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Leaders All: Teacher-Led Participatory Action Research At The Middle School Level

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LEADERS ALL: TEACHER-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AT THE
MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

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MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

Abstract

Classroom teachers who wish to have voice in decisions that influence their daily practice often confront barriers, causing some to leave the classroom altogether to become school administrators. There is little participatory action research conducted by classroom-based educators on teachers' perceptions of transcending the organizational, political, and cultural barriers to their own leadership. The dearth of such studies exemplifies an acute example of the marginalization experienced by many classroom teachers.

By examining the perceptions of teachers working in a distributed leadership practice, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how teachers become agents of transformation without leaving their positions in the classroom. The study also assesses the impact of participating in a distributed leadership model on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and the democratization of a school community. Three research questions framed the study: how do teachers view themselves as change agents; to what extent does the professional learning community (PLC) model of distributed leadership provide them with agency and voice; and how do teachers experience this process of shared leadership? The study utilized grounded theory qualitative design to generate a theory "grounded" in participant language. Interviews, surveys, PLC artifacts, researcher analytical memoranda, and existing school documents formed the data corpus. Findings suggest that a model of distributed leadership can provide a mechanism for classroom teachers to build individual and collective

agency and voice without leaving their positions as classroom teachers for positions in administration. A process of disruptive creation was observed as teachers moved from navigating demands and obstacles in relative isolation to more fully participating in school decision-making by disrupting the status quo in the workplace. Disruptive creation is an action process that transforms the status quo when community members successfully confront obstacles to agency and voice. This process created a sense of inclusion, which led to increased feelings of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and increased democratization of the workplace.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Why do so many organizations remain complacent in the face of opportunities to reform, grow, and evolve to meet new demands? Perhaps this complacency is due in part to a lack of organized will. John Kotter (2012) suggested that “in an organization of 100 employees, at least two dozen must go far beyond the normal call of duty to produce a significant change” (p. 37). During my own journey, I have encountered complacency in the workplace and it has directly informed my choice of research study. When we began this program, my initial area of inquiry was the intersection of learning, memory, and emerging technologies. By looking at how 21st-century digital technologies are being used in middle school classrooms, I sought to understand how these technologies impact cognitive processes and retention.

During nearly a year of inquiry and observation in my school setting, however, I came to realize that many reform initiatives taking place in the school—technology being just one—were not having the intended positive impact on daily classroom practice. A lack of mechanisms for teacher input in the development of these changes impeded their implementation. The publication of the site’s 2012-2015 strategic plan further confirmed the need to include more voices in decision-making processes by mandating the engagement of teachers to participate in the development of priorities and objectives for meeting school goals. The time to introduce new voices to curricular and instructional discussions arrived with the release of the strategic plan in 2012. My research explored how teachers perceived and experienced these new opportunities and mechanisms to contribute to school reforms and change initiatives.

Problem Statement, Purpose and Significance of Study

Roland Barth wrote that teachers and principals formed two classes of citizens separated by space and access to power (as cited in Scherer, 2013, p. 7). Recognizing the resultant marginalization of one group but taking no action to remove its cause, further alienates people from each other (Green, 1993, p. 17). Historically, classroom teachers who wish to confront barriers to their participation in the decision-making processes had one option: leave the classroom altogether to become school administrators. Models for improving teacher agency in schools, such as professional learning communities, have been deployed for many years. They have met with only partial success, however, due in large part to two factors: failure to adequately plan for sustaining them and lack of school/district support of the initiative (Graham, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Watson, 2005).

When planned well and fully supported, however, these structures for teacher participation can contribute to democratizing schools. Indeed, change is more effective and enduring when those tasked with its implementation are invited to participate in the decision-making process (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007); therefore, establishing and sustaining methods for teachers to participate is a pragmatic decision. A great deal has yet to be learned about how classroom teachers experience and perceive shared leadership opportunities in their schools and whether the professional learning community (PLC) model can empower teachers with agency in the important decisions that impact their daily practice.

My inquiry looked specifically at distributed leadership from the practicing classroom teacher's point-of-view. By examining teacher responses to their involvement in a distributed leadership practice, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how teachers work to become agents of transformation without leaving their positions as classroom teachers. This

participatory action study fostered distributed leadership in the form of teacher-directed professional learning communities (PLCs) to support meaningful contributions to school reform initiatives. This model of distributed leadership was studied as a potential mechanism for teachers to share knowledge, expertise, and concerns, while they collaboratively developed pedagogically-sound solutions for issues impacting their daily work with students. By studying teachers' perceptions of and responses to their experiences in the PLC, this study contributes to the literature on shared leadership in schools and its impact on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and the democratization of school communities.

Campbell (2014), building on the work of Zeichner and Noffke (2001), found practitioner-researchers developed more varied knowledge than their nonresearcher colleagues of teaching and curricula, a deeper exploration of sense of self, richer awareness of student perspectives and needs, a clarified personal theory of teaching, and expanded reflective processes of inquiry and action. That study, thus, revealed overwhelmingly positive impacts on practice and agency for the teacher-researcher. What of classroom teachers who are not themselves researchers, but desirous of contributing to the evolution of their schools? While there is significant literature examining classroom practice, school reform, and professional learning structures (Hulpia, Devos, & Rossel, 2009; Somech, 2010), there has been little participatory action research conducted by practicing classroom educators on teachers' perceptions of and experiences working toward transcending the organizational, political, and cultural barriers to their own leadership. The dearth of such studies conducted by practicing teachers is an acute example of the marginalization experienced by many classroom teachers. Lack of participatory action research led by teachers is an area in need of further study.

Research Questions

Guiding this research was the overarching question: *How can teachers contribute to school reform and change initiatives without leaving the classroom to join the ranks of administration?* Related research questions included:

- How do teachers view themselves as agents of school transformation?
- To what extent does the professional learning community (PLC) model provide teachers with agency and voice in decisions impacting their daily practice?
- How do classroom teachers experience the process of distributed (shared) leadership?

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided primarily by theories of distributed and transformative leadership. For purposes of this study, distributed leadership refers to the sharing of some roles and functions based on situational need as opposed to the hierarchical structures (principal/headmaster) of an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Through shared stewardship and participatory decision-making, teachers may contribute directly and powerfully to organizational transformation (Berry, Byrd, & Weider, 2013). The cooperative learning and action that is the hallmark of the PLC model used in this study provides a mechanism for teacher agency and a lens through which to study their perceptions about the experience.

The larger goal of democratizing the school community reflects the underpinning of this research study, which is transformative leadership theory. Examination of the role of teachers in the school setting through the lens of justice and equality allows a critique of distributed leadership practices. The action research methodology employed in this study enacts transformative leadership by challenging inequity and injustice in the workplace (Shields, 2010).

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope

Limitations included the staff size of fewer than 20 participants. The participant population, practicing classroom teachers, was reflective of the larger demographic of teachers and, therefore, findings may have application beyond this school setting. The setting, an independent school, also suggests limitations to extrapolating findings from this study and applying them to public middle schools. In addition, the study is limited to the perceptions of teachers as they experienced shared leadership through the PLC.

As a participant researcher and colleague of other participants in the proposed study, I worked to remain vigilant for bias on my part. Operating within the dual roles of colleague and researcher required transparency, as well as employing frequent participant fact-checking and transcript review to maintain the integrity of the study and the validity of results.

Summary

An organization that is static can create a state of complacency, its membership working to maintain the status quo. In such situations, inequity and disempowerment may be unintended consequences of doing business as it has always been done. The 2012 strategic plan formulated by this school added impetus to the goodwill of many to interrupt the status quo by transforming leadership practices at the middle school level. To some degree, the PLC model of teacher-led decision making represents a flattening of vertical lines of power in favor of horizontal distribution, which may further develop a culture of trust and reciprocal accountability, which in turn can allow rich expertise to take hold and flourish (Angelle, 2010; Galbraith, as cited in Gallos, 2006). To meet its mission and carry out its vision, the school leadership recognized the value of keeping excellent teachers working with students daily. To retain such teachers, who also wished more voice and agency in school decision-making, the leadership team further

recognized there was progress to be made in this area. This study contributes to an understanding of how teachers responded to and perceived opportunities to remain in the classroom while also contributing to school reforms and change initiatives. It adds to our understanding of teachers as agents of school transformation and contributes to the literature on the effectiveness of professional learning communities at the middle school level.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Support for this action research is built upon an examination of the literature in five areas: Teacher Identity as Agents of Change, Transformative Leadership Theory, Distributed Leadership Practice (in school settings), Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and School Reform Initiatives (utilizing participatory action research (PAR)). I considered the literature on transformative leadership to be the theoretical framework of the study; it informed my motivation and rationale while providing essential grounding for the methodology to be employed. The remaining four themes helped to develop a more nuanced understanding of the historical, pragmatic, and epistemological underpinnings of teacher involvement in school reform efforts.

Teacher Identity as Agents of Change

Bennis and Nanus (2007) posited four strategies employed by strong leaders: attention through vision, meaning through communication, trust through positioning, and the deployment of self through positive self-regard by putting one's all into the effort. These strategies are not tied to specific titles or roles within an organization; rather, those exhibiting these strategic behaviors in their work relationships emerge as local leaders, regardless of official position. Teacher leaders exemplify these purpose-driven, skillful facilitators, evidence-based decision makers, ongoing learners, and change agents (Teach Plus, 2012). The teacher-leader possesses agency in his or her school, agency that is developed through action and relationships and distributed through social interactions (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012). Their leadership is

not official; rather, it is contextualized in the daily life of a school through specific actions and behaviors.

Teachers have long been aware of two strands of leadership within their schools: official and informal. The explicit, formal leadership roles presented in a chart of hierarchical authority provide one avenue of school leadership. However, schools also rely upon informal networks and processes that operate and travel throughout the daily life of a school. A teacher's identity is partly shaped by such informal modes of leadership; for example, by providing leadership in responding to student needs by organizing a needed peer tutoring program, coordinating a new student effort to launch a literary magazine, or providing mentoring and guidance to a new or struggling colleague. Teacher leaders are well-positioned and have the experience necessary to help schools work to meet the many priorities they face. As front line members of the school community, they represent a large contingent capable of building "the capacity and collective will to move forward the equity agenda" (Weidrick, 2011, p. 19). Classroom teachers are also positioned to step up into more formalized leadership roles while maintaining a reduced classroom teaching load through hybrid teaching/leading positions. Bolman and Deal (2008) further suggested that we need "people in the right roles and relationships" (p. 46) to effectively share and invite others to help a vision of collaborative leadership take hold. Yet, the historical factory model of education has hindered the realization of teacher leadership by positing that "some staff are supposed to think, plan, and coordinate work while others are supposed to do it" (Darling-Hammond, as cited in Berry et al., 2013, p. 89). Teachers have been trained and informed by this model of education through which they entered the profession.

Today's educators, however, are increasingly demanding more involvement in the myriad processes of decision-making in their schools (Berry et al., 2013). The definition of "teacher

voice” is itself changing, from token input in the decisions of others to legitimate and impactful contributions to the life of a school. In her discussion of new modes of teacher leadership, Kim Farris-Berg (2014) highlighted this shift in the dimensions of teacher voice, noting that teachers do not embrace “having input in or being the face of someone else’s ultimate decision” (p. 32) nor see such input as equating to true voice or agency in their schools.

At the start of my study, a participant described teachers as “promoters” of another’s agenda and not “agents of change” themselves. Over the course of the study, she experienced agency and collective empowerment when invited to make authentic contributions to the school community, as prior research as shown in studies conducted by Somech (2010) and Hipp and Huffman (2010). Agency hinges also on teachers’ perceptions of their own abilities and ideas about their own self-efficacy; this locus of control can be supported or hindered by an organization’s structure and openness to change (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004).

The strides toward social justice and equality made over the past 50 years have produced a population of American teachers who seek more equity and democracy in their own workplaces. Additionally, developments in corporate management, with more businesses distributing authority to front-line employees and utilizing team approaches to problem solving, have drifted into conversations regarding how teachers may more fully participate in the evolution of their own organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2008, pp. 132-133).

Disrupting the Status Quo: Transformative Leadership and Change from Within

Transformative learning “involves the acquisition (or manipulation) of knowledge that disrupts prior learning and stimulates the reflective reshaping of deeply ingrained knowledge and belief structures” (Davis, 2006, para. 3). Transformative leadership requires a similar disruption and reformulating of beliefs, beginning with recognition of the inequalities and obstacles faced

by workers within organizations. Underpinning such transformative leadership is the tenet that knowledge is reflective of relationships of power situated within society (Creswell, 2013). This relationship dynamic, informed by a skewed power structure amongst teachers, administrators, school boards, and other stakeholders frequently results in the marginalization of teachers within the dialogues that take place across the country as schools navigate mandates and pressures to change. Such inequities work to legitimize some knowledge frameworks while delegitimizing others. This causes a disparity in access to power and agency, contributing to teacher attrition and job dissatisfaction (Berry et al., 2013).

Examples of this inequity abound in the day-to-day life of our nation's schools, with a recent example from Georgia highlighting the problem. In January, 2015, Georgia's governor, Nathan Deal (2015), established a new Education Reform Commission to "study the state's education system, including its funding formula, and provide recommendations intended to improve the system, increase access to early learning programs, recruit and retain high-quality instructors and expand school options for Georgia's families" (www.georgia.gov), yet not one practicing classroom teacher was selected to serve on the commission. Thousands of Georgia educators actively petitioned to be included in this reform initiative; however, the outcome of their efforts remains unresolved at this writing. This example provides a context from which to glimpse the struggle of classroom educators whose professional practices are largely determined by decisions made without their input.

In their 2005 article on action research within an immigrant community, Woods, O'Neill, and Webster suggested that we should endeavor to remove the barriers that prevent people from participating in decision-making processes in order to increase their access to power over their own work, home, and community lives (p. 76). This lens of associational justice may also be

applied to classroom educators, who often feel disenfranchised from the decision-making processes that most affect their daily practice (Power & Gewirtz, as cited in Woods et al., 2011, p. 76). With barriers to participation in place, teachers may feel compelled to leave the classroom altogether in order to contribute to change efforts as a school or district administrator. For example, the teacher who feels disconnected from the choices made within a school regarding texts and materials to be used in teaching critical reading may feel he or she has only one route to participating in those broad curricular decisions—leave teaching to become an administrator. Transformative leadership demands that we work to remedy this alienation and lack of agency by creating and anchoring sustainable methods for empowering classroom teachers to contribute to change initiatives. Students deserve great teachers and teachers overwhelmingly desire more input and agency in the workplace (Berry et al., 2013; Sacks, 2013). As teaching staff generally represents over half of all employees in most schools, bracketing out their voices creates partially-informed decisions when schools work to enact their visions and missions (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

A 2012 study conducted for MetLife Insurance by Markow, Macia, and Lee yielded evidence of a precipitous slide in teacher job satisfaction while also offering a glimpse into the potential for turning around this dissatisfaction. In just under 5 years, teacher job satisfaction dipped 23 percentage points, from 62 percent in 2008 to 39 percent in 2012, the lowest point in 25 years (Markow et al., 2012, p. 5). Teachers surveyed for this study indicated feeling overwhelmed by barriers, deep budget cuts, and difficulties implementing Common Core State Standards, and found few opportunities for collaboration with colleagues. Interestingly, the process by which The Common Core State Standards were developed illustrates the absence of teacher voice in national conversations and policy creation. The team of 50 that devised The

Common Core included only one classroom teacher. This token input by practicing classroom teachers in “what is perhaps the most far-reaching experiment in American educational history” (Sacks, 2013, p. 18) suggests a failure to view education professionals as valuable members in the development of national education policy, a failure which this study may help remedy.

Despite such obstacles to their participation, teachers continue to strive for agency without leaving their classrooms altogether for administrative positions. Just 31 percent indicated they would consider leaving the classroom to become school principals; while 51 percent favored teaching part-time while performing other school or district roles (Markow et al., 2012, p. 5). Thus, the majority of teachers who wished to participate more fully in decision-making processes in their schools did not wish to leave the classroom altogether for administrative positions. Rather, they desired opportunities to become involved in the decision-making and change initiatives that impact their work in the classrooms and with students. The term “teacher-leader” aptly describes those practitioners who crave a voice beyond their classrooms. Caudle, Moran, and Hobbs (2014) reported that the evolution of the teacher-leader is tied to strong support from school leadership for their individual and collective growth.

