

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF A
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY:
ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY:
ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLES

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a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education

and hereby certify that in their opinion is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

“To practice a discipline is to be a lifelong learner. You never arrive; you spend your life mastering disciplines. The more you learn, the more acutely aware you become of your ignorance.” This quote from Peter Senge speaks volumes to anyone who dedicates themselves to the betterment of the human condition. There is never a moment in time in which anyone, no matter what discipline becomes the focus of mastery, can claim to have reached a destination of finished. The great French novelist, Marcel Proust once said, “We don’t receive wisdom; we discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare for us.”

I continue in my own journey of lifelong learning, consistently passionate in my advocacy for populations who have little influence to champion for their own value. A path of continuous learning has undoubtedly helped me to develop a collaborative approach in working with others to achieve this goal and support vulnerable students through the most appropriate means. This dissertation is dedicated to all those courageous enough to initiate and continue a journey of lifelong collaborative learning to positively impact the populations that they serve.

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ABSTRACT

The Director of Elementary Education, elementary principals, and elementary teachers offered information during a structured interview, surveys, and a focus group pertaining to collaboration. Within the context of this study, collaboration was defined as “a way of working with colleagues that is characterized by cooperation, mutual respect, and shared goals, involving sharing of information, coordinating actions, discussing what is working and what is not, and perpetually seeking input and feedback,” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 54). This qualitative, bounded case study, conducted in a Midwestern suburban school district, provides an analysis of collaboration at the elementary school level with a focus on professional learning communities and the elementary principal’s role. The purpose of this study was to discover perceptions of elementary principals’ role in implementing collaborative processes through the framework of a professional learning community. Hord’s (1997, 2008) framework for a professional learning community was the conceptual framework for this study. Open and axial coding were utilized throughout the qualitative data analysis process. Findings indicated prominent themes of facilitator, team builder, and strategic planner as the perceived role of the elementary principal in the implementation of collaborative practices and processes within a professional learning community. Additional findings indicated that each tenant of an effective professional learning community (Hord 1997, 2008) was equitably recognized by respondents across data collection modalities.

Keywords: collaboration, elementary principal, qualitative case study, elementary school, professional learning community.

SECTION I

INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

“We now live in a change rich environment, where multiple policy initiatives and innovation overload are the norm,” (Hopkins & Ainscot, 1993, p. 303). This sentiment continues to ring true today. As the pressure of accountability rises throughout education, many elementary schools struggle to meet the academic needs of all students (Bower & Powers, 2009). Many school districts have large populations of students requiring strong academic interventions and strive to implement effective instructional strategies to increase academic performance (Abbott & Wills, 2012). As elementary school classrooms contain more diverse learners than ever before, literacy and learning skills present a continual challenge (Brozo, 2010).

When faced with the challenge of improving student outcomes, many school districts and principals have embraced collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities to improve learning for students (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Reeves, 2011). Professional learning communities are described as educational climates in which teachers work collaboratively to consider existing instructional practices, examine student outcome data, and adjust teaching strategies for certain students within their classrooms (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Districts and school buildings implementing professional learning communities demonstrate the capability to improve learning for students and transform overall achievement for their districts and buildings (DuFour, 2007).

At the epicenter of the collaborative professional learning community lies the concept that the mere provision of instruction does not fulfill the obligation of the professional educator. Assuring students learn is a fundamental responsibility of the professional educator (DuFour, 2004). Collaboration among educators working in professional learning communities establishes

a foundation for transformation that positively influences student learning (Hord, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Senge, 1990).

Establishing collaboration through a professional learning community in a school setting necessitates strong leadership. Leithwood et al., 2004 state, “Leadership is only second to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in school” (p. 7). Principals play an important role in overall school effectiveness (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Improved principal leadership plays a significant role in the improvement of student achievement (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004).

A principal’s capacity to transform schools through the implementation of collaborative practices is enormous. Louis, Kruse, and Marks (1996) state, “The principal plays a critical role in the development of professional learning communities, forging the conditions that give rise to the growth of learning communities in schools” (p. 19). Newmann and Wehlage (1995) agree with this position in their statement that, “The effectiveness of a school staff depends much on the quality of leadership” (p. 37). Principals possess the positional power to implement and maintain effective collaborative practices (Northouse, 2013). McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) indicate that principals significantly influence the outcome of building-level collaborative professional learning communities.

Statement of the Problem

The problem within this study was little available research on the perception of elementary principals in their role of ensuring collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities within the Midwest Suburban School District. Elementary principals’ perceptions of their role in implementing collaboration through the framework of professional learning communities were unknown within the district prior to this research study.

Additional problems to be addressed included lack of knowledge of elementary principals' working definition of collaboration, as well as how elementary principals currently implement collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community. This research study aimed to gain perceptions of elementary school principals to gain feedback and potentially improve collaborative practices district-wide.

Collaborative Practices through Professional Learning Communities

Research indicates that when utilized effectively, collaboration amongst educational professionals demonstrates an effective means to achieve improvement in student learning. Hord (2008) describes the principal as instrumental in transforming the school into a learning community. Wells and Feun (2007) view lack of support from principals as a barrier to successful implementation of professional collaborative practices. As building leaders, principals deem essential in the "creation and the long-term maintenance of professional learning communities" (Sparks, 2005, p. 156). Perceptions of principals as to their roles in such successful implementation was unknown in the Midwest Suburban School District.

Existing research indicates that the traditional role of the principal has transformed from managers of schools to leaders that encompass the characteristics of vision and advocacy for successful collaboration among teachers, contributing to an environment in which all students grow academically (NAESP, 2008). Implementing the collaborative construct of a professional learning community necessitates a building leader that is committed to providing effective leadership (Dufour & Marzano, 2011). Research on existing collaborative practices through the framework of professional learning communities had never been conducted in the Midwest suburban school district. It was unknown if perceptions are consistent, if collaboration is defined consistently, or if further support may be needed to assist in problem-solving potential obstacles

in implementation. Gaining perspectives from elementary principals in the Midwest Suburban School District was necessary to understand the challenges elementary principals face in this continuously evolving role, as well as to understand necessary supports for the role from the district level.

Gap in Existing Literature

While there is extensive literature dedicated to the characteristics and significance of collaboration in the educational setting (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2012; Dufour et al., 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Sparks, 2005), very little research on the principal's perception of the implementation of collaboration through professional learning communities exists, specifically at the elementary school level. Although many research studies emphasize the influence of the role of the building principal (Hallinger & Heck, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006), most conclusions merely recommend principal involvement in the process. None of the research examined elementary principal perceptions of their roles in implementing collaboration through professional learning communities. An investigation of perceptions of elementary principals' role in implementing collaboration through professional learning communities, as well as how they currently define collaboration and implement it through the framework of a professional learning community proved necessary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to fill the gap in existing literature through the examination of elementary principals' perceptions of their role in establishing collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities within elementary schools in the Midwest Suburban School District. Insight to current collaborative practices through the framework of a professional learning community will be gained through exploration of

elementary principal perceptions of their current role in the process. Additional insights will be gained as to how elementary principals currently define collaboration and implement collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community in the Midwest Suburban School District.

Understanding elementary principals' perceptions will allow district administration to better understand various levels of collaboration through professional learning community implementation, as well as the specific role that principals perceive to play in the process. Findings may play a relevant role in providing recommendations to the district's Director of Elementary Education and may also serve as a resource for other professionals with an interest in elementary education, particularly in the areas of collaboration and professional learning communities. In addition, research findings may additionally be useful within elementary school settings of a school district of similar size and demographic make-up of the Midwest Suburban School District.

Research Questions

The focus of this study was to examine elementary principals' perceptions of their role in establishing collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities within their respective schools. Two types of research questions were involved in qualitative research studies: the central question and sub-questions (Creswell, 2012). The central research question guiding this qualitative study was: What are elementary principals' perceptions of their role in implementing a professional learning community? The following sub-questions support the central research question and narrow the focus of the study to collaboration, the role of the principal, and professional learning communities (Creswell, 2012):

1. How do elementary principals define collaboration?

2. How do elementary principals describe their role in the implementation of a professional learning community?

Hord's Framework for a Professional Learning Community

“A conceptual framework serves as an underlying structure which guides the research study,” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 85). A conceptual framework can be understood to be a lens through which a researcher will investigate a problem, serving as the foundation of the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the conceptual framework for the research study in the Midwest Suburban School District.

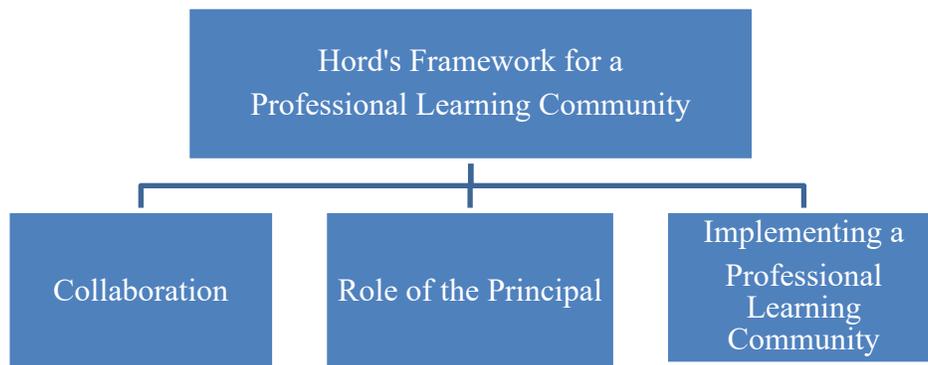


Figure 1. Hord's framework for a professional learning community was the conceptual framework for this study, contributing to this qualitative investigation of collaborative practices of professional learning communities in the Midwest Suburban School District. Collaboration, role of the principal, and implementation of a professional learning community were key variables.

Hord (1997, 2008) developed five dimensions that are indicative of successful professional learning communities. These dimensions provide scaffolding for an understanding of collaboration within a professional learning community and the role of the elementary

principal in its implementation. These dimensions include shared vision and values, shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application, shared personal practice and supportive conditions. These dimensions served as filters in discerning the abundance of literature to be reviewed for this study, as well as provided a means of exploring applications of these dimensions in a real educational setting.

Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision

Shared beliefs, values, and vision are central to meaningful adjustments integral to increased student learning (Hord, 2008). Senge (1990) posits that learning organizations cannot exist without shared vision. Collective goals can be achieved when teachers work in collaboration, guided by shared beliefs and vision. Pankake and Moller (2004) contend the incorporation of a vision that is “characterized by an undeviating focus on student learning” characterizes “the hallmark of a true professional learning community” (p. 8). Printy and Marks (2006) contribute that when a principal and teachers engage in the same belief and effort of producing an exceptional education for students, “schools do not undertake innovation purely for the sake of change” (p. 131).

Shared and Supportive Leadership

The implementation of shared leadership and decision-making within the professional learning community results in increased student learning (Fleming & Leo, 1999; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Administrative cultivation of relationships is necessary to maintain shared leadership and responsibility (Hord, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003, 2010). “A principal who is willing to initiate structure and share responsibilities” is crucial for the implementation of a professional learning community (O’Malley, 2010).

Collective Learning and Application

As a fundamental dimension of a professional learning community, increasing collective learning and application of learning deems essential. DuFour (2004) describes collective learning as necessary in addressing the central concepts of what we want students to learn, how we will know when students have learned what we want them to learn, and how we will react when students do not respond to selected instructional strategies. Senge (1990) contends that collective learning also involves enhancing abilities to work as teams. Hord (1997, 1998, 2008) iterates that collective learning is integral in effective professional learning communities that positively influence student learning.

Shared Personal Practice

Professional learning communities implement shared practice to positively impact student learning. Research indicates the importance for educators to support one another to strengthen collective learning and application of that learning (Hord, 2008).

Supportive Conditions

Supportive conditions provide a foundation for professional learning communities to develop and grow, including supportive relational conditions and supportive structural conditions (Hord, 1997, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).



Figure 2. Illustration of the five dimensions that are indicative of successful professional learning communities (Hord, 1997).

Design of the Study

The overall goal of this qualitative bounded case study (Creswell, 2014) was to determine the perceptions of elementary school principals' role in implementing collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community, specifically focusing on how elementary principals define collaboration and how they perceive their roles in the implementation of a professional learning community. To accomplish this, the researcher gathered information from the Director of Elementary Education, elementary school principals, and elementary teachers within the Midwest Suburban School District. The researcher triangulated the data (Seidman, 1998) through the use of a semi-structured interview, qualitative survey, and focus group(s) (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Fink, 2013; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Setting

Research was conducted in the Midwest Suburban School District located in a suburban Missouri city with an approximate population of 76,000 citizens (United States Census Bureau, 2016). The Midwest Suburban School District included fourteen operating elementary schools within the school district boundaries. Two elementary schools were comprised of a K-5 school-age population, while the remaining twelve elementary schools were comprised of a K-6 school-age population. Population sizes of elementary schools ranged in size from 301 to 687 students. All elementary schools employed a principal, with four elementary schools with larger populations additionally employing a vice principal.

Elementary schools within the Midwest Suburban School District were comprised mostly of Caucasian students, with 25.3% identified as Hispanic, African American, Asian, or American Indian (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Free and reduced breakfast and lunch percentages across elementary schools range from 32.62% to 100% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Approval was granted for this research study by the Director of School Improvement and the District Research Committee in the Midwest Suburban School District.

Participants

The Director of Elementary Education, elementary school principals, and elementary teachers within the Midwest Suburban School District were the invited participants of this bounded case study. The researcher sought participation from these participants within the school district. As some level of implementation of collaboration through the professional learning community process was a criterion for participation, the researcher utilized a non-probability, purposeful sampling procedure (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) states “purposeful

sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77).

Participation was on a volunteer basis and a consent form was obtained from volunteering participants. Participants were contacted via email, through personal phone calls, or face-to-face interaction. The researcher’s role involved the maintenance of participant confidentiality throughout the research process.

Procedures and Data Collection Tools

The conceptual framework of Hord (1997, 2008) and a review of existing literature provided a guide for this investigation. As the purpose of this study was to explore principals’ perceptions of their role in the implementation of collaboration through professional learning communities at the elementary school level in the Midwest Suburban School District, this research utilized a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). The role of the researcher throughout the qualitative research was one of instrument of data collection (Merriam, 2009). The researcher collected multiple sources of qualitative data to compile more complete data and developed meaningful findings (Creswell, 2012). Institutional Review Board approval at the university and school district levels was obtained prior to qualitative data collection.

The review of literature and Hord’s (1997, 2008) five dimensions of professional learning communities additionally assisted in the formulation of the interview protocol, survey instrument, and support focus group facilitation. Comparisons of interview, survey, and focus group results increased reliability in research results, thus achieving trustworthiness through triangulation (Fink, 2013).

Semi-Structured Interview

The researcher scheduled and conducted a semi-structured interview with the Director of Elementary Education as a means of understanding the district expectation of implementation of professional learning communities within elementary schools of the Midwest Suburban School District. Merriam (2009) indicates that the semi-structured interview consists of “a mix of more and less structured interview questions that will be used flexibly and allow for probing questions to be asked based on participants’ responses” (p. 89). Data gleaned from the semi-structured interview were instrumental in developing questions for a survey instrument, as well as support focus group facilitation.

The format of the interview was semi-structured, with a goal of “minimum bias through maintaining a neutral stance in regard to the research topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 92). An interview protocol (See Appendix C) was utilized to record and organize information gained. This allowed the researcher to organize questioning in a coherent manner and to record descriptive notes of responses.

The researcher developed an interview protocol and followed it as suggested by Merriam (2009). As guided by Emerson et al. (2011), the researcher formulated questions that slowly engaged the interviewee, established comfort, and was created with “open-ended questions that could be followed up with probes and requests for more detail” (Merriam, 2009, p. 17). These open-ended questions incorporated experience, opinions and values, feelings, and knowledge to the research topic (Merriam, 2009). Useful questions were utilized within the interview that were prepared in advance to obtain meaningful data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The interview was conducted via a teleconferencing platform and the use of an audio digital recording device was utilized to capture interviewee responses. The interview was

anticipated to approximate a duration of 15-25 minutes, depending on the nature of responses and length of follow-up questions. As interviews represent verbatim records, an audio recording of the individual interview was imperative to conduct data analysis. The interview participant determined the use of recording device based on comfort level within the individual interview (Merriam, 2009). After completion of the interview, the researcher reviewed interview notes and transcribed the recording verbatim to enable full analysis of qualitative data gained. The transcription was completed by hand. Transcription of the interview was provided to the participant for review upon completion to continue a trustworthy relationship with the researcher.

Qualitative Survey

A survey instrument was utilized with elementary principals as a means of acquiring understanding of principals' perceptions of their roles in implementing collaborative processes through professional learning communities within their buildings. Surveys are best used when perceptions of the stakeholders are desired (Fink, 2013). McDavid (2013) states that surveys typically receive a 50% response rate. The researcher chose to utilize Survey Monkey, an online survey-generating program, and distributed the survey through email to all participating elementary principals within the Midwest Suburban School District. Fink (2013) states that surveyors and respondents alike prefer online surveys due to accessibility, affordability, and ability to reach a large number of respondents in a short amount of time.

The survey protocol (See Appendix D) contained questions appropriately relevant to the research questions, and a pilot test was conducted for feedback concerning clarity, conciseness, and bias (Fink, 2013). Specific questions inquiring objective facts (Fink, 2013) were positioned at the beginning of the survey, leading to more subjective and broad questions at its

conclusion. The survey included open-ended constructed response questions, incorporating experience, opinions and values, feelings, and knowledge to the research topic (Merriam, 2013).

Content validity was obtained through an expert panel review, as advised by Fink (2013). Data provided by are “the descriptions of feelings and perceptions,” (Fink, 2013, p. 5). The qualitative data collected from this survey contributed to other qualitative data gathered within the research study for more meaningful results (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2009) indicates the necessity of confidentiality within qualitative research. All survey data and results were confidentially secure and respondent identities were not available to other participants.

