "You weren't stressed about the scores, 'oh my god, I'm going to get fired because I'm not scoring high enough.' You were focused on student scores instead of your own scores."
- 6th grade focus group, Page 6: "As far as promoting reflection, I feel like making it non-threatening enables to you reflect honestly. It's like it was OK to be open and honest about what worked, what didn't work, and not feeling like 'oh, if I say this didn't work and they didn't notice I'm going to get dinged for it.'"

Psychological safety was characterized by reduction in pressure, stress and anxiety. This appeared to open opportunity for teachers to focus on teaching to their students' needs and to open opportunity for risk taking, looking at student data, and 'honest' reflection and conversation between teacher and supervising administrator. Although this intervention was not seen through to its completion for the 2018-19 school year, removal of a focus on the ratings from individual observations appeared to open a door to more authentic, growth-oriented conversation.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented findings from focus group interviews, individual teacher interviews, TTD interview, and PLC and classroom walkthrough archival data analysis. Transcripts were analyzed, coded, and subsequently categorized. Categories were analyzed to develop sub-themes for each research sub-question.

The interventions described in this study appear to have had a positive influence on teachers' growth and development as professionals.

The next chapter interprets these findings in relation to the initial conceptual framework for this study and related literature. Additionally, Chapter 5 presents conclusions and limitations of this study, implications for further investigation, and insights into possible future teacher evaluation reform.

CHAPTER FIVE:
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of teacher evaluation policy, practice, and subsequent experiences that teachers have with evaluation, creating a collaborative school culture is an uphill battle for practicing principals. The tension that exists between the functions of evaluation—accountability/judgment versus growth/development—is real and is extremely challenging to navigate.

This study explored how one middle school in Hillsborough County, Florida, used collaborative practices to foster teacher professional learning and growth. Specifically, the study explored how professional learning communities (PLCs), non-evaluative classroom walkthroughs conducted by both administrator and peer teachers, and coaching conversations following formal classroom observations fostered a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice.

The primary research question guiding this study was: how does a principal foster a collaborative culture to support instructional improvement through PLCs, classroom walkthroughs, and reflective coaching conversations? Three sub-questions guided deeper exploration of the primary question:

- How do professional learning communities foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?
- How do non-evaluative classroom walkthroughs and feedback foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?

- How do comments-only coaching conversations following formal classroom observation foster a collaborative culture to improve instructional practice?

This study was situated in case study and action research. I was a principal actor in the research, serving as principal in the school of study. The math department defined the specific case because the department stood out as a model of collaboration in the school. Transcripts from focus groups, transcripts from individual teacher and TTD interviews, and PLC and classroom walkthrough archival documents were analyzed. Findings of the study follow and are presented in relation to the three sub-questions listed previously.

Chapter 4 presented the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the coding and categorizing of 54 transcript pages from three focus group interviews, 76 transcript pages from seven individual teacher interviews, a 17-page transcript from an individual TTD (teacher talent developer) interview, and over 50 pages of PLC and classroom walkthrough archival documents. This chapter interprets these findings in relation to the initial conceptual framework of this study and related literature. In addition, Chapter 5 presents conclusions and limitations to this study, followed by implications for further investigation.

Conceptual Framework Revisited

The conceptual framework for this study (see Figure 1 in Chapter 1) represented three key collaborative practices being implemented at the school site at the time the study was conceived: PLCs, classroom walkthroughs and feedback, and comments-only feedback in formal classroom observation. PLCs operate under the assumptions that one of the most important aspects of improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for teachers. PLCs are an instrument for facilitating enhanced learning, teaching, and leadership capacity at all levels of the education system (Ontario Principals' Council, 2008). Danielson (2012) suggested

one way that evaluation serves a more developmental purpose is through professional conversations between teachers and colleagues who observe in their classrooms (i.e., classroom walkthroughs and feedback. Comments-only feedback with formal observations shifts the focus of evaluation from one of judgment and ratings to one of feedback and growth. The three interventions and their components are all intended to develop collaborative and growth-oriented practices.

The findings of this study, combined with my personal reflections as the principal implementing the interventions over time, illuminate the time over which the interventions matured. Figure 3 presents a timeline representing the length of each intervention and the structure and focus of each intervention. In the high-stakes context of school turnaround, this timeline is important.

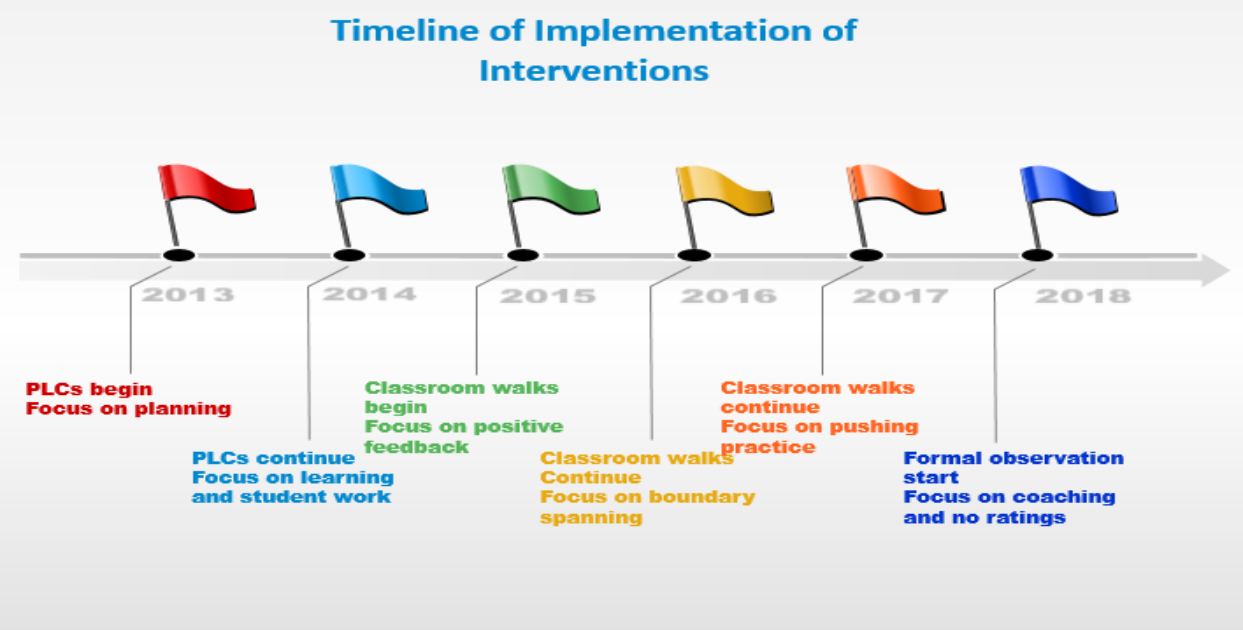

Figure 4. Representation of the timeline of implementation of the three interventions.