Research further has supported the inclusion of teacher voices as a force for increasing organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The 2012 MetLife study revealed also that teacher job satisfaction declined in hand with reduced professional development opportunities, from a 21 percent satisfaction rate in 2008 to a low of 14 percent in 2012; during the same period common collaboration time was cut from 29 percent to 16 percent (Markow et al., 2012, p. 5). Time to collaborate and avenues for effective professional development can work to build teacher agency and voice in the school community. In fact, when teachers are directly involved in decision-making regarding professional development programs in schools, their overall job

satisfaction improves, along with feelings of increased competence (Taylor, Yates, Meyer, & Kinsela, 2011). Directly involving teachers in the creation of professional development programming allows them “to explore and develop knowledge bases to which they had previously had limited exposure . . . [resulting in] new understandings regarding pedagogy, evidence-based assessment practices, and leadership and change management” (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 89). Such growth and development in practice and knowledge can result in far-reaching positive outcomes for the students with whom that teacher works on a daily basis while also building teachers’ sense of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and overall commitment to the school (Berry et al., 2013; Caudle et al., 2014).

Schools that embrace a more democratized system of decision-making by embedding within their structure mechanisms for professional development, teacher contribution, consultation, and genuine involvement in reform suggest an alternative to disengagement and dissatisfaction (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Somech 2010). With 40-50 percent of teachers quitting the profession within 5 years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014), actions to improve workplace conditions, including access to power and increased equity, are crucially important. The transformative, distributed leadership approach that is embraced in organizations with a more empowered workforce removes the obstacles to worker input by building strong team-based structures that enable staff members to carry out vision and mission. Such an approach requires a culture of leadership that encourages teacher contributions, for without it “the best practices of expert teachers may never reach beyond their individual classrooms” and teachers will continue to feel they must leave the classroom for the administrative office to enact school reform efforts (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2011, p. 6). Pragmatically, schools should be invested in creating leaders amongst their faculty, for research suggests that staffing will become an even

more challenging issue for schools due to a growing percentage of inexperienced teachers in classrooms as more teachers retire. There is now an annual turnover rate of 17 percent and many effective teachers leaving in large numbers within their first 5 years in the profession (Scherer, 2013, p. 7).

Transformative leaders recognize the need for all voices to be heard, all stakeholders represented, and all workers consulted. Indeed, transformative leaders guide their constituents toward goals of democracy in the workplace. Transformative leadership can occur within classrooms as well as from building administrators and district leaders. Teachers working to embody school vision through leading small changes via their daily practice and collaboration with other educators are demonstrating transformative leadership. This model of leadership provides theoretical guidance for teacher practitioners who wish to explore authentic means of participation in school change without leaving the ranks of classroom educators.

The transformative approach to leadership was a requisite condition for the participatory action research conducted in this study, for one must work from within the school structure, and specifically the classroom, while also working as activist for change. The National Inventory of Schools with Collective Teacher Autonomy (Nazareno, 2014) provides data that supports the value of teachers working as agents of transformation by enacting collective autonomy within their schools. Classroom teachers in such school settings practice nine actions that transform school culture: accepting ownership, innovating, sharing purpose, collaborating, leading effectively, functioning as learners, avoiding insularity, engaging and motivating each other and students, and assessing teacher and student performance (Farris-Berg, 2014, pp. 34-35). As a practicing middle school teacher, I was positioned to aid in the transformation from teacher isolation to teacher leadership. Tenets of transformative leadership that informed my own

practice included balancing critique and promise, effecting deep and equitable change, and creating new knowledge frameworks (Shields, 2010). The design of this study and its salient goals speak directly to these tenets.

Conceptual Framework: Distributed Leadership and Transformation

The literature reveals a dearth of research on teacher career paths that do not remove them from the classroom. This may be due in part to the fact that there are, in fact, few distinct career paths for classroom educators who wish to remain in the classroom teaching while also helping to lead school reform (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Teachers who wish to advance professionally must generally leave classroom teaching to do so. This study investigated the scope of possibilities for teachers to remain in their classrooms while also taking part in aspects of school reform and change initiatives. (See Appendix A for conceptual framework.)

Distributed leadership can empower workers by creating avenues for collaboration on high-performing teams (Spillane, 2006). Nearly 25 years ago, the Carnegie Corporation released *Turning Points*, which outlined a structure and provided a compelling rationale for sharing leadership between teachers and administrators to improve student learning outcomes (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Yet, these many years later, teachers in the United States still do not typically have the structural or administrative supports necessary, such as collaborative, professional development time, for shared leadership to take hold (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009, p. 6).

Where such distribution of leadership has been deployed, the impacts have been overwhelmingly positive on teacher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and student outcomes (Barrett, 2013; Hulpia, 2009; Hulpia & Devos, 2010). A number of replication studies done within U.S. schools have confirmed that the most effective middle school principals

practice shared/participatory leadership (Keefe, Valentine, Clark, & Irvin, 1994; Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2002, 2004). The term “most effective” refers largely to student outcomes (Keefe et al., 1994; Valentine et al., 2002, 2004), which in turn has been tied to teacher job satisfaction (Tek, 2014). In a large-scale study of over 17,000 teachers across 503 schools, Tek found that “when teachers perceived their school leadership more positively, they were more satisfied with their job . . . and more satisfied teachers had students who performed better on standardized tests” (p. 90). Additionally, principals identified as “highly effective” by the Middle Level Leadership Questionnaire (MLLQ) proposed by Brown and Anfara (2002) and replicated for validation by Bickmore (2011, pp. 1-5), exhibited practices of shared leadership with teachers, leading the transformation of their schools.

These studies suggest that middle school leaders are more likely than their peers in elementary and secondary schools to practice shared leadership. The middle school setting for this study is indicative of a supportive mindset for shared leadership; its official leadership was fully committed to creating and maintaining mechanisms for more teacher engagement and agency in improvement initiatives. Learning more about the apparent readiness for middle school principals to foster distributed leadership may help develop similar mindsets and behaviors at the elementary and secondary levels, but that is an area of inquiry beyond the scope of this study.

Distributed leadership at the middle school level can increase efficacy, feelings of trust, job satisfaction, and teacher commitment to schools (Angelle, 2010). Such improvements in overall teacher morale and dedication are worth noting when one considers that the instructional staff attrition rate is quite high, with independent schools facing an annual attrition rate ranging from 15.9 percent to 20 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This figure is particularly striking in consideration of the setting for this study, which is the researcher’s independent

school. The 2007 National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) Survey of Teacher Satisfaction indicated that the relationships teachers have with school leaders heavily influenced their job satisfaction. Of nine rating areas, independent school teachers showed the least satisfaction with the degree of communication and voice teachers have with school leaders (p. 3). NAIS issued the specific recommendation that school leaders “open up channels of communication between administrators and faculty and actively seek faculty input on school-wide issues and decisions” (p. 3). This site’s strategic plan echoes this advice, instructing institution leadership to engage “a range of constituencies, including teachers, to develop shared priorities and strategic objectives” for meeting the goals of its three year plan (p. 3). Distributed leadership, in the form of professional learning communities (PLCs), can help school staff to meet this mandate.

Distributed leadership opportunities, driven by shared vision and mission, allowed workers, in this study—teachers, a meaningful way to contribute to collaborative efforts that move them away from classroom isolation and into highly effective teams of professionals with a common purpose (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kotter, 2007). Teacher leaders who continue teaching while spearheading change initiatives are “organizational boundary spanners” (Berry et al., 2013, p.38) and thus, uniquely positioned to bring a breadth of teaching skills and pedagogical knowledge to bear on crucial decisions that affect a school’s course through change.

It is important, however, to recognize that forces driving for change often face opposition by restraining forces—those wishing to maintain the status quo. In a critique of the distributed leadership method used in schools, Wright (2008) examined the pitfalls not explored by Spillane (2006) and others who have ardently advocated for this method of shared power. Wright’s critique examined the literature on distributed leadership and suggested that it could be limited

by the structure of schools: power relationships steeped in an historical education model that are maintained by privilege, silence, and marginalization.

It was therefore crucial to assess the ratio of driving forces to restraining forces prior to beginning this study (Lewin, 1943). The majority of stakeholders at this site and within the larger community of this school are overwhelmingly in support of encouraging teachers to become involved in driving change. Some members of the school community may be hesitant to embrace change, as is the case in any organization, for they fear experiencing the uncertainty of chaos that accompanies a disruption of past habits and ways of seeing and doing (Kotter, 2012). These “unseen but real forces . . . influence people’s behavior” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 15) and one should not be reticent to ignore them. Castelow’s (2014) study of teachers’ attitudes and perceptions as they experienced curricular reform confirmed the presence of resistance and contradiction by teachers as they moved through the reform process. A significant change from the status quo, with new voices contributing to decision-making processes that heretofore did not include input from others, may create “a state of non-equilibrium” a sense of being “off balance” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 78). Yet, this disequilibrium is precisely the condition necessary for growth to take place. Public and ongoing support for the PLC by administration did purport to demonstrate full support for the process; however, logistical issues that impeded some aspects of the work of the PLC leave the question of the effectiveness of distributed leadership in need of further consideration.

Kotter (2012) explained that honoring the past, celebrating small successes, and demonstrating clear appreciation for the value brought to the change effort by all community members are key components to solidifying, or anchoring, this type of change initiative. Transparency and openness during transformative processes can ameliorate some feelings of

anxiety about change, and help address the fearfulness that can accompany times of great change and was observed in this study.

A dual-frame approach (political and human resource) to transforming teacher involvement at this site was used in recognition of the complexity and diversity of institutions (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The framework for this study included teachers and administrators working together from the earliest discussions of the PLC through implementation and evaluation of action items set by the teacher-led team. This participatory action study sought to engender a strong sense of community and shared sense of purpose by establishing self-directed teams as permanent structures of distributed leadership within the organization. Research suggested that early and continued engagement is by far a “stronger and more constant predictor of teacher buy-in to a school reform program” than mandates alone can ever be (Turnbull, 2002, p. 35).

Professional Development Using Learning Communities

A model for distributing leadership in schools is the Professional Learning Community (PLC), which has a long evolution beginning in the 1960s (DuFour, 2004; Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz, & Louis 2009). Such teams work in schools to partner with administration and other community members to work in a continuous cycle of research, action, and reflection to identify and address curricular and professional development needs through the lens of classroom teacher. Their work is pedagogical and pragmatic in nature, calling upon many perspectives and conducted by thoughtful deliberation followed by action. Indeed, the PLC model is at once a form of shared leadership and also ongoing team-designed form of professional development. As organizational insiders, teacher-leaders take ownership of their work as they promote collaborative learning, risk-taking, and experimentation via the professional learning

communities (Caudle et al., 2014, p.46). Such professional development is highly effective, for it connects content with context (Niska, 2013).

Professional learning communities consist of teachers with content, pedagogical, and developmental expertise, successfully producing interventions and strategies for improving student outcomes. PLCs utilize essential question methodology to improve their schools by addressing a particular curricular, instructional, or pedagogical issue (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008). This model of teacher leadership is framed by three assumptions: the purpose of schools is to ensure high-level learning, teachers cannot achieve collective success in isolation, and verification of PLC effectiveness is found in student outcomes (DuFour, 2004).

While the PLC model has become popular within many schools in the United States, it is more significantly embedded in Asian and European countries, where such teacher-led teaming is institutionalized. Instructional time in those countries makes up “less than half of a teacher’s working time” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012, p. 15) with the balance of a teacher’s work week (15-20 hours) devoted to other teaching-related tasks, including working in colleague groups (PLCs) on curricular and grade level matters. Such allocation of time for teachers to collaborate and contribute in various decision-making roles is not commonly the case in American schools, despite clear evidence that collaborative time for middle school teachers can improve student outcomes, increase academic optimism, build a sense of collective efficacy, and raise job satisfaction (Anfara, Mertens, Caskey, & Flowers, 2012; Best, 2014).

Several studies have affirmed the positive outcomes and improved morale of self-directed teams over more traditional models of top-down control (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 113). The shared leadership and valued contributions of teachers to whole school initiatives are evident by the practices of scheduled, embedded meeting and collaboration time for these learning

communities in a number of other countries. By studying teacher responses to participation in a model of collective contribution, this research contributes to our understanding of how such models might work to embed shared leadership within independent middle schools in the United States.

The organization and processes of PLCs make them an ideal forum for shared leadership in school communities but great attention must be given to creating supporting structures that will allow them to thrive (Maloney & Konza, 2011). Careful planning and authentic support by building leadership are vital to achieving positive outcomes, as outlined above. Professional learning communities can indeed serve an emancipatory function; yet, when team processes are not team-directed but mandated by others, the PLC can actually serve a disciplinary role (Watson, 2005). A conformist mindset, groupthink, can result when team members do not feel they are truly participating in a shared leadership activity. Maloney and Konza (2011) found that some teachers involved in a PLC did not speak up when their own opinions differed with the dominant view. Indeed, colleague relationships, personality traits, personal agenda and motivations can restrain the emancipatory promise of a PLC.

It was, therefore, crucial to consider the inter-personal dynamics of team members and structure the PLC to establish a judgment-free zone in which all participants feel equally comfortable sharing opinions and views. Integral to building the capacity and good-will that marks an effective PLC is establishing parameters for its function early on; rotating leadership roles, working by agenda, providing opportunity for all voices to share, and reflecting on activities after cycles of action all contribute to solidifying the PLC as an integral structure within the life of a school. When PLCs or similar models of shared leadership are abandoned prematurely, it is generally due to poor planning at the outset, poor communication of the vision

and purpose for the team, funnel vision (groupthink), or poor logistical support (Maloney & Konza, 2011).

Two studies conducted in 2010 (Angelle, 2010; Cook, 2010) provide examples of the effective uses of this model of distributed leadership at the middle school level. In each case, teachers met several times per week in interdisciplinary teams and cross-divisional professional learning communities in order to work on curriculum alignment, develop common assessments, and analyze student assessment outcomes. Teachers in these schools were free to devise methods and measures for their work in furthering a shared vision of school improvement and student outcomes. Building administrators shared some of their authority for decision-making in order to invest these teacher-led groups with the common meeting time and the support necessary to move a variety of initiatives forward (Cook, 2010). These two examples reinforce the five components essential to building a successful PLC as outlined by Hord and Sommers (2008): PLC members must

- Share beliefs, visions, and values about their work,
- Enjoy shared leadership,
- Engage in collective learning and applied action,
- Maintain conditions that support their work,
- Share personal practice

This study sought to formalize a professional learning community by scheduling requisite time to ensure members are able to adequately communicate and take action on a shared vision to meet the desired outcomes of the site's strategic plan with regard to teacher inclusion in decision-making. Integral to the success of this team is membership that includes various points of view, reputable individuals, and key players—those known for getting things done (Kotter,

2012, pp. 59-60). The teacher-led, inquiry-based approach, which is the essence of professional learning communities, provides teachers with a structured space and time to further their own professional development as educators working toward overall school performance (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012, p. 3). The site's strategic plan mandated inclusion of teacher voices with the aim of improving school outcomes. The PLC model of distributed leadership helps to meet this mandate.

Meeting the mandate of the aforementioned strategic plan to engage teachers by using this teaming model of collaboration helped empower teachers as agents of change, ameliorating feelings of uncertainty. Indeed, uncertainty amongst workers is a chief cause of anxiety, insecurity, decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Engaging teachers in teams that are structured to be both learning and action-taking networks can remove ambiguity while providing access to power structures within the school (DuFour, 2004). It was therefore incumbent upon school leadership to provide the structures and supports necessary for the PLC to function (Graham, 2007, pp. 11-13). Critical to this study was the early support and detailed planning for a PLC structure that was embedded within the school day, open to all middle school teachers, and fully endorsed by school leadership. PLCs that fail to thrive are overwhelmingly under-supported and poorly articulated to stakeholders (Vescio, Ross, & Adams 2008). The following section outlines critical issues of logistics that were vital to introducing a PLC structure to the school site selected for this study.

Logistics of the PLC Model in Schools

Edgar Schein (2006) suggested that we consider process over product when we wish to improve our organizations. Boundary and interpersonal management processes impact school operations and can support or hinder implementation of any initiative. Creating appropriate

processes for teachers to work together with other members of the school community was found to be vital for success. Scheduling is a crucial component of designing and measuring the effectiveness of such processes. With collaborative time reduced significantly in many schools since 2008 due to budgetary cuts, teachers have little opportunity to work in collaborative groups, such as PLCs (Markow et al., 2012, p. 4). Yet, common planning time for teams of teachers to meet is “essential to school success” in performance, instruction, and faculty morale (Cook, 2010, p. 6). With common meeting times in place for PLC meetings, this method of collaboration was found to be even more effective at producing desired school reform and student learning outcomes than common planning time alone (Mis, 2008).