Focus Group

In addition, a focus group consisting of voluntary participating elementary teachers was conducted by the researcher to draw upon participants’ range of attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and experiences pertaining to the focus of this study (Krueger & Casey, 2009). As Merriam (2009) recommends, the focus group is a purposeful sampling of teachers, due to their level of knowledge of the implementation of professional learning communities within the elementary schools in which they are employed. This included regular education teachers and special education teachers who were considered information-rich people in a single-category design (Krueger & Casey, 2009). This also met the ideal size of a focus group (five to seven) for a noncommercial topic (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The focus group took place via a teleconferencing platform and to respect the time and responsibilities of participating respondents, the focus group timeframe was limited to one hour. The researcher facilitated the focus group and an audio digital recording device was utilized to capture participant responses. The researcher utilized preliminary and planned focus group questions (See Appendix E). Based on information gleaned from the semi-structured interview

and qualitative survey responses, focus group questions were revised and refined to effectively triangulate the data (Creswell, 2012).

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interview and focus group(s) were audio recorded to analyze (Merriam, 2009). Transcribing audio recordings provided optimum opportunity for analysis (Merriam, 2009). Analyzing verbatim transcriptions allows researchers to uncover similarities across data (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Once survey data was collected from the online survey program (Survey Monkey Inc., 2014) the researcher conducted an analysis of individual survey questions. These responses were helpful in determining opinions of elementary principals regarding the research questions.

The researcher utilized the process of coding to label and sort collected qualitative data (Emerson et al., 2011; Merriam, 2009). Coding also served to summarize and interpret themes that emerge from the data (Emerson et al., 2011). Open coding (Krueger & Casey, 2009) was initially implemented to analyze survey responses, as well as focus group and interview transcriptions to provide a basic structure for collected data. Themes were developed from interview and focus group transcriptions using axial coding (Emerson et al., Merriam, 2009). This provided opportunities for the researcher to consider all qualitative data gathered, interpret the meaning of responses, and categorize them into developed themes.

The data was mined using an inductive process, allowing for construction of themes and categories from small bits of qualitative data (Merriam, 2009). The researcher notated emerging themes. Multiple iterations were conducted to develop complex categories of themes (Yin, 2009). The themes and notations that emerged were compiled in a document for comparison of consistency and ranked in order of prominence and relevance to the posed research questions.

The conceptual framework, research questions, and literature review guided data analysis to avoid personal bias throughout this process.

Reliability, validity, and transferability were regarded throughout the research process. Reliability is increased when all elementary principals are provided an opportunity to participate in the research study, as opposed to a researcher selected sample (Merriam, 2009). Validity was evident through multiple data sources, including survey, focus group, and interview data, as well as an extensive literature review on the subject matter (Creswell, 2012). Triangulation of data sources are necessary to support the validity of research findings (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). This research study should not be considered transferable to all elementary school environments striving to implement collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community, but rather as a contribution to existing research in these areas.

Ethical Considerations

Absolute confidentiality of responses and identity was emphasized to study participants by the researcher to ensure honest feedback (Fink, 2013). As confidentiality of participants was imperative, upon completion of transcription of interviews, voice recordings were deleted from the audio recording device. Pseudonyms were given to each participant within written results of the research study, and no intentional connections with each participant and their respective buildings within the school district were made. Voluntary participants were informed of the research purpose and objectives prior to the interview process and signed informed consent forms were obtained by the researcher. Permission was obtained from the Midwest Suburban School District in which the participating educators, principals, and teachers are employed prior to initiation of research. No known harm existed throughout participation in this research study.

Limitations, Assumptions, Design Controls

Limitations

As this was a qualitative bounded case study, responses from participants were a result of their own experiences. The validity and reliability of specific responses was viewed with caution. There was very little possibility of replicating this research study, nor is the researcher claiming transferability to other school districts of similar size or demographic nature. Researcher bias must also be accounted for, including both the researcher's past experiences with professional learning communities, in addition to past professional interactions with participating school district staff. Creswell (2012) cautions that these potential biases may impact interpretation of the qualitative data.

Assumptions

This study assumed that the responses collected through a survey, focus group, and semi-structured interviews were an accurate reflection of participant perceptions, and were not changed for the purposes of this qualitative study. This study examined the individual perceptions of elementary principals' roles in the implementation of collaborative processes through the framework of a professional learning community.

All participants fulfilled principal roles at the elementary level and provided honest and accurate information without deliberate manipulation of the outcome of the study's conclusions. Although information conveyed throughout participation is an accurate account of their experiences, it can be assumed that error or biases may inadvertently influence the conclusions of this qualitative study (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

Design Controls

Creswell (2012, 2014) indicates that consistent focus of the researcher on the problem statement and research questions of the study are imperative. Implementing precautions will impede undue influence of outlined assumptions and limitations on collected data (Creswell, 2012, 2014). Following these recommendations assisted the researcher in focusing on participant perspectives and minimized researcher biases.

Quality data was necessary to help the researcher formulate valid findings and recommendations. Participants in qualitative studies can often feel intimidated to openly share perceptions of the topic under investigation. The utilization of surveys can be helpful in acquiring richer qualitative data in such circumstances (Fink, 2013). Preparing focus group and interview questions in advance also assisted the researcher in gathering high quality data through more complete accounts of participant responses (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 1998).

Quality data analysis is also necessary to provide valid and reliable interpretations of data (Creswell, 2012, 2014; Fink, 2013; Kruger & Casey, 2009). Transcription of focus groups and interviews, as well as open and axial coding processes assisted the researcher in developing themes that emerged from the qualitative data provided by participants (Fink, 2013; Kruger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Definitions of Key Terms

Collaboration. For the purpose of this study, collaboration will be defined as “a way of working with colleagues that is characterized by cooperation, mutual respect, and shared goals. It involves sharing information, coordinating actions, discussing what’s working and what’s not, and perpetually seeking input and feedback,” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 54).

Collective/shared leadership. Leadership from multiple leaders in order to maintain shared responsibility (Boyd-Dimock & Hord, 1994; Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

Collective learning. A dynamic and collective process of the accumulation and further production of knowledge. Knowledge is utilized to form systematic means of guiding decision-making (Senge, 1990).

Director of Elementary Education. Individual employed at the district level that is “responsible for supporting elementary buildings’ improvement through the supervision of elementary principals. Oversees the conditions of teaching and learning in elementary schools and facilitates the ongoing development and alignment of the district’s elementary programs,” (Midwestern suburban school district website, Human Resources, job descriptions).

Elementary Principal. Individual employed at the elementary building level to “provide effective instructional leadership; direct overall site operations, services, and staff; provide information and serve as a resource to others; develop community relations; enforce established policies and regulatory requirements; coordinate school activities and address issues, situations and/or problems that arise on campus or with students and staff,” (Midwestern suburban school district website, Human Resources, job descriptions).

Elementary school. A school consisting of a preschool-grade five or preschool-grade six population of students.

Learning leader. Individual who models learning and guides conditions for continuous learning for all members of an organization (Fullan, 2014)

Learning organization. “Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured,

where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together,” (Senge, 2010, p. 12).

Positional power. Authority that is exerted over others to accomplish tasks or goals (Northouse, 2013).

Professional learning community. An educational climate in which teachers work collaboratively to consider existing instructional practices, examine student outcome data, and adjust teaching strategies for certain students within their classrooms (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

Professional learning community according to Hord. A way of organizing the educational staff to engage in intentional learning for the purpose of improving staff effectiveness and improve student learning (Hord, 2008). Five dimensions are indicative of successful professional learning communities, including shared vision and values, shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application, shared personal practice and supportive conditions. (Hord, 1997).

Shared practice. Members of an organization develop a shared repertoire of resources, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems (Senge, 1990).

Supportive conditions. Supportive relational conditions and supportive structural conditions (Hord, 1997, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Supportive relational conditions include trust, respect, caring relationships, recognition, celebration, risk-taking, and reflective dialogue (DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Supportive structural conditions consist of available time and physical capacity to accomplish collaborative efforts among team members (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Significance of the Study

Scholarship

Extensive research on the characteristics of collaboration through the framework professional learning communities can be found within existing literature. Collaboration through the framework of professional learning communities has been cited in contributing to improved student learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2007). Features of schools implementing professional learning communities include shared vision and beliefs, shared and supportive leadership, team learning, supportive conditions, and shared practice (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Hord, 1998, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). According to literature, the building principal is deemed instrumental in the implementation of collaboration through the framework of professional learning communities (Fleming & Leo, 1999; Hord, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

As few studies have emphasized perceptions of the role of the principal in the implementation of collaboration through the framework of professional learning communities, this study concentrated on this area. Exploration of elementary principals' perception of their role in implementing collaborative practices through the framework of professional learning communities within their buildings was critical to ascertain what may promote or obstruct the professional learning community process.

Practice

This research may highlight connections between elementary principal perceptions of their role in the implementation of collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community, and possibly the impact on student learning. It may assist elementary principals in decision-making regarding the creation and implementation of consistent

collaboration procedures across grade levels. This research may also provide the district with valuable information in relation to consistent practices of effective elementary collaboration through professional learning communities within the district. Ultimately, it may provide a model for similar research regarding collaboration through professional learning communities within other school districts.

Summary

A multitude of current research studies support the positive contributions of collaboration through professional learning communities to increase student learning (Barth, 2005; Dufour et al., 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Educational leadership requires increased understanding in how to successfully implement such processes within their schools. The purpose of this research was to examine the perceptions of principals' roles in the implementation of collaboration through the framework of professional learning communities at the elementary level in the Midwest Suburban School District. Hord's (1997, 1998, 2008) five dimensions of a professional learning community guided the research as a conceptual framework. Qualitative methods were utilized, including a semi-structured interview, qualitative survey, and focus groups. Qualitative data analysis was conducted to highlight emerging themes and data was triangulated with information gleaned from the literature review, as well as the conceptual framework.

Outcomes of this research study may lead to informed decision-making in implementing collaboration through professional learning communities within elementary school settings of the Midwest Suburban School District. Research findings may additionally be useful within elementary school settings of a school district of similar size and demographic make-up of the Midwest Suburban School District. Districts and school buildings implementing professional

learning communities demonstrate the capability to improve learning for all students and transform overall achievement for their districts and buildings (DuFour, 2007). As building leaders, principals deem essential in the “creation and the long-term maintenance of professional learning communities” (Sparks, 2005, p. 156). This research may prove an asset in increasing elementary principals’ awareness of their fundamental role in impacting student learning through the implementation of collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community.

SECTION II

PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY

The setting for this qualitative bounded case study contained fourteen elementary schools, of all of which can be found within the geographical bounds of the Midwest Suburban School District. This school district is located in a Missouri suburban city of approximately 76,000 residents (United States Census Bureau, 2016) and contained approximately 10,000 students, ranging from preschool to twelfth grade. In addition to fourteen elementary schools, Midwest Suburban School District consisted of four middle schools and three high schools. The school district additionally supports an early childhood learning center, alternative school programming, a technical career center, and gifted and talented programs. As part of Midwest Suburban School District's mission of educating each child for success, the district promotes a student-centered, rigorous teaching program, offering specialized coursework, one-to-one technology services, and high-quality staff.

History of the Organization

The Midwest Suburban School District was incorporated by an act of state legislature in January of 1860. At that time, a group of interested citizens successfully obtained a charter from the state's General Assembly that incorporated the "Midwest Suburban School District Public Schools." Three schools were built and opened in April of 1860 (Midwest Suburban School District history book, 2017).

The district would go on to expand through annexation and multiple building projects. The district also played a key part in the growth of higher education opportunities in the northwest region of the state. The district opened Midwest Junior College in 1915, which evolved into Midwest State College, an autonomous four-year college, in 1965 (Midwest

Suburban School District history book, 2017). Although the Midwest Suburban School District was conceived from meager beginnings, it went on to become a multi-faceted public educational organization with a variety of programming and resources to serve a spectrum of educational needs for students from preschool to secondary levels, with a continuous commitment to providing a quality education and preparing students for post-secondary success (Midwest Suburban School District history book, 2017).

Current Demographics

Midwest Suburban School District is an accredited school district in the state of Missouri, currently employing 868 certified staff members, serving 11,663 students within its geographical boundaries (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). The district has a current a graduation rate of 81% and a current free and reduced lunch rate of 70.5% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020). The district constitutes the following diversity demographics: 74% White (8,577 students), 9% Hispanic (1,013 students), 7% Black (841 students), 7% Multiracial (836 students), 2% Asian (235 students), 1% Hawaiian (135 students), and American Indian (26 students). Midwest Suburban School District current operates its 14 elementary schools, four middle schools, three high school, and three specialized learning centers across 135.2 square miles in Midwest County (Midwest Suburban School District website).

Elementary School A

Elementary School A was built and opened its doors as a fully operational elementary school in 2014 and serves students in kindergarten through sixth grade. The school was named for the site it was built on, after a bookkeeper at St. Patrick Parish who planted evergreen trees on the land that bears his name as well as other sites around the city (Midwest Suburban

School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 45 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School A, serving 700 students, with the following demographics: 68% White, 9% Hispanic, 12% Black, 10% Multiracial, n/a% Asian, 1% Hawaiian, n/a% American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 100% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School A's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School B

Elementary School B was built in 1966 and serves students in kindergarten through sixth grade. The school was originally named for an American novelist and writer of short stories (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 33 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School B, serving 425 students, with the following demographics: 47% White, 10% Hispanic, 17% Black, 9% Multiracial, 8% Asian, 9% Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 100% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School B's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School C

Elementary School C opened in January of 1931. It was constructed in response to two deteriorating schools. At the time of opening, Elementary School C provided educational services to students in grades 1-7. Each grade occupied one classroom and was made up of about 45 students per class. By the mid-1950s, increased enrollment reached capacity, and a three-story addition was built. The addition included all rooms east of the gym on all three

floors and the playground was paved for the first time (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 32 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School C, serving 420 students, with the following demographics: 49% White, 21% Hispanic, 13% Black, 13% Multiracial, 2% Asian, 2% Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 100% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School C's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School D

Elementary School D was built and opened its doors as a fully operational elementary school in 1954 and serves students in kindergarten through sixth grade.

The school sits on 13 acres of beautiful land outside the city limits of the geographic boundaries of the school district (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 22 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School D, serving 341 students, with the following demographics: with the following demographics: 78% White, 4% Hispanic, 7% Black, 9% Multiracial, 2% Asian, n/a % Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 38.5% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School D's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School E

Elementary School E opened its doors as a fully operational elementary school in 1917 and currently serves students in kindergarten through sixth grade. In the summer of 1973,

the oldest part of the school burned, destroying a large portion of the building. The building was redesigned and by 1974, a renovated building continued under the existing school name (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 22 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School E, serving 344 students, with the following demographics: with the following demographics: 77% White, 7% Hispanic, 2% Black, 6% Multiracial, 8% Asian, n/a % Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 36.8% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School E's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School F

Elementary School F was originally built in 1901 and in 1954, a large acreage was purchased on the south side of the community and a new building was constructed. Elementary School F currently serves students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The school was originally named after a member of the board of education who was serving his second term when he died in August 21, 1901 (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 33 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School F, serving 468 students, with the following demographics: with the following demographics: 77% White, 12% Hispanic, 2% Black, 7% Multiracial, n/a % Asian, 1% Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 100% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School F's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School G

Elementary School G originated as a one-room school on a plot of land donated by its namesake in 1850. In 1860, a four-room structure was built nearby. In 1870, a large frame structure was built adjacent to this structure and utilized until it was destroyed by fire in 1893. In 1894, a new school was built on the same ground, but given a different name. In 1901 a four-room brick school was erected, with an addition added in 1908, and students were moved to this structure, with name reverting back to its original name. Elementary School G currently serves students in kindergarten through sixth grade (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 25 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School G, serving 432 students, with the following demographics: 87% White, 3% Hispanic, 3% Black, 6% Multiracial, n/a % Asian, n/a % Hawaiian, 1% American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 58.4% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School G's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School H

Elementary School H was originally occupied in the fall of 1931 and is named in honor of a famed aviator. Elementary School H currently serves students in kindergarten through fifth grade (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 38 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School H, serving 450 students, with the following demographics: with the following demographics: 76% White, 9% Hispanic, 5% Black, 9% Multiracial, n/a % Asian, 1% Hawaiian, 1% American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 100% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of

Elementary School H's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School I

Elementary School I was originally built in 1954 and was named in honor of a famed American writer. Elementary School I served students in kindergarten through sixth grade (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 24 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School I, serving 388 students, with the following demographics: with the following demographics: 75% White, 8% Hispanic, 8% Black, 8% Multiracial, 1% Asian, n/a % Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 100% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School I's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School J

Elementary School J opened in 2014 and was named for a school of the same name that once sat in nearby area. Elementary School J served students in preschool through sixth grade (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 51 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School J, serving 617 students, with the following demographics: with the following demographics: 73% White, 8% Hispanic, 5% Black, 7% Multiracial, 6% Asian, 1% Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 29.1% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School J's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional

Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School K

Elementary School K was built in 1971 and was named for the adjacent parkway system in the area. Elementary School K served students in kindergarten through sixth grade (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 29 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School K, serving 404 students, with the following demographics: with the following demographics: 78% White, 6% Hispanic, 4% Black, 9% Multiracial, 1% Asian, 2% Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 100% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School K's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School L

Elementary School L was built in 1925 and was named in honor of a World War I Army General from Missouri who headed the American Expeditionary Forces. Elementary School L served students in kindergarten through sixth grade (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 20 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School L, serving 319 students, with the following demographics: 86% White, 4% Hispanic, 1% Black, 8% Multiracial, 1% Asian, n/a % Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 53.6% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School L's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School M

The original Elementary School M was part of the county organization of schools. The school was added to the district in 1965 when the county district dissolved. The original structure burned in 1954 and the current structure was enlarged in 1958. Elementary School M served students in kindergarten through sixth grade (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 20 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School M, serving 313 students, with the following demographics: with the following demographics: 78% White, 6% Hispanic, 3% Black, 12% Multiracial, 1% Asian, n/a % Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 100% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Elementary School M's website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Elementary School N

Elementary School N was built in 1965 in anticipation of Elementary School M joining the district. Elementary School N was named in honor of a well-known educator in the area who was the principal of Elementary School M, prior to becoming part of the Midwest Suburban School District. Elementary School N served students in kindergarten through sixth grade (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). At the time of the study, 26 full-time certified teachers were employed with Elementary School N, serving 455 students, with the following demographics: 78% White, 4% Hispanic, 4% Black, 11% Multiracial, 2% Asian, 1% Hawaiian, n/a % American Indian and a free and reduced lunch rate of 57.4% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Review of Review of Elementary School N's

website provides no indication of current numbers of Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, nor which individual(s) lead such groups within the building.