According to Bill Honig (2019, para. 32), former California State Superintendent and Vice Chair of the California Instructional Quality Commission,

> Perverse accountability incentives have encouraged teachers and administrators to game the system by devoting inordinate time to test preparation, concentrating only on students near cutoff points, and, in some tragic cases, outright cheating. In many states, reformers have promoted unfair, unproven reward-and-punishment tools, which have discouraged collaboration among teachers, thwarted the building of effective teams, and caused a severe drop in morale. Finally, reform nostrums have diverted attention from, de-emphasized, or belittled Build-and-Support policies that can actually produce substantial results.

The quick fix mentality of high-stakes school improvement negates the importance of the time required to engage in 'build-and-support' efforts that can produce results. In this case study, the maturation of a collaborative culture took five years to develop and was just 'ready' for introduction of the critical component of changing the way teachers experience formal evaluation.

Discussion of Findings in Focus Groups, Interviews, and Artifacts

The findings related to each of the three interventions are discussed in the following sections, seeking to illuminate how the three interventions of PLCs, classroom walkthroughs and feedback, and feedback focused formal observation were represented and interacted. Each theme is situated within the literature review for this study.

PLCs

For the purpose of this study, PLCs were defined as educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour & DuFour, 2009). Five subthemes within the theme of PLCs emerged from analysis of the data:

- *Collaborative standards-based planning*. Transcript excerpts from focus group and individual teacher interviews showed that teachers used PLC time to deepen their knowledge of content standards, had conversations around skills needed for students to be successful, and planned common assessments as a team.
- *Collaborative data analysis and student work analysis*. PLC time was spent studying and learning more about formative assessment practices, analyzing data by skill, using data analysis tools that were collaboratively established, and identifying specific areas where learning broke down for students.
- *Modifications and adjustments to instruction*. Transcripts indicated that substantial PLC time was spent on discussing methods of re-teaching content, pacing decisions based on data analysis, ideas for differentiation, and methods of incorporating areas of growth identified in data into new future learning.
- *Trust, safety, and vulnerability*. To some extent, every teacher in the study suggested the importance of forming strong relationships with colleagues, knowing each other, establishing human connections, and operating in a low-stakes environment.
- *Time*. Teachers referenced a lack of time in general, the importance of embedding time for collaboration within the work day, and common planning time as an embedded master schedule structure as central to building a collaborative culture.

These sub-themes provide evidence that teachers had engaged in the cyclical continuous improvement process that characterizes PLC work. Evidence also suggests the underlying importance of trust in the functioning of teams, as well as the challenges that teachers in the United States face because of the lack of time available to meet the demands of the job (Jensen et al., 2016; Tucker, 2019).

Existing literature supports the themes identified in this study. For example, in reviewing teacher evaluation policy related to Race to the Top, one of the most important accomplishments of RTTT is cited as the adoption of common academic standards and assessments (McGuinn, 2012). This study found that teachers collaborated in the math PLCs around standards-based planning and data analysis.

Some key attributes of effective PLCs identified in the literature included a focus on results of student learning, shared vision and mission, collaborative culture/teamwork, action orientation, teacher capacity building, and commitment to continuous improvement (DuFour & DuFour, 2009; Easton, 2008). This study illustrated the cyclical nature of PLC work and teachers' commitment to continuous improvement. Teachers engaged in standards-based planning, implemented strategies and best practices they studied in the PLC to address the standard, engaged in short cycles of formative assessment, reviewed formative assessment data, and then determined next steps.

As a sub-theme, trust emerged as a very strong factor in this study. This also aligns with existing research. Bryk and his colleagues (1999) argued that by far, the strongest facilitator of professional community is social trust among faculty members. When teachers trust and respect each other, a powerful social resource is available for supporting the collaboration, reflective dialogue, and deprivatization characteristic of a professional community. This establishment and development of trust over time led to more high-risk interactions within PLCs. For example, teachers shared openly data from common assessments while critically examining their own practices. Teachers openly admitted when their students struggled to grasp a concept and allowed their peers to offer suggestions.

Teacher Leadership in PLCs

One key sub-component to the PLC intervention was the establishment and development of the teacher talent developer (TTD) role. This teacher leader facilitated each grade level content PLC. This leadership role emerged as a critical catalyst to the success of each math PLC.

Five sub-themes emerged from the focus group interviews and individual teacher interviews related to the characteristics of effective teacher leadership exhibited by the TTD in facilitating teacher learning in PLCs. The subthemes are:

- *Safe and professional environment*. Teachers talked about how interactions with the TTD always felt like support, that she was open and helpful, and not there to judge them.
- *Allow for vulnerability*. Teachers shared that the TTD showed humility in her interactions, that she trusted the teachers, and that she modeled vulnerability by sharing her weaknesses.
- *Facilitative teaching using questions*. When interviewing the TTD, she attributed her success to asking good questions at critical points in PLCs, and teachers shared that effective questioning promoted reflection and deeper thinking when working in PLCs.
- *Customizes learning and lifts teacher voice*. When speaking about the TTD, teachers shared that she was flexible, customized forms and learning to meet their needs, and provided differentiated supports as needed.
- *Deep content knowledge*. This theme was the strongest of the five, with seven out of the seven teachers referencing the TTD's knowledge of math content as a key to the success in the role of teacher leader.

These sub-themes provide evidence of what teachers want, need, and require of teacher leaders that are attempting to help them develop and grow.

Teacher leadership is an area that was not explored in the literature review for this study. The results of this study illustrate the significant role that the TTD/teacher leader played in facilitating the learning of other teachers and that further exploration of this topic is necessary. One major sub-theme that emerged from this study was around the importance of the TTD/teacher leader having deep content knowledge. Given the variety of subject areas that exist in one school, it is nearly impossible for a principal to have deep content knowledge in all subjects, making the content knowledge of the TTD important to explore. Wenner and Campbell (2017) found that further research was needed on the 'disciplinary idiosyncrasies' that may influence the work of teacher leaders in the various disciplines.

Classroom Walkthroughs and Feedback

For the purposes of this study, classroom walkthroughs consisted of administrators and peers conducting regular, frequent, non-evaluative walkthroughs and provide written feedback. A typical walkthrough lasted 10 minutes.

The subthemes identified in this study were:

- *Feedback preferences*. Teachers weighed in differently on how and where they found value in feedback provided from walkthroughs. For example, some teachers received all feedback as negative, others preferred thought-provoking questions that prompted reflection, and others felt valued from appreciative feedback.
- *Process preferences*. Various aspects of the processes used to conduct walkthroughs emerged as valuable to different teachers. For example, some teachers preferred to conduct walkthroughs with groups of teachers because they valued the conversations

that occurred during a post-walkthrough debrief, others preferred having a consistent schedule to conduct walkthroughs, and others preferred the flexibility to choose who they observed and when they observed another teacher.