The school site for the current study implemented two common periods during each 8-day rotation during the school year 2014-2015, which facilitated the meeting and activities of this PLC. The PLC secured time during these common working periods and a designated extension period on Monday afternoons for its meetings. The planning during summer months prior to initiating this PLC model involved meetings with key administrators at the site to gain approvals, scheduling accommodations for the PLC to meet, and building consensus to provide sustaining supports to enable this PLC to succeed. School leadership also provided time during back-to-school meetings in late August for this researcher to present the proposed study to potential participants in advance of formal invitation letters. This preparatory work in terms of logistics for the PLC was vital to its long-term success, confirming what a number of studies have shown that strong organizational support and logistical planning is necessary for a PLC to take hold within an organization (Bloom & Vitcov, 2010; Schechter, 2010; Slavit, Kennedy, Nelson, & Deuel, 2011).

The structure of professional collaboration that is the hallmark of the PLC taps teacher knowledge and expertise, an important factor in student achievement (Berry et al., 2013; Darling-Hammond & Ball, 1997). This highly structured and frequent collaboration of teachers maximizes the potential of common planning time. A participative action research approach to studying this issue may help other schools identify ways they can provide common planning time and other supports for PLCs in order to provide increased agency to teachers whilst improving instruction, student performance, and faculty morale (Cook & Faulkner, 2010; Styron & Nyman, 2008; Tonso, Jung, & Columbo, 2006). The evidence suggests that such embedded systems foster teacher input, leadership, and training dramatically (Joyce & Showers, 2002), thus increasing organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Fullan, 2010). This study drew upon earlier research by measuring teachers' responses to and perceptions over the course of their participation in the middle school PLC.

This model of teacher leadership is contingent upon the enculturation of such teams in the operation of the school community. The true value of PLCs emerges when they are sustained over the long term. The PLC features groups of teachers who are committed to this long view, cognizant that most change occurs in small steps over time. Therefore, it was incumbent upon building leadership to promote and maintain this model of shared leadership consistently as an integral part of the life of a school. Even extremely successful PLCs have experienced loss of effectiveness during times of administrative transition, when a strong school PLC loses support by a school or district administration. Transitions in staffing may limit teacher access to information or reduce meeting time and decision-making ability of the PLC (Tonso, 2006). The efficacy of the PLC may dwindle as school operations became more secretive and increasingly driven by administrative mandate (Tonso, 2006). Public commitment by school leadership to

creating and sustaining the PLC was necessary to sustaining it over time. Providing time, meeting space, online support in the form of an in-house website maintained by PLC membership, and frequent public statements supporting the work of the group achieved a level of sponsorship and authority enjoyed by the PLC in this study.

Leaders in our Midst: PAR and School Reform

Unofficial leadership abounds within schools; teachers of many backgrounds and experiences fill a variety of unofficial leadership roles and have initiated many division and departmental improvement initiatives themselves, illustrating Jill Janov's statement "that leadership is best thought of as a behavior, not a role" (as cited in Wheatley, 2006, p. 24) for individuals and small groups regularly undertake myriad leadership functions despite the lack of any official title or authority. Where teachers participate as activists in the changes, reforms, and life of a school community, they embody the concept of teacher leadership (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). When communication amongst stakeholders and inclusion of teacher voices exists, the potential for successful reform increases. However, school reform failures are due largely to one or more of the following five reasons: weak leadership, teacher turnover, lack of collective commitment, lack of funding, and/or disagreement on need for the reform (Ediger, as cited in Castelow, 2014; Kotter, 2012).

In their action research study, Phillips, Berg, Rodriguez, and Morgan (2010) worked to reduce drop-out rates in a New England middle school, utilizing inquiry-based approach to identify the ways in which students felt "silenced" in the classroom, thus highlighting "gaps between theory and practice" (p. 118). It is not difficult to extrapolate from the scenario in this and other analogous studies, similar situations in which teachers cut off from the decision-making in their schools felt silenced. Borman and Dowling's 2008 review of several teacher

attrition studies yielded support for the theory that increased opportunities for engagement with colleagues in important decision-making processes within schools bore a direct relation to lower attrition rates (p. 390). Numerous studies of teachers involved in participative decision-making show they have generally “higher levels of . . . morale and job satisfaction, manifested in less absence and tardiness as well as reduced interpersonal conflict” (DeDreu, as cited in Somech, 2010, p. 180) and enhanced involvement and commitment to reform initiatives within schools (Rice & Schneider, 1994; Turnbull, 2002). The combination of participation (through PLCs) with action (in the form of participative action research) provided an occasion to study teacher responses to the approach itself and add to the body of knowledge in this area.

Models of Teacher Leadership in Practice

Unlike their counterparts in many other developed countries, American classroom teachers do not typically hold clearly-defined leadership positions. In Israel, for example, more than 25 percent of teachers also have an administrative position (Avidov-Ungar, Friedman, & Olshtain, 2014, p. 706). The Avidov-Ungar et al. study of these official teacher-leaders revealed that even those with a sanctioned decision-making role experience a range of empowerment, from “limited” to “change-enhancing” (2014, p. 704). This study shows just how difficult it is to teach and lead; even in supportive conditions, feelings of empowerment are not always strong. Without support for teacher leaders in American schools, professionals certainly cannot expect to reach even the low end of this range.

Some teachers whose leadership potential is not supported within their organizations opt to form their own teacher-led schools (Nazareno, 2014). Approximately 60 teacher-led schools are currently in operation within the United States (Nazareno, 2014). These schools frequently

employ the PAR model as a leadership method and offer a lens through which to consider teacher-leadership successes and pitfalls.

The Reiche Elementary School (2013) in Portland, Maine provides an example of a fully teacher-led school that utilizes the PAR model of leadership and design. The school relies upon teacher leaders, standing committees, and leadership teams to work with parents in carrying out the school and community vision for educating their children. The school has been teacher-led for nearly 4 years their leadership model continue to evolve. Their internal surveys and early results do point toward strong teacher and community satisfaction with the model, parent, and community surveys of satisfaction in “the high 90’s” and at the conclusion of their first year, spring 2012, 48 of 52 teachers (or 92 percent) responded in support of a continuation of this PAR (reiche.portlandschools.org).

In their survey of 11 high-performing teacher-led schools, Farris-Berg, Dirkswager, and Junge (2012) confirmed that such schools can achieve great outcomes “characterized by a sense of common challenge and discovery, rather than a culture in which experts impart information” (p. 35). The outcomes reveal strong student gains and vastly improved teacher feelings of effectiveness and job satisfaction. However, teachers responded that residual resistance to trusting teachers with such autonomy and collective power remained a concern in some cases. This pushback, combined with the increased workload that is required of teachers who also lead, requires further study and was a component of this research study.

Other iterations of teacher involvement in school reform continue to take place and yield data that helps to contextualize the experiences teachers have with their level of participation in school decision-making processes. Innovation Schools, which include strong teacher input in many aspects of decision-making, continue to open across the country (Barrett, 2013, p. 52).

Such schools offer insight into the opportunities and pitfalls that come with opening and operating schools that break with a traditional hierarchy of school administration and daily operation. Participants interviewed for one large survey of Innovation Schools caution against trying “to do too much too fast” and urge for “more teacher involvement from the beginning” (Barrett, 2013, p. 55). Innovation Schools have also witnessed some teacher burnout as they become overwhelmed by the many duties in addition to teaching that come with school leadership. In planning for participatory action research (PAR), it is critical to develop authentic means of teacher input and involvement without creating hardship through an unmanageable workload. Providing sufficient time and a supportive structure for embedding PLCs and considering teacher-leader responsibilities is a necessary planning component to long-term success in such reform initiatives.

Time, space, and incentives are crucial components to nurturing the leadership of teachers who wish to continue teaching while also leading education reforms in their schools and beyond (Berry et al., 2013, p.16). Such leadership roles are collaborative in their nature, offering teachers the opportunity to participate in collective groups, such as PLCs, to innovate and create. While teacher leadership enhances involvement and commitment to reform initiatives within schools, it is crucial to note that simply communicating a vision and a plan *to* teachers is not empowering, nor will it result in desired outcomes (Rice & Schneider, 1994; Turnbull 2002).

A number of studies, including Barbara Turnbull’s (2002) broad empirical study, have revealed that involvement from initial discussions to training and support, and control over implementation in the classroom setting, were by far “stronger and more constant predictors of teacher buy-in to a school reform program” p. 35). These models of teacher-leadership in schools reveal that there are myriad ways in which teachers may span boundaries to improve their

schools. Their inter-organizational experience combined with disciplinary and pedagogical expertise position them to lead change from within and beyond their classrooms. Taken together, the literature on transformative, shared leadership practices in schools suggests that teachers are uniquely positioned to conduct participatory action research in order to change the status quo of daily practice experienced by many disenfranchised classroom educators.

School leadership at the study site, including the head of school and three division heads, were amenable to including teachers in more sanctioned leadership roles within the school, recognizing that their roles in relation to each other change frequently as dictated by circumstance and need. Therefore, the constructs for this study combined elements of the human resources and political frames of organizational leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The method of distributed leadership provided a blueprint for how the school can formalize teacher involvement, adding a more democratizing aspect to the middle school community. Discussions about duplicating the PLC model within the two other divisions at the site are currently underway.

This study mirrors the vision outlined in the site's strategic plan, specifically to "assess our current internal situation," identify programs currently meeting our needs and "opportunities for new initiatives to meet goals and values" and finally, to engage "a range of constituencies" in meeting these desired outcomes (p. 3). The strategic plan outlines a learning-by-design framework for assessing needs and taking action to meet those need through cycles of investigation, learning, implementing, and assessing (Coughlin & Brannick, 2009).

The PLC component of this study further developed learning-by-design in practice as teachers worked together to build alternative methods and practices through a similar cycle of inquiry and action. Combining the organization of PLCs with Participative Action Research

(PAR) demonstrated the possibility of a more just and equitable workplace for teachers. Studies suggest that active teacher participation in all stages of decision-making “promotes school and teacher outcomes through two motivational mechanisms: organizational commitment and teacher empowerment” (Somech, 2010, p. 185). A sense of purpose, community spirit, and shared investment are all outcomes observed in studies which presented teachers with opportunities to share their expertise and concerns, as well as to ask questions during the planning phases of school reform.

Summary

The vision for this study is captured in its title: *Leaders All*. This vision highlights the owner-operator model of organizational leadership, which sees all stakeholders valued and utilized in efforts to move an organization toward meeting its goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The study aligns with my initial site study developed during the first semester of this doctoral program. In that document, I wrote that “discussions about technology implementation revealed a gap in communication between teachers and technology decision makers in the school” (Crafton, 2012). Choices regarding technology presented just one example of many important conversations from which teachers have been absent. This research study responded to the results of an earlier site study that led to an action research plan to provide teachers with a voice in decision-making. The initial goal was to improve job satisfaction, feelings of agency and voice, and overall middle school climate. Much research has been conducted about the operation of shared leadership models and professional learning communities in schools; however, there has been little research conducted by classroom-based educators aimed at learning about teacher feelings of agency and their responses to shared leadership opportunities that might allow them to remain classroom instructors while working as agents of transformation in their schools.

The teacher team at the school site, a small independent middle school serving students in grades 6-8, desires more input into school reform efforts and will therefore, be most interested in the results of this study. In addition, other teachers, administrators, and board members within the school community will share a keen interest in its outcome. Beyond the site, others in middle school environments and within organizations aligned with the mission of middle schools, such as the Association of Middle Level Educators and the National Middle School Association, may have interest in these findings.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study approach featuring grounded theory design was selected for this action research project. The structure of grounded theory allows researchers to follow a prescribed, yet flexible, structure and set of guidelines for collecting and analyzing data. A grounded research study builds and draws relationships between categories of information, culminating in “an abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience” (Charmaz, 2012, p. 6), a theory *grounded*, therefore, in the data. Integral to grounded theory methodology are researcher reflections and questions about the data collection process, which work as mechanisms for shaping study activities and data analysis. The construction of grounded theory is informed through a merging of experiences, perspectives, behaviors, and interactions. A foundational grounded theory researcher, Anselm Strauss, posited that individuals are agents active in the processes of their daily lives; therefore, the process and not the structure is of most meaning when considering social relationships (as cited in Charmaz, 2012, p. 13). Further, the unique combination of language and action form the nexus of human interaction, becoming the lens of analysis for the pragmatic grounded researcher (Birks & Mills, 2011).

The collective case study approach used in data generation and analysis allows for data collection to take place within a real world bounded system over a specific time period (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). Participant interviews (two cycles), a mid-study survey, and analysis of documentation generated by the PLC allowed for the development of a richer context of the experience of teachers working in teams to affect change beyond individual classrooms

(Kindwall, 2007, p. 14). In addition, the use of analytical memo writing formed a third branch of data generation used to triangulate the analysis of participant responses and PLC documentation.

The guiding question of this study was *How can teachers contribute to school -reform and change initiatives without leaving the classroom to join the ranks of administration?* Three focused research questions explored by this study are:

- How do teachers view themselves as agents of school transformation?
- To what extent does the professional learning community (PLC) model provide teachers with agency and voice in decisions impacting their daily practice?
- How do classroom teachers experience the process of distributed (shared) leadership?

Site Selection

The study site was a small, suburban independent middle school of 116 students, 13 teachers, and one administrator. It was one of three divisions in a PK-12 day school of nearly 500 students and 70 full and part-time teaching faculty members. All divisions were housed on one campus; the middle school operated in one section of one building of this campus. As a participant researcher and classroom teacher in this middle school, the site was a practical and purposeful choice for me to conduct this action research study. Administration at the site was supportive of this study. Additionally, the site's 2012 strategic plan had mandated inclusion of teachers in decision-making and implementation processes regarding curricular programs, new initiatives, and priority setting.

Participants and Stakeholders

All faculty members of the middle school community (13 individuals in all) were invited to participate via Participant Invitation Letter in late August, 2014 (see Appendix B). Participant Outreach Letters provided initial informed consent, with additional consent obtained for

interviews and surveys (Appendix C). Participants received approximately 2 weeks' notice prior to the start of the study to determine interest in participation. In addition, a formal presentation of the proposed study was conducted with potential participants in late August, prior to any individual outreach or seeking of consent. There was no language or other barrier to understanding the Participant Invitation Letter. Partners and participants included: a middle school team of teachers representing all instructional areas, one learning specialist, and an administrator (middle school principal). Within the single site, this selection of teachers helped to achieve "purposeful maximal sampling" in order to show different perspectives on the issue being studied (Creswell, 2012, p. 626; Creswell, 2013, p. 100).

Stakeholders included teachers and administrators within the middle school particularly, but also across divisional lines, for the PLC model may be expanded to other divisions based on its effectiveness this year. Other constituencies may become interested in these findings: education policy makers, teacher advocacy groups, the National and New Jersey Associations of Independent Schools, and the school's board of trustees as well as other boards of schools addressing limited teacher involvement in decision-making at a time of expanding demands to evolve and remain relevant in an increasingly competitive independent school market.

Method Selection

Qualitative methods were selected for this study in order to capture participant perceptions and reflections about their involvement in a form distributed leadership (PLC). Data collection, in the form of interviews, was one of three primary methods for exploring participant voices, for it allowed a depth and breadth of responses to be gathered and analyzed closely for larger patterns and themes. Observation notes, meeting records, documents and artifacts produced by the PLC formed another integral branch of data in this study. These "social

products” (Saldana, 2013, p. 54) presented a reflection of participant perspectives, interests, and activities as they negotiated issues of power, legitimacy, reality, agency, and voice. Analytical memoranda formed the third primary data set, for they establish “sites of conversation” (Clarke, as cited in Saldana, 2013, p. 41) between the researcher and her data.

As a grounded theory data generation method, analytical memo writing is at least as vital as the coding of interviews and other data sources. Gordon-Finlayson articulated the critical position of analytical memo writing, arguing that “coding is simply a structure on which reflection (via memo-writing) happens. *It is memo-writing that is the engine of grounded theory, not coding*” (as cited in Saldana, 2013, p. 52, emphasis in original). Thus, memo-writing formed a crucial method for developing connections between categories developed in coding interviews, PLC-generated documents, existing school documents, surveys, and observations.