Organizational Analysis

Organizations are complex and typically develop a hierarchical structure that places individuals in positions of leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Organizations can also be viewed from multiple frames of reference, and quite often a given situation may require a person to consider one or more lenses to obtain a complete picture of current circumstances within the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The structural frame as well as the human resources frame are necessary to balance the managerial and leadership needs that complex organizations experience (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Organizational structure provides for a distinct division of labor, allowing distribution of tasks and responsibilities across departments based upon specialized areas of expertise. In addition, a hierarchical chain of command, as well as set policies and procedures provide consistency in standards for work performance and completion of tasks (Bolman & Deal, 2008). To balance the structural frame, it is also important to consider the human resource frame to positively support personnel in effectively achieving expectations within the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Analyzing the structural organization of education, as well as the needs of individuals that play pertinent roles will allow a better understanding of the significance of leadership through both lenses to positively support the learning needs of all students.

The structural frame focuses on the “how” of change, primarily on the strategy, such as clarifying tasks and responsibilities with well-defined roles. The emphasis of this organizational lens often lies with facts and data-driven decision making and may necessitate direct and methodical leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The human resources frame represents individual people that fill roles within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). This frame focuses on the needs of people fulfilling various roles, as well as the value that they bring to the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Critical to this frame include concepts such as supportive conditions, coaching, guidance, and trust, all of which are significant attributes of a successful professional learning community (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Hord, 1997). Ideally, a good fit is demonstrated between the district and the teachers that serve its mission daily. When “individuals find meaningful and satisfying work, organizations get the talent and energy they need to succeed,” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 137). This is accomplished when the needs of teachers are kept at the forefront of decisions within the structural and the human resource frame. “Subordinates will be motivated if they think they are capable of performing their work, if they believe their efforts will result in a certain outcome, and if they believe that the payoffs for doing their work are worthwhile,” (Northouse, 2013, p. 137).

Midwest Suburban School District

As the Midwest Suburban School District continued to grow and serve the community in various capacities, a more sophisticated categorization of labor evolved. Five basic parts of an organization are outlined by Henry Mintzberg (Mintzberg, 1973; Sahfritz, Ott, & Yang, 2005), including the strategic apex, middle line, operating core, support staff, and technostructure. The Midwest Suburban School District included all district level administration and staff within the strategic apex. Building principals, assistant principals, and managers constituted the middle line, with the operating core being comprised predominantly with certificated staff. The district’s support staff included maintenance personnel, nutrition services personnel, and clerical staff. Staff members from the district’s technology department comprised technostructure.

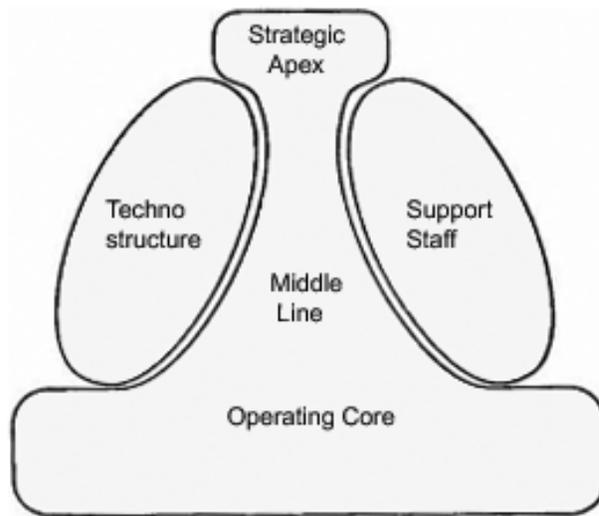


Figure 4: Illustration of Henry Mintzberg's five basic parts of Organizations (Mintzberg, 1973; Shafritz et al., 2005)

Professional Learning Communities in Midwest Suburban School District

The role of the Director of Elementary Education could be found within the strategic apex under the supervision of the Assistant Superintendent of Academic and Education Services (Mintzberg, 1973; Shafritz et al., 2005) and was responsible for the supervision of all elementary school principals within the district. Additional general responsibilities included provision of leadership support to elementary schools, ensuring alignment of elementary schools' plans for continuous improvement with the district level continuous improvement plan and monitoring the effectiveness of individual school plans, communicating policies, procedures, and practices to elementary schools, and assisting with plans for the implementation of professional development for elementary schools. Providing support and consultation to building principals in the development of professional learning communities and ongoing building staff collaboration and

professional development was an important priority of this position (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021).

Principals and assistant principals fell within the middle line of Mintzberg's (Mintzberg, 1973; Shafritz et al., 2005) organizational configuration. Principals were responsible for direct supervision of assistant principals (if applicable), as well as evaluation of assigned personnel to ensure standards were achieved and performance was maximized, facilitated cadres (including professional learning communities, safety, site advisory, etc.) to ensure outcomes achieve school, district and/or state objectives, developed budgets and financial forecasts to provide financial guidance and recommendations, developed and demonstrated effective communications through regular staff meetings, weekly building communications, newsletters, and personal contacts, facilitated communication between personnel, students and/or parents to evaluate situations, solve problems, and/or resolve conflicts, represented the school within community forums for the purpose of maintaining ongoing community support for educational goals, implemented policies, procedures, and/or processes to provide direction and/or comply with mandated requirements, and managed school administrative functions to maintain safe and efficient school operations within district guidelines (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021).

Principals were ultimately responsible for the creation and implementation of the structures and climate of a professional learning community within individual elementary schools, with assistant principals supporting the principal in overall administration of instructional programming, implementation of professional development, and maintenance of a positive learning environment. Only elementary buildings with significant student enrollment were afforded the role of an assistant principal in the Midwestern Suburban School District, with

only Elementary Schools A, F and H including this specific position throughout the course of this research study (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021).

Certified teachers operated within the operating core of Mintzberg's organizational framework and were directly supervised by building principals (Mintzberg, 1973; Shafritz et al., 2005). Classroom teachers, as well as instructional interventionists and instructional coaches (when the role was available) were responsible for participating within professional learning community teams and actively collaborating to analyze student data and develop pertinent instructional strategies for the provision of high quality, whole-class and small group intervention instruction for all students. Building administrators often designated timeframes throughout school operational hours for professional learning teams to collaborate, review student data, and determine next steps for instructional interventions for large group, small group, or individual student instruction.

In its efforts to fulfill its mission of "educating each child for success," district leadership (including the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent and Director of Elementary Education), as well as principals and assistant principals, "invested in employee learning, provided information and support, and created development opportunities," (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 142) through the respective roles and functions served. These provisions are indicative of both the structural and the human resource perspective of organizations, as the relationship between the district' leadership structures and the teachers that endeavor to fulfill its purposes is emphasized (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

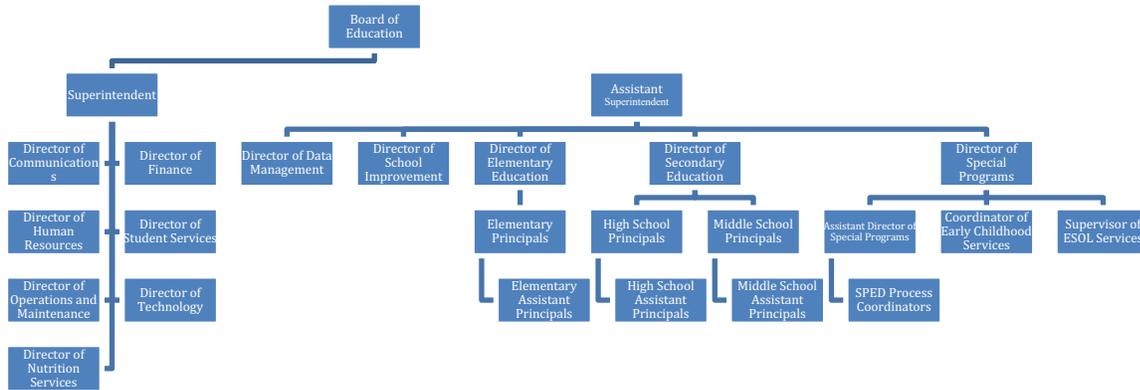


Figure 5: 2021 Organizational Structure of the Midwestern Suburban School District

Leadership Analysis

Kotter (1990) contends that a contrast exists between the function of management and the function of leadership. The purpose of management is to achieve order and stability, whereas the purpose of leadership is to anticipate organizational change and make decisions to adjust accordingly. Bennis and Nanus (1985) posit that there is a notable distinction between these two skill sets. Northouse (2013) describes this distinction in the following terms: “to manage means to accomplish activities and master routines, whereas to lead means to influence others and create visions for change” (p. 13).

Leadership Versus Management

Administrative roles of the Midwest Suburban School District balance managerial roles as well as leadership roles, including the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Elementary Education, and Elementary Principals (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021). Job descriptions of each role contain managerial duties of responsibilities of supervision of subordinates, as well as leadership responsibilities to further components of district and/or school improvement plans (Midwest Suburban School District, 2021).

Elementary principals of the Midwest Suburban School District require a wide variety of skills sets to reflect the broad range of expectations and requirements of the position. Principals must play multiple roles to fulfill both managerial responsibilities and to anticipate potential organizational change by influencing others through leadership expertise and skill. A balance of perspectives deems essential in the daily operations of the Midwest Suburban School District. Varying types of leadership are necessary, depending upon the prioritized goal or task (Northouse, 2013). An elementary principal in the Midwest Suburban School District would seem unable to accomplish all expectations of the position without implementing a variety of leadership strategies.

Path-Goal Leadership

Path-goal leadership suggests that leaders have an obligation to assist employees in removing obstacles that “create excessive uncertainties, frustrations, or threats,” (Northouse, 2013, p. 142). When organizations provide employees with training and support pertaining to collaboration and expectations, these employees receive knowledge and tools necessary to accomplish their work collectively in a satisfactory manner. As teams grow in their capacities and experience with collaboration through professional learning teams, leaders provide opportunities to define goals and the paths to reach them, as well as contribute to the development of leaders within teams. This is accomplished by direction, guidance, and coaching along the way (Northouse, 2013).



Figure 5: Illustration of Path-Goal Leadership (Northouse, 2013, p. 138).

As collaborative teams grow in sophistication and maturity in their collaborative work, elementary principals may find themselves shifting from the primary role of leader of team decision making to a secondary managerial role of monitoring team functions (Northouse, 2013). This model of Team Leadership allows for shared responsibility of leadership, to be distributed across the team, including goal setting, coaching, and rewarding (Northouse, 2013). This approach is critical within often-changing roles of leaders and followers within organizations. It does not focus on the positional power of the administrator, but rather on the “critical functions of leadership” for team members to make decisions and implement action steps (Northouse, 2013, p. 305).



Figure 6: Illustration of Hill’s Model for Team Leadership (Northouse, 2013, p. 291).

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

Findings from this qualitative bounded case study provided responses to the posed research questions and provided the Midwest Suburban School District with pertinent information regarding collaboration and professional learning communities at the elementary level. Qualitative methods of research were particularly useful, as there has been little research conducted in this area (Creswell, 2014). Findings of this research study provided feedback regarding professional learning communities at the elementary school level, existing strengths and weaknesses, recommendations for practices to maintain and considerations for change. In addition, this qualitative research further contributed to the existing research literature.

Scant research exists that distinctly analyzes principals' perceptions of their roles in implementing collaboration through the framework of the professional learning community, particularly at the elementary level. Current research also does not describe obstacles to implementing collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community from the perspective of the building principal (Dufour et al., 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2012, Barth, 2005; Sparks, 2005). This qualitative study further assisted in understanding elementary principal perceptions of their role in this process.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to clarify perceptions of elementary principals understanding of current collaborative practices through the framework of a professional learning community. Insight to current collaborative practices through the framework of a professional learning community was gained through exploration of elementary principal perceptions of their current role in the process. Additional insights were gained as to how elementary principals currently define collaboration and implement collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community in the Midwest Suburban School District.

Qualitative research has been suggested to be appropriate research methods when attempting to gain the understanding of participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2012). Participants were invited to share opinions and experiences regarding professional learning community frameworks, practices, and outcomes without fear of breach of confidentiality or threat of retribution. This research study aimed to understand the framework of professional learning communities in the Midwest Suburban School District, as well as the experiences and perceptions of participants of existing processes and practices within the existing framework.

The findings of this study provided additional input from the Director of Elementary Education in relation to current expectations of professional learning communities at the elementary level, as well as feedback from elementary teachers working at the forefront regarding current practices within individual elementary buildings. The Academic Services Department at the Midwest Suburban School District gained knowledge from the feedback and input of participating teachers, building principals, and department director. Findings of this study provided pertinent information regarding current district practices in relation to collaboration within professional learning communities and the perceptions of elementary principals' role in the process.

Summary

Understanding the setting for this research study is imperative, as “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Understanding the district's history, demographics, organizational structure, leadership structure, as well as pertinent roles and responsibilities all contribute important contextual information for conducting qualitative research.

A qualitative bounded case study of collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community in the elementary schools of the Midwest Suburban School District provided perceptions of elementary principals of their definitions of collaboration, as well as their role in the implementation of the process through qualitative surveys. Additional insights were gained from the director level, as well as from front line teachers. An individual interview with the Director of Elementary Education provided information regarding a

framework of district expectations and focus group feedback from elementary teachers elicited feedback about current building practices.

A better understanding of current collaborative practices through the framework of a professional learning community in the Midwest Suburban School District's elementary schools was the objective of this study. This was accomplished through qualitative research methods to discover perceptions from teachers and administrators, including building principals and the Director of Elementary Education. Research results were analyzed and summarized for review and consideration of the Director of Elementary Education.

SECTION III

SCHOLARLY REVIEW FOR THE STUDY

When utilized effectively, collaboration amongst educational professionals demonstrates an effective means to achieve improvement in staff learning and ultimately student achievement. The literature presents the principal as instrumental in “transforming the school into a collaborative learning community” (Hord, 1997, 2008). Wells and Feun (2007) view lack of support from principals as a barrier to successful implementation of collaboration through professional learning communities. As building leaders, principals deem essential in the “creation and the long-term maintenance of professional learning communities” (Sparks, 2005, p. 156).

While there is extensive literature dedicated to the characteristics and significance of collaboration within professional learning communities (Dufour et al., 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2012, Barth, 2005; Sparks, 2005), very little research on principals’ perceptions of their roles in the implementation of collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community exists, specifically at the elementary school level. Although many research studies emphasize the influence of the role of the principal (Hallinger & Heck, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006), most conclusions merely recommend principal involvement in the process. None of the research examines elementary principal perceptions of their roles in implementing collaboration through professional learning communities. Very little research regarding elementary principals’ perceptions of their role in implementing collaboration through the framework of professional learning community exists, particularly in a Midwestern suburban school district.

The dimensions of a professional learning community, as defined by Hord, 1997 include shared vision and values, shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions. These five dimensions provide a framework for understanding collaboration, as well as the role of the elementary principal in implementing collaboration through the structure of a professional learning community.

Collaboration

“The most significant gift our species brings to the world is our capacity to think. The most significant danger our species brings to the world is our inability to think with those who think differently,” (Markova & McArthur, 2015, p. 5). The problems of today’s world are becoming increasingly more complex, requiring people to work collaboratively across areas of expertise. In order to stay abreast of developments in many fields, individuals, as well as organizations, must commit to life-long learning (Andrews & Lewis, 2007). The term “learning organization” is prevalent in the arena of business, describing an organization that comes together regularly to review information that has been compiled on its own activities, collaborates to understand this information, and develops actions based upon conclusions as to improve the operations of the collective organization (Boudett & City, 2014).

Through continuous data review and implementation of systematic communication and practices, learning organizations assure better chances of continued growth, even when individual roles or people change within or depart from the organization (Boudett & City, 2014). Collective learning through collaboration deems necessary to compete in a continually evolving organizational environment (Edmondson, 2012). “Collaboration is a way of working with colleagues that is characterized by cooperation, mutual respect, and shared goals. It involves

sharing information, coordinating actions, discussing what's working and what's not, and perpetually seeking input and feedback," (Edmondson, 2012, p. 54).

Many organizations must utilize collaboration with people across its entirety, "many of whom have different priorities, incentives, and ways of doing things," (Hughes & Weiss, 2013, p. 91). Yet simply collecting individuals with the appropriate expertise to collaborate for specific tasks does not ensure success of the team or the organization (Edmondson, 2008). To achieve effectiveness, teams or organizations must "organize themselves to perform tasks, develop social relations to support their operations, and assign leaders who can provide direction and facilitate team operations," (Levi, 2014, p. 27).

Short-term performance indicators do not prove to be the most effective guidepost for teams or organizations to gauge overall success in a collaborative environment (Edmondson, 2012). Embracing learning goals instead encourages collaborative leadership and assists leaders of such organizational learning to consider establishing collaboration, communication, and gaining insight from others (Ibarra & Hansen, 2013). Such leadership creates the capacity to "engage people and groups outside one's formal control and inspire them to work toward common goals- despite differences in convictions, cultural values, and operating norms," (Ibarra & Hansen, 2013, p. 10).

Applying the concept of collaboration through collective learning in the educational setting shifts the focus from student learning to adult or organizational learning. (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2012). There is an expanse of literature devoted to the favorable influence of collaboration among educational professionals on student academic growth (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Reeves, 2011). Much of this literature indicates a need for the creation of collaborative environments within

school districts and individual school buildings (Barth, 2005; Dufour et al., 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Collaboration is detailed as a “powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching and professional learning in ways to produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers” (Sparks, 2005).