- *Teacher mindset*. Multiple teachers stressed the importance of having an open mind, a willingness to learn, and desire to grow as an important characteristic contributing to the perceived effectiveness of walkthroughs.
- Time. Time emerged again as a limiting factor for teachers. Most teachers expressed a desire to conduct more walkthroughs, if they had more time to conduct them.

The subthemes provide evidence that teachers had a variety of preferences in how feedback was delivered to them and how the process for walkthroughs was conducted. The themes also suggest that teacher mindset (i.e., fixed versus growth) and time were factors that influenced the effectiveness of this intervention.

Generally, teachers learned and grew from the process of non-evaluative walkthroughs. This aligns with existing research. For example, Danielson (2012) suggested one way that evaluation serves a more developmental purpose is through professional conversations between teachers and colleagues who observe in their classrooms. In addition, when observations are conducted with more frequency and accompanied with bite-sized, actionable feedback, teaching practice is more likely to improve (Almy, 2011; Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Milanowski & Heneman, 2001; Taylor & Tyler, 2012). These elements were intentionally incorporated into the walkthrough intervention in this study, and teachers shared positive learning experiences from the walkthroughs. Teachers in the United States spend a disproportionately high amount of time in front of students compared to other countries. This causes teachers to spend more time

performing in front of students, and allows for less time to dedicate to their own learning and growth (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Tucker, 2019).

Formal Observation Process

For the purpose of this study, formal observation is the process in which teacher evaluation is heavily based. Within the context of the school for this study, formal observation consists of a district-mandated full-period observation. It also includes an optional pre-conference and a required face-to-face post-conference. Ratings and feedback are provided after the observation, and typically the ratings are used to heavily influence the teacher's final evaluation for the school year. In this study the intervention essentially attempted to abandon the use of high-stakes ratings with individual lessons so that the teacher could focus on feedback and growth. By having comments-only coaching conversations, this intervention attempted to put teachers in the driver's seat, helping them to drive their own learning and reflection. Although this intervention was the shortest lived in length—this started in the fall of 2018 and lasted only three months before I was transferred to another school site—it appeared to be a very successful intervention in helping establish a collaborative culture. One theme emerged from this limited data set: The theme is:

- *Psychological safety*. Teachers shared many positive outcomes from this intervention. They shared that they felt pressure being taken off of them, had more freedom to do what was best for kids, and were able to take more risks and chances with their teaching.

Research supports the impact of psychological safety on team behaviors. First, trust between colleagues contributes to what Edmondson, Kramer, and Cook (2004) call psychological safety, defined as "individuals' perceptions about the consequences of

interpersonal risks in their work environment" (p. 241). Edmondson et al. argued that individuals who feel psychological safety are more likely to engage in five important team learning behaviors, including feedback seeking, help seeking, speaking up about concerns and mistakes, innovation, and boundary spanning. These team behaviors help to create conditions to support learning in work groups. The findings of this study fully support the research on the impact of psychological safety in contributing to a collaborative culture in the formal observation environment.

Research suggests that feedback falls on deaf ears when combined with numerical ratings (Wiliam, 2011). A study of 6th grade students showed that adding a numeric score to written comments wiped out the benefits of the comments. Without feedback, or feedback coupled with ratings, it is not surprising that few teachers report that evaluation is useful to them (Donaldson, Woulfin, & LeChasseur, 2016). Teachers in this study communicated that much more value was found in the formal observation process due to the absence of ratings.

Teachers often view evaluation as a high-stakes, high-stress experience**,** which can interfere with the development of trusting relationships between principal and teachers (Kelley & Maslow, 2012). This intervention extended trust to teachers and reduced their anxiety, leading to a more collaborative culture in this formal observation context.

Recommendations for Action and Further Research

The findings of this study have implications for teacher evaluation policy, the role of teacher, teacher retention, development of trust and social capital, and leadership development.

Teacher Evaluation Policy

This study suggests that there are many positive impacts that occur when teachers feel psychological safety within the teacher evaluation practice. When the pressure is taken off of

teachers, a more trusting culture exists. It appears that policy might be shifting in this direction. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) became law in 2015, giving states more authority and autonomy to lessen the role of high-stakes testing. Close et al. (2018) analyzed ESSA plans and found that while many states continue to use large-scale student tests, greater control at the local level is leading to some signs of change. Some changes include redefining student growth as something other than a high-stakes test and moving away from high-stakes consequences and toward formative rather than summative assessments. A growing trend across state ESSA plans is language about supporting teachers by stressing formative feedback and de-emphasizing summative evaluations with high stakes consequences. Now appears to be the time to ask even more questions about the function of teacher evaluation, and what might be a better return on investment for policy makers. Given the teacher shortage crisis, perhaps we would all be better served by concentrating our efforts on improving our existing teachers, not only by creating more collaborative conditions at school sites, but by focusing heavily, if not exclusively, on teacher growth and development. What implications might exist for further research?

- Can the formative and summative functions of teacher evaluation co-exist?
- What might be the impact on student achievement when formative feedback, growth, and teacher development is the sole purpose and focus on teacher evaluation?
- In what ways can teacher growth and development matter more in teacher evaluation?
- How can collaboration and a team approach have more emphasis in teacher evaluation systems in the United States?

Teacher Leadership

In regard to the first intervention of this study—the work of PLCs—the study suggests that teacher leaders play a critical role in the development of their peers. As facilitators of job-

embedded professional learning and given deep content knowledge, teacher leaders play roles in schools that principals cannot manage by themselves. In addition, many top-performing countries have clear incentive systems for master teachers. Evaluation systems are set up to compensate master teachers when they are successful at improving other teachers' practice. Teacher leaders are highly valued in other top-performing countries around the world, where it is not uncommon to see master teachers make more money than administrators (Jensen et al., 2016). This seems like a topic worth exploring here in the United States. While teacher leaders in my district are given titles, status, and a stipend, this study suggests that further inquiry might be worthwhile:

- How can career ladders for teacher leaders be created to incentivize teachers to 1) stay in the classroom and 2) have their jobs depend on the growth and success of other teachers?
- What can be gleaned from career ladder systems in other top-performing countries that might be able to implement here in the United States?
- In what ways can we as a system invest more in teacher leaders to support the instructional work of principals?