The rich data that is gathered using interviews and focus groups generate transcripts that allowed me to identify themes and patterns in order to construct a theory grounded in the data. Unlike quantitative methods, the qualitative grounded theory design of this study utilized a hypothesis building approach rather than a hypothesis testing stance.

In addition, this study was structured as action research as it also positioned teachers to become agents of change, producing needed improvements in school climate and culture. The four steps to a cycle of action research—diagnosis, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action—are each features of the PLC model of shared leadership that guide the improvement of the school community, making the PLC an action research working group. The permanence and self-direction of the professional learning community model is a potent mechanism for engaging teachers in decision-making processes and was studied for its effect on teacher feelings of agency and voice as they worked in a distributed model of school leadership.

Research indicated that permanent, embedded structures are more effective at producing long-term results (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 113). A professional learning community, unlike an ad hoc group, is designed to work long term as an embedded organizational structure (Cunningham, 2002; DuFour, 2003). The PLC was comprised of teachers, with administrators providing the structural support needed for team meetings to become a part of the life of the middle school. This teacher-led team operated independently of traditional top-down control. This particular structure was selected in order to bring democratic problem-solving to critical issues of curricula, pedagogy, and other matters that impact teachers' daily practice. This structure also supported efforts to carry out the mission of the school and its strategic plan, which specifically mandated the school staff assess the current state of curricular and program offerings as they reflect the mission and vision of the school, identify those programs currently meeting the mission and vision of the school, research opportunities to address unmet goals and re-examine values of the school, and engage various stakeholders in the process (p. 3). Tasked with developing their own agendas and action items, PLC team members became action researchers themselves, building investment in the outcomes of their work.

Data Collection

The goal of this qualitative study was to enrich the understanding of factors that inhibit or enhance classroom teacher participation in school reforms, in order to better understand what schools might do to empower classroom teachers so that they do not feel they must leave the classroom in order to contribute to school changes and reforms. A first round of participant interviews took place in September 2014 and was designed to gauge attitudes and perceptions regarding teacher agency, voice, and involvement in school change initiatives (see Appendix D

for first round interview questions). These interviews also provided a a baseline understanding of teacher perceptions prior to the launch of the PLC regarding distributed leadership.

Prior to interviews, informed consent documentation was obtained (see Appendix C). An amended IRB request was submitted and approved in October 2014 in order to conduct a mid-study survey based on initial transcription and early review of first round interviews. A brief array of follow up questions crafted to elicit more information about teacher perspectives and experiences as members of decision-making committees and related topics was used for this survey, which was administered in late December 2014 (see Appendix D for specific questions).

Shortly after initial interviews were completed, the PLC began meeting to identify, formulate, and take collective action to improve programs of the middle school. The PLC met at least twice monthly within the scheduled school day for a total of 13 formal meetings between September 2014 and March 1, 2015. Additional meetings of sub-teams, created by the PLC to conduct inquiry and take action on specific team-assigned tasks, and asynchronous online collaboration occurred throughout the study. Data collection and generation also included review of documentation and artifacts created by the PLC (agendas, action items and evaluations, team notes, team recommendations to school leadership), my observational notes, researcher analytical memos, and pre-existing school documents that pertained to the work of the PLC and this study (2012 Strategic plan and aggregated school data used by PLC in its work, such as school and student performance indicators). The study concluded with a final round of individual interviews in late February 2015, which were conducted during the school day, before school, and during teacher prep periods (see Appendix D for specific questions) in order to learn teachers' perceptions regarding their participation in the PLC. All interview questions were generated using research questions as a guide.

Participant responses were coded to protect privacy and maintain confidentiality. All research materials were stored at the researcher's home on an encrypted computer system and print materials kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office. Two rounds of member-checking were included in the study timetable to allow participants to review transcriptions of interviews and PLC meetings notes. An initial round of member-checking took place in September 2014; participants reviewed transcribed interviews prior to any coding activities on the part of this researcher. These member-checking components were vital to ensuring accuracy in transcription prior to beginning coding and theme generation. A second member-check occurred after final interviews were transcribed. A formal presentation to interested participants will be held at the site in mid-June 2015 (see Table 1, Data Collection Timeframe).

Table 1

Data Collection Timeframep

Dates	Activities
August-September 2014	Invitations to participants; Round one and follow up participant interviews; PLC initial meetings
September-December 2014	PLC meetings (2x/monthly); member checks (October); initial coding and early theme development
January – February 2015	Theme development; PLC meetings (2x/monthly)
February-March 2015	Final round participant interviews; final PLC meetings; theme development and early theory generation; member check; draft findings
February-April 2015	Theme and theory development; final member data check; review/revise findings
April 2015	Submit findings

Data Analysis and Validation Strategies

Grounded theory is achieved through ongoing analysis of data collected *in situ* with themes and patterns constantly compared throughout the life of the study. In order to examine and explain the social processes of teachers as agents of change, the data cannot be forced into predetermined categories; rather, a new theory may be generated, one grounded in the relationship of themes and patterns. This approach allows researchers to contextualize meaning through participant examples and experiences, which then form thematic categories.

Qualitative methodology was used in this study in order to examine participant language and activities as well as related PLC and researcher-generated documentation for common themes and patterns in relation to the research questions posed. The emergent grounded theory

design of this study required immediate and ongoing analysis of data while it was fresh, rather than waiting until all data had been collected before beginning analysis (Creswell, 2012, p. 433). Therefore, upon transcribing each interview, I began the process of exploratory coding, which helped me to become familiar with the data by organizing and reading through transcripts. The two formal member checks incorporated into the schedule in Table 1 were vital to ensuring thoroughness and objectivity throughout data collection. These member checks allowed each participant to review transcribed interviews for accuracy.

A formal round of coding followed the exploratory stage and used *In Vivo* methodology, which relies upon verbatim participant language where possible as a code label. *In Vivo* codes capture participant perspectives in their own words, which was important to this study as it sought to understand teachers' perceptions of self. Second round coding methods included Initial and Focused, which each operate using a line-by-line analysis of transcripts to contextualize meaning and refine categories. Focused coding provides what Saldana (2013) described as "a streamlined adaptation of classic grounded theory's Axial Coding" (p. 213). This method was chosen for it allows a constant comparison of codes across participant data while remaining open to category development, without forcing data into pre-existing theories or categories (Charmaz, 2014).

Remaining open to myriad methods of working with the data was critical for authentic theory generation; therefore, additional coding methods were employed as the study progressed. Stephen Corey, a foundational writer on action research has argued "it is impossible to know definitively in advance the exact nature of the inquiry that will develop" (as cited in Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, p. 7) when conducting action research; therefore, I remained open to refining methodology while conducting this participatory action research (PAR) study. This flexibility in

methods approach was vital to achieving a grounded theory; for example, early in the analysis of first round participant interviews, I determined that the depth of information hoped for was lacking. In October, 2014 the Institutional Review Board granted an amendment to the study, allowing for a mid-study survey. The coding process itself informed my decision to return to the Institutional Review Board for approval to amend the study; greater nuance and detail were obtained through follow-up surveys.

Discourse analysis was initially identified as a method I would use to identify patterns and unravel meaning in common language used by teachers as they describe the shared leadership experience. Discourse analysis examines the relationship between language (phrases, utterances, words), and social processes, which reveals patterns, values, beliefs, and power dynamics within a group (Gee, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, early in the data collection process, it became quite clear that an analysis of utterances alone, the discourse analysis approach, would not provide the depth of understanding I hoped to achieve. More critical to my study was building a nuanced theory that emerged from participants' actions, stories, and experiences and less from the idiosyncrasies of their speech patterns and vocabulary choices. Interpreting data through multiple rounds of coding in the emergent grounded theory design put forth most cogently by Kathy Charmaz (2014; and as cited in Creswell, 2012) and Johnny Saldana (2013) matched the goals of this study to develop a theory steeped in participant experience and voice.

Therefore, the categories and larger themes identified from transcribed interviews, PLC documents (such as meeting notes), and analytical memoranda were analyzed to generate a theory that may explain the process of evolving teacher leadership in this middle school setting (Creswell, 2012). An emerging/ constructivist grounded theory design was used in order to

contextualize and explain the processes and interactions of the PLC from teacher perspectives (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Charmaz, as cited in Creswell, 2012, pp. 428-430). PLC documents were coded using descriptive and evaluative coding methods, which captured information for triangulating themes and patterns identified in participant interviews. The discussions, actions, and recommendations made by the PLC were also coded using descriptive coding methods.

Analytical memoranda, written by researcher during the study itself, formed another integral data set. Coding and analytic memo writing are concurrent qualitative data analytic activities, for they form a reciprocal relationship between with development of a coding system and understanding what emerges from that system (Saldana, 2013, pp. 41-57). In fact, analytic memo writing is “the engine” (Saldana, 2013, p. 42) of grounded theory that drives the researcher in making connections and generating ideas amongst categories. Validation strategies included triangulating PLC team documentation with observations, member checks for accuracy, researcher analytical memoranda, and existing school documentation. Figure 1 presents a view of the data triangulation design of this study.

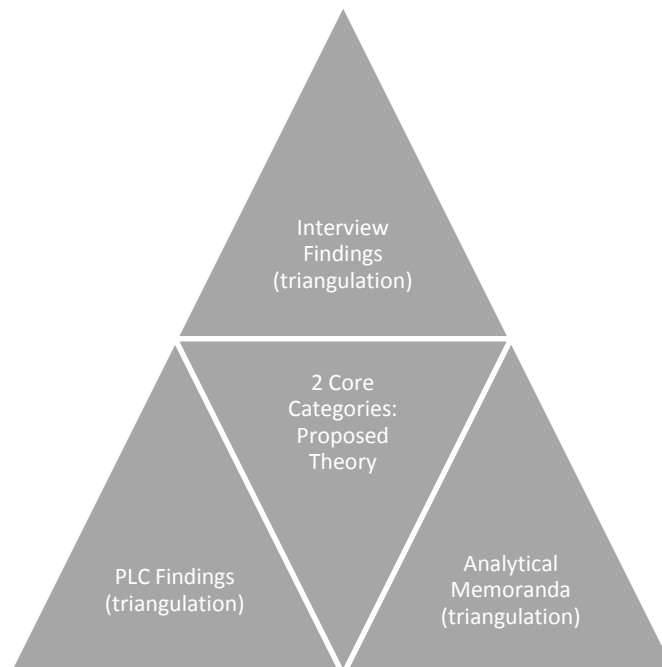


Figure 1. Triangulation of data.

Limitations, Biases, and Ethical Concerns

Limitations included the relatively small sample size of 10 teachers. A small study precludes generalizing the findings of the study to other middle school settings, particularly those that are considerably larger than this site. The qualitative methodology employed in this study examined distributed leadership as perceived and experienced by teachers; therefore, it was limited to these perspectives. The length of the study, approximately 7 months, limited examination of how teacher perceptions regarding this leadership model may change over the course of the entire school year and beyond. Revisiting participants' views over time in a future study could provide important information regarding long-term impacts of the PLC on teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

As a participant-researcher, I worked to remain vigilant for my own biases and influences I could exert on the study. In order to minimize such influence, frequent member checks of data

were critical. Explicit and tacit knowledge, insights, and experiences I possessed as an organization insider could both empower yet restrain my research inquiry (Gummesson, as cited in Coughlin & Brannick, 2009, p. 61). These pre-understandings of organizational operations, culture, customs, language, and history all contributed to my position as a researcher and informed my dual identity as researcher and organizational insider. Concrete measures that I took to maintain my neutrality and objectivity included “epistemic reflexivity” (Coughlan & Brannick, 2009, p. 62): the active engagement in thinking about my own biases and assumptions in order to separate them out from the critiques I made and findings I reported when studying my own organization. Systematic analytical memo writing as a reflection tool for assessing my own responses and feelings during this research process was an indispensable tool while operating in this dual identity. In addition, turning to an external consultant for help in navigating my role and experiences as an insider and a researcher provided advice and valuable guidance while traversing this duality.

This study presented me with an opportunity and responsibility to live the words I wrote at the beginning of the journey: “Organizational leaders are not tied to specific titles or roles; rather, those who demonstrate key capacities in their work relationships and behavior emerge as local leaders, regardless of official position” (Crafton, 2012, p. 6). In many ways, the duality I found myself experiencing—as a researcher and organizational insider—was akin to the experiences I have had as a classroom teacher and unofficial school leader. The balancing, boundary spanning, and need to maintain two distinct roles simultaneously were similar in both cases. Maintaining reflexivity as a researcher and honesty regarding my own perceptions were essential to conducting this study of my own organization.

Participants' Rights

Participation in the study was strictly voluntary and participants were permitted to opt out of data collection methods or withdraw from the study at any time. Participants signed a consent agreement, which included privacy protections (see Appendix C). The data gathered was cataloged and coded without individual identification markers. Transcriptions of interviews were shared with participants for ongoing member checking. A copy of the completed study will be provided to the participants upon request. A presentation of findings will be made to the middle school faculty and administration at the site in early summer 2015.

Pilot Study

Upon Institutional Review Board approval on July 15, 2014, a pilot study was initiated. A group of five experienced educators, who had no affiliation with the site or the study, were selected to preview interview questions for clarity, focus, and purpose in light of study objectives. Their feedback resulted in some refinement of test questions for clarity. One question was eliminated as redundant. The pilot study and subsequent revisions to the interview instrument improved the validity of the questions for this study.

Definitions

Agency and Voice are the consistent and meaningful inclusion of classroom teachers in the life of the school beyond their classroom. This includes their full participation in decision-making processes and opportunities to share expertise, needs, concerns, and ideas.

Distributed Leadership is the practice of sharing leadership, with roles and functions defined by situations as opposed to hierarchical structures (principal/headmaster) of an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Grounded Theory uses qualitative procedures to create a theory that explains a process, action, or interaction (such as the PLC form of distributed leadership in this study) (Creswell, 2012).

Participative Action Research is an emancipatory focus on the improvement of the school community through empowering teachers (Creswell, 2012).

PLC/Professional Learning Communities are teacher-led teams who partner with school administration to work in a continuous cycle to identify and take action on items necessary for improved school and student outcomes (DuFour, 2004).

Self-efficacy. Individuals' self-judgments regarding their own efforts, capabilities, and successes. Self-efficacy is forward-oriented thought regarding individual perceptions about capacity and ability to achieve a goal (Bandura, 1997).

Teacher Leaders are producers and co-producers of solutions and are highly committed to the processes of change and growth within their practice and their schools (Berry et al., 2013).

Transformative Agents are teachers capable and positioned to individually or collectively commit to and mobilize democratizing change within schools to further the aims of social justice (Bennis & Nanus, 2007; Shields, 2010).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study addressed the concerns of teachers who wished to contribute to school-reform and change initiatives without leaving their classrooms to join the ranks of administration. This study examined distributed leadership from the practicing classroom teacher's point-of-view. By investigating teacher responses to their involvement in a distributed leadership practice, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how teachers work to become agents of transformation without leaving their positions as classroom teachers. Research questions were developed to learn about the experiences and perceptions of classroom teachers as they engaged in a form of distributed leadership aimed at providing agency and voice in decision-making processes that affected their daily practice as well as school reforms and change initiatives. The research questions examined (a) how these teachers viewed themselves as agents of school transformation, (b) the extent to which the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model of distributed leadership provided them with agency and voice, and (c) the perceptions of teachers as they experienced this process of shared leadership.

The site for the study is a small, independent middle school located in suburban, central New Jersey. The middle school had a student population of 116 and a teaching faculty of 13. Of the 13 faculty members, 11 were included in this study (including the researcher). One potential participant was on a medical leave from the launch of the study through most of its duration and one elected not to participate. The participants ranged in age from early 20s to late 60s, with an average age of 44.5 years, and included 3 males and 9 females. Teaching experience across the participant pool ranged from novice with fewer than 2 years full time teaching experience to

teachers with over 40 years' experience; average teaching experience was 17.3 years.