In attempts to educate all students, adults within school settings “need to learn how to address complex, unprecedented challenges, and they need to be in organizations that support that learning,” (Boudett & City, 2014, p. 13). To accomplish the goal of educating all students well, schools will need to prioritize continuous improvement through collaboration and consideration to changing circumstances, be it legislative or societal in context. Specific aspects need to be considered as fundamental to developing learning organizations through collaboration, including a learning environment that provides support, consistent learning processes and practices, and leaders who consistently demonstrate behaviors that reinforce learning (Edmondson, Garvin, & Gino, 2008). The role of the building principal as “lead teacher and lead learner becomes the fulcrum point, as well as steward for the collaborative learning process as a whole,” (Senge, et al., 2012, p. 20).

Role of the Building Principal

Historically, the role of a school principal predominantly has entailed managerial duties and student discipline, “the guys in charge of making sure of two things: maintaining discipline when a student became too disruptive for the teacher and making sure there were enough office supplies,” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 151). The educational environment now vastly differs to one in which “multiple policy initiatives and innovation overload are the norm” (Hopkins & Ainscot, 1993, p. 303). Many principals experience change in the role and expectations of the principalship, including increased complexity in the needs of students (Shen, 2005).

The traditional role of the building principal has evolved from managers of schools to leaders that encompass the characteristics of vision and advocacy for successful collaborative professional learning communities, contributing to an environment in which all students grow academically (NAESP, 2008). These responsibilities are imperative within an educational environment with increasing demands upon school accountability, particularly in relation to student achievement (Brown, 2016). The success of a modern school principal depends upon the willingness to embrace changes in societal context and legislative dictate, focusing upon key elements that create an effective school leader in this day and age (Rousmanierie, 2013).

“The role of the principal is a complex one. How well principals play that role matters to the success of the students and teachers they serve” (Psencik & Brown, 2018).

Within the public educational system, the role of the principal is not only complex, but contradictory of the responsibilities that it entails (Rousmaniere, 2013). The principal must balance a job description that includes administration of educational policy and building manager, including embracing and championing for school change, all the while defending the durability of the bureaucratic educational system. “A single person, in a single professional role, acts on a daily basis as the connecting link between a large bureaucratic system and the individual daily experiences of a large number of children and adults,” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 2).

As the responsibilities in the role of principalship incorporates an instructional focus, ninety percent of principals believe that they are ultimately accountable (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2013). Increasing expectations of the building principal have become almost unattainable by the average individual (Fullan, 2014). A different kind of leadership will be necessary to guide staff and stakeholders through changing dynamics in the educational

terrain, including students and teachers collaborating in learning and the increasing utilization of digital means for learning (Fullan, 2014).

“The principal is second only to the teacher in terms of impact on student learning,” (Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstorm, 2004, p. 5) and it is necessary to frame the role of the building principal as that of “learning leader- one who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis,” (Fullan, 2014, p. 9). Research on the role of the principal and its effect on student learning indicates that when teachers are dedicated to working collaboratively, increased learning in a greater number of students will result (; Bryk, Bender-Sebring, Allensworth, Lupescu, & Eaton, 2010; Robinson, V., 2011; Timperley, H., 2011, Leithwood, K., 2012). “As principals directly impact how teachers can learn together, they will maximize their impact on student learning,” (Fullan, 2014, p. 66). As leaders are integral to the implementation of collaboration through professional learning communities (Sparks, 2005), it is necessary to review the existing literature regarding the principal’s role in the process.

Implementation of a Professional Learning Community

“A true professional learning community is a way of organizing the educational staff to engage in purposeful, collegial learning. This learning is intentional for the purpose of improving staff effectiveness, so all students learn successfully to high standards,” (Hord, 2008, p. 13). As leaders of learning, school principals play a pivotal role in the implementation of collaboration through professional learning communities (Dufour & Marzano, 2011), and the absence of administrative endorsement is touted as an obstacle to the establishment of professional learning communities (Wells & Feun, 2007).

Principals not only involve themselves in the process, but also advocate for the preservation of the collective vision in thriving professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Principals can make an extraordinary difference in the execution of professional learning communities through the initiation of structures and conditions that reinforce collaborative procedures of the professional learning community.

Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision

Shared beliefs, values, and vision are necessary for the implementation of a successful professional learning community (Hord, 1997, 2008). Genuinely embracing a common vision of learning for all students propels educators to reconsider their efforts in meeting student needs (Eaker & Keating, 2008). This vision is evident when professional learning communities employ systems thinking to implement transformation in beliefs and values to favorably influence student learning (Hord, 1998; Senge, 1990). Research indicates that a shift in philosophy and practice produces a positive impact on student learning (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010; Vescio et al., 2007).

Research also reveals that principal leadership can play a key role in the promotion or obstruction of the professional learning community process (Graham, 2007; Hord, 1997, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Expectations that principals relay to staff are crucial in ensuring incentive to participate (Printy, 2008). Many functions have been identified as instrumental in implementing a professional learning community, including provision of role modeling throughout the process, motivation of teachers and staff, distributing leadership, and ensuring supportive conditions (Fleming & Leo, 1999; Graham, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008). “A

principal's ability to establish a professional learning community will be more effective if teachers feel they can trust and are trusted by leadership," (Templeton & Willis, 2017).

Employing a laissez-faire strategy to the professional learning community process results in a negative impact on its implementation (Hord, 1997, 2008).

Shared and Supportive Leadership

Shared leadership necessitates a shift in paradigm that involves re-acculturation toward collaborative methods of addressing student learning (DuFour, 2004). Principals that demonstrate success in implementing professional learning communities "empower and support teacher leadership to improve teaching practice" (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). DuFour (2004) contends that "leadership should be widely dispersed throughout a school, and thus developing the leadership potential of all staff members is imperative" (p. 23). Perceiving leadership as a collective practice as opposed to an individual person assists in pairing competencies with circumstances within the educational setting (Sergiovanni, 2005).

Leadership evolves from multiple leaders within effective professional learning communities (Boyd-Dimock & Hord, 1994). Principals ensure collaboration and input in the decision-making processes, as opposed to maintaining a position of manager (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Principals perform necessary functions with teachers "working elbow to elbow to identify and meet the needs of their students" (Fleming & Leo, 1999, p. 4). The principal assisting in removing obstacles and providing necessary resources to make essential decisions also indicates shared and supportive leadership (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Collective Learning and Application

Hord (1997) describes collective learning as integral to an effective professional learning community. Educational leaders can play an important role in establishing and maintaining an

organization of lifelong learners (Barth, 2005). Principals must maintain expectations that teachers can and will learn (Barth, 2005). Sparks (2005) posits that the quality of a professional learning community is contingent upon the quality of the leadership of the building principal. It deems imperative for building principals to encompass and expect learning of teachers and staff within the implementation of a professional learning community, as Senge (1990) contends that the organization's potential for learning is contingent upon its members' available opportunities to learn.

Shared Personal Practice

Senge (1990), posits that organizations must be willing to release former mental models in order to engage in change. Disclosure of previously private information, such as “goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results” (DuFour, 2004, p. 4) is also necessary to achieve shared practice within a professional learning community. Reeves (2011) emphasizes the necessity for leaders of professional learning communities to stabilize the inclination for professional independence with the vision and values that foster collaboration and joint responsibility.

Supportive Conditions

Supportive conditions within professional learning communities consist of supportive relational conditions and supportive structural conditions (Hord, 1997, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Supportive relational conditions within a professional learning community include trust, respect, caring relationships, recognition, celebration, risk-taking, and reflective dialogue (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Supportive structural conditions within a professional learning

community consist of available time and physical capacity to accomplish collaborative efforts among team members (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Obstacles also present themselves throughout the implementation of professional learning communities (Graham, 2007; Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Wells & Feun, 2007;). Building principals possess positional power (Northouse, 2013) to remove obstacles for teachers and staff. Administrators have an important function in ensuring conditions that are supportive of a collaborative environment (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006), as “explicitly creating and facilitating reflective dialogues and ownership over time is necessary for professional learning communities to flourish,” (Bruijn & Schapp, 2017, p. 1). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) assert that “principals can help create a culture in which leadership is distributed in an emergent and even assertive way” (p. 267). Principals can accomplish this through nurturing supportive relational conditions as well as supportive structural conditions to enhance the professional learning community process (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Conclusion

The current review of the existing literature supports the necessity of collaboration within organizations (Boudett & City, 2014; Edmondson, 2012; Hughes & Weiss, 2013), as well as characteristics of effective professional learning communities (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hord, 1997; Hord, 2008). Hord’s five dimensions were extensively described, including shared beliefs, values, and vision; shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions. This framework will provide a lens through which the proposed study will be filtered. Prevalent research supports the positive impact that effective professional learning communities have upon student learning. Tremendous descriptions were gained as to what constitutes a successful professional learning community, but no research was

discovered regarding the perceptions of elementary principals in their roles of implementing collaboration through a professional learning community.

The principal's role is critical in the implementation of collaboration through a professional learning community as described in the existing literature (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Graham, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008). The principal's responsibility in delineating initial parameters and expectations is crucial to the initial implementation stages. Authentic modeling and encouraging teachers and staff to participate fully in the process appears to be a central leadership role that the building principal plays throughout the process. As the literature describes the professional learning community as an effective means to implement collaboration, and ultimately ensure learning for all students, the building principal bears great responsibility in initiating a paradigm shift, both in mental models and in daily practice.

Although the primary leader within the structure of the school building, the principal must embrace and initiate shared leadership to create an effective professional learning community (Barth, 2005; DuFour, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). The concept of shared leadership must originate with the principal and emanate throughout the organization of the school. This proves a critical juncture at which the existing research lacks specifications for building principals to initiate the implementation of an effective professional learning community and ultimately maintain its ongoing progression.

Scant research exists that distinctly analyzes principals' perceptions of their roles in implementing collaboration through the framework of the professional learning community, particularly at the elementary level. Current research also does not describe obstacles to implementing collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community from

the perspective of the principal (Barth, 2005; Dufour et al., 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2012; Sparks, 2005). Building principals play a crucial role in “transforming the school into a collaborative learning community” (Hord, 1997; Hord, 2008). An extension of previous research is warranted to examine elementary principals’ perceptions of this important role in implementing collaboration through the framework of the professional learning community process at the elementary school level.

SECTION IV

CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

Plan for Dissemination of Practitioner Contribution

Who: Director of Elementary Education, Participating Elementary Principals

When: Spring, 2023

How: Provided via Email, as well as Face-to-Face

The target for dissemination for practitioner contribution is an informal PowerPoint Presentation with the Director of Elementary Education and participating Elementary Principals. The Director and Principals will be provided opportunities to ask questions for clarification of research findings throughout the presentation. The Director will be provided the PowerPoint presentation via email for future reference.

Type of Document(s)

PowerPoint slides will be provided to the Director of Elementary Education and Elementary Principals, if requested by the district. A full report of research findings will be provided upon request, with the PowerPoint presentation slides providing important data in a concise and efficient format.

Rationale for this Contribution Type

PowerPoint presentations provide a visually appealing analysis and synthesis of complex information (Smith, 2017). This contribution type is a useful and beneficial format to absorb and comprehend information in an efficient manner. It also provides opportunities to share information easily with associated colleagues within the Midwest Suburban School District to evaluate current collaborative practices and make appropriate recommendations for improvement, if necessary.

Outline of Proposed Contents

Problem Statement:

Purpose of Research:

Research Questions:

Conceptual Framework:

Collaboration:

Role of Principal:

Implementing a Professional Learning Community:

Research Methodology (Design of the Study):

Participants:

Findings:

Recommendations:

References:

Presentation

**COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES WITHIN THE
FRAMEWORK OF A PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING COMMUNITY: ELEMENTARY
PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE**

By Cheryl E. Allen

University of Missouri Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis Program

Dr. Nissa Ingraham, Dissertation Supervisor

Problem Statement

- Gap in the knowledge
 - Perception of elementary principals in their role of ensuring collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) were unknown
- Literature indicates a need for the creation of collaborative environments within school districts and individual school buildings (Boudett & City, 2014; Dufour et al., 2005; Edmondson, 2012; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Hughes & Weiss, 2013).
- Elementary principal's role in the implementation of a PLC
 - Necessity of collaboration within organizations (Boudett & City, 2014; Edmondson, 2012; Hughes & Weiss, 2013)
 - Characteristics of effective professional learning communities (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hord, 1997; Hord, 2008).
 - The principal's role is critical (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Graham, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

A lack of information is a knowledge gap in qualitative research (Merriam 2009, 2016). There have been no studies regarding the elementary principal perception of their roles in establishing professional learning communities in the Midwest Suburban School District.

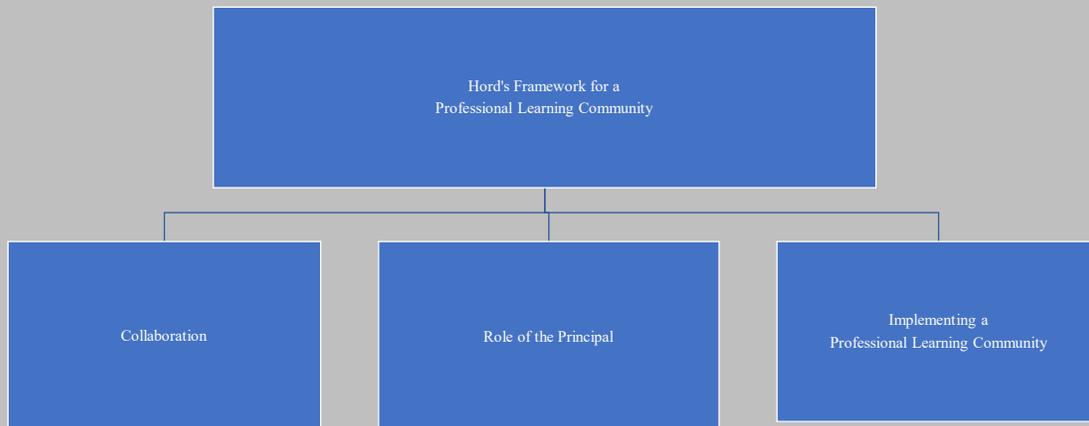
A review of existing literature supports the necessity of collaboration within organizations (Boudett & City, 2014; Edmondson, 2012; Hughes & Weiss, 2013), as well as characteristics of effective professional learning communities (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hord, 1997; Hord, 2008). The principal's role is critical in the implementation of collaboration through a professional learning community as described in the existing literature (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Graham, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Purpose of the Research

- The primary purpose was to understand elementary school principals' perceptions of their role in establishing collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities within elementary schools in the Midwest Suburban School District.
- An extension of previous research was designed to fill the gap in existing literature.
- This qualitative study made perceptions from a variety of stakeholders known and provides further information for professionals interested in elementary school education, particularly in the areas of collaboration and professional learning communities.

The purpose statement describes the focus of the research study as a whole, (Creswell, 2012, 2014). Deriving and understanding perceptions of the elementary principal's role in establishing collaboration through a professional learning community in the Midwest Suburban School District was the researcher's purpose. Analysis of input from teachers, principals, and the Director of Elementary Education was utilized to develop recommendations for the Midwest Suburban School District to sustain or improve collaborative practices at the elementary level.

Conceptual Framework

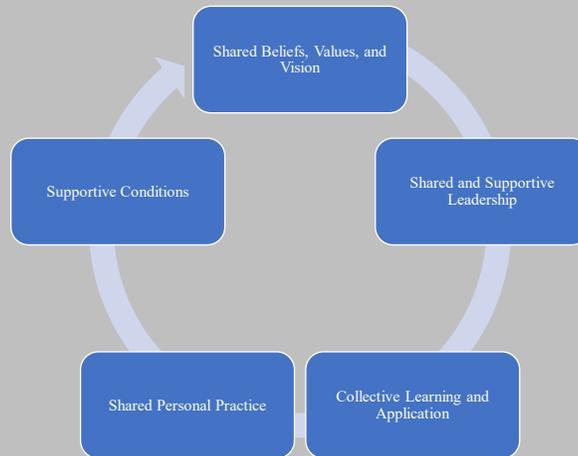


“A conceptual framework serves as an underlying structure which guides the research study,” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 85). A conceptual framework can be understood to be a lens through which a researcher will investigate a problem, serving as the foundation of the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Hord’s framework for a professional learning community was the conceptual framework for this study, contributing to this qualitative investigation of collaborative practices of professional learning communities in the Midwest Suburban School District. Collaboration, role of the principal, and implementation of a professional learning community were key variables.

Hord (1997, 2008) developed five dimensions that are indicative of successful professional learning communities. These dimensions provide scaffolding for an understanding of collaboration within a professional learning community and the role of the elementary principal in its implementation.

Professional Learning Communities According to Hord



The above adapted illustration is the five dimensions that are indicative of successful professional learning communities (Hord, 1997, 2008).

“A true professional learning community is a way of organizing the educational staff to engage in purposeful, collegial learning. This learning is intentional for the purpose of improving staff effectiveness, so all students learn successfully to high standards,” (Hord, 2008, p. 13).

Collaboration

- “Collaboration is a way of working with colleagues that is characterized by cooperation, mutual respect, and shared goals. It involves sharing information, coordinating actions, discussing what’s working and what’s not, and perpetually seeking input and feedback,” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 54).
- Applying the concept of collaboration through collective learning in the educational setting shifts the focus from student learning to adult or organizational learning. (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2012).
- In attempts to educate all students, adults within school settings “need to learn how to address complex, unprecedented challenges, and they need to be in organizations that support that learning,” (Boudett & City, 2014, p. 13).

Role of The Principal

- Building principals play a crucial role in “transforming the school into a collaborative learning community” (Hord, 1997; Hord, 2008).
- “The role of the principal is a complex one. How well principals play that role matters to the success of the students and teachers they serve” (Psencik & Brown, 2018).
- “The principal is second only to the teacher in terms of impact on student learning,” (Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstorm, 2004, p. 5) and it is necessary to frame the role of the building principal as that of “learning leader- one who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis,” (Fullan, 2014, p. 9).
- The principal’s role is critical in the implementation of collaboration through a professional learning community as described in the existing literature (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Graham, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Research Design

- Qualitative bounded case study
- Focus groups (Kreuger & Casey, 2009), interview (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Merriam, 2009;), survey (Fink, 2013; McDavid, 2013)
- Open coding (Kreuger & Casey, 2009), axial coding (Merriam, 2009), frequencies (Fink, 2013)
- Limitations, Assumptions, Design Control

Qualitative research involves asking participants about their experiences of things that happen in their lives. It enables researchers to obtain insights into what it feels like to be another person and to understand the world as he or she experiences it (Merriam, 2009). A bounded case study is a study of specific circumstances that has limits created around the circumstances to be studied (Merriam, 2009).