Teacher Retention

Another major finding from this study was the issue around time. Collaborative cultures are clearly enhanced when time and structures are created to support teacher collaboration. Compared to other top-performing countries, teachers in the United States spend a much greater percentage of time in front of students, while spending considerably less time focused on their own learning, growth, and collaborating with colleagues. While this may save districts money in the short-term, it is very possible that this lack of time for meaningful professional learning

contributes directly to the teacher shortage crisis in the United States (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Tucker, 2019).

Attrition rates among teachers are alarmingly high, and attrition is costly. Thirty percent of new teachers leave the profession within five years (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In addition, according to Darling-Hammond (2010), more recent data from the National Commission of Teaching and America's Future suggest that replacement costs for teachers are now closer to $15,000 for each teacher who leaves the profession, and the national price tag may exceed seven billion annually. Schools and districts with limited budgets would benefit greatly from more effective retention efforts. With a marked decrease in the number of students enrolling in colleges of education, developing and retaining existing teachers becomes an even greater priority.

Creating a collaborative culture can play a large role in teacher development efforts and job satisfaction. Although a wide range of conditions matter to teachers, the specific elements that matter the most to teachers are the social conditions—the school's culture, the principal's leadership, and relationships among colleagues (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). At my new school in the 2019-20 school year, we have created an additional period of time for teachers to be released from students, giving my teachers a full 37.5% of their day dedicated to their own learning and growth. While this is costing the district an additional five teaching units at my school this year, this investment is likely to have a positive impact on teacher retention efforts. I hired 40 teachers at one of the lowest-performing schools. At a school that usually has several vacancies, we are fully staffed. Informal exchanges so far suggest that teachers love the idea of being provided time during the day to focus on their own learning and growth in a collaborative

setting. They see this as being treated more like professionals and less like factory workers. There are many implications to providing teachers with the time they so desperately crave:

- What impact does investing in more teacher release time from students have on teacher retention efforts? What is the cost vs. benefit of this type of policy?
- In what ways would more teacher release time impact student achievement?
- What is the social-emotional and psychological impact on providing teachers with more time to dedicate to their own learning?
- How does overworking our teachers contribute to teacher attrition?

Trust

This study shows how trust accumulates over time. Each intervention built trust in the math department to the point where it had a very large positive impact on both the staff culture and student achievement. My new school is a high-needs school that has been in intervention with the state, and the atmosphere of trust has eroded over time. Given the results of this study, trust takes time to develop, and further inquiry could be beneficial:

- Can high levels of trust exist in a turnaround setting?
- Are there ways that trust development can be accelerated?
- What factors contribute to the creation and building of trust in turnaround schools?

Principal Leadership Development

The focus of this study was on teachers' perceptions of the impact of specific interventions applied by a principal. We learned that the collaborative conditions established by a principal have an impact on teachers' abilities to collaborate. We know that the principal is responsible for lead learning and sets the tone and expectations for the building. Further inquiry

might be beneficial to explore other tangential aspects of principal leadership as it relates to teacher collaboration:

- Are there certain dispositions that makes a principal more effective at establishing a collaborative culture at a school?
- What character traits are necessary for a principal to foster a collaborative culture?
- How does a principal effectively navigate staff culture as change initiatives are implemented?

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a brief overview of the purpose of the study, situated in case study and action research orientation. It also revisited the study's initial conceptual framework, followed by an illustration of a secondary framework based on the findings of the study as described in Chapter 4.

This chapter then discussed the findings of the analysis in Chapter 4 in relation to the literature reviewed. Finally, the chapter identified some implications and recommendations for further research. Chapter 6 will follow with participant reflections and implications for school leadership.

CHAPTER SIX:
CLOSING REFLECTIONS

It was the moment that Jim Collins describes as the "breakthrough" moment, occurring after a period of time known as the buildup. Malcolm Gladwell refers to this same moment in time as the "tipping point," that moment where a rapid acceleration and burst of greatness happens. From the outside, it looks like this moment comes out of nowhere, this brilliant flash of lightning. But, the people on the inside know that this is not the case. In fact, most people on the inside have difficulty pointing to these "tipping point" moments because to them each day looks the same. To people on the inside, the same work happens day-in and day-out, a slow and gradual process. People on the inside don't see.

I recognized that that moment was upon me when it happened on June 21, 2018. It was the moment I read the recently-released RAND research report that pointed out the disappointing results of the 7-year Gates multi-million investment in my district's teacher evaluation system (SDHC RAND Gates Report, 2018). For five years I was battling the tension between working collaboratively with teachers, building their trust through focused feedback and collaboration, and working alongside teachers in PLCs. While great collaborative work was happening throughout the campus, it was often overshadowed by the stress and pressure of district-prescribed, high-stakes, time-consuming formal and informal observations, a system that did anything but build trust. I had been trying for years to mitigate the negative impact our current evaluation system had on teachers. When I saw that the RAND research essentially confirmed everything I had been experiencing, I made the decision to eliminate the use and purpose of the

ratings associated with our current system. And, I felt emboldened to do so because the new research was clearly on my side.

I played baseball from the age of 5 until my junior year at a Division 1 college. I love the sport. Before stepping up to the plate in baseball, the hitter usually spends time in what is known as the on-deck circle. Time is spent in the on-deck circle warming up when the person who hits in front of you is at the plate. Typically, a heavy weight, called a donut, is placed on the bat while warming up. This serves to warm up your muscles, and by the time you step up to the plate to hit without the donut on your bat, the bat feels extremely light. It gives you the illusion that your bat is lighter, and when the time comes to hit against a live pitcher, you are able to swing harder and faster because the weight is no longer on the bat.

This is the exact feeling I would use to describe what happened to my teachers after I "took the pressure off" of them and announced that I would be giving zero weight to their rated informal and formal observations. I took a high-stakes, high-pressure environment and essentially took the donut off of their bats. August through October 2018 were the best three months I have ever experienced on a campus. Trust levels were off the charts. I had teachers inviting me in to do observations when they were trying new strategies. I had teachers begging for more feedback. I had teachers asking me to co-teach with them during their most difficult classes. It was the purest form of collaboration I had ever experienced. It was awesome. It was a true breakthrough, a true tipping point.

Reflections on the Case

The math department teachers in this case represented a model team. Trust levels among the teachers were high; their time together raised levels of trust. Leadership in the department was consistent, and relationships were solid. Student achievement results improved each year as

the team continued to grow and gel. As the principal, I was a consistent presence and an active participant in PLCs and in classrooms. I had conversations about instruction with the math teachers daily, and I visited their classrooms all the time. The frequency of my instructional contact with the math teachers, combined with the fact that I was also a math teacher prior to becoming an administrator, most likely added to my perceived credibility as an instructional leader. We grew very comfortable with each other, and relationships grew over time. I knew each teacher on a personal level—about their families, their interests, their hobbies, their goals, etc. The strength of our relationships improved as we continued to experience successful student outcomes.