Participants represented a wide range of disciplines and practices, including academic, athletic, fine and performing arts, and learning support instruction. Two participants had prior administrative experience elsewhere, one as a supervisor of special education and another as an assistant head of school (middle grades). See Table 2, Participant Demographics.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant Code	Years Teaching	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
P01	40	F	51-65	W
P02	15	M	31-40	W
P03	24	F	41-50	W
P04	2	F	20-30	W
P05	15	F	51-65	W
P06	18	F	41-50	W
P07	40	F	65+	W
P08	6	F	41-50	-
P09	14	M	41-50	W
P10	3	M	20-30	W
Avg. of Teaching Experience: 17.3		8 Female 3 Male	Avg. Age: 44.5	Dominant Ethnicity: W

At the time of this study, the school was beginning its final year of a 3-year strategic plan that included mandates for improving communication amongst stakeholders, establishing methods for including teachers in decision-making, and developing sustainable methods of

recruiting and retaining an excellent teaching staff. The site's strategic plan document formed the underpinning for this study in that it provided the imperative for addressing the dearth of classroom teacher voices in the important work of reforming teacher practice and improving school outcomes.

A January, 2015 faculty/staff survey conducted by the site's Board of Trustees identified the three areas of lowest satisfaction amongst those surveyed to be salary/benefits, workload, and opportunities for advancement. This survey included members of the participant group in this study and supports the findings of this study in terms of the state of the school climate and the need for more avenues of teacher-leadership. The launch of the PLC this year at the site was a step toward addressing these concerns by faculty members.

The Iterative Process: Emergent Grounded Theory and Continuous Cycles of Coding

The data in Chapter 4 are drawn from initial and final interviews, with a mid-study survey and PLC documentation providing an additional source of participant reflection and perspective. Data collection began in August 2014 with initial participant interviews, continued throughout the study with PLC documentation, a mid-study survey, and concluded with final participant interviews in March 2015. See Figure 2, Data collection and analysis cycle.

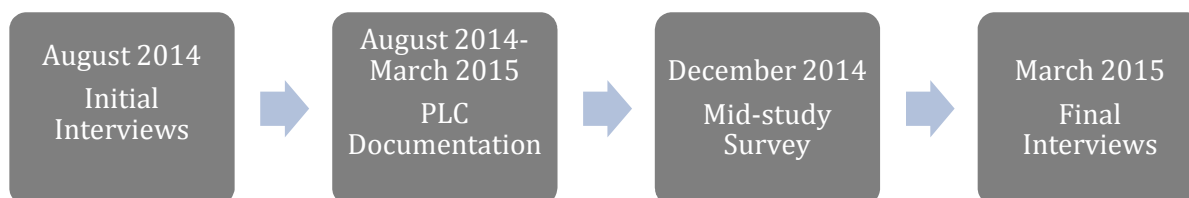


Figure 2. Data collection and analysis cycle.

Continuous cycles of coding throughout data collection are a hallmark of an emergent grounded theory design. Through this continual comparison of the data, two dominant themes emerged: *Navigating Competing Demands* and *Creating Teacher Agency*. Theoretical coding, which is discussed later in this chapter, explores these two dominant themes further and the process theory which emerges. Using multiple methods of coding the same data is also an important feature of this method of inquiry.

Three coding methods were employed throughout the study: Initial (Open), *In Vivo*, and Descriptive. Initial coding was the first method used in this study and involved labeling units of data (codes) and framing emerging categories. *In Vivo* coding utilized participant spoken (verbatim) language to form codes that maintained the closest link possible to the corpus of participant interviews. Descriptive coding was used for analyzing documents and artifacts, such as PLC meeting minutes, in order to provide a sense of the import and purpose of the document being studied in light of research questions. These three primary methods of coding first and second round interview transcripts, 11 PLC-generated documents, PLC agenda and meeting minutes from 13 meetings, 55 researcher analytical memos, and existing school documents identified 444 salient terms and ideas, which were refined using a fourth method of analysis, Focused coding. This method of coding emphasizes processes (using gerunds, -ing words) and develops the most frequent or significant codes identified through earlier methods (Saldana, 2013). Examples of Focused codes in this study are “Navigating,” “Working,” “Confronting,” “Making,” and “Identifying.” Focused coding collapsed the larger data set into 35 concepts that were then organized into five categories.

Refinement of categories was achieved through examining connections and patterns between codes, categories, and additional terms and ideas captured through ongoing data

collection over the course of the study. The continual review and code mapping of data identified many concepts that further defined the scope of these five categories: (a) *navigating competing demands*, (b) *working within the state of the school*, (c) *confronting dead ends*, (d) *making collective contributions*, and (e) *identifying the qualities of teacher agency*. The refinement of 5 main and 18 subcategories emerged through the constant comparison of data, which allowed for developing a hierarchy of categories, pruning for redundancies, collapsing similar codes, and achieving saturation when no new codes appeared in the data. These structures and methods for the continual comparative analysis of data throughout the life of the study is an integral feature of the grounded theory method and necessary for the generation of a theory *grounded* in the data (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In order to validate the veracity of five categories, a rule for inclusion was established for each one. These rules provided a procedure for screening coded data as to appropriate fit in a given category (Saldana, 2013, p. 10). As the scope, properties, and dimensions of each category emerged, codes from participant interviews, PLC documents, and researcher analytical memoranda were compared through these rules of inclusion. Each participant quotation presented in the inclusion statements below is representative of the experiences relayed by all participants in the study and succinctly captures participant perspectives. See Table 3, Code Mapping.

Table 3

Code Mapping

Category Refinement/Major and Subcategories with Inclusion Statements
<p>Category I: Navigating Competing Demands</p> <p>Subcategories: <i>Workload Time Expectations Administrators v. Teachers</i></p> <p>Inclusion Statement: The participant perceives inequity or imbalance in the structure and parameters of his or her duties. Example, “The most serious issue for teachers and staff at the moment is the school’s schedule and course load. We are stretched too thin.” (P8)</p>
<p>Category II: Working within the State of the School</p> <p>Subcategories: <i>Inconsistent Leadership Resistance to Change</i></p> <p>Inclusion Statement: The participant perceives through daily work environment a status quo in the school setting that either inhibits or supports a culture of transformation and growth. Example, “Things stall out. Things don’t seem to go past a certain level—things are planned, handed off, then get back-burnered.” (P4)</p>
<p>Category III: Confronting Dead Ends</p> <p>Subcategories: <i>Lack of Voice/Input No Communication Token Input Fear</i></p> <p>Inclusion Statement: The participant shares experiences and perceptions regarding limited or absent inclusion or participation in decision-making, disappointment or frustration regarding attempts to contribute to school reforms or change initiatives. Example, “I was asked to help design the new [classroom], so I thought there was a leadership role but that only went so far. They took all the ideas and never came back. They went ahead and changed things. I wasn’t part of the continuation and that was disappointing.” (P5)</p>
<p>Category IV: Making Collective Contributions</p> <p>Subcategories: <i>Committees Collaboration Teacher Actions (gerunds, -ing)</i></p> <p>Inclusion Statement: The participant shares experiences and perceptions regarding work on committees and/or in collaboration with other teachers. Example, “We have formed a really good community of getting together and getting things done.” (P1)</p>
<p>Category V: Identifying Qualities of Teacher Agency</p> <p>Subcategories: <i>Freedom Autonomy Flexibility Administrative Support</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>Teacher actions (gerunds, -ing)</i></p> <p>Inclusion Statement: The participant perceives agency and voice in a decision-making capacity that is supported by school leadership. Example, “We have the freedom to choose our own books.” (P10)</p>

Category I: Navigating Competing Demands

The participant perceived inequity or imbalance in the structure and parameters of his or her duties. This category forms one of two core categories on which findings are based, for the responses of participants to myriad competing demands in the workplace spurred their subsequent action or inaction, influencing outcomes over the course of the study. Competing demands are the extrinsic forces exerted upon participants in the course of their daily work. These demands, as articulated by participants, fall within the four subcategories of *workload*, *time*, *expectations*, and *administration v. teachers*. Navigating amongst the often-differing expectations of administrators, parents, and participants' personal standards of professional diligence appeared as prominent features across the data. Struggling to meet the demands of a heavy teaching and duty schedule without the necessary time or support framed and restrained participant actions, behaviors, and responses to pressures, expectations, and their own sense of self-efficacy.

Of 430 distinct terms and phrases culled from the data, nearly one-quarter (84) spoke directly to this category and over 100 additional terms and phrases aligned with this and a second category (*Confronting Dead Ends* or *Working Within the State of the School*). Thus, nearly half of all codes (analyzed terms and phrases) collected during the study represented participant negotiation of competing demands in the workplace. The frequency of these codes across participant data suggested that a tension existed between demands on teachers and their capacity to meet these demands within the school structure. The concept of being over-scheduled and under-supported permeates the data, as represented in the repetition of phrases such as: "stretched too thin," "rough schedule," "heavy workload," "disconnect between administration and teachers," "steamrolled," "isolation," "pressure," and many others.

Time and workload. When participants were asked to reflect and elaborate upon their daily workload and their desire to contribute more to school-wide initiatives, such as professional development and scheduling committee work, they unanimously indicated feeling restrained from fully participating due to time and schedules constraints. One participant explained his dilemma:

If my schedule were a little bit easier, I would definitely be interested in doing something like that [professional development] for sure. But just right now, with the way things are going, scheduling wise, there's not much extra time. . . . I would definitely want to be involved if my schedule would support it. (P9)

Highlighting the irony of the school schedule was one participant's explanation that he did not "have the discretionary time to get involved" (P10) in the scheduling committee tasked with improving the very aspect of work which was causing him such hardship. The inability to participate due to forces beyond their control, left 9 of 10 participants feeling disenfranchised, as one reflected:

I do not feel I have any role in solving any school issues. . . . My experience has been that the further away you are from a clearly defined administrative role, the harder it is to become involved in larger school reform. And superseding the effect of job title is time. For all members of the school community, the major inhibitory factor always seems to be time. (P2)

Participants clearly conveyed their desire to participate in decisions impacting their school while explaining through personal examples that mechanisms for doing so were generally absent or, at best, tenuously available. All participants stated they valued collaboration with colleagues, but again found time constraining those opportunities. When asked about access to

colleagues for collaboration in daily practice and their ability to participate in school reforms and initiatives beyond the classroom, eight participants referred to their very tight schedules and workload as prohibitive to their involvement. One teacher described the heavy demands and isolation that classroom teachers can experience, saying, “I’m so involved with my own little world that sometimes I just go with the flow with the larger decisions being made. I’ve got enough on my own plate” (P8). Another participant with over 15 years at the site explained her duties and responsibilities in this way:

In private schools you end up wearing a lot of hats. So between being a middle school teacher, a .. teacher for the upper school . . . grade coordinator, and being involved with coaching at middle school and varsity level, as well as peer leadership and being an advisor, I mean the list just goes on and on. I’m involved in three committees; one for the schedule, which makes sense, and another for trips. . . . So there’s other meetings and whatnot. So, I feel like we are being tasked with trying to make these improvements and a lot of this is the same people who volunteer or they want only a certain group of people. (P6)

This participant’s response echoes those of seven others who described a state of being continually overwhelmed by responsibilities, with collaboration happening only incidentally to formal duties. Navigating within the limitation of time and, as one participant put it, “a broken schedule” (P5), figured prominently into individual participant discussions with the researcher as well as during meetings of the PLC. However, despite great dissatisfaction with school schedule and their struggles to maneuver around competing logistical and professional demands, participants did find ways to meet and collaborate, if only very informally. As one participant in her second year at the school explained:

I feel we have a lot of really good conversations between colleagues, especially within the division . . . and we share ideas and hints and tips and tricks and ‘hey this might work’. Very informally. Not within a formal space. But we have formed a really good community of working together and getting things done. (P4)

This example conveys the persistence of which six participants spoke in terms of making conversations happen despite limitations on time and lack of formal structures for collaboration. When asked to elaborate on what has impeded formalizing these conversations, this participant added:

I think we just have a lot on our plates. I think we have a lot of great ideas . . . but we don’t always necessarily have time when we can all be together to make something happen. That shared planning time. That reflection time. (P4)

Expectations of administration versus teachers. When asked how they navigated the limitation of time with given expectations for job performance, all participants related experiences of isolation and frustration, but also creativity and resiliency. One participant conveyed the feeling that teachers “just do what we’re expected to do” (P9), and this sentiment was echoed by several others, suggesting a resignation to the status quo. Another participant conveyed the necessity of persistence in navigating these demands, “If you’re persistent and you do the legwork in the system, I’ve seen it can work if you’re willing to keep approaching and keep at it. . . . So, you’ve got to stay at it” (P2). This participant further explained why such persistence was vital for teachers who wished to be heard and included in the work of improving their schools:

Teachers don’t get heard as much [as administrators] because they’re rushing to get through this mandated curriculum . . . you hear at faculty meetings whatever it might be

from teachers asking for more time instead of being mile wide and inch deep it's a little bit more in-depth coverage. I think sometimes there's a disconnect between administration and teachers and faculty in general. (P2)

Nine of 10 participants shared experiences that indicated a lack of communication or disagreements in philosophy or approach between administration and teachers. A participant who has worked as both an administrator and classroom teacher (currently), shared his insights on the differences:

When I was in administration, I was heavily involved in decision-making. When I was teaching, I was more heavily involved in recommendations the board had a sub-committee on technology, which was great, but they weren't in the classroom, so there was that conflict. They were great people and they did great things, but there was that disconnect too. (P2)

In my analytical memoranda I reflected on this concept of disconnect and the sometimes antagonistic language participants used to describe what they did in the classroom each day when compared with school leadership. Participants used language I termed "fighting words" (Crafton, analytic memo, December 7, 2014) occasionally in describing their experiences while in this navigation phase. One teacher described her position in relation to school administration being "the vanguard" with teachers "on the front line implementing change" imposed by others (P8). Another participant described teachers as working "in the trenches" by virtue of working in classrooms all day (P7).

This first of five categories, *Navigating Competing Demands*, reveals the struggle participants had in managing their heavy workloads with conflicting messages and expectations. All participants relayed some struggle with multiple demands on their time. Participant examples

of frustration in dealing with these demands reflected dissatisfaction with structural issues at the site, including a “broken” schedule and a lack of understanding and respect for the workload of teachers. These concerns figure into the second category, *Working within the State of the School*, which follows.

Category II: Working within the State of the School

The participant perceives through daily work environment a status quo in the school setting that either inhibits or supports a culture of transformation and growth. This second category emerged from my analytical memoranda reflecting on participant discussions of their struggles and successes as agents of change and transformation within the existing structure of the school prior to the launch of the Professional Learning Community (PLC). Working within the state of the school (logistics, scheduling, stakeholders, and physical structures) included also the navigating and maneuvering participants did in order to move forward their own personal equity agendas, garner support for hoped-for changes and reforms, and build bridges for addressing their concerns across the three divisions of the school. Subcategories of *Inconsistent Leadership* and *Resistance to Change* reflect the primarily extrinsic nature of factors confronting participants in this category. Participants shared examples of successes as well as frustrations in dealing with the state of the school.

Ninety distinct terms and ideas (codes) align with this category, of which about half, or 44, speak to the primary (core) category *Navigating Competing Demands* and the second category *Confronting Dead Ends*. The relatively high frequency of codes that relate to participants’ negotiation within the state of the organization revealed that these participants were eager to be involved and heard in many aspects of school changes and initiatives, including:

scheduling, programs and curricular reforms, technology implementation, budgeting, professional development, and student life.

Within the state of the school, participants have found varying degrees of success in being heard and contributing individually to the efforts to be involved in these efforts. Key words and phrases echoed across the data describe some frustration with the status quo in school structure include: “growing pains,” “administration playing favorites,” “limited guidance/training,” “lack of leadership,” “living a vision,” “living a bad schedule,” “hierarchy impedes change,” and “lack of clear-cut goals.” However, not all participants experienced a dearth of administrative support; three participants relayed instances when administrative support, particularly within the middle school division, allowed them to share ideas and work toward improving an aspect of the curriculum. One participant relayed a positive perspective on school support for teacher participation:

I got a lot of support from my department chair and our division head in being able to interpret it [the curriculum] in a way I saw suitable for what we could accomplish in a way that makes sense. Both of them were open to changing the textbook to make it fit better with the curriculum, looking at how much we’re trying to fit in. So it was a very open discussion, which was good. (P4)

Another participant, a veteran teacher, said, “I think my voice is heard here. It can be tempered, but I think people listen” (P7). Five participants did not feel a strong sense of support from administration for their ideas, contributions, or suggestions. Rather, these five participants perceived that school leadership listened little to their concerns. When asked to what degree she felt she was an agent of change in the middle school, a world language teacher responded, “I

have trouble with the word ‘agent’ . . . more than an agent they [teachers] are the promoters . . . most of the time it’s not the teachers’ decision; they are the one bringing the proposal” (P3).