A focus group consisting of voluntary participating elementary teachers was conducted by the researcher to draw upon participants' range of attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and experiences pertaining to the focus of this study (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The researcher formulated interview questions that slowly engaged the interviewee, established comfort, and was created with "open-ended questions that could be followed up with probes and requests for more detail" (Merriam, 2009, p. 17). These open-ended questions incorporated experience, opinions and values, feelings, and knowledge to the research topic (Merriam, 2009).

A survey instrument was utilized with elementary principals as a means of acquiring understanding of principals' perceptions of their roles in implementing collaborative processes through professional learning communities within their buildings in a confidential manner. Surveys are best used when authentic perceptions of stakeholders are desired (Fink, 2013).

Questions for protocols for the focus group, interview, and survey were guided by the research questions. Voluntary participants were informed of the research purpose and objectives prior to the interview process and signed informed consent forms were obtained by the researcher.

Permission was obtained from the Midwest Suburban School District in which the participating educators, principals, and teachers are employed prior to initiation of research.

The semi-structured interview and focus group(s) were audio recorded to analyze (Merriam, 2009). Transcribing audio recordings provided optimum opportunity for analysis (Merriam, 2009). Open coding (Krueger & Casey, 2009) was initially implemented to analyze survey responses, as well as focus group and interview transcriptions to provide a basic structure for collected data. Themes were developed from interview and focus group transcriptions using axial coding (Emerson et al., 2011; Merriam, 2009). This provided opportunities for the researcher to consider all qualitative data gathered, interpret the meaning of responses, and categorize them into developed themes.

Reliability, validity, and transferability were regarded throughout the research process. Reliability was increased when all elementary principals are provided an opportunity to participate in the research study, as opposed to a researcher selected sample (Merriam, 2009). Validity was evident through multiple data sources, including survey, focus group, and interview data, as well as an extensive literature review on the subject matter (Creswell, 2012). Triangulation of data sources was necessary to support the validity of research findings (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

This research study should not be considered transferable to all elementary school environments striving to implement collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community, but rather as a contribution to existing research in these areas.

The basis of qualitative research requires assumptions to be made by the researcher (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). The researcher assumed that responses collected were an honest and accurate reflection of participant perceptions and were not changed for the purposes of this qualitative study. Although information conveyed throughout participation is an accurate account of their experiences, it can be assumed that error or biases may inadvertently influence the conclusions of this qualitative study (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

Creswell (2012, 2014) advised that consistent focus on the problem statement and research questions are imperative. Implementing precautions impeded undue influence of outlined assumptions and limitations on collected data (Creswell, 2012, 2014). Preparing focus group and interview questions in advance also assisted the researcher in gathering high quality data through more complete accounts of participant responses (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 1998).

Quality data analysis is also provided valid and reliable interpretations of data (Creswell, 2012, 2014; Fink, 2013; Kruger & Casey, 2009). Transcription of focus groups and interviews, as well as open and axial coding processes assisted the researcher in developing themes that emerged from the qualitative data provided by participants (Fink, 2013; Kruger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Participants

- Research Participants
 - Interview
 - Director of Elementary Education
 - Surveys
 - Elementary Principals
 - 3 out of 14 responses gained
 - 21% response rate
 - Focus group
 - 3 regular education teachers
 - 2 special education teachers
 - 1 ELD teacher

Research Questions

- Central Research Question
 - What are elementary principals' perceptions of their role in implementing a professional learning community?
- Sub-questions
 - How do elementary principals define collaboration?
 - How do elementary principals describe their role in the implementation of a professional learning community?

Two types of research questions help to narrow the focus or purpose of the research study (Creswell, 2012, 2014).

Findings

Table 1
Interview Coding Frequencies Chart

Theme	Number of times mentioned	Percentage
Facilitator	1	25%
Team Builder	2	50%
Strategic Planner	1	25%

Table 1 indicates results of open coding (Krueger & Casey, 2009) and axial coding (Emerson et al., Merriam, 2009) with frequencies (Fink, 2014) of key themes that emerged throughout the individual interview. Below are direct quotes provided by respondent.

“District level admin send out a weekly update with procedural reminders and tidbits of learning. Our intention is to consistently focus on our vision, mission, and values (learning, community, equity). Elementary principals and secondary principals also meet monthly to collaborate and discuss necessary items.”

“I encourage members of our team to challenge my thinking by bringing new ideas. With teacher and staff shortages, we have been tasked with creative ways to make things work to provide quality learning experiences for our students.”

“Collaboration is driven by data and purpose. This happens in job-embedded professional development, grade-level common plan times, vertical teams, and staff meetings.”

“Building leadership cannot happen with one person. A building leader will build a team of people that support the vision and mission of the building. This is what will help to bring change and drive growth with the facilitation of the principal.”

Findings

Table 2
Survey Coding Frequencies Chart

Theme	Number of times mentioned	Percentage
Facilitator	2	29%
Team Builder	2	29%
Strategic Planner	3	42%

Table 2 indicates results of open coding (Krueger & Casey, 2009) and axial coding (Emerson et al., 2011; Merriam, 2009) with frequencies (Fink, 2014) of key themes that emerged throughout all survey documents. Below are direct quotes provided by respondents.

“Without a mission, decisions are made in the moment with different driving factors. When the mission and values are the core of the organization, it will bring focus to the work and ideas.”

“My role as an elementary principal in a collaborative PLC is that of facilitator. I do this by attending all JEPD meetings and strategically design opportunities for collaboration.”

“As the principal, I am a constant in the collaboration. I have to make time for each JEPD and commit to the process”

“As the building administrator, I create the culture, time, and space for collaboration. Sometimes teachers are unwilling to put in the ‘extra’ time to collaborate.”

“Some teachers do not collaborate with team members without my direction.”

Findings

Table 3
Focus Group Coding Frequencies Chart

Theme	Number of times mentioned	Percentage
Facilitator	2	22%
Team Builder	5	56%
Strategic Planner	2	22%

Table 3 indicates results of open coding (Krueger & Casey, 2009) and axial coding (Emerson et al., 2011; Merriam, 2009) with frequencies (Fink, 2014) of key themes that emerged throughout the conducted focus group. Below are direct quotes provided by respondents.

“I have never had professional development in effective collaboration or professional learning communities. My building principal helps to guide this.”

“In our school, there are a variety of teams that provide leadership opportunities, including leadership team, PBIS team, MTSS team, and family involvement. Staff are encouraged to share ideas and knowledge about certain areas such as special education or ESOL, or after attending a professional development with the rest of the staff.”

“Our principal ensures that staff utilize multiple sources of data to collaboratively make instructional intervention decisions for students, including iReady, Lexia, MTSS data, or data from MAP assessment scores or ESOL Access scores.”

“Grade levels consistently plan and meet during their plan time in my school. Everyone is happy to help each other. Staff really look to one another for support.”

“My school is short on space. JEPD is sometimes held in the principal’s office or in a teacher’s classroom. There is no other available space that teachers could leave items to promote collaboration. There are even a few grade levels where all teachers are not in classrooms right next to each other.”

“Time to collaborate is difficult, as I don’t have a plan time with my teaching partner. Sometimes I can rearrange my schedule to be part of collaboration, but it is not always possible.”

“Staff relationships are generally positive and collaborative. Building staff as a whole respect one another and behavior in a professional manner. Grade level teams work closely together. We have a large staff with higher student needs, so vertical collaboration is often difficult to accomplish.”

“I feel valued and supported by my building principal, and I believe this is the overall relationship that staff members have with our administration. Our building principal is open to providing support to teachers through collaborative meetings and follow-up observations of the implementation of classroom strategies and plans.”

“Our building principal does a great job of supporting and nurturing all staff members. All staff members are considered important members of our building team. Everyone feels important and appreciated.”

Collective Findings

Table 4
Combined Coding Frequencies Chart

Theme	Number of times mentioned	Percentage
Facilitator	5	25%
Team Builder	9	45%
Strategic Planner	6	30%

Table 4 summarizes findings from all previous tables and indicates the prominent key themes that emerged throughout the qualitative analysis process. The collective findings include one structured interview, three surveys, and one focus group.

Responses received from all data sources resulted in the prominent themes of facilitator, team builder, and strategic planner as the perceptions of integral roles and functions of the elementary principal throughout the implementation of collaborative processes within the framework of a professional learning community. These functions are comparable to the variety of roles and responsibilities that are necessary for the essential functioning of a professional football team: head coach (facilitator), assistant coach (team builder), and general manger (strategic planner).

Facilitator

- Responses received from all data sources indicated that facilitation is a necessary function of the building principal in the context of team collaboration within a professional learning community to make the process run more smoothly.
- Facilitation involves consistently maintaining a neutral stance to help a group of people work together to develop common objectives and action steps to meet those objectives.
- Additional facilitation responsibilities include agenda setting, guidance on action steps and task management, motivating staff, and managing the emotional culture of the group.
- This can be related to the role of a head coach of a professional football team that must trust coordinators to maintain the day-to-day operations for offense, defense, and special teams. The head coach arranges regular practices (meetings), develops game strategies (building learning objectives), motivates staff (staff and students).

Team Builder

- Responses from all data sources indicated culture and climate of the district and elementary buildings supports continuous learning.
- Responses received from all data sources indicated that team building is a necessary function of the building principal in the context of team collaboration within a professional learning community.
- Elementary principals play a key role in building teams of people with highly qualified content knowledge that can work together to cooperate and collaborate to achieve specific goals and to ensure cohesiveness of the group.
- This can be related to the role of an assistant and special teams coach of a professional football team that must support the head coach in building a positive team environment, provide quality mentoring, ensure that facilities and training equipment are adequately prepared, and develop cohesive teams that can execute successful play strategies together.

Strategic Planner

- Responses from all data sources indicated the principal commitment to the process, as well as assurance of necessary vision, administrative duties, and assurance of resources are integral to implementation of collaboration through a professional learning community.
- This entails planning and organizing of both information and people, communicating effectively with staff, maintaining positive interpersonal relationships, and assuring proper resources of time, space, and learning materials.
- This can be related to the role of a general manager of a professional football team that must ultimately build a team to contend for success. The general manager is responsible for making sure that the team has all the necessary tools at its disposal to achieve its goals and to be successful. The general manager has oversight of the entire team.
- Responsibilities such as drafting the right players for the team (hiring the right people for the right positions), making changes mid-season when necessary (changing or re-arranging collaborative teams), and having difficult conversations when players must be let go or traded (staff that don't or won't assimilate to the team's vision and mission).

Additional Collective Findings

Table 5
Combined Coding Frequencies Chart

Theme	Number of times mentioned	Percentage
Shared beliefs, values, vision	12	19%
Shared and supportive leadership	14	22%
Collective application	11	17%
Shared personal practice	13	21%
Supportive conditions	13	21%

Table 5 indicates results of open coding (Krueger & Casey, 2009) and axial coding (Emerson et al., 2011; Merriam, 2009) with frequencies (Fink, 2014) of additional themes that emerged throughout the qualitative analysis process. The collective findings include one structured interview, three surveys, and one focus group.

These additional themes are important to note, as they directly relate to Hord's (1997, 2008) framework for an effective professional learning community.

“A true professional learning community is a way of organizing the educational staff to engage in purposeful, collegial learning. This learning is intentional for the purpose of improving staff effectiveness, so all students learn successfully to high standards,” (Hord, 2008, p. 13).

Each tenant of an effective professional learning community was equitably recognized by respondents across data collection modalities. This may indicate a balance of the necessary tenants for the implementation and maintenance of a professional learning community that engages staff in intentional learning for the purpose of improving effectiveness and ultimately student learning. Further qualitative research specific to these concepts may be necessary to corroborate these perceptions with observations of actual collaborative teams within elementary school settings in the Midwest Suburban School District.

Recommendations for Practice

- Provide regular training on collaboration based on Hord's framework of a professional learning community for all elementary building principals (1997; 2008).
- Maintain time for collaboration via PLCs through job-embedded professional development (JEPD). Building principals continue to assist in protecting this collaboration time.
- Create differentiated professional development plan for elementary principals regarding collaboration and the implementation of PLCs, based upon knowledge, level of experience, and ability to offer ongoing support/mentoring to colleagues.
- Create a structured PLC and time for elementary principals to collaborate and problem-solve collectively. Ensure that the PLC models the creation of a vision, mission, and norms.

Recommendations for Practice

- Provide clear description and expectations of the elementary principal within the implementation of a collaboration through a PLC.
- Support building principals in building a culture that supports collaboration.
 - Provide consistent district messaging supporting collaboration via PLCs.
 - Provide a visual of the five dimensions indicative of a successful PLC.
 - Provide positive reinforcement resources for elementary principals to utilize to assist with gaining ownership for staff members within the process of PLC implementation.
- Conduct observations of/with building principals new to the collaborative PLC process and provide immediate feedback.
- Provide elementary principals opportunities to observe ideal collaborative PLC processes throughout the district.

Recommendations for Further Research

- Conduct further action research studies within the district, to include observations of collaborative PLC meetings within elementary buildings
- Utilize confidential surveys before interviews and focus groups to allow for more higher comfort levels in sharing responses
- Conduct research in district(s) of similar size and demographics that exhibit ideal conditions for collaboration within the framework of a professional learning community
- Research professional development and ongoing collaborative practices necessary for elementary principals

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SECTION V

CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

Target Journal

The target journal for publication is the Journal of Research of Leadership Education.

Rationale for this Target

The Journal of Research of Leadership Education is an electronic, peer-reviewed journal that provides an international venue for scholarship and discourse on the teaching and learning of leadership to inform the field of educational leadership. Topics of interest for this journal include: teaching, learning, assessing of leadership preparation and practice, political and contextual issues that impact leadership education, and the links between leadership education and student learning. The Journal of Research of Leadership Education directly relates to the conceptual framework of the research study, as well as the key variables of collaboration, the role of the building principal, and the implementation of a professional learning community.

Outline of Proposed Contents

Abstract
Statement of the Problem
Purpose of the Study
Research Questions
Conceptual Framework
 Collaboration
 Role of the Building Principal
 Implementing a Professional Learning Community
Assumptions
Limitations
Design Control
Key Terms
Methods
 Participants
 Procedures
 Data Analysis
Results
Discussion
Future Research
References

Plan for Submission

Who: Journal of Research of Leadership Education

When: May-August 2023

How: Website _____

Submission Ready Journal Article

Collaborative Practices Within the Framework of a Professional Learning Community: Elementary Principals' Perceptions of Their Role

Abstract

The Director of Elementary Education, elementary principals, and elementary teachers offered information during a structured interview, surveys, and a focus group pertaining to collaboration. Within the context of this study, collaboration was defined as “a way of working with colleagues that is characterized by cooperation, mutual respect, and shared goals, involving sharing of information, coordination of actions, discussing what is working and what is not, and perpetually seeking input and feedback,” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 54). This qualitative, bounded case study, conducted in a Midwestern suburban school district, provides an analysis of collaboration at the elementary school level with a focus on professional learning communities and the elementary principal’s role. The purpose of the study was to discover perceptions of elementary principals’ role in implementing collaborative processes through the framework of a professional learning community. Hord’s (1997, 2008) framework for a professional learning community was the conceptual framework for this study. Open and axial coding were utilized throughout the qualitative data analysis process. Findings indicated prominent themes of facilitator, team builder, and strategic planner as the perceived roles of the elementary principal within the implementation of collaborative practices and processes within a professional learning community. Additional findings indicated that each tenant of an effective professional learning community as defined by Hord (1997, 2008) was equitably recognized by respondents across data collection modalities.

Keywords: collaboration, elementary principal, qualitative case study, elementary school, professional learning community

Statement of the Problem

The problem within this study was little research on the perception of elementary principals in their role of ensuring collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities within the Midwest Suburban School District. Elementary principals’ perceptions of their role in implementing collaboration through the framework of professional

learning communities were unknown within the district prior to this research study. Additional problems to be addressed included lack of knowledge of elementary principals' working definition of collaboration, as well as how elementary principals currently implement collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community. This research study aimed to gain perceptions of elementary school principals to gain feedback and potentially improve collaborative practices district-wide.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to fill the gap in existing literature through the examination of elementary principals' perceptions of their role in establishing collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities within elementary schools in the Midwest Suburban School District. Insight to current collaborative practices through the framework of a professional learning community were gained through exploration of elementary principal perceptions of their current role in the process. Additional insights were gained as to how elementary principals currently define collaboration and implement collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community in the Midwest Suburban School District.

Understanding elementary principals' perceptions will allow district administration to better understand various levels of collaboration through professional learning community implementation, as well as the specific role that principals perceive to play in the process. Findings may play a relevant role in providing recommendations to the district's Director of Elementary Education and may also serve as a resource for other professionals with an interest in elementary education, particularly in the areas of collaboration and professional learning communities. In addition, research findings may additionally be useful within elementary school

settings of a school district of similar size and demographic make-up of the Midwest Suburban School District.

Research Questions

The focus of this study is to examine elementary principals' perceptions of their role in establishing collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities within their respective schools. Two types of research questions are involved in qualitative research studies: the central question and sub-questions (Creswell, 2012). The central research question guiding this qualitative study is: What are elementary principals' perceptions of their role in implementing a professional learning community? The following sub-questions support the central research question and narrow the focus of the study to collaboration, the role of the principal, and professional learning communities (Creswell, 2012):

1. How do elementary principals define collaboration?
2. How do elementary principals describe their role in the implementation of a professional learning community?

Conceptual Framework

“A conceptual framework serves as an underlying structure which guides the research study,” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 85). A conceptual framework can be understood to be a lens through which a researcher will investigate a problem, serving as the foundation of the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the conceptual framework for the research study in the Midwest Suburban School District.