Reflections on the Three Themes

This study is simple. It is all about one thing and one thing only—helping teachers re-discover their voices again. It is about treating teachers like the professionals they are. The secondary timeline framework correctly illustrates that the interventions took time, and over time trust grew, and subsequently social capital emerged among teachers and between the teachers and me. What follows are my reflections on how this occurred in this math department through the lens of the three interventions implemented in this study.

Trust among teachers began forming as *PLCs* were implemented, beginning in my first full year at the school in study in 2013-14. Much of this initial PLC time was spent on low-risk interactions, where teachers spent a high percentage of PLC time in collaborative planning and discussing their own ideas of how they would teach. As trust built, the work within PLCs began shifting to more high-risk interactions, where teachers regularly brought in student work samples to analyze as a team, exposing their own impact on student learning. Based on results of what was working and not working with students, teachers would share resources and modify their

practices. They borrowed ideas and strategies from each other and visited each other's classrooms when practicing and implementing new strategies. This required more vulnerability than simply discussing lesson plans. As trust accumulated, so did the high-risk interactions among teachers. This led to the second intervention, one that requires much more trust than work in PLCs.

Collaborative planning and data analysis continued, and the next intervention required teachers to visit each other where the real action takes place—the classroom. It is one thing to talk about teaching; it takes higher levels of trust to expose your teaching practices to your colleagues. *Walkthroughs* started in 2016-17 as a simple way to build culture among staff members. Feedback was always appreciative, and teachers that opened their classrooms did so on a voluntary basis. As this intervention matured into the 2017-18 school year, teachers began expanding their boundaries, watching teachers they were less familiar with, visiting each other more frequently and sometimes unannounced. In 2018-19, it took another step forward into higher risk, as teachers began leaving reflective, thought-provoking questions to truly push each other's practice. Trust continued to build.

Comments-only feedback in formal classroom observation essentially removed all of the pressure and stress of rated individual lessons and truly accelerated trust on all levels. It was palpable among the staff, so much so that teachers hired from other schools were immediately immersed in a trusting culture. I remember sharing my plans with the faculty to remove the impact of ratings of individual lessons from evaluation. One new teacher said that she cried when she heard this; she couldn't believe how awesome it was. In a separate story, a second new teacher shared with me how she used to tremble when she had to meet with her previous principal for an observation post-conference because of how nervous the process made her.

As a principal, some of my actions may have helped facilitate the effectiveness of the interventions. Principals help create the *conditions* that support teacher learning and growth. I worked closely with our assistant principal to outline the master schedule to ensure time was embedded to support PLC work. I used contractual meeting time to have a strong focus on PLC work. I worked very closely with the teacher talent developer (TTD) to discuss creating PLC agendas, how to deal with resistant teachers, what direction to take PLC conversations, and how to work together to provide the right combination of supports for teachers. I worked hard to separate the role of coaching for the TTD from the role of evaluator, which was my role as the principal of the school. Protecting the TTD from any appearance of an evaluator was a key to the success of the math department.

When I was packing up my office to head to my new school in November 2018, multiple teachers had thanked me for giving them a new-found passion for the profession, one that they had somehow lost along the way. It really felt like these interventions had resonated with so many people. Knowing that I was about to leave a high-performing school to enter a turnaround school left me wondering if it was even possible to create a collaborative and trusting culture, given the high stakes accountability atmosphere, district and state intervention, and the overall distrust and scapegoating of teachers throughout the system. While I am less than one year into this new experience and this remains be seen, I am hopeful that I will be able to successfully navigate the system and build a similar culture to the one we experienced together at the school I led during this study.

Reflections on Leadership

I was unexpectedly moved to a turnaround school in November of 2018, a school ordered by the state to remove its existing principal. While I was and continue to be excited about this

move, I couldn't help but feel that the work we had started in this study was left in cliffhanger fashion, completed unfinished, with the best yet to come. However, this study showed me what teachers see as threatening, particularly where what we do in schools contributes to their fear and anxiety. When teachers see administrators in their classroom once a year for a rated observation, the stakes are high, the perception (and most likely the reality) is that principals are disconnected from the work of teachers, that the principal does not know enough about the teacher to fairly evaluate them, etc. When a teacher's paycheck is closely associated with their performance on individual lessons, conversations about weaknesses or growth become inauthentic. Teachers are much more concerned about hiding growth areas in the interest of receiving high ratings, and understandably so. In addition, given the large amount of time that is required to complete a formal observation cycle, principals are left with less time to conduct more frequent observations, which would not only promote teacher growth but would build relationships and trust with teachers in the process.

New Principal of a Turnaround School

I find myself now in a completely different context, one where trust is at ground zero. The current accountability system and all its flaws are in full effect at my new site. But, I learned enough from my study to know that I have discovered something much bigger, something I am determined to incorporate at my current school. There is even more at stake now, at a turnaround school, because no group of educators has been more scapegoated for society's ills than teachers and schools in turnaround. I have never been more determined to show everyone what can happen when you create a collaborative culture with a strong foundation of trust.

When I started at my current school, there were multiple vacancies. Also, within my first month of working there in December 2018, the state ordered that we replace six existing teachers that were deemed unsatisfactory based on their state VAM scores. The morale of the staff was at an all-time low; this story made the news and other media outlets as well. I remember thinking to myself that it would be a daunting task to recruit any teacher to work in the conditions created by an unjust system, but one we have to operate within nonetheless.

During the completion of my first partial year (2018-19) from November 2018 to July 2019, I knew immediately that I needed to push 'pause' on my learning from this study and evaluate the teaching staff I just inherited. As I was learning the context of the school, I observed PLC interactions, learned about systems for observations, classroom visits, etc. Based on my initial learning, I knew I needed to make drastic changes in the staff. I remember thinking that the current teachers would have to "unlearn" so many things in order to work in the system I envisioned.

Content PLCs were run based on what the state Department of Education directed teachers to focus on. Classroom visits were very compliance-driven. The administrators and instructional coaches looked for things like a posted standard on the board and lesson plans on the teacher's desk. Feedback was rarely provided to teachers. The outgoing principal shared with me that she evaluated teachers exclusively on ratings from the one required formal observation and one required informal observation.

These practices were such a sharp contrast from what I envisioned creating, I decided to focus on turning over the existing staff while actively recruiting teachers as my top priorities for the remainder of the year. It was the one thing I decided to put all of my efforts into. By the start of the 2019-20 school year, I had turned over approximately 80% of the teaching staff.

Miraculously, our school grade improved from a "D" rating to a "C" rating in 2018-19. This was sufficient to remove the state Department of Education from our school for the 2019-20 year. I am thrilled about my starting point for the 2019-20 school year because I have experienced and quality teaching staff, 80% of which are new to the school, and we are not under the same pressure and oversight from the Department of Education because of our school grade improvement. I think the conditions were quickly established for my "new way of work" to thrive. That remains to be seen, so stay tuned.