Participant perspectives regarding the current state of school operations centered upon logistical aspects of school operation, particularly the daily school schedule. The view of 7 of 10 participants was that school administration did not appreciate the scope and challenge of daily teaching duties that were further complicated by a problematic rotating schedule. A participant who teaches across the three divisions of the school said:

I think the schedule is one of the toughest things in this school. There’s too many different classes offered where the schedule just can’t support them anymore and in turn, we end up adding days to the schedule to the rotation, which for [my] classes, it can be kind of rough, because the more days in a cycle, the less rehearsals before concerts . . . it’s becoming a problem. (P9)

Another participant echoed this feeling of anxiety and frustration with the schedule, stating that “morale is down as teachers accomplish the bare bones” (P5).

Inconsistent leadership. Concern with mixed messaging and inconsistent support for initiatives, particularly those impacting teachers directly, merited inclusion of this subcategory. One participant conveyed her sense that more could be done to clarify long-term plans suggesting, “if there is no organization or clear-cut goals of change, than those goals could not be communicated or carried out” (P5). Five additional participants voiced concern about the lack of cohesion amongst the three divisions in the school. Two participants who taught across the divisions especially felt the disconnect, one explaining it thus:

What holds us back as a community is the sense that we say that we’re a community, but we really are three divisions. We need to figure out a way to either be divisions

separately but underneath the same umbrella . . . or we need to figure out a way that we actually all come together and we work together. . . . Until we do that, faculty are going to continue to feel stressed and have strain and then they aren't going to perform to their best and it's just sort of a steamroll effect. (P6)

Another participant who taught across three divisions felt a distinct lack of leadership and communication during his second year at the school:

The schedule was just changed without my knowledge. And what ended up happening with that is I ended up missing half a block, half a class with my students who went from three times a cycle to two and a half times a cycle and even though I think it might have been unavoidable, it would have been nice to know that ahead of time. (P9)

Communication, clear vision and goals, and working to build a strong community across divisions are three areas of concern identified across the data in terms of the relationship between school leadership and teachers.

Resistance to change. Coupled with *Inconsistent Leadership* is the subcategory *Resistance to Change*. Participants who spoke to this topic shared their perspectives regarding the change process itself and resistance they have experienced. A mid-career teacher with over 10 years' experience at the school shared her experience of working with both teachers and administrators who were reticent to embrace change:

I think there are some teachers who are very excited about change. And then unfortunately, I can't decide if we are outnumbered or if the other people are just louder. But there are people who are very comfortable in how they have been doing things. . . . I don't know if it's just that they weren't supported along the way to make or encouraged to make change, so I think there is a group of people who are fearful of course, we're

always afraid of what we you know. Fear of change is worse than change itself kind of thing, so people tend to get stuck in a rut. And then I think that there are people who really want to make changes, but they're not really sure how to go about it or without proper support they can easily get frustrated. (P6)

The excerpt above reveals the individual nature of negotiating change whilst navigating through a maze of competing priorities and demands. This participant described some who fear change and avoid it while all 10 participants in this study indicated a strong desire to be part of change efforts themselves. The above participant's example of "people who really want to make changes," but found a lack of support and became frustrated, was echoed across the data in one example after another.

The status quo at the site affected each participant a bit differently; some felt a lack of leadership profoundly while others indicated more concern with logistics, such as an unsustainable teaching schedule and array of duties. Each participant reported working within an imperfect system and structure. How participants responded to inconsistent or absent support or access to involvement in change initiatives frames category three, which follows.

Category III: Confronting Dead Ends

The participants shared experiences and perceptions regarding limited or absent participation in decision-making, as well as disappointment or frustration regarding attempts to contribute to school reforms or change initiatives. The antithesis to teacher agency is confronting a dead end. Abundant examples from participants placed this category on nearly equal footing with the primary (core) category *Navigating Competing Demands*.

There are four subcategories contributing to the scope of this category: Lack of Voice/Input, Token Input, Communication, and Fear. The category label "Dead Ends" was taken

verbatim from a participant interview transcript, for it succinctly captured the frustration and seeming hopelessness many have faced when trying to improve their work lives, participate in school reforms and changes, and contribute their voices to activities that will ultimately impact their work with students and student outcomes.

Much of the data for this category came in the form of stories, specific examples of experiences that participants had at the site when they confronted an obstacle to making or contributing to change. A novice teacher with just one full year at the school observed when suggesting improvements within her department that “things stall out. Things don’t seem to go past a certain level; things are planned, handed off, then get back-burnered” (P4). Despite the short duration of her employment at the site, she had observed stagnation, dead ends, and a sense of “token input” as a classroom teacher.

One hundred and one distinct codes construct this category, with some duplication of codes in this and categories I and II: *Navigating Competing Demands* and *Working within the State of the School*). Examples of the ideas and terms that make up the codes in this category are: “not invited,” “stuck,” “teachers aren’t heard,” “steamrolled,” “no input,” “isolated,” “token and tempered,” “disconnect,” and “discouraged”.

Lack of voice or input. Participants’ responses indicated they recognized disenfranchisement in their work lives and have each shared at least one experience of a lack of voice in a school decision that has had a direct impact on classroom practice and/or personal job satisfaction and feelings of self-efficacy. For example, a sixth and seventh grade teacher looked forward to the summer renovation of her classroom:

I was asked to help design the [room]. So, I thought there was a leadership role there but I feel that only went so far, because the initial planning, well they took all my ideas, came

up with something, and never came back. And they went ahead and changed things and did things. . . . I wasn't part of the continuation and that was disappointing. And I was so busy that by the time I realized it, it's spring and I hadn't seen the plans. And I pushed to see the plans, but it was done. (P5)

This participant hoped for, planned on, and initially felt included in the design changes that would impact her day-to-day work in the classroom with students. Her excitement over the renovation was replaced with disappointment when the entire project proceeded without her input. This example is one of several across the data that demonstrate the inconsistency participants experience in their involvement in decisions that impact what they do in their classrooms.

In interviews with 10 participants, half believed decisions involving a wide range of school policies and practices, from technology choices to scheduling, were completely out of their hands. The remaining five participants reported degrees of involvement, with most indicating a limited scope of input. A study participant relayed her disappointment regarding many curricular and program changes that were made over several years without what she believed to be important considerations for the different ways students learn, stating that her involvement has been "not much even though [she] have offered [her] services many times" (P7). Her repeated attempts to be involved in those discussions were not met with a positive reception and she presented the experience in a resigned fashion with a shrug of her shoulders. When asked to elaborate a bit on the experience, she said, "I don't want to go there."

It is important to note that some participants may have been hesitant to share the degree of their disappointment for fear of repercussions should their opinions be heard by others. Over the course of the study, assurances through privacy documents, researcher conversations with

participants regarding data security and protocols, and a supportive PLC structure may have ameliorated such fears, as one participant suggested:

It's just nice to be able to trust each other that it doesn't go outside of the circle. I think we're beginning to have that type of relationship within our PLC . . . it's a time when we get together without a boss around. So, we can say things in our group that we wouldn't say at a faculty meeting. (P1)

Four other participants made similar comments regarding a sense of security and community created within the PLC.

No communication. The concept of poor or absent communication between administration and teaching staff appeared across the data. A math teacher in the study gave voice to the frustration and hopelessness sometimes experienced by participants as they came upon one dead end after another, "You get shot down so many times that you, well it's like learned helplessness. You know, why am I going to try? No one's listening to me anyway" (P2). In this example, the participant described one-sided communication; a teacher feeling rejection to such an extent that he believed no one was listening. Another participant discussed the role that ineffectual and inconsistent communication can have on those who try to bridge the divide between teachers and administrator, saying, "I feel like the major agents of change . . . constantly meet a dead end and they get discouraged and I'll be honest, we've lost some of our best teachers" (P6). This resignation to the status quo was present to varying degrees in the examples provided by all participants across the study. Yet, participants described these past events while voicing optimism about future endeavors of cooperation and collaboration between faculty and school leadership.

Fear. Fear of disrupting the status quo or of standing out appeared in two participant responses; however, the concept of fear was discerned in participant language elsewhere in the data. A teacher new to the school explained what he perceived as collective fear amongst teachers, saying, “We’re too afraid that we’ll stand out or we’re too afraid that we will somehow show up the other teachers” (P10). This example reveals the perception that, for at least one participant, fear centered on relationships with colleagues just as much, or more, than with administration. Another teacher in the study shared her perspective on fearing the reaction of her colleagues, “If you’re not supported by your colleagues, then you might think your ideas don’t have merit” (P6).

Other participants described being hesitant to take a stand on an issue or become involved in discussions about changes within the school because they did not believe that hoped-for changes would result or that their own involvement would be curtailed by administration over time. Indeed, these fears were merited in some cases, as with the science lab example discussed previously.

Summary. This category, *Confronting Dead Ends* and its four subcategories, capture instances of participant frustration, confusion, and disenfranchisement in the decision-making processes that they feel are important to their work in and beyond the classroom. Each participant related one or more personal experiences of struggle to be heard or provide input beyond his or classroom. In my analytical memoranda on participant use of language to explore confronting obstacles I wrote:

The nearly equal balance between language of frustration (i.e., “dead end”) and that of hope (i.e., “administration seeking my input”) suggests that these teachers do perceive barriers to a fuller sense of agency and democracy in the workplace. They want those

walls to come down but aren't sure where to start, or they have tried to dismantle the obstacles themselves, only to meet with partial or incomplete success at best.

Category four, which follows, examines the creative and collective ways in which participants moved beyond confronting dead ends to working through and around them.

Category IV: Making Collective Contributions

The participants shared experiences and perceptions regarding work on committees and/or in collaboration with other teachers. Responding with creative, often collaborative, solutions to obstacles is a hallmark of the stories and perspectives shared by participants in the study; these experiences construct this fourth category, which includes subcategories: *teacher actions (gerunds)*, *committees*, and *collaboration*. Ninety-five unique codes populate this category, with approximately one-third, or 30, connecting also to one of two primary (core) categories: *Identifying Qualities of Teacher Agency*.

Virtually all codes representing this category are gerunds (verbs ending with -ing), which suggests participants view their collective work as highly active. For example, “co-leading,” “developing curriculum,” “connecting research,” “proposing changes,” “evaluating,” “exchanging ideas,” “making our claims,” “volunteering,” and “initiating” all illustrate a stance of agency and voice by the collective in the larger life of the school.

Collaboration and committees. Several participants described situations and experiences that presented them with a dead end or obstacle to which they responded with a creative work-around. In an analytical memo from January 2015, I wrote about the duality teacher's experience “when they experience frustration as they meet dead ends but also a desire to transcend them” (Crafton, analytic memo, January 10, 2015). In her first interview with me, a

veteran teacher at the school explained her tactic for what she terms “circumventing the system” when faced with an obstacle:

My ideas were not met with wonderful enthusiasm, so I was no longer sort of invited into the room to partake in that scheduling [meeting]. So, I sort of took a little back door approach and would help the people that *were* asked to take a look at the schedule and then ultimately I kind of just created one myself with another schedule alongside the upper school one and somebody else gave it to them. And at the time she [head] adopted it, she had no idea it was, that I had something to do with it. Because if she did, she never would have adopted it. (P6)

This example shows the subterfuge that some teachers, including two in this study, adopted as a strategy for dealing with dead ends in the workplace. This participant relished the success she had in maneuvering through the system using this “back door” approach and related that she does this “planting the seed” as she calls it, quite often. I wrote about this tactic in analytical memoranda, as I struggled with my own feelings as a researcher-participant and colleague with the questionable ethics utilized in this and other situations related by participants who had resorted to methods that were morally questionable. Questions of ethics and bias infused my own reflections on this participant’s experiences as I wrote:

Why shouldn’t a teacher fight fire with fire? She is obviously feeling excluded from an important aspect of school reform to which she had been included previously. She is now simply conveying her thoughts, using her voice, in an alternative way by making her suggestions to a colleague who is still involved in scheduling. But why, then, am I bothered by this tactic? Am I remaining neutral as I evaluate each participant’s experience? As a classroom teacher myself, am I conflicted? Yes, indeed but I am also

committed to getting her story right and sharing everything a participant has to share that can shed light on how their voices are included and excluded. I suppose what is bothering me most is the fact that this teacher is using secrecy to achieve her personal equity agenda—the very tactic that has been abhorred by teachers as they conjecture about the motives and activities of others when they are barred from participating themselves. It is not for me to judge; it is for me to report and evaluate in light of the study.

This experience as researcher-participant was crucial in my development as an action researcher working within the emerging grounded theory framework. Acknowledging one's dual position, embracing it in fact, and moving forward with the study was critical to accomplish this study within my own workplace. I was able to move forward with confidence in my own processes and reflexivity as a researcher. Member checking and frequent self-checking became even more imperative as I continued the study.

This category features collective optimism and resourcefulness experienced by groups of participants as they worked together to remove or transcend obstacles. When participants reflected on their shared experiences of working with colleagues on issues of mutual importance, they focused on instances of collaboration, committee work, and precise actions. The use of teams, such as the PLC launched for the first time this year, provided a collective contribution platform that allowed teachers to maximize small increments of time by working together and building a strong collective voice. Introducing a mechanism, the PLC, to develop teacher agency through collective and individual action was met with enthusiasm by middle school staff. The PLC began meeting in late August 2014 with an introductory gathering and invitation to all middle school faculty to join. Eleven of 13 members, including the researcher, joined the PLC, which met during a set time within the school day in a teacher's classroom. The meeting location

rotated along with meeting leadership. Members of the PLC volunteered to lead meetings or to take notes during meetings. This rotating leadership is a cogent example of the shared responsibility that marked the operation of the PLC.

The group met 13 times through the close of the study. As action items were identified, smaller groups met apart from the larger group to plan, research, and report back to the larger group on tasked items, such as assessing student performance, English Language Learner support, and developing interdisciplinary projects. Participants found success in confronting obstacles to their participation in the school primarily by working collectively. These collective actions took place in many configurations, from a team of two colleagues working together to move a curricular change through to adoption, to the entire middle school faculty asserting their collective voice on the issue of whole-school schedule changes. Subcategories *collaboration*, *committees*, and *teacher actions* present the three ways by which participants experienced increased voice, agency, and participation as part of a cooperative group.

Collective agency. Collective agency occurred simply when a few teachers worked together to accomplish a goal that had eluded a teacher working on his or her own. Three participants, including this researcher, became aware of previously unknown curricular connections during an early meeting of the PLC in September, 2014. An art teacher who had conducted a project with her students for nearly a decade became aware of connections to history and to my English program. With relative ease, we were able to enrich the scope of our three units of study while making deep connections between the disciplines apparent for students. This fortuitous conversation happened only because the PLC had begun meeting and its direction chosen by teacher-participants: inter-disciplinary connections.

Over the course of the study, 9 of 10 participants reported collective agency occurring when teachers worked in larger groups, such as the PLC, toward a common goal with these successes occurred in small steps or stages. In her final interview for the study one participant shared a positive improvement in terms of her agency and voice beyond the classroom:

When I was invited to the Board of Trustees . . . to talk about the program and when a question came up, I was able to say actually that this year teachers have been collaborating and we're looking to do more collaboration We've had meetings. I was able to use this as an example of how we are working on certain issues for the students . . . it's [the PLC] primary goal is to break that isolation. (P5)

Nine of 10 participants related that the PLC provided a safe space and time for sharing ideas and crafting action steps that helped them experience a sense of genuine agency and contribution that did not happen for them when they acted solo. When asked during her final interview about the extent to which the PLC has proven a mechanism for responding to challenges that impact daily practice, one participant explained, "Since we never had anything like that, the fact that it is there is amazing. I think there was nothing there prior and now we have something that's in place and I think that it's very important that we continue to hold onto it" (P8). All participants responded positively to the addition of the PLC into this year's schedule and identified it as "worthwhile," "important," and "necessary." One of the history teachers in the study, explained that she "love[s] that these are our meetings; no we cannot have a faculty meeting. No we cannot do class coverage. We have somewhere we have to be and I think that it is respected" (P4). And another world language teacher contextualizing the work of the PLC as the place "where theory meets practice, where rubber meets the road" (P10).