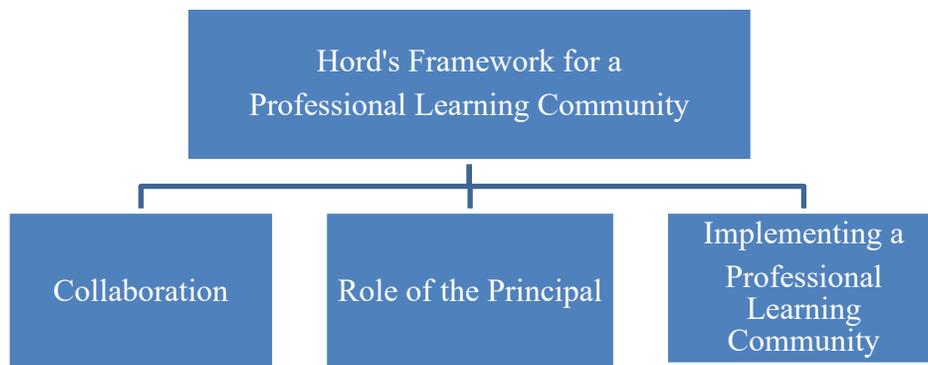


Figure 1. Hord’s framework for a professional learning community was the conceptual framework for this study, contributing to this qualitative investigation of collaborative practices of professional learning communities in the Midwest Suburban School District. Collaboration, role of the principal, and implementation of a professional learning community were key variables.

Five Dimensions of Successful Professional Learning Communities According to Hord

Hord (1997, 2008) developed five dimensions that are indicative of successful professional learning communities. These dimensions provide scaffolding for an understanding of collaboration within a professional learning community and the role of the elementary principal in its implementation. These dimensions include shared vision and values, shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application, shared personal practice and supportive conditions. These dimensions served as filters in discerning the abundance of literature to be reviewed for this study, as well as provided a means of exploring applications of these dimensions in a real educational setting.

Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision

Shared beliefs, values, and vision are central to meaningful adjustments integral to increased student learning (Hord, 2008). Senge (1990) posits that learning organizations cannot exist without shared vision. Collective goals can be achieved when teachers work in collaboration, guided by shared beliefs and vision. Pankake and Moller (2003) contend the incorporation of a vision that is “characterized by an undeviating focus on student learning” characterizes “the hallmark of a true professional learning community” (p. 8). Printy and Marks (2006) contribute that when a principal and teachers engage in the same belief and effort of producing an exceptional education for students, “schools do not undertake innovation purely for the sake of change” (p. 131).

Shared and Supportive Leadership

The implementation of shared leadership and decision-making within the professional learning community results in increased student learning (Fleming & Leo, 1999; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Administrative cultivation of relationships is necessary to maintain shared leadership and responsibility (Hord, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003, 2010). “A principal who is willing to initiate structure and share responsibilities” is crucial for the implementation of a professional learning community (O’Malley, 2010).

Collective Learning and Application

As a fundamental dimension of a professional learning community, increasing collective learning and application of learning deems essential. DuFour (2004) describes collective learning as necessary in addressing the central concepts of what we want students to learn, how we will know when students have learned what we want them to learn, and how we will react when students do not respond to selected instructional strategies. Senge (1990) contends that

collective learning also involves enhancing abilities to work as teams. Hord (1997, 1998, 2008) iterates that collective learning is integral in effective professional learning communities that positively influence student learning.

Shared Personal Practice

Professional learning communities implement shared practice to positively impact student learning. Research indicates the importance for educators to support one another to strengthen collective learning and application of that learning (Hord, 2008).

Supportive Conditions

Supportive conditions provide a foundation for professional learning communities to develop and grow, including supportive relational conditions and supportive structural conditions (Hord, 1997, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).



Figure 2. Illustration of the five dimensions that are indicative of successful professional learning communities (Hord, 1997).

Collaboration

“The most significant gift our species brings to the world is our capacity to think. The most significant danger our species brings to the world is our inability to think with those who think differently,” (Markova & McArthur, 2015, p. 5). The problems of today’s world are becoming increasingly more complex, requiring people to work collaboratively across areas of expertise. In order to stay abreast of developments in many fields, individuals, as well as organizations, must commit to life-long learning (Andrews & Lewis, 2007). The term “learning organization” is prevalent in the arena of business, describing an organization that comes together regularly to review information that has been compiled on its own activities, collaborates to understand this information, and develops actions based upon conclusions as to improve the operations of the collective organization (Boudett & City, 2014).

Through continuous data review and implementation of systematic communication and practices, learning organizations assure better chances of continued growth, even when individual roles or people change within or depart from the organization (Boudett & City, 2014). Collective learning through collaboration deems necessary to compete in a continually evolving organizational environment (Edmondson, 2012). “Collaboration is a way of working with colleagues that is characterized by cooperation, mutual respect, and shared goals. It involves sharing information, coordinating actions, discussing what’s working and what’s not, and perpetually seeking input and feedback,” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 54).

Many organizations must utilize collaboration with people across its entirety, “many of whom have different priorities, incentives, and ways of doing things,” (Hughes & Weiss, 2013, p. 91). Yet simply collecting individuals with the appropriate expertise to collaborate for specific tasks does not ensure success of the team or the organization (Edmondson, 2008). To

achieve effectiveness, teams or organizations must “organize themselves to perform tasks, develop social relations to support their operations, and assign leaders who can provide direction and facilitate team operations,” (Levi, 2014, p. 27).

Short-term performance indicators do not prove to be the most effective guidepost for teams or organizations to gauge overall success in a collaborative environment (Edmondson, 2012). Embracing learning goals instead encourages collaborative leadership and assists leaders of such organizational learning to consider establishing collaboration, communication, and gaining insight from others (Ibarra & Hansen, 2013). Such leadership creates the capacity to “engage people and groups outside one’s formal control and inspire them to work toward common goals- despite differences in convictions, cultural values, and operating norms,” (Ibarra & Hansen, 2013, p. 10).

Applying the concept of collaboration through collective learning in the educational setting shifts the focus from student learning to adult or organizational learning. (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2012). There is an expanse of literature devoted to the favorable influence of collaboration among educational professionals on student academic growth (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Reeves, 2011). Much of this literature indicates a need for the creation of collaborative environments within school districts and individual school buildings (Barth, 2005; Dufour et al., 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Collaboration is detailed as a “powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching and professional learning in ways to produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers” (Sparks, 2005).

In attempts to educate all students, adults within school settings “need to learn how to address complex, unprecedented challenges, and they need to be in organizations that support

that learning,” (Boudett & City, 2014, p. 13). To accomplish the goal of educating all students well, schools will need to prioritize continuous improvement through collaboration and consideration to changing circumstances, be it legislative or societal in context. Specific aspects need to be considered as fundamental to developing learning organizations through collaboration, including a learning environment that provides support, consistent learning processes and practices, and leaders who consistently demonstrate behaviors that reinforce learning (Edmondson, Garvin, & Gino, 2008). The role of the building principal as “lead teacher and lead learner becomes the fulcrum point, as well as steward for the collaborative learning process as a whole,” (Senge, et al., 2012, p. 20).

Role of the Building Principal

Historically, the role of a school principal predominantly has entailed managerial duties and student discipline, “the guys in charge of making sure of two things: maintaining discipline when a student became too disruptive for the teacher and making sure there were enough office supplies,” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 151). The educational environment now vastly differs to one in which “multiple policy initiatives and innovation overload are the norm” (Hopkins & Ainscow, 1993, p. 303). Many principals experience change in the role and expectations of the principalship, including increased complexity in the needs of students (Shen, 2005).

The traditional role of the building principal has evolved from managers of schools to leaders that encompass the characteristics of vision and advocacy for successful collaborative professional learning communities, contributing to an environment in which all students grow academically (NAESP, 2008). These responsibilities are imperative within an educational environment with increasing demands upon school accountability, particularly in relation to student achievement (Brown, 2016). The success of a modern school principal depends upon the

willingness to embrace changes in societal context and legislative dictate, focusing upon key elements that create an effective school leader in this day and age (Rousmanierie, 2013).

“The role of the principal is a complex one. How well principals play that role matters to the success of the students and teachers they serve” (Psencik & Brown, 2018).

Within the public educational system, the role of the principal is not only complex, but contradictory of the responsibilities that it entails (Rousmaniere, 2013). The principal must balance a job description that includes administration of educational policy and building manager, including embracing and championing for school change, all the while defending the durability of the bureaucratic educational system. “A single person, in a single professional role, acts on a daily basis as the connecting link between a large bureaucratic system and the individual daily experiences of a large number of children and adults,” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 2).

As the responsibilities in the role of principalship incorporates an instructional focus, ninety percent of principals believe that they are ultimately accountable (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2013). Increasing expectations of the building principal have become almost unattainable by the average individual (Fullan, 2014). A different kind of leadership will be necessary to guide staff and stakeholders through changing dynamics in the educational terrain, including students and teachers collaborating in learning and the increasing utilization of digital means for learning (Fullan, 2014).

“The principal is second only to the teacher in terms of impact on student learning,” (Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstorm, 2004, p. 5) and it is necessary to frame the role of the building principal as that of “learning leader- one who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis,” (Fullan, 2014, p. 9). Research on

the role of the principal and its effect on student learning indicates that when teachers are dedicated to working collaboratively, increased learning in a greater number of students will result (Allensworth, Lupescu, & Eaton, 2010; Leithwood, K., 2012, Bryk, Bender-Sebring; Robinson, V., 2011, Timperley, H., 2011). “As principals directly impact how teachers can learn together, they will maximize their impact on student learning,” (Fullan, 2014, p. 66). As leaders are integral to the implementation of collaboration through professional learning communities (Sparks, 2005), it is necessary to review the existing literature regarding the principal’s role in the process.

Limitations

As this was a qualitative bounded case study, responses from participants were a result of their own experiences. The validity and reliability of specific responses was viewed with caution. There was very little possibility of replicating this research study, nor is the researcher claiming transferability to other school districts of similar size or demographic nature. Researcher bias must also be accounted for, including both the researcher’s past experiences with professional learning communities, in addition to past professional interactions with participating school district staff. Creswell (2012) cautions that these potential biases may impact interpretation of the qualitative data.

Assumptions

This study assumed that the responses collected through a survey, focus group, and semi-structured interviews were an accurate reflection of participant perceptions, and were not changed for the purposes of this qualitative study. This study examined the individual perceptions of elementary principals’ roles in the implementation of collaborative processes through the framework of a professional learning community.

All participants fulfilled principal roles at the elementary level and provided honest and accurate information without deliberate manipulation of the outcome of the study's conclusions. Although information conveyed throughout participation is an accurate account of their experiences, it can be assumed that error or biases may inadvertently influence the conclusions of this qualitative study (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

Design Controls

Creswell (2012, 2014) indicates that consistent focus of the researcher on the problem statement and research questions of the study are imperative. Implementing precautions will impede undue influence of outlined assumptions and limitations on collected data (Creswell, 2012, 2014). Following these recommendations assisted the researcher in focusing on participant perspectives and minimize researcher biases.

Quality data was necessary to help the researcher formulate valid findings and recommendations. Participants in qualitative studies can often feel intimidated to openly share perceptions of the topic under investigation. The utilization of surveys can be helpful in acquiring richer qualitative data in such circumstances (Fink, 2013). Preparing focus group and interview questions in advance also assisted the researcher in gathering high quality data through more complete accounts of participant responses (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 1998).

Quality data analysis is also necessary to provide valid and reliable interpretations of data (Creswell, 2012, 2014; Fink, 2013; Kruger & Casey, 2009). Transcription of focus groups and interviews, as well as open and axial coding processes assisted the researcher in developing themes that emerged from the qualitative data provided by participants (Fink, 2013; Kruger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Definitions of Key Term

Collaboration. For the purpose of this study, collaboration will be defined as “a way of working with colleagues that is characterized by cooperation, mutual respect, and shared goals. It involves sharing information, coordinating actions, discussing what’s working and what’s not, and perpetually seeking input and feedback,” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 54).

Collective/shared leadership. Leadership from multiple leaders in order to maintain shared responsibility (Boyd-Dimock & Hord, 1994; Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003, 2010).

Collective learning. A dynamic and collective process of the accumulation and further production of knowledge. Knowledge is utilized to form systematic means of guiding decision-making (Senge, 1990).

Director of Elementary Education. Individual employed at the district level that is “responsible for supporting elementary buildings’ improvement through the supervision of elementary principals. Oversees the conditions of teaching and learning in elementary schools and facilitates the ongoing development and alignment of the district’s elementary programs,” (Midwestern suburban school district website, Human Resources, job descriptions).

Elementary Principal. Individual employed at the elementary building level to “provide effective instructional leadership; direct overall site operations, services, and staff; provide information and serve as a resource to others; develop community relations; enforce established policies and regulatory requirements; coordinate school activities and address issues, situations and/or problems that arise on campus or with students and staff,” (Midwestern suburban school district website, Human Resources, job descriptions).

Elementary school. A school consisting of a preschool-grade five or preschool-grade six population of students.

Learning leader. Individual who models learning and guides conditions for continuous learning for all members of an organization (Fullan, 2014)

Learning organization. “Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together,” (Senge, 1990).

Positional power. Authority that is exerted over others to accomplish tasks or goals (Northouse, 2013).

Professional learning community. An educational climate in which teachers work collaboratively to consider existing instructional practices, examine student outcome data, and adjust teaching strategies for certain students within their classrooms (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

Professional learning community according to Hord. A way of organizing the educational staff to engage in intentional learning for the purpose of improving staff effectiveness and improve student learning (Hord, 2008). Five dimensions are indicative of successful professional learning communities, including shared vision and values, shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application, shared personal practice and supportive conditions. (Hord, 1997).

Shared practice. Members of an organization develop a shared repertoire of resources, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems (Senge, 1990).

Supportive conditions. Supportive relational conditions and supportive structural conditions (Hord, 1997, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Supportive relational conditions include trust, respect, caring relationships, recognition, celebration, risk-

taking, and reflective dialogue (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Supportive structural conditions consist of available time and physical capacity to accomplish collaborative efforts among team members (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Methods

A qualitative bounded case study (Creswell, 2014) was conducted to determine the perceptions of elementary school principals' role in implementing collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community, specifically focusing on how elementary principals perceive their roles in the implementation of a professional learning community. To accomplish this, the researcher gathered information from the Director of Elementary Education, elementary school principals, and elementary teachers within the Midwest Suburban School District. The researcher triangulated the data (Seidman, 1998) through the use of a semi-structured interview, qualitative survey, and focus group(s) (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Fink, 2013; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Research was conducted in the Midwest Suburban School District located in a suburban Missouri city with an approximate population of 76,000 citizens (United States Census Bureau, 2016). The Midwest Suburban School District included fourteen operating elementary schools within the school district boundaries. Two elementary schools were comprised of a K-5 school-age population, while the remaining twelve elementary schools were comprised of a K-6 school-age population. Population sizes of elementary schools ranged in size from 301 to 687 students. All elementary schools employed a principal, with four elementary schools with larger populations additionally employing a vice principal.

Elementary schools within the Midwest Suburban School District were comprised mostly of Caucasian students, with 25.3% identified as Hispanic, African American, Asian, or American

Indian (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Free and reduced breakfast and lunch percentages across elementary schools range from 32.62% to 100% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Approval was granted for this research study by the Director of School Improvement and the District Research Committee in the Midwest Suburban School District.

Participants

The Director of Elementary Education, elementary school principals, and elementary teachers within the Midwest Suburban School District were the invited participants of this bounded case study. The researcher sought participation from these participants within the school district. As some level of implementation of collaboration through the professional learning community process was a criterion for participation, the researcher utilized a non-probability, purposeful sampling procedure (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) states “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77).

Participation was on a volunteer basis and a consent form was obtained from volunteering participants. Participants were contacted via email, through personal phone calls, or face-to-face interaction. The researcher’s role involved the maintenance of participant confidentiality throughout the research process.

Procedures

A variety of data collection tools, including semi-structured interview, surveys, and a focus group were conducted to gather qualitative input from participants.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the Director of Elementary Education as a means of understanding the district expectation of implementation of professional learning

communities within elementary schools of the Midwest Suburban School District. Merriam (2009) indicates that the semi-structured interview consists of “a mix of more and less structured interview questions that will be used flexibly and allow for probing questions to be asked based on participants’ responses” (p. 89). Data gleaned from the semi-structured interview were instrumental in developing questions for a survey instrument, as well as support focus group facilitation.

The format of the interview was semi-structured, with a goal of “minimum bias through maintaining a neutral stance in regard to the research topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 92). An interview protocol (See Appendix C) was utilized to record and organize information gained. This allowed the researcher to organize questioning in a coherent manner and to record descriptive notes of responses.

A survey instrument was utilized with elementary principals as a means of acquiring understanding of principals’ perceptions of their roles in implementing collaborative processes through professional learning communities within their buildings. Surveys are best used when perceptions of the stakeholders are desired (Fink, 2013). McDavid (2013) states that surveys typically receive a 50% response rate. The researcher chose to utilize Survey Monkey, an online survey-generating program, and distributed the survey through email to all participating elementary principals within the Midwest Suburban School District. Fink (2013) states that surveyors and respondents alike prefer online surveys due to accessibility, affordability, and ability to reach a large number of respondents in a short amount of time.

Content validity was obtained through an expert panel review, as advised by Fink (2013). Data provided by are “the descriptions of feelings and perceptions,” (Fink, 2013, p. 5). The qualitative data collected from this survey contributed to other qualitative data gathered within

the research study for more meaningful results (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2009) indicates the necessity of confidentiality within qualitative research. All survey data and results were confidentially secure and respondent identities were not available to other participants.

In addition, a focus group consisting of voluntary participating elementary teachers was conducted by the researcher to draw upon participants' range of attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and experiences pertaining to the focus of this study (Krueger & Casey, 2009). As Merriam (2009) recommends, the focus group is a purposeful sampling of teachers, due to their level of knowledge of the implementation of professional learning communities within the elementary schools in which they are employed. This included regular education teachers and special education teachers who were considered information-rich people in a single-category design (Krueger & Casey, 2009). This also met the ideal size of a focus group (five to seven) for a noncommercial topic (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interview and focus group(s) were audio recorded to analyze (Merriam, 2009). Transcribing audio recordings provided optimum opportunity for analysis (Merriam, 2009). Analyzing verbatim transcriptions allows researchers to uncover similarities across data (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Once survey data was collected from the online survey program (Survey Monkey Inc., 2014) the researcher conducted an analysis of individual survey questions. These responses were helpful in determining opinions of elementary principals regarding the research questions.