Going Forward

I feel strongly that last year's work benefited me in recruiting teachers to my school today. What ensued in terms of teacher recruitment and hiring has been remarkable. Teachers from across the district reached out to me, expressing an interest in working with us for the following year. In total, l hired 40 new instructional staff, and 39 out of the 40 teachers were hired based on prior relationships and based on what they have heard about our systems. Thirteen of the 40 worked with me at the school that this study was based on. All 40 are rated effective or highly effective based on their evaluations and VAM scores. To this day I do not know how to use our hiring database because I haven't had to reach outside of social networks to attract teachers. While I can't prove anything, I feel strongly that the efforts we have made to help teachers find their voices has spread across the district and has aided me in attracting some of the top talent in the district. I look forward to seeing how quickly we can achieve high results for our students.

I am taking everything I've learned from years of action research cycles at my former school and am applying my learning to my current work in a turnaround setting. I have manipulated our units to provide all core teachers with an additional professional learning period

this year, so teachers now have 37.5% of their time released from students to dedicate to their own professional learning and growth. Embedded in this extra time are two days per week dedicated to PLCs and one full day dedicated to classroom visits. During the classroom visitations, teachers leave 100% appreciative feedback; we are beginning the process of building trust. I look forward to seeing the impact of these structures and am hopeful that it will lead to increased teacher retention. I hope I am able to show the district that this time investment in teachers is worth the potential cost of teacher attrition. And, it is also my hope that our kids are the beneficiaries of higher quality teachers and teaching. We know that teachers are the single most important factor in student achievement, and I hope this cycle of action research at my current site proves it.

While conducting my own research through my dissertation experience, I simultaneously participated in another personal professional learning experience that has significantly informed my practice. Back in January 2017, I was one of a handful of novice principals (year 3-5) selected to participate in the Investing in Innovation (i3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education through the National Institute of School Leadership (NISL) Executive Development Program (EDP). Joining a cohort of administrators from an adjacent district, this 12-month curriculum exposed me to some of the best learning I have ever experienced. Among many leadership topics we studied, there was an emphasis on learning about what other top-performing countries' systems look like. These systems are almost the complete opposite of what we practice in the United States. It was here where many of my ideas originated, ideas such as an emphasis on teacher leaders, the importance of providing teachers with time embedded in the day to focus on professional learning, providing teachers with more release time from students, using both instructional and facilitative coaching, and the emphasis on teamwork and

collaboration in all systems. We learned a lot about formative assessment practices, which form the foundation for PLC work, and we learned about how powerful a learning experience it is for teachers to watch each other teach. While these practices are not commonplace in the U.S., they are the foundations of professional practice throughout the top-performing systems in the world, in countries such as Finland, Singapore, Australia, Canada, Shanghai, and Japan. In these countries teachers are elevated to the status of true professionals. These systems look more like law firms or accounting firms, whereas the current U.S. systems continues to treat teachers like factory workers on an assembly line. It's no wonder there is a teacher shortage problem in the United States.

These learning experiences gave me unique perspectives on many aspects of leadership that frankly I was not learning from my experiences in my district. After graduating the 12-month program, I went on to get credentialed to be an EDP facilitator in the summer of 2018, and I have facilitated the NISL curriculum in multiple counties in the state of Florida while continuing my current practice as a middle school principal. I am extremely grateful for these opportunities.

Other district administrators have caught wind of what we were building at the school that this study is based on. It has been extremely well-received by employees at many levels in my district. I have been asked to speak about our systems at small group principal meetings and recently presented at the district's Turnaround Leadership Pathways learning tour in the summer of 2019. Both of my assistant principals have spoken at multiple assistant principal retreats about our work, and over a dozen schools have visited our campus to see the work in action.

Maybe we are on to something big. Maybe teachers crave to have their voices heard. Maybe teachers crave being treated and recognized as true professionals. Maybe it's time for the entire system to change.

Principal Leadership Development

As a practicing principal, I learned many things from this study that could inform principal leadership. First, being a lead learner and making instructional leadership a priority is critical for principals. Understanding that mistakes are a necessary part of learning is important to remember too. Principals can set the tone by creating a culture where mistakes are accepted and celebrated. I talk about my mistakes publicly all of the time, and by doing so it hopefully gives others permission to make mistakes as well. Lastly, the demands on the modern-day principal are so lofty that no single person can accomplish every expectation alone. I think it is very important for principals to take time to invest in teacher leadership and in building teams to support school improvement.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sample Focus Group Interview Questions (by grade level, 3-4 teachers in each grade level, total of 2 of the 4 teams)

Think about the processes we have in place (formal observation reflective comments-only post-conferences, administrator and peer walkthroughs through #observeme, and PLC work supported by TTDs) when responding to the questions:

1. What do you feel is working in this process?
2. What do you feel like you have learned or gained?
3. Has there been any point where you have been confused or felt unsure?
4. In what ways has our process made you a better teacher?
5. In what ways has our processes promoted reflection?
6. If this work were to expand across the district, what advice would you have for future implementation?
7. What suggestions for improvement do you have for the formal observation process? #observeme process? PLC process?
8. What are the most important skills for an administrator to possess in order to support this work? Why?
9. What are the most important skills for a TTD to possess in order to support this work? Why?

Appendix B: Sample Teacher Talent Developer Interview Questions (1 Math TTD)

1. What does the phrase *collaborative culture* mean to you?
2. What factors to you think contribute to creating a collaborative culture?
3. Describe your role in supporting PLC work.
4. How do you prepare for PLCs?
5. What type of assistance and/or support do you provide teachers?
6. Can you provide an example of something specific you did in your TTD role that resulted in improved practice of another teacher? Any other examples?
7. What are some factors that have enabled you to be successful with your teachers?

8. What challenges have you faced in implementing your vision for supporting teachers? How did you deal with that challenge?
9. Have you encountered any resistance from teachers, and if so how did you respond? If not, why do you think teachers are willing to participate?
10. What aspect of your work do you think is the most impactful for teachers? Why?
11. Where do you see opportunities to improve our structures or our systems of support for teachers?
12. Where do you see opportunities to improve our structures or our systems of support for Talent Developers?