The PLC was not the only mechanism for collective power and agency building. Indeed, participants related stories of the power found in the informal collaboration such as impromptu hallway meetings where informal collaboration happens:

because we look for each other and sometimes things arise in the last minute and we don't have the opportunity of providing time for what is needed . . . sometimes you need to reach out to someone, colleagues, to talk about it to inform them about the situation, looking for some advice from them or maybe trying to plan an action that will be needed.

(P3)

However, productive curricula change, program modification, and decision-making that have the potential to improve the life of the school cannot be left to happenstance or the occasional chat at the water fountain. One math teacher in the study explained rarely seeing math colleagues:

unless I make a conscious effort to walk up there and sort of pop in. But even then, the schedule is not real conducive to doing that. You know there's one or two teachers I see on a regular basis. I make an effort and there's some that I never see (P2).

Likewise, ad hoc committees at the site did not always achieve desired outcomes, as a humanities teacher explained. In August, 2014, she was “added to a committee here in the Athletics Department to look at how to better manage student attendance and student engagement” (P4). During her final interview in February 2015, this participant indicated that the ad hoc committee on varsity athletes had not had one meeting all year. The permanency of an embedded teacher-led body, such as the PLC, provided a vital structure to sustained activity by the group, furthering their agency and voice in the school community.

PLC as distributed leadership. In terms of goals and reforms beyond their individual classrooms, all participants viewed the PLC as a mechanism suited to increasing the influence of

middle school teachers in decisions of this nature. Participants described the PLC as “useful,” for it provided:

a set structured time to talk with my colleagues to discuss issues we’re seeing the middle school program and plan new curriculum initiatives. So much of our faculty meetings is devoted to student issues/agenda updates that this is the first opportunity we’ve had to really collaborate. (P9)

All participants echoed the above sentiment to some degree. Several experienced its potential, recognizing that, in its infancy, the PLC still had a great deal of growth in order to become the fully-embedded, action-rich teacher team all hoped for. One participant’s response spoke to its potential for increasing job satisfaction, saying:

The more you feel a part of decision-making, I think the more connected to the school, the higher the job satisfaction. The fact that even if you don’t get your way . . . at least you’re being heard or you’re having input. You’re part of the discussion and that lends itself to feeling more part of the team. (P2)

Participants used 50 terms and phrases, including many gerunds (-ing words) to describe their perspective and involvement in the PLC: “we decided,” “we are creating,” “built by all,” “rotating leadership,” “benchmarking,” “investigation,” “inviting,” “teacher-led initiatives,” “actionable items,” “assessing and targetting actions,” “affirming,” “articulating connections,” and “taking the long view.”

Unlike the ad hoc committee or informal collaborative exchanges in hallways, the PLC was perceived as an embedded structure in the middle school, which provided some teacher voice in larger changes and initiatives of the school beyond the teacher’s classroom. The

structure—embedded within the school day and featuring rotating leadership within the group—was termed “encouraging” by three participants, one explaining:

The structure works well—it gives everyone a voice, and *encourages* (participant emphasis) everyone to have a voice. I am sometimes reluctant to share opinions and tend to hang back, but the PLC creates an environment that makes it a bit easier for me to do so and feel comfortable. (P1)

The importance of building a level of trust and comfort became apparent early in the data analysis process; participants quickly grew to see the PLC as a forum for teacher-driven and student-centered discussion directed toward improving the middle school as a whole. The topics chosen for inquiry and action by the PLC during the 7 months of this study exemplify this focus: understanding English Language Learners, building a repository of inter-disciplinary units and shared knowledge, delving into student assessments and alternative assessments strategies. Upon his final interview, one participant reflected on the PLC saying:

It’s been really helpful. I have *never* felt that sense of teamwork and obviously I’m very young, but like in my previous jobs there were regular faculty meetings and department meetings, but not something that’s that sort of specific or maybe even non-specific, something that is just you know you have this forum to just talk about what you guys think is important. And you know, we start off with one topic but it doesn’t necessarily always have to be that topic. If we wanted to look at assessment for instance, which I think is a really interesting piece of project based learning, and look at how to create an integrated performance assessment. Like that model is really intriguing to me and it’s something that I’m really happy to be able to explore here. (P10)

Within my researcher analytical memoranda, I wrote extensively about the progress and processes of the professional learning community. A number of those memoranda revolved around the impact that the state of the school had on the work of the PLC. One such memo from early January, 2015 captures the challenge:

The primary restraining force for the PLC at this time is time. Time to meet, time to devote to our homework, time to follow up and follow through, time to catch up with members who could not attend a meeting—because they have no time! Our time together feels fleeting although we seem to accomplish a great deal in those thirty minutes sessions; the hectic rush to get so much done within this year’s schedule is a pressure I worry about. The PLC needs to be embedded in the life of the school. But where will we find the time?

The newness of the PLC to the middle school, combined with the limited bi-weekly, thirty minute meetings of the group make it an imperfect solution for achieving full equity for teachers as participants in decision-making processes in the seven months it has been meeting. One participant shared her perspective on the ambitious goals of the PLC in light of this limitation:

The frequency of the meetings is fine; however, many of the tasks we assign ourselves cannot be accomplished for the next meeting. Other activities and school duties conflict with the possibility of finding common work time to collaborate with teachers involved in the same task therefore a more reasonable time setting is needed. (P3)

Another participant described the schedule as “squished” and felt that the PLC, while in her opinion “necessary,” was “squished” into an already packed schedule, sometimes forcing teachers to choose between a PLC meeting and working with a student (P5). And as this participant continued, “the students won, because that’s our primary focus.” Work remains to be

done in terms of finding adequate time for the PLC to meet and to conduct research and actions in furtherance of its long-term objectives. However, the overwhelmingly positive response by teachers to their involvement in this new teacher-led initiative provides a strong rationale for continuing the PLC next year, provided attention is paid to providing adequate and dedicated time in the schedule for meeting. Participants' statements contrasting their experiences on the PLC with their experiences in traditional professional development structures further supported the value and strengths of the PLC for these teachers:

I feel like we were able to set up our own discussion, bring in our ELL specialist and talk to her and we kind of had that leeway to kind of figure out how we want to tackle the problem. It's really useful rather than being handed a speaker, who may or may not apply to our school and our kids. I think that we've been able to do that on our project-based learning topics. Rather than bringing in a speaker, we've been able to work organically and together, which has been a whole lot more constructive. . . . We've definitely started to come up with good solutions and implemented some good projects. (P8)

During her final interview, one teacher explained the importance to her of the PLC, saying, "in the four years that I have been working here, I have not seen work across the curriculum happen. This year it is happening . . . this [the PLC] has to continue. I don't think one year is going to consolidate it" (P3). This perspective on the value of the PLC was voiced across final participant interviews.

The collective contributions of participants working with a colleague or as part of the PLC framed this fourth category, which through further analysis becomes vital to an emerging grounded theory. Identifying the specific qualities and characteristics that build teacher agency,

individual and collective, round out category development in the following discussion of category five.

Category V: Identifying Qualities of Teacher Agency

The participants perceived agency and voice in decision-making capacities that were supported by school leadership. This final category emerged through early collapsing of redundant categories, by looking at phrases, ideas, and examples that participants provided which defined *HOW* they formed, built, or constructed agency. By examining *when* and *how* participants experienced opportunities to make decisions and voice opinions and ideas, I was able to see in the data the supports and structures that make teacher agency possible.

Four subcategories capture these qualities: *Freedom, Autonomy, Flexibility, Administration Support, and Teacher Actions (gerunds)*. There were many instances when participants related through examples or in answers to a specific question a scenario or set of structures that encouraged their agency. Curricular control and choice (Freedom, Autonomy, Flexibility) were top amongst these structures, as all participants reflected to some degree on the value in having control over their own curriculum. These three subcategories were collapsed further through theoretical coding, explained later in this chapter. Eighty-eight codes inform this category and are generally descriptive in nature; for example, “persistence,” “trustworthy,” “collegial respect,” “co-leader,” and “control over curriculum.” Nearly half, or 40, of the codes in this category are gerunds (verbs ending with –ing) and appear also in the second category *Making Collective Contributions*.

Freedom and autonomy supported or restrained by administrative support. The examples of agency related by all participants included the feature of administrative support for autonomy and freedom within the classroom, particularly in designing and implementing a

curriculum. A humanities teacher explained this curricular freedom, “It’s nice to have a certain structure, like you have a textbook that you use and then within that structure it’s easier using the resources that are available. . . . I can pick and choose what things work best for each group” (P10). A long-term teacher at the site put it succinctly, “We do have flexibility of how to do it [curriculum] . . . no one comes in and tells me what to do or how to run my classroom” (P1).

The freedom and autonomy enjoyed by teachers within their classroom contributed to their sense of self-efficacy, reported across the data and articulated here by a teacher who compared her work at the study site with that in a previous middle school setting:

Unlike other places I’ve been as a student teacher or teacher, we have the freedom [here] to choose our own books. That’s something I had never experienced in a school where the teachers had the freedom to choose their own novels. So, I found that to be really exciting . . . as a teacher who was new to the building last year, that it was ok to make decisions and that we were trusted. You were trusted to know what you were doing and the ability to make those decisions and have them be a good fit and at least be able to back them up. (P4)

The autonomy and agency experienced within individual classrooms, while limited to those spaces, did seem to encourage participants to hope for more agency beyond those spaces. The safe sharing zone of the PLC and frequent informal meetings amongst smaller groups of teachers appeared in participant reflections as moments when they felt increased voice in the middle school community, using phrases such as “collegial support,” “give and take,” “making time to talk,” “listened to differently,” “capitalizing on what we do,” “exciting,” and “successfully intervening” to explain their own sense of empowerment on the job. One participant described

how the PLC allowed her to revitalize and broaden the scope of a project she has done with students for 10 years by connecting with teachers in other disciplines:

Every year I know that there's something more that I can add to it and I presented it . . . different every single year, never being satisfied with how I presented that project. . . . I think the PLC planted the seed for this time of collaborative thinking and teaching to happen. We really capitalized on what we were currently doing in our classes . . . and so now we have this awesome project that even though it's the first year we're doing it, I think it's really going to become something that we continue to build. (P6)

These sentiments were echoed by six other participants in the study. Participant 6, quoted above, also relayed her feeling that her work in the school had changed significantly in terms of her relationship with official leadership of the school:

The difference this year is that not only do I feel like they've tapped into a strength of mine, but I'm part of the conversation. And part of the brainstorming, so it's not just "She's good at schedules." It's also, "How else can she be encouraged to have a voice?" And asking for my voice, which makes me feel good about my contributions. I have a growing relationship with administration and the leadership and growing trust as well. (P6)

Final interviews especially revealed the hopeful, future-thinking perspective of participants, one whose response reflected the majority of participants, saying, "We're becoming more and more involved," and "I think we're getting there; it's the first time I've felt that way in a long time" (P1). There existed a state of hopefulness that things can change, that communication can improve, and that more teacher voices could be heard.

Teacher actions. Important to identifying qualities of teacher agency is identifying specific actions that build agency. The subcategory Teacher Actions is gerund-focused and includes participant words and phrases that indicated their specific actions, such as “building,” “creating,” “writing,” “revising,” “developing,” and at least two dozen more such action words and phrases. Qualities of teacher agency are both intrinsic and extrinsic in their composition. One participant, new to the school this year, explored his own hesitancy to engage fully, explaining:

I’ve been very passive in these meetings for good or for bad. Partly because I’m still trying to figure out what’s going on and how people think and how people do things. . . . I don’t think I’ve done a great job. It’s allowed me to participate in that I’m able to hear these ideas from different people. (P2)

This contrasts with the 9 other outspoken and strident teacher-leaders in the group, who eagerly stepped forward to seize agency-building opportunities. Despite differing levels perhaps of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, participants unanimously described and enacted “autonomy” and “flexibility” in their daily interactions with each other and this researcher as well as in their membership on the PLC.

However, the “freedom” to pursue a line of inquiry and action required support from official school leadership; thus there were significant extrinsic forces at work in the development of teacher agency. The official, public support of administration for the PLC activities that took place this year helped to lend authority to the group, providing PLC members with a sense of permission to delve into topics and potential areas of inquiry and action that individual participants may have been reticent to broach on their own. One participant illustrated this, saying, “It’s not you going out on a limb; you’re going out there with your colleagues” (P9).

Sanctioned by school leadership, the PLC was condoned and supported by administration in terms of providing formal space within the schedule for meeting. Administration did not, however, have a hand in setting the agenda or otherwise influencing the scope of the work of the PLC. The middle school head was invited to visit the PLC twice during the school year to observe its functionality and to further build trust in the PLC model as an appropriate use of teacher time in the course of the school day.

Voicing concerns, for example, with a lack of structured support for international students struggling to learn English had been a delicate topic for teachers to discuss in middle school meetings prior to the launch of the PLC. However, the freedom given to the PLC at its inception to pursue topics of interest gave it permission to investigate even thorny issues. One participant reflected during her final interview her feeling that the PLC was worthwhile because:

The topics are teacher-driven; those are the concerns that we have that impact us directly. And up to now there was not a you know, an official venue for us. I mean sometimes we kind of met in the hall and had an ad hoc conversation. But this kind of formalizes it a little bit. It has us focused on something as a group. (P7)

All participants indicated the PLC increased collective agency in a way that individuals were not altogether able to achieve, one participant explaining the PLC as a:

group in which we have a voice and actually being able to address in a more formal way our petitions. Otherwise, our petitions were not considered because in the past they have been addressed individually and I suppose that in that way even that we were listened [to] we were not considered . . . but we have been this year able to address our concerns now in a more formal way and actually they have been taken into consideration in a much better way. So, we are listened to differently. (P3)

Participant 8 explained the change initiatives begun by the PLC this year, saying, “When change is imposed on the teachers there is usually pushback and so it’s nice when it comes from the teachers as more genuine and probably more likely to progress.” All participants stated that the experience this year presented a strong feeling of self-efficacy; of 10 participants, seven attributed that increase directly to the PLC while two indicated the link was present, and one indicated the PLC did not contribute to his experience in this area, citing the “newness” of the PLC to the school and feeling that it was too early in its adoption to make the connection.

PLC documentation. Analysis and mapping of PLC documentation continued to accrue during the second half of the study (meeting minutes, researcher observations, and PLC-created artifacts) and yielded 99 additional codes, which when mapped with existing categories provided triangulation of emergent themes. This triangulation of the data (interviews, PLC, and analytical memoranda) was achieved through continual cycles of comparison and revision of early findings with ongoing data generation, particularly in terms of categories II and III, with active codes such as *Collaborating*, *Building a Team*, *Acting to Transform*, *Determining Focus Areas*, *Agency-Building*.

PLC meeting minutes and observation notes were particularly rich in gerunds (verbs ending in –ing), which captured very specific actions and plans of the PLC and the progression of participants through stages of agency building. For example, the PLC minutes for the first four meetings alone included 16 gerunds occurring many times over the course of these meetings: “*creating, determining, assigning, volunteering, planning, finding, inviting, researching, looking, administering, reviewing, contributing, articulating, identifying, recapping, and confirming.*” As the PLC continued to meet and conduct its work, additional gerunds appeared in the data; these codes became increasingly vital in theory development when analysis of participant views,

experiences, and hopes at the start of the study were compared with data collected during the distributed leadership model (the PLC) used to study potential changes in voice and agency over time. The triangulation and theoretical development that followed, using surveys and final participant interviews, further built upon this work.

The Final Analysis: Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical coding is a method of grounded theory sampling used in this study as a final step in the analysis process to further explicate the properties of categories and propose a theory *grounded* in the lived process of study participants (Charmaz, 2014, p. 345). This coding method tests emerging categories and themes for validity and saturation by gathering additional information about what has been observed or analyzed to assess the “properties, boundaries, and relevance” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 212) of categories. Theoretical sampling was achieved through the use of mid-study surveys and final participant interviews, which further illuminated two central, or core, themes and revealed a theory at work across the data. Figure 3 represents the six stages of data analysis, beginning with initial interview and document coding and moving through stages of coding and analysis to a proposed theory. See Figure 3, Coding analysis process.