The researcher utilized the process of coding to label and sort collected qualitative data (Emerson et al., 2011; Merriam, 2009). Coding also served to summarize and interpret themes that emerge from the data (Emerson et al., 2011). Open coding (Krueger & Casey, 2009) was

initially implemented to analyze survey responses, as well as focus group and interview transcriptions to provide a basic structure for collected data. Themes were developed from interview and focus group transcriptions using axial coding (Emerson et al., 2011; Merriam, 2009). This provided opportunities for the researcher to consider all qualitative data gathered, interpret the meaning of responses, and categorize them into developed themes.

Reliability, validity, and transferability were regarded throughout the research process. Reliability is increased when all elementary principals are provided an opportunity to participate in the research study, as opposed to a researcher selected sample (Merriam, 2009). Validity was evident through multiple data sources, including survey, focus group, and interview data, as well as an extensive literature review on the subject matter (Creswell, 2012). Triangulation of data sources are necessary to support the validity of research findings (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). This research study should not be considered transferable to all elementary school environments striving to implement collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community, but rather as a contribution to existing research in these areas. No known harm existed throughout participation in this research study.

Results

The purpose of this study was to discover perceptions of elementary principals' role in implementing collaborative processes through the framework of a professional learning community. Three predominant themes emerged as a result of a structured interview, three survey responses, and responses from one focus group: (a) the elementary principal as facilitator of collaborative processes within the framework of a professional learning community, (b) the elementary principal as a team builder for collaborative processes within the framework of a professional learning community, and (c) the elementary principal as a strategic planner for

collaborative processes within the framework of a professional learning community. Table 6 outlines specific categories that were discovered within the themes that emerged throughout the data analysis process.

Table 6

Themes About Collaboration, Professional Learning Communities, and the Role of the Elementary Principal

Theme	Frequency	Categories included
Facilitator	5	Principal commitment to collaboration Principal follow-through on team decisions Expectation of common purpose for collaborative teams Expectation of data-driven decision making
Team Builder	9	Review of vision and mission regularly Maintaining professionalism and positivity Principal listening to and nurturing needs Expectation of learning from one another All staff members valued members teams
Strategic Planner	6	Removal of obstacles to collaboration process (time, space) Collaboration in job-embedded professional development Creation of vertical collaboration teams Leadership opportunities in a variety of collaborative teams

Facilitator

The elementary principal as a facilitator emerged as a consistent theme throughout the data collection process. The elementary principal was indicated as key to ensuring collaboration through the implementation of the tenants of a professional learning community (Hord, 1997, 2008). The interview participant expressed

“Building leadership cannot happen with one person. A building leader will build a team of people that support the vision and mission of the building. This is what will help to bring change and drive growth with the facilitation of the principal.”

Several participants indicated the consistency of the elementary principal as facilitator of collaborative processes as necessary for the ongoing function of professional learning communities. Building principals indicated the importance of their role of facilitator, both for staff members choosing to consistently engage in the process, as well as for those that did not. One survey participant provided an overview of specific activities involved in facilitation of collaboration through implementation of a professional learning community. “My role as an elementary principal in a collaborative PLC is that of facilitator. I do this by attending all JEPD meetings and strategically design opportunities for collaboration.” Another elementary principal stated, “Some teachers do not collaborate with team members without my direction.”

The consistent consensus amongst elementary teacher participants indicated that elementary principals facilitate a variety of functions to ensure effective collaboration within a professional learning community. One focus group participant shared the importance of the elementary principal as facilitator in assurance of utilizing a variety of data sources to guide discussions and decision making.

“Our principal ensures that staff utilize multiple sources of data to collaboratively make instructional intervention decisions for students, including iReady, Lexia, MTSS data, or data from MAP assessment scores or ESOL Access scores.”

To add to this theme, another focus group participant indicated the necessity of the elementary principal to ensure ongoing collaboration through the facilitation of ongoing professional development. “I have never had professional development in effective collaboration or professional learning communities. My building principal helps to guide this.”

Team Builder

The elementary principal as a team builder was an additional theme that emerged from analysis of the data. Utilizing mission and vision as guiding principles was indicated by the interview participant at the district level.

“District level admin send out a weekly update with procedural reminders and tidbits of learning. Our intention is to consistently focus on our vision, mission, and values (learning, community, equity). Elementary principals and secondary principals also meet monthly to collaborate and discuss necessary items.”

Elementary principals indicated the importance of their role in guiding staff to reviewing mission and vision regularly. “Without a mission, decisions are made in the moment with different driving factors. When the mission and values are the core of the organization, it will bring focus to the work and ideas.”

Respondents consistently indicated the elementary principal’s integral role in team building through building a collaborative team of responsive support. One focus group respondent stated,

“I feel valued and supported by my building principal, and I believe this is the overall relationship that staff members have with our administration. Our building principal is open to providing support to teachers through collaborative meetings and follow-up observations of the implementation of classroom strategies and plans.”

In addition, the role of elementary principal as team builder was reported as that of valuing all team members and nurturing staff needs. Another focus group participant noted, “Our building principal does a great job of supporting and nurturing all staff members. All staff

members are considered important members of our building team. Everyone feels important and appreciated.”

Strategic Planner

The elementary principal as a strategic planner was another theme that was consistently cited throughout transcription analysis. Creating opportunities for collaboration, removing obstacles to the collaborative process, and the provision of multiple opportunities for leadership were all categories that emerged within the theme of strategic planner. The interview participant indicated the importance for creating opportunities for collaboration. “Collaboration is driven by data and purpose. This happens in job-embedded professional development, grade-level common plan times, vertical teams, and staff meetings.”

In addition, elementary principals recognized the importance of removing obstacles to the collaboration process. One survey participant shared, “As the building administrator, I create the culture, time, and space for collaboration. Sometimes teachers are unwilling to put in the ‘extra’ time to collaborate.” Other participants shared specific obstacles that often pose as challenges requiring strategic planning on the part of the elementary principal. One focus group participant indicated,

“My school is short on space. JEPD is sometimes held in the principal’s office or in a teacher’s classroom. There is no other available space that teachers could leave items to promote collaboration. There are even a few grade levels where all teachers are not in classrooms right next to each other.”

The provision of a variety of opportunities for leadership was also indicated as a category within the theme of elementary principal as strategic planner. One focus group participant indicated,

“In our school, there are a variety of teams that provide leadership opportunities, including leadership team, PBIS team, MTSS team, and family involvement. Staff are encouraged to share ideas and knowledge about certain areas such as special education or ESOL, or after attending a professional development with the rest of the staff.”

Additional Findings

Table 7

Indications of Tenants of Hord’s Framework of a Professional Learning Community

Theme	Number of times mentioned	Percentage
Shared beliefs, values, vision	12	19%
Shared and supportive leadership	14	22%
Collective application	11	17%
Shared personal practice	13	21%
Supportive conditions	13	21%

Table 7 indicates additional themes that are important to note, as they directly relate to Hord’s (1997, 2008) framework for an effective professional learning community. Hord’s (1997, 2008) framework includes five dimensions that are indicative of successful professional learning communities. These dimensions provide scaffolding for an understanding of collaboration within a professional learning community and the role of the elementary principal in its implementation.

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to fill the gap in existing literature through the examination of elementary principals’ perceptions of their role in establishing collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities within elementary schools in

the Midwest Suburban School District. Insight to current collaborative practices through the framework of a professional learning community were gained through exploration of elementary principal perceptions of their current role in the process.

Participant perceptions of the role of the elementary principal encompassed a broad range of responsibilities to ensure collaborative practices through the implementation of a professional learning community. Participants across data collection modalities described the elementary principal as a facilitator, team builder, and strategic planner as the three major themes that emerged throughout the course of this study. These findings, along with recommendations for future research, were provided to the Director of Elementary Education as evidence of current practices, as well as recommendations to further support the role of the elementary principal in the implementation of these professional practices.

Collaboration is detailed as a “powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching and professional learning in ways to produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers” (Sparks, 2005). Specific aspects need to be considered as fundamental to developing learning organizations through collaboration, including a learning environment that provides support, consistent learning processes and practices, and leaders who consistently demonstrate behaviors that reinforce learning (Edmondson, Garvin, & Gino, 2008). The role of the building principal as “lead teacher and lead learner becomes the fulcrum point, as well as steward for the collaborative learning process as a whole,” (Senge, et al., 2012, p. 20).

This concept of the elementary principal as fulcrum point emerged within the responses obtained by participants and the themes that emerged within this study. The elementary principal as a facilitator in many aspects of the collaborative process were mentioned five times, for 25% of the resulting data. “As principals directly impact how teachers can learn together,

they will maximize their impact on student learning,” (Fullan, 2014, p. 66). Elementary principals were perceived to fulfill necessary functions of maintaining commitment to collaborative processes, following through with team decisions, maintaining expectations of common purpose, and maintaining expectations for utilizing data to drive decision-making.

The concept of the elementary principal as a steward for the collaborative learning process was indicated within the other two themes that emerged from the collected data. The elementary principal as team builder was mentioned 9 times, for 45% of the resulting data. Research on the role of the principal and its effect on student learning indicates that when teachers are dedicated to working collaboratively, increased learning in a greater number of students will result (Leithwood, K., 2012, Bryk, Bender-Sebring, Allensworth, Lupescu, & Eaton, 2010; Robinson, V., 2011, Timperley, H., 2011). Elementary principals were perceived to fulfill team building functions such as reviewing vision and mission regularly with teams, maintaining professionalism and positivity, listening to and nurturing staff needs, valuing team members, and maintaining expectations of learning from one another.

The elementary principal as strategic planner was mentioned 6 times for 30% of the resulting data. “The principal is second only to the teacher in terms of impact on student learning,” (Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstorm, 2004, p. 5) and it is necessary to frame the role of the building principal as that of “learning leader- one who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis,” (Fullan, 2014, p. 9). Elementary principals were perceived to fulfill strategic planning functions such as removing obstacles to the collaborative process, provision of collaboration time within the school day through job-embedded professional development, creation of vertical collaboration teams across grade levels, and provision of leadership opportunities in a variety of collaborative teams.

In addition to the three major themes that emerged in relation to the central research question, additional themes were important to note that directly related to Hord's (1997, 2008) framework for an effective professional learning community. Shared beliefs, values, and vision was mentioned 12 times, for 19% of the resulting data. Shared and supportive leadership was mentioned 14 times for 22% of the resulting data. Collective application was mentioned 11 times, for 17% of the resulting data. Shared personal practice was mentioned 13 times, for 21% of the resulting data. Supportive conditions were mentioned 13 times, for 21% of the resulting data. Each tenant of an effective professional learning community was equitably recognized by respondents across data collection modalities. This may indicate a balance of the necessary tenants for the implementation and maintenance of a professional learning community that engages staff in intentional learning for the purpose of improving teacher effectiveness and ultimately student learning. "A true professional learning community is a way of organizing the educational staff to engage in purposeful, collegial learning. This learning is intentional for the purpose of improving staff effectiveness, so all students learn successfully to high standards," (Hord, 2008, p. 13).

Future Research

The results of this study supports previous research in the many roles that the principal plays within the functions of the position. Results of this research further indicates that the perceptions of elementary principals' role in implementing a professional learning community include that of facilitator, team builder, and strategic planner. With few studies examining collaboration at the elementary level through the lens of the professional learning community, the findings should be utilized for the following:

- planning collaborative processes and frameworks for professional learning communities

within elementary schools, elementary schedule design with embedded collaborative time

- professional development or professional learning planning
- revealing perceptions from elementary principals, teachers, and district administration to the Director of Elementary Education with information for maintenance or improvement of district practices
- encouraging district administration to provide consistency in expectations, support, and learning opportunities for all elementary principals for the effective implementation of collaborative processes through a PLC at the elementary level
- fill the gap in literature and provide a foundation for future studies

The researcher proposed suggestions for future researchers who are interested in the field of collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community. One suggestion included conducting observations within collaborative PLC meetings in elementary schools. Perceptions within this study solely came from teachers, elementary principals, and the director of elementary education. Collaboration in the context of a PLC meeting within an elementary building was not observed or experienced. Further qualitative research specific to these concepts may be necessary to corroborate these perceptions with observations of actual collaborative teams within elementary school settings in the Midwest Suburban School District. Future research would benefit from including this component of observation. This could include further action research within the Midwest Suburban School District.

A limitation of this qualitative research was reliance upon participant responses. Future studies might include a variety of data collection modalities, beyond participant responses. Possibilities could include qualitative observations of collaborative PLC meetings at the

elementary level. Additional limitations included the small number of responses that were obtained for data analysis. Utilizing a confidential survey before the interview and focus group may have captured additional information that participants did not feel comfortable sharing in the presence of others.

An area recommended for extension of this research study included additional research examining district(s) of similar size and demographics that exhibit ideal conditions for collaboration within the framework of a professional learning community. Incorporating observation and feedback of the components that contribute to these ideal conditions, as well as perceptions of pertinent district stakeholders would be useful in applying to the Midwest Suburban School District, as well as other school districts that engage in collaborative practices through the framework of a professional learning community.

A second area of potential extension of this research study included additional research into the professional development and ongoing collaborative practices necessary for elementary principals. Obtaining knowledge and experience is essential to balance the multiple necessary roles to develop successful collaborative practices within a professional learning community. Research studies of effective professional development or professional learning for elementary principals in these areas would provide valuable information in the areas of collaboration, professional learning communities, and the role of the elementary principal for the Midwest Suburban School District, as well as any other districts that implement these professional practices.

SECTION VI

SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

My journey in life began as a child within a military family. A military path afforded my family opportunities to reside in many locations throughout this great nation. Service obligations and job relocations took my family to multiple regions, providing me with exposure to numerous cultural backgrounds and a variety of differing perspectives. As I observed and experienced qualities of distinct and varying categories of differences, including race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, culture, and regional perspective, education consistently emerged as a common thread for potential success within the fabric of being American. I learned at a very young age that education plays a key role to ensure and maintain a quality standard of life. Access to high quality education, however, became a strikingly distinct difference among varying groups of people, particularly in relation to race and socioeconomic class.

Leader

My collective experiences with differences and equitable access have developed my enduring advocacy for vulnerable sectors of our population. Participation in this doctoral program has undoubtedly helped me to transform my approach in achieving such ends. Garvin and Roberto (2001) contend that often “we argue our position with a passion that prevents us from weighing opposing views” (p. 77). They go on to discuss inquiry as a far more effective approach. “Inquiry carefully considers a variety of options, works with others to discover the best solutions, and stimulates creative thinking rather than suppressing dissension” (p. 77). Garvin and Roberto posit that acquiring the decision-making skills of conflict, consideration, and closure are necessary to encourage constructive conflict throughout the process.

It is imperative for educational leaders to continuously challenge themselves to practice ethically sound leadership. Mihelic, Lipicnik, and Tekavcic (2010) state “ethics has a lot if not everything to do with management/leadership” (p. 31). Leaders must be versatile, dynamic and ethical in considerations and decision-making processes. Not only is it pertinent to form and participate in leadership teams that contain a variety of leadership and personality styles, it is also imperative to include a diversity of perspectives of human qualities.

After four years of service in the field of clinical mental health and fifteen years of service in the arena of special education, I still hold the same conviction to best serve children and youth. As a result of completing the doctoral and dissertation process, fundamental areas in which my leadership can strengthen the field of special education are continuing to provide sound information regarding special education process to my regular education colleagues, as well as providing the inspiration necessary for others to follow my lead.

When “individuals find meaningful and satisfying work, organizations get the talent and energy they need to succeed,” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 137). I find myself fortunate to hold a position within the district that I am currently employed, to have responsibility and oversight for many tasks, but no administrative obligation to oversee and evaluate people. This lends a unique opportunity to communicate and influence those with whom I work closely without the undertone or retribution of evaluative accountability. I consistently employ path-goal leadership to remove obstacles to alleviate task-related pressure, that further solidifies positive working relationships. Path-goal leadership suggests that leaders have an obligation to assist employees in removing obstacles that “create excessive uncertainties, frustrations, or threats,” (Northouse, 2013, p. 142). The payoffs for doing their work are worthwhile,” (Northouse, 2013, p. 137). This is accomplished by direction, guidance, and coaching along the way (Northouse,

2013). I find this to be the most effective leadership role, fitting with my desire to positively influence teams of people that are working to make sound instructional and intervention decisions for individual students.

Scholar

Upon reflection of my extensive career as an adult learner, I find that I can collectively describe my experiences as a learner and my reaction to newly presented knowledge and learning scenarios as critical. I am truly a very critical learner. Some may view my relentless questioning and examination of the social structures of the world around me as incessant, tedious, or abrasive. I, however, view it as a necessary endeavor, not only to shape my own perspective of reality, but also to contribute a voice for those who may not be in positions to advocate for themselves. The doctoral/dissertation process has certainly contributed to developing a sophistication in which I employ questioning of information and circumstances.

Meriram & Bierema (2014), describe critical theorists as “asking questions about social conditions, such as ‘who benefits from these arrangements?’ or ‘who says x is true?’” (p. 215). I will claim membership in the tribe of critical theorists, as this has consistently been my reaction to all types of new learning throughout my life, particularly my adult life. Be it experiential or reflective learning through professional practice, or even more contrived learning situations set in the secure vacuum of university classrooms or lecture halls, I constantly find myself examining assumptions of the world around me. Merriam & Bierema (2014) would describe this process as examining the deep-seated beliefs that guide thoughts and actions.

Utilizing my critical style of learning contributes to a developing learning culture within my professional environment. Questioning what the group needs to know and how we will arrive at the necessary knowledge often motivates my colleagues to move in a particular

direction rather than remaining stagnant in beliefs and practices. Gill (2010) states that “organizational learning is a process of forming and applying collective knowledge to problems and needs” (p. 6). Learning should be intentional to achieve effectiveness as an organization. Creating a culture that supports continuous learning at all levels is imperative, including the individual, team, whole organization, and community levels (Gill, 2010). Further developing this skill remains a high priority for me in pursuing my professional goal of assisting in the implementation and maintenance of a professional learning community within all the school buildings that I support and provide procedural guidance.