Appendix C: Sample Teacher Interview Questions

For Research Sub Question #1: Math PLC (9 teachers)

1. What does the phrase *collaborative culture* mean to you?
2. What factors do you think contribute to creating a collaborative culture?
3. Tell me a little bit about your experiences with your Math PLC.
4. Describe a typical PLC meeting. What types of activities does the group focus on?
5. How does the work in your PLC connect to your classroom instruction?
6. What changes or improvements to instruction have you made as a result of your PLC work?
7. How have your PLC colleagues contributed to your professional growth? Specific example?
8. How has your work with your PLC colleagues contributed to our students' success in math?
9. How has your TTD contributed to your professional growth? Specific example?
10. How has your work with your PLC colleagues contributed to our students' success in math?
11. What factors do you think contribute to creating a collaborative culture in your PLC?
12. What challenges have you faced in supporting each other?
13. If there was a teaching vacancy on your team, what would you be looking for in a potential teacher to determine if they might be a good fit for the collaborative culture you have established? Why?
14. What are the most important skills for an administrator to possess in order to support this work? Why?

For Research Sub Question #2: Non-evaluative Walkthroughs (subgroup of 3 teachers in the Math PLC)

1. Describe your experiences with #observeme walkthroughs with administrators. When and how often do these occur? What tends to happen? What kind of feedback do you receive?
2. Describe your experiences with #observeme walkthroughs with your peers. When and how often do these occur? What tends to happen? What kind of feedback do you receive?
3. What is an example of feedback you received from an administrator that resulted in an improvement in your instructional practice?
4. What is an example of feedback you received from a peer that resulted in an improvement in your instructional practice?
5. What suggestions do you have for improvement in the process?

For Research Sub Question #3: Formal Observation Process (subgroup of 3 teachers in the Math PLC)

1. Describe your experiences with your formal observation post-conference. When and how often do these occur? What tends to happen? What kind of feedback do you receive?

2. How did this experience (a formal observation post-conference) compare to previous experiences?
    - What is different about it?
    - What was helpful?
    - What was not helpful?
3. What changes to your practice have resulted from this kind of formal observation post-conference?
4. In what ways has this post-conference process made you more reflective? What do you reflect on?
5. How has receiving observation data and comments-only (and no ratings) impacted your experience?
6. What recommendations do you have for improving the process?

Appendix D: District Approval of Research

Hillsborough County
PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Preparing Students for Life

May 30, 2019

Mr. Andrew Olson
32510 Summerglade Dr.
Wesley Chapel, FL 33545

Dear Mr. Olson:

The Hillsborough County Public School district has agreed to participate in your research proposal, *Building a Collaborative Culture in a Middle School: A Case Study*, has been approved by the district. **Your approval number is RR1819-161. You must refer to this number in all correspondence**. Approval is given for your research under the following conditions:

1) Participation is to be on a voluntary basis. That is, participation is **NOT MANDATORY** and you must advise **ALL PARTICIPANTS** that they are not obligated to participate in your study.
2) If the principal agrees the school will participate, it is up to you to find out what rules the school has for allowing people on campus and you must abide by the school's check-in policy. You will **NOT BE ALLOWED** on any school campus without first following the school's rules for entering campus grounds.
3) Confidentiality must be assured for all. That is, **ALL DATA MUST BE AGGREGATED SUCH THAT THE PARTICIPANTS CANNOT BE IDENTIFIED**. Participants include the district, principals, administrators, teachers, support personnel, students and parents.
4) Any student data **MUST** be **DESTROYED** when the project has been completed.
5) Since you are an employee of the Hillsborough County Public Schools, all work related to this research **must be done outside your normal working hours** unless your administrator believes the research is a function of your position.
6) If this work is **not part of your job, you can not use the school mail or email system** to send or receive any documents.
7) Research approval does not constitute the use of the district's equipment, software, email, or district mail service. In addition, requests that result in extra work by the district such as data analysis, programming or assisting with electronic surveys, may have a cost borne by the researcher.
8) This approval **WILL EXPIRE ON 12/31/2019**. You will have to contact us at that time if you feel your research approval should be extended.
9) A copy of your research findings must be submitted to this department and for our files.

Raymond O. Shelton School Administrative Center • 901 East Kennedy Boulevard • Tampa, Florida 33602
School District Main Office: 813-272-4000 • P.O. Box 3408 • Tampa, Florida 33601 • website: www.sdhc.k12.fl.us
Office of Strategy Management

Good luck with your endeavor. If you have any questions, please advise.

Sincerely,

Julie McLeod, Manager
Strategic Data and Evaluation
Office of Strategy Management

JM/vv

cc: Peter J. Megara, Principal, Progress Village

Appendix E: IRB Approval of Research

USF
UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH FLORIDA

RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

May 24, 2019

Andrew Olson
Educational Leadship
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Exempt Certification**
IRB#: Pro00040411
Title: Building a Collaborative Culture in a Middle School: A Case Study

Dear Mr. Olson:

On 5/24/2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that your research meets criteria for exemption from the federal regulations as outlined by 45 CFR 46.104(d):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests(cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:(i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

As the principal investigator for this study, it is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted as outlined in your application and consistent with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report and with USF HRPP policies and procedures.

Please note, as per USF HRPP Policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in ARC. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant an Amendment

or new application.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subjects research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board

Appendix F: Participant Letter

Hillsborough County PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Preparing Students for Life

Progress Village Middle Magnet School of the Arts

To: Selected Teachers/Staff of Progress Village Middle Magnet School of the Arts
Subject: Invitation to Participate in Interview/Focus Group for Collaborative Culture Dissertation Study

Dear Teacher/Staff of Progress Village Middle Magnet School for the Arts,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study about the ways a principal might create a collaborative culture focused on teacher learning and growth. The purpose of this action research case study is to provide deep insight into how a principal implements his vision for creating a collaborative culture and the ways in which teachers experience the implementation.

As part of my efforts to understand the ways in which teachers experience these interventions, I am interested in speaking with selected staff members from the math department that play a key role in the implementation and/or are affected by the changes.

I have identified you as one of these staff members. I believe your opinions and experiences are vital for my research study and hope you will accept this invitation to participate in an interview/focus group taking place during the school day on **(insert date here)**

Your participation in the study is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will have no bearing on your employment or relationship with me. If you choose to participate, you can stop your participation at any time or skip any questions. I will keep what you say confidential. I will not identify you by name or attribute any statements to you. There is no direct financial benefit to you for participating, and there is no foreseeable risk, except the possible breach of confidentiality.

Please indicate whether you would like to participate in the interview/focus group completing the information below.

___ I AM INTERESTED in participating in the research study.

[Name] _____
[Position/Title] _____

___ I DECLINE to participate in the research study.

[Name] _____
[Position/Title] _____

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at any time.

Thank you,
Andrew Olson

Appendix G: Informed Consent

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

IRB Study # _____

I am asking you to take part in a research study that is called:
Creating a Collaborative Culture Focused on Teacher Learning and Growth

I am in charge of this study and I am doing it to fulfill a requirement for my dissertation and my EdD degree work at the University of South Florida.