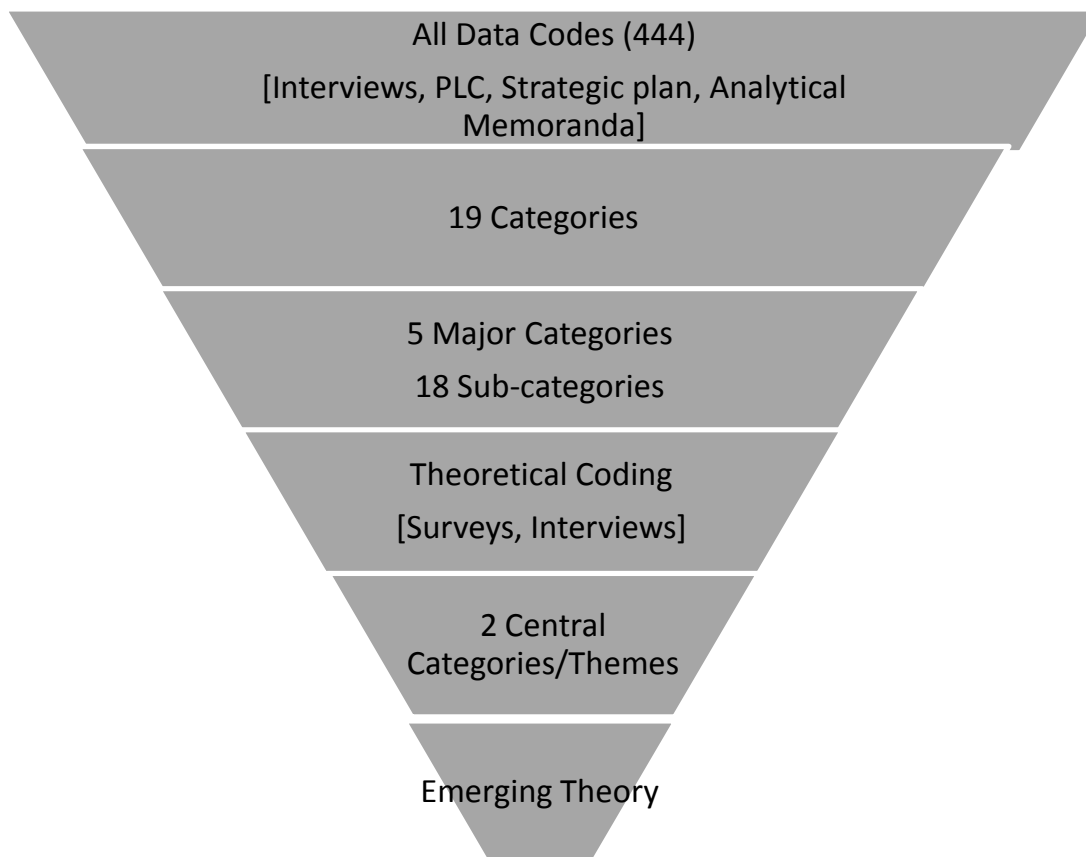


Figure 3. Coding analysis process.

Analysis of Data

Mid-study survey. The survey questions were developed through examination of the codes and categories of first round interviews, PLC notes and observations, as well as researcher analytical memoranda, with close attention given to participant language (codes) as a way of designing questions that focused on the emerging themes of *competing demands*, *identification of teacher agency in practice*, *confronting dead ends*, *making collective contributions*, and *working within the status quo*. The survey instrument specifically assessed the effect of the PLC as a mechanism for distributing leadership amongst teachers and further gauging participant perspectives on the experience of belonging to the PLC. Mid-study surveys yielded four primary

findings, all of which supported to varying degrees the theoretical process outlined later in this chapter. These four findings emerged from unanimous indications who completed the survey (one participant did not complete his survey). See Figure 4, Mid-study survey findings.

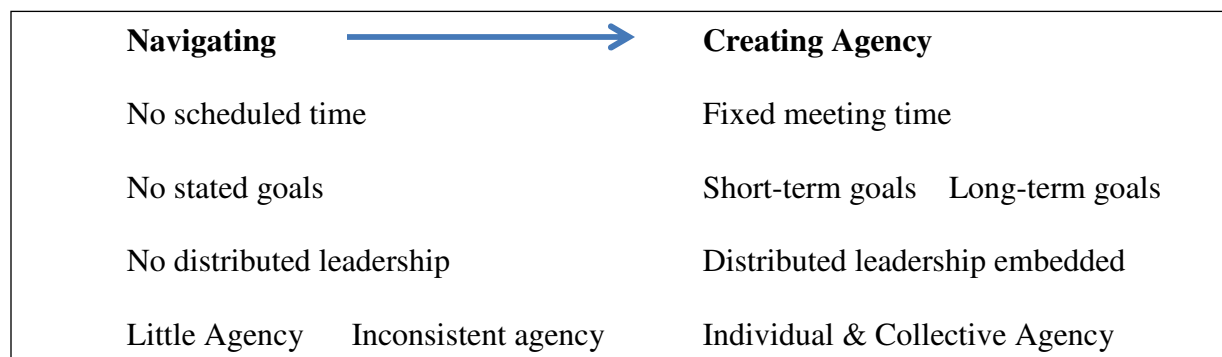


Figure 4. Mid-study survey findings.

Survey finding 1. Participants viewed the PLC meeting time embedded in the school day as valuable and necessary; it was time not available elsewhere in the schedule.

Survey finding 2. Participants viewed the PLC as a mechanism for producing long-term goals over short-term goals.

Survey finding 3. Participants viewed the structure of the PLC as providing a mechanism to distribute some leadership from administration to teachers, particularly as to curriculum and program decisions.

Survey finding 4. Participants viewed the PLC as mechanism for building individual and collective agency.

Final participant interviews. Final participant interviews, conducted at the conclusion of the study period, further supported findings by providing triangulation of the data and achieving saturation of categories and robustness of the proposed theory. Final interviews confirmed parameters and scope of categories, provided triangulation of findings, and enriched

and provided depth to the data analysis carried out in first round interviews, PLC documentation, analytical memoranda, and mid-study surveys.

In addition to triangulating findings, final interviews provided a tool for measuring participants' sense of their own agency and voice in the school. On a continuum ranging from "very little" to "a great deal" participants were asked to discuss where they would place themselves in terms of personal agency and voice in the school at two different time periods: August 2014 and February 2015. Figure 5 presents the range of participant responses on this continuum. Where five participants had indicated "very little" agency in August 2014, before the study began, zero participants reported feeling "very little" agency in February 2015. Their discussion of moving one standard deviation forward on the continuum to "some" agency was framed by the power of the PLC to provide a mechanism and motivation for working to increase their agency in the school. No participants indicated a shift away from a place of agency. Two additional participants indicated a movement along the continuum, one moving from "some" to "an average amount" and another moving two standard deviations from "some" to "consistently."

These results suggest that the PLC has potential for significantly increasing teachers' sense of agency and voice in this school. As several participants in this study also noted in their final interviews, the PLC is still "new" and "as we get more comfortable, it probably will get better and better" (P10) over time. The PLC is a work-in-progress, as one participant considered when reflecting on the work begun and what lies ahead: "We have to start looking at things in a different way and it's not going to change in one year. We're just setting the outlines of what we want it to be and trying to drive it forward one step at a time" (P2). See Figure 5, Agency and voice perception growth.

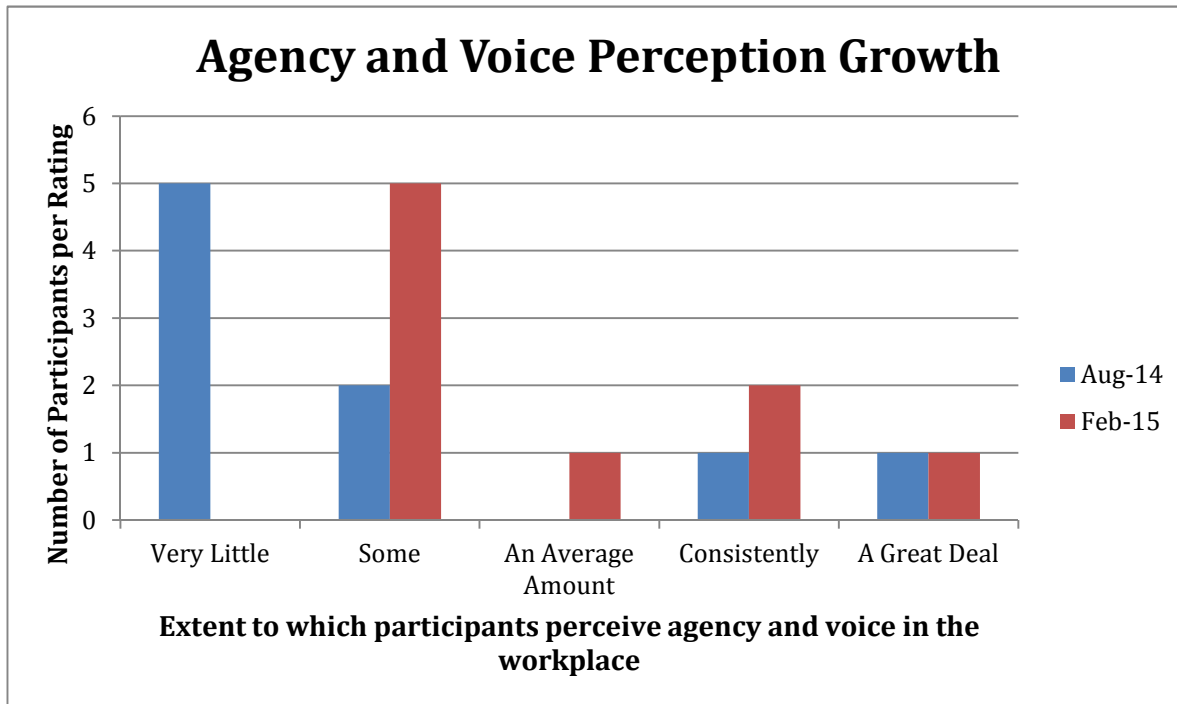


Figure 5. Agency and voice perception growth.

The theoretical method of coding, utilizing mid-study surveys and final interviews, enabled me to employ strategic, targeted, and systematic inquiry into categories already identified and further, develop the properties of each category, ultimately providing the depth of analysis to identify relationships and connections between them. Theoretical sampling required a very close examination of the data for concepts and ideas that did not fit within existing categories, or which fit within multiple categories, an indication of redundancy that aided in collapsing, refining, and then reducing five categories to two core themes, which generated the emerging theory.

The five validated categories were compared with survey findings and final interviews for similarity, difference, boundaries, relevance, and saturation of ideas and experiences. From this coding emerged two central themes on which the emerging theory is based: *Navigating*

Competing Demands and *Creating Teacher Agency*. Through continued analytical memo writing and theoretical coding, the proposed theory was carefully articulated. This theory suggests that there is a distinctively disruptive process in the development of agency and voice for classroom teachers.

Achieving Agency through Disruption: A Process Theory

Disruption became a guiding theme transcending the two core themes, revealing a four-step process of teacher transformation: *Navigating*, *Confronting*, *Disrupting*, and *Creating*. The Greek term *autopoiesis* means self-making and may be used to describe renewal and creation within individual organisms as well as within large organizations (Wheatley, 2006, p. 20). Sometimes, disruption of the status quo is needed in order to generate autopoiesis in school communities. Wheatley describes the origin of disruption as coming “from places and sources people never thought to look before” (p. 83). Teachers may not always have been invited or able to lend their voices to the important conversations taking place beyond their classrooms, yet they often have special knowledge and expertise which can inform and support changes and reforms initiated by school leadership.

Early in the study, one participant described teachers not as agents, but as “promoters” of an agenda determined elsewhere. In her final interview, she described a momentum shift that allows teachers to achieve agency as a group. Teachers in this study also reported feeling isolated when working without opportunities for connecting and collaborating with their colleagues. Collective disruption creates agency through group representation, power in numbers, and united voice. The agency experienced collectively by participants in the study was demonstrated by the interaction of causes, processes, and outcomes observed across the data corpus.

Figure 6 (agency through disruption cycle), demonstrates this process of change in its simplest form. The first three movements in the process (navigating, confronting, and disrupting) are requisite for “creating” agency. This process frames my core category, *Agency through Disruption*, and forms the proposed theory:

A teacher’s sense of agency and voice in the decision-making processes that affect his or her daily practice may be determined by that teacher’s ability to move through a change process from a position of relative powerlessness to a place of power through disruption.

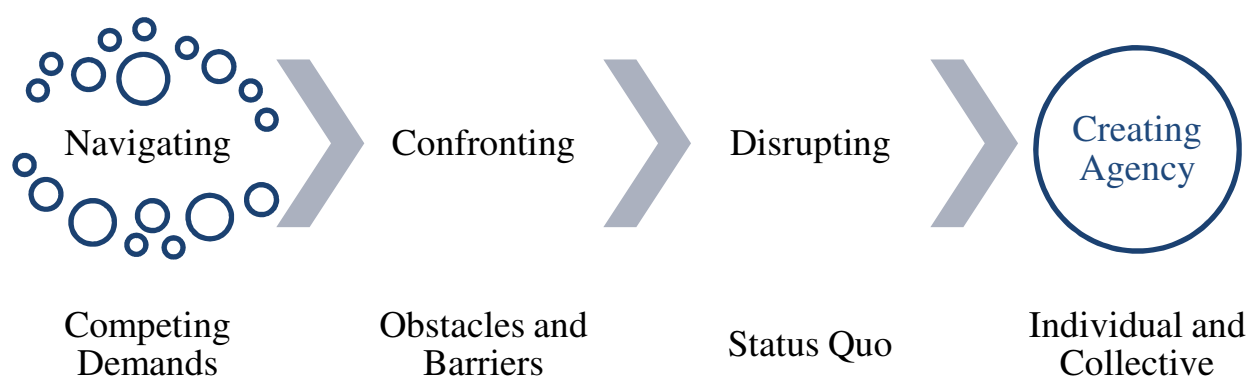


Figure 6. Agency through the disruption cycle.

Participants shared their typical experiences of trying to *navigate* through the competing demands of the workplace (limited time for collaboration and contributing to school reform activities, heavy workload, additional mandatory uncompensated duties, conflicting or inconsistent administrative support for their ideas and suggestions, conflicting stakeholder demands, and increasing expectations for excellence without necessary professional development or structural support). All participants related at least several examples of moving beyond navigation to a stance of persistence in order to achieve a professional goal or complete a desired task. These persistent teachers desired more input, voice, and agency in their workplace and described specific actions they took to *confront* obstacles or dead ends. (Dead ends included lack

of input on issues of professional significance, token input, lack of communication from official school leadership, and fear of what may happen when they do take action.)

These participants deliberately confronted such roadblocks in very creative ways, most often in colleague groups of varying size and over a period of time. The confrontation phase takes great persistence and determination to stay the course. The confrontation phase led to a *disruption* of the status quo, requisite for the genesis or *creation* of true agency. Participants related feelings of empowerment and respect by demonstrating perseverance, committing to the long view, and working hard to find pockets of opportunity amidst obstacles, creating collective and individual agency through creative disruption of the status quo.

Process phase I: Navigating competing demands. The daily navigation to meet competing demands and pressures tends to occur in isolation, with teachers experiencing the struggle alone. This phase is marked by the absence of agency or voice on the part of the teacher. Without permanent structures in place within the daily schedule of the school, individual teachers have few opportunities to build collective voice or agency to confront perceived issues in need of change or improvement in the school. Their examples reveal the reality for these participants, most of whom felt an acute sense of isolation and lack of voice when navigating the complexity and rush in daily practice. Participants also frequently referenced the physical distance between themselves and administration as a causative factor for out of sync expectations. Without proximity to the challenges within a classroom and the complexity and confusion wrought by competing expectations and increasing demands on teachers' time, 9 of ten participants felt that administrators could not fully grasp the scope of their challenges.

All participants spent a great deal of energy and time in the negotiation phase, navigating competing demands within limited time, amidst oft-conflicting expectations and inconsistent

agreement between administration and faculty as to needs and outcomes. When intrinsically motivated and supported by colleagues, however, participants took action to confront obstacles to better workplace outcomes and job satisfaction, and to create a more democratized organization.

Process phase II: Confronting obstacles. Participants in the study overwhelmingly relayed that confronting obstacles to their agency was the norm. No participants in the study refrained completely from confronting, challenging, or attempting to transcend a dead end. The PLC model of distributed, or shared, leadership provided collective agency and will to confront issues that some participants felt a reluctance to tackle on their own. Final interviews across the participant group revealed the motivation