Conclusion

As I move forward in my leadership journey, it is imperative to build common ground with colleagues to achieve collective goals. This can be accomplished through shared vision and mission, as well as communication and collaboration. Finding the balance of ethics, trust, and collaboration will be essential to my continued learning and development as an organizational leader. The wisdom that will result from current and future experiences will only be accomplished through a commitment to lifelong learning alongside those within my organization, no matter what position I may hold. I believe Senge would agree that such a commitment will further enhance effectiveness as a leader, as well as the functioning of the organization within which I serve. I can only hope that my journey in education will be one that is depicted by Merriam & Bierema (2014) as “action that is mindful and timely: mindful in the sense that it has a moral or ethical basis, and timely in that we do not want to overthink acting when intervention is needed,” (p. 227).

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Appendix A

Participant Invitation Email

Dear Participant:

What is the elementary principal's role in the creation of collaborative environment through a professional learning community? I am asking for your help in telling me what you know about this subject.

As a doctoral student at the University of Missouri-Columbia, I am investigating the elementary principal's role in the creation of a collaborative workplace environment for teachers. As an elementary principal, director of elementary education, or practicing teacher, your views on this important subject are extremely valuable. If you are willing to participate in my research, I will make arrangements to conduct an individual interview, survey, or focus group at your convenience. This study has been approved by the district's Department of School Improvement, as well as by the University of Missouri IRB committee (_____). Questions regarding your rights as a participant or any other matter pertaining to this study can be submitted to the committee at (573) 882-9585. Your decision to participate or not to participate will be kept confidential.

Attached to this email is a general participant letter and description of informed consent that explains my research in detail, as well as your rights as a research participant. Please read the informed consent thoroughly before deciding if you would like to participate. If you have any questions concerning this research, please feel free to contact me at (816) 262-8723 or at dr.allen2019@gmail.com.

Please reply to this email once you have made decision regarding participating or not.

Thank you for your consideration,

Cheryl Allen, University of Missouri Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B

Participant Cover Letter

Date: _____

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding collaboration and professional learning community practices at the elementary school level. This study, entitled *Collaborative Practices Within the Framework of a Professional Learning Community: Elementary Principals' Perception of Their Role*, is being conducted as a research project in the University of Missouri's Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program as part of the requirements necessary for dissertation completion. The following information is provided to assist you in making an informed decision regarding participation.

The purpose of this study is to investigate perceptions of educational staff and elementary principals regarding collaboration within the framework of a professional learning community. This study will gain feedback and insight into perceptions of collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community at the elementary school level to be known, which will be used as to generate recommendations for improvement, if deemed appropriate and necessary. Your feedback will be valued and greatly appreciated.

Participation in this study is voluntary and no compensation will be provided. As a participant, you will be asked to provide your thoughts and/or opinions in a focus group setting, individual interview, or short survey. The focus group and interviews will be audio recorded and sent to an online transcription service (<https://www.rev.com>), for a transcribed document of the conversation. Focus group members will be asked to maintain confidentiality of other participants' identities and expressed communication. Information you disclose during the focus

group being released by other participants is a potential risk. If you wish to refrain from the focus group due to the possibility of your feedback being exposed, an individual interview with the same questions will be offered.

If you choose to participate in the study, your identity and input will be kept confidential. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity and place of employment. The school will be referred to as “Midwest Suburban School District” and all 14 elementary schools will be provided a letter of the alphabet in place of its name to ensure confidentiality. If you agree to participate in this research study, you will be required to sign an informed letter of consent beforehand. A copy of the consent form will be provided to all participants.

You may withdraw participation at any time, including during the focus group or interview. Furthermore, if after participation you decide you do not want your input included in the study, please contact the researcher immediately and your feedback will be excluded. If you have additional questions or concerns, you may contact the researcher, Cheryl Allen, at 816-262-8723 or by email: dr.allen2019@gmail.com. You may also contact the University of Missouri IRB at 573-882-9585.

Thank you for your consideration,

Cheryl Allen, University of Missouri Doctoral Candidate

Appendix C

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Researcher's Name(s): Cheryl Allen

Project Number: _____

Project Title: COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR ROLE

Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this case study is to develop an understanding of the perceived role of the elementary principal in the collaborative environments within elementary schools in a suburban public school district in Missouri. A "collaborative workplace environment" is generally defined as a school where teachers work together in the shared pursuit of improving professional practices that advance student learning.

This research is being conducted to understand the perceptions of elementary principals pertaining to collaboration within the framework of professional learning communities in elementary schools. Additional information and perceptions will be gathered from the director and teacher levels to obtain a complete picture of collected data on this topic. When you are invited to participate in research, you have the right to be informed about the study procedures so that you can decide whether you want to consent to participation. This form may contain words you do not know. Please ask the researcher to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

Procedures:

All elementary principals will be invited to participate in qualitative surveys. In addition, the district Director of Elementary Education will be invited to participate via individual interview and elementary teachers throughout the district will be identified to participate in focus groups through purposeful sampling. Times will be scheduled, at the convenience of participants, to conduct the individual interview and focus groups, lasting approximately one hour in length. The interview and focus groups will take place via a teleconference platform and surveys will take place via a confidential online survey service. The interview and focus group(s) will be audio taped and then transcribed by the researcher.

You have the right to know what you will be asked to do so that you can decide whether to be in the study. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to be part of the study if you do not want to. You may refuse to be in the study, and nothing will happen. If you do not want to continue to be in the study, you may stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

This research is funded by Cheryl Allen.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this research is to understand perceptions of elementary principals and their roles in implementing collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE IN THE STUDY?

Approximately 45 people will participate in this study through the University of Missouri.

WHAT AM I BEING ASKED TO DO?

You will be asked to participate in an individual interview, anonymous survey, or focus group. All information will be kept confidential by the researcher.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?

This study will take approximately 15 minutes to one hour to complete, depending on the format of your participation. You can stop participating at any time without penalty.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING IN THE STUDY?

Benefits of participating in this study may include allowing perceptions of collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community at the elementary school level to be known and possible recommendations for improvement, if deemed appropriate and necessary. Ultimately, this study aims to improve teacher practices and student learning.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF BEING IN THE STUDY?

There is a possible risk of colleagues using disclosed information during the focus group and breaking confidentiality, resulting in embarrassment or conflict. No other risks have been identified.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF BEING IN THE STUDY?

There is no cost to you.

WHAT OTHER OPTIONS ARE THERE?

You have the option of not participating in this study and will not be penalized for your decision.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Information produced by this study will be stored in the researcher's locked file and identified by a code number only. The code key connecting your name to specific information connected to you will be kept in a separate, secure location. Information contained in your records may not be

given to anyone unaffiliated with the study in a form that could identify you without your written consent, except required by law.

In addition, if audiotapes taken during the study can identify you, then you must give special written permission for their use. In that case, you will be given the opportunity to listen, as applicable, to the audiotapes before you give your permission for their use, if you so request.

WILL I BE COMPENSATED FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY?

You will receive no payment for taking part in the study.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A PARTICIPANT?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to participate in this study.

You will also be informed of any new information discovered during the course of this study that might influence your health, welfare, or willingness to be in this study.

A participant's participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the subject's consent if a participant becomes volatile and/or aggressive during the focus group or interview.

WHO DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

Please contact Cheryl Allen if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research.

WHOM DO I CALL IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research and/or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or continue to participate in this study, you may contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board (which is a group of people who review research studies in order to protect participants' rights) at (573) 882-9585 or umcresearchirb@missouri.edu.

You may ask more questions about the study at any time. For questions about the study or research-related injury, contact Cheryl Allen at (816) 262-8723.

A copy of this Informed Consent form will be given to you before you participate in the research.

SIGNATURES

I have read this consent form and my questions have been answered. My signature below means that I do want to be in the study. I know that I can remove myself from the study at any time without any problems.

Subject

Date

Participant Informed Consent Form

I, _____ (please print), agree to participate in qualitative case study conducted by Cheryl Allen, doctoral student in the University of Missouri's Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program. This study will benefit the Midwest Suburban School District's elementary schools and other professionals in the field of education by providing data related to collaboration and professional learning communities at the elementary school level. I understand the following guidelines:

1. Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants do not have to answer questions that make them feel uncomfortable. Participants may end the discussion and leave at any time. There will be no payment or incentive for participation in this study.
2. There are no known risks or benefits involved in participation of this study.
3. Interview and focus group discussions will be audio recorded. The audio recordings will be transcribed either by hand or through the utilization of Rev.com, an online transcription service. These transcribed documents will be used for data analysis in this research study. All discussions will be kept confidential, and no actual names will be identified in any report.
4. Survey data will be kept confidential. Names are not needed to participate in the survey.
5. Pseudonyms will be utilized for names of the school district, as well as individual schools, within all parts of this research study to protect confidentiality.
6. Questions pertaining to this study may be directed to Cheryl Allen via email (dr.allen2019@gmail.com) or phone (816-262-8723).

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix D

Participant Follow-Up Reminder Email

Dear Participant,

I am following up in reference to the email that I sent previously this week inviting you to participate in my research study. If you have additional questions regarding the study, please don't hesitate to contact me. If you would like to participate, please contact me via reply to this email or calling me at (816) 262-8723.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Allen

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Qualitative Research Purpose: *The purpose of this case study is to develop an understanding of the elementary principals' role in creating a collaborative environment through the framework of a professional learning community*

Date of Interview: _____ Time of Interview: _____

Years at present position and site: _____ Total Years in Education: _____

- Please describe your current role and how many years you have been in education.
- How are district policies, practices, and procedures congruent with the learning mission of the district?
- How is the learning mission the centerpiece of discussions as new initiatives are considered and decisions are made?
- What types of evidence can a principal provide to demonstrate a focus on learning has been embedded in the culture of the school?
 - Student learning?
 - Adult learning?
- What do you look for in a principal's leadership that a commitment to collaboration is present in the day-to-day life of a building?
- How are building principals supported from the district level to promote and communicate shared values and commitments in collaboration, as well as in achieving school-wide goals?

Appendix F

Survey Protocol

- How many years you have been in education/administration?
- How do you define a collaborative workplace environment?
 - What does collaboration look like in your building?
 - How do you describe an effective collaborative environment for teachers?
 - What training have you participated to help in building a collaborative environment for teachers?
 - What experience do you have in building a collaborative environment?
- How do you describe the essential elements of a collaborative environment for teachers?
- How do you create a collaborative environment for teachers?
 - Describe any obstacles or challenges that you have encountered while establishing or maintaining a collaborative workplace environment.
- What strategies have you used to sustain a collaborative workplace for teachers?
- What are your expectations when you begin/began to create a collaborative environment for teachers?
- In your opinion, what are the most important things an elementary principal should do to create a collaborative environment for teachers?
- Any other comments about your role in creating a collaborative environment for teachers?

Appendix G

Focus Group Protocol

- Please describe your current role and how many years you have been in education.
- What professional development have you participated in to develop staff collaboration through a professional learning community?
- Describe how leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff members.
- How does your building currently develop values and norms for collaborative processes that guide decisions about teaching and learning.
- Describe how your school utilizes collaboration to determine the effectiveness of instructional practices.
- Describe any opportunities that exist for staff members to observe peers and offer encouragement.
- Describe any opportunities that exist for coaching and mentoring in your building.
- Describe relationships that exist between staff and administration in your building.
- Describe relationships among staff members in your building.
- Describe relationships that exist between staff and students in your building.
- Describe how time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.
- Describe any challenges with space and layout to effectively collaborate with grade levels or departmental colleagues.
- Describe any challenges that you find in your building in helping staff members to successfully implement collaborative processes.

Source: Olivier, D. F., Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B. (2008). Assessing and analyzing schools as PLCs.

Appendix H

Executive Summary

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLES

Statement of the Problem

The problem within this study was a gap in research of the perception of elementary principals in their role of collaboration through the implementation of professional learning communities in the Midwest Suburban School District.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate elementary principal perceptions of their role in the process of collaboration through the framework of a professional learning community (PLCs) in the Midwest Suburban School District (MSSD).

This qualitative study aimed to fill the gap in existing literature. No previous research exists pertaining to collaboration and PLCs in MSSD.

Conceptual Framework

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) as defined by Hord (1997)

Key Variables

- Collaboration (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Edmondson, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Senge, 2012)
- Role of the Principal (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstorm, 2004; Rousmaniere, 2013)
- Implementing a PLC (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Hord, 2008).

Design of the Study

Qualitative Bounded Case Study- Bounded case study is a qualitative method that separates the case focus of research in terms of time and place, creating limits around the object/circumstances to be studied (Creswell, 2014).

Semi-Structured Interview- Conducted with Director of Elementary Education at MSSD (Emerson, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative Surveys- Sent to all Elementary Principals at the elementary schools at MSSD. Surveys are best used when perceptions of the stakeholders are desired (Fink, 2013).

Focus Groups- Conducted with teachers of the elementary schools of MSSD (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Research Question

What are elementary principals' perceptions of their role in implementing a professional learning community?

Research Sub-Questions

1. How do elementary principals define collaboration?
2. How do elementary principals describe their role in the implementation of a professional learning community?

Limitations

- There was little possibility of replicating this study, nor was there claim of transferability to other school districts of similar size or demographic nature.
- Researcher bias was accounted for, including background, culture, and experiences (Creswell, 2014).
- Small sample size may not completely or accurately reflect perceptions of all stakeholders within the MSSD elementary schools.

Delimitations

- This study included 2021-2022 district level director and elementary principals and teachers at MSSD.
- Open-ended questions with follow-up probes
- Survey was reviewed, revised, and approved by an expert panel to raise content validity (Fink, 2013).
- Transcription analysis; Open and axial coding (Emerson et al., 2011; Krueger & Casey; Merriam, 2009)

Significance of the Study

Outcomes of this research study may lead to informed decision-making in implementing collaboration through professional learning communities within elementary school settings of the Midwestern Suburban School District.

This research may prove an asset in increasing elementary principals' awareness of their fundamental role in the success or downfall of the implementation of collaboration through the framework of the professional learning community, and ultimately positively impact student learning.

Findings

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Times mentioned</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Facilitator	5	25%
Team Builder	9	45%
Strategic Planner	6	30%
<u>Additional Findings</u>	<u>Times mentioned</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Shared beliefs, values, vision	12	19%
Shared and supportive leadership	14	22%
Collective application	11	17%
Shared personal practice	13	21%
<u>Supportive conditions</u>	13	21%

Discussion

Implications for Policy – Collaboration within a PLC is critical for the purpose of all students learning with a higher rate of success.

Implications for Practice – Elementary principals play multiple roles in establishing collaborative practices within a PLC. Ongoing professional development, allowance of necessary resources, and development of PLC collaboration time specific for elementary principals is necessary to balance multiple roles.

Recommendations for Practice

- Provide regular training on collaboration based on Hord's framework of a professional learning community for all elementary building principals (1997; 2008).
- Maintain time for collaboration via PLCs through job-embedded professional development (JEPD). Building principals continue to assist in protecting this collaboration time.
- Create differentiated professional development plan for elementary principals regarding collaboration and the implementation of PLCs, based upon knowledge, level of experience, and ability to offer ongoing support/mentoring to colleagues.
- Create a structured PLC and collaboration time for elementary principals to collaborate and problem-solve collectively. Ensure that the PLC models the creation of a vision, mission, and norms.

Recommendations for Practice

- Provide clear description and expectations of the elementary principal within the implementation of a collaboration through a PLC.
- Support building principals in building a culture that supports collaboration.
- Provide consistent district messaging supporting collaboration via PLCs.
- Provide a visual of the five dimensions indicative of a successful PLC.
- Provide positive reinforcement resources for elementary principals to utilize to assist with gaining ownership for staff members within the process of PLC implementation.
- Conduct observations of/with building principals new to the collaborative PLC process and provide immediate feedback.
- Provide elementary principals opportunities to observe ideal collaborative PLC processes throughout the district.

Future Research

The following are recommended for future research studies pertaining to collaboration, PLCs, and the role of the elementary principal:

- Conduct further action research studies within the district, to include observations of collaborative PLC meetings within elementary buildings
- Utilize confidential surveys before interviews and focus groups to allow for more higher comfort levels in sharing responses
- Conduct research in district(s) of similar size and demographics that exhibit ideal conditions for collaboration within the framework of a professional learning community
- Research professional development and ongoing collaborative practices necessary for elementary principals

VITA

The author of this qualitative study, Cheryl Allen, began her educational career at Missouri Western State University in St. Joseph, Missouri. After earning a bachelor's degree in Social Work with minors in psychology and sociology, she went on to earn a master's degree in Social Work with an emphasis in clinical mental health from the University of Kansas. Cheryl served as a licensed clinical social worker for four years in an outpatient community mental health center in the northwest Missouri region, providing cognitive behavioral therapy, solution-focused therapy, and family therapy for children, adolescents, adults, and families. In addition, she provided clinical supervision for a team of school-based community support workers.

Cheryl transitioned into the field of special education, while simultaneously completing an alternative certification program in Special Education through Northwest Missouri State University, continuing with the completion of a master's degree in Special Education. Cheryl has served in the capacity of Special Education teacher in multiple settings in a northwest Missouri suburban school district. She has taught special education in multiple capacities, including separate public day school, cross-categorical, and resource room settings in a variety of schools throughout the district. Cheryl also served in the capacity of Process Consultant and provided special education process and legal guidance for a wide range of schools in both population and composition within the northwest Missouri suburban school district, while also serving as the liaison/Local Education Agency (LEA) representative for all private and parochial schools within the district attendance boundaries.

Cheryl is currently career certified in Cross-Categorical K-12 Special Education and is near completion of an Educational Specialist Degree in Elementary Principalship from Northwest Missouri State University. Cheryl is completing a Doctorate in Educational

Leadership & Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri and serves as a special education Process Coordinator and LEA Representative in a Kansas City, Missouri metropolitan school district.