The research will be done at Progress Village Middle Magnet School of the Arts, located at 8113 Zinnia Drive, Tampa, FL 33619.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to better understand how a principal can foster a collaborative culture focused on teacher learning and growth.

Study Procedures

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to

- *1) actively engage in professional learning community (PLC) conversations around your growth and development;*
- *2) provide a sample or samples of artifacts such as your work in PLCs, completed peer observation forms;*
- *3) participate in an interview/focus group to describe your experiences and provide the researcher with feedback*

The research will be conducted on campus during the between January and May 2019.

If audiotaping will be used, I will inform you of taping and you will be given the option to agree to the recording. I will be the only one that has access to these tapes, the information will not be identifiable, and the recordings will be destroyed by deleting the files at the conclusion of the study in December 2019.

Alternatives

You have the alternative to choose not to participate in this research study. If you choose not to participate it will not impact any aspect of your evaluation of your performance.

Benefits

One of the benefits of doing action research is that it has the potential to improve my practice as a principal. Therefore, this study has the potential to benefit you by improving my instructional leadership and ability to lead change initiatives. The implications from this study also have the potential to inform future human resources policy within our district, as well as leadership development coursework.

Risks or Discomfort

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day as part of being a teacher at Progress Village. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation

I will not provide you with any compensation for volunteering to be part of this study. Teachers will not earn extra credit for their overall evaluation and those who choose not to participate will not be penalized.

Confidentiality

I will keep my study records as confidential as possible.

Because I am doing this action research study as part of my dissertation requirements at USF, I will be the only one to see the data that I collect. Therefore, no one else will have access to my records.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study, to please me. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your job status or overall evaluation.

Questions, concerns, or complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call me at 727-243-4429.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please sign the form, if the following statements are true.

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

_____ _____

Signature of Person Taking Part in Study Date

_____

Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands:

- What the study is about.
- What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used.
- What the potential benefits might be.
- What the known risks might be.

_____ _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent Date

_____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Appendix H: Excerpts Coded in PLC Theme

Teacher	Page	Code	Research Question	Plus?	Delta?	Notes/Quotes
2	2	flexibility	PLC	yes		
2	2	willingness to learn	PLC			
2	2	honest	PLC			
2	2	open to hearing research	PLC			
2	2	planned agenda	PLC			
2	2	talk about students	PLC			
2	2	common assessments	PLC			
3	2	collective responsibility	PLC			"oh my kids did gret on this, let me see, how'd you teach it? So it's not much on either end, everyone is here together for the benefit of not just their students but their colleagues as well."
3	2	sharing ideas	PLC			
3	2	hear other perspectives	PLC			
3	3	stressed at testing time	PLC			
3	3	more focused	PLC			
3	3	based on standards	PLC			"those targeted PLCs with the TTD are real things we could use right then and there with our students, and that we were creating together to use with our students, based on the standards, and based on specific student needs."
3	3	based on evidence	PLC			
3	3	trust built in PLC	PLC			
3	3	enforcing norms of behavior	PLC			
3	4	build on strengths	PLC			"...if you want people to continue to have that buy-in and feel that worth shared within the group, then find everyone's strengths and kind of build upon them."

Appendix I: Excerpts Coded in Walkthroughs and Feedback Theme

Teacher	Page	Code	Research Question	Plus?	Delta?	Notes/Quotes
1	10	clear expectation from admin	CW			"hold people to a certain number"
2	14	ideas from colleagues	CW			"they definitely have great ideas. One example is going to Ms. Ventura's classroom and seeing her posters on her mirror. To have posters with different questions and then she used sticky notes where the kids would put their answers and the feedack on. And so it's a science classroom, it's a different setting, but then I thought 'hey, how can I do that in my classroom?' I liked that, because you've got to get them up and going, you can't just have them sitting down the whole time. So I found that was interesting. So mixing it up, having mixed skills is important."
3	8	see different teaching styles	CW			
3	8	boundary spanning	CW			
3	8	see students in different setting	CW			
3	8	feedback specific makes good	CW			
3	9	group discussions after CW	CW			
3	9	feedback preferred with improvements	CW			
3	10	growth mindset	CW			
4	15	consistenly scheduled	CW		yes	
5	7	debrief with teacher observed	CW			
5	7	bring closure with follow up conversation with	CW			

Appendix J: Excerpts Coded in Comments-Only Feedback in Formal Observation Theme

Teacher	Page	Code	Research Question	Plus?	Delta?	Notes/Quotes
1	8	pressure of ratings	FO			"..in the past I would get real nervous about it because it was evaluative."
1	8	partial picture in a formal observation	FO			"....they don't know my plan..Whereas, if that came up in an evaluation I would've been very threatened by that."
2	6	less pressure	FO			"the idea really just makes teachers less pressued about that initial day, leading up to it, the during, the after, the subsequent afters and all the other afters when you think about that one moment when it happened. So it just takes the pressure off that, because you realize that it's just all of this work that you can document the awesome days when no one walks in, if you're able to document all of those things then that's when, I feel, and it just take the pressure off because there's too much pressure and a lot of people let pressure get the best of them. And when you take the pressure out of things, and people can truly be themselves and teach how they want to teach, and their students get their best teacher."
2	7	take more risks	FO			"...taking more risks, because I know some people that will do the same lesson every year for their observation."
2	8	not afraid	FO			"you're not afraid of trial and error. And that it's all part of your own personal growth."
3	5	very freeing	FO			"so having the freedom to do what's best for kids and not feel like you had to fit within these boxes on a rubric"
3	5	very freeing	FO			"you didn't stress about did I check this box? It was more about did the lesson work, did the kids get it, what did the data say?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Olson is originally from Syracuse, New York. A high school graduate of C.W. Baker High School in Baldwinsville, NY, he received his Bachelor's Degree in Accounting from Le Moyne College, his Master's in Educational Leadership from the University of South Florida, and completed all of the coursework towards the Ed.S. degree in Turnaround Leadership from the University of South Florida.

For over 15 years, he has served as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal at various sites in Hillsborough County Public Schools. His experiences include serving as a teacher leaders at one middle school that improved from a "B" rated school to an "A" rated school, a K-8 school that improved from a "C" to an "A" rated school, and serving as principal at a middle school whose grade improved from a "B" to an "A."

In January 2018, he completed a 12-month training with the National Institute of School Leadership's (NISL) Executive Development Program (EDP). His school was nominated by NISL and selected by the RAND Corporation as one of nine in the United States for an in-depth case study on the practices he employed to implement strategic change while applying his learning in the EDP program.

He is currently serving as a principal at a high-needs school in Hillsborough County. Assigned as a result of state-mandated turnaround directives, he improved the school grade from a "D" to a "C" in his first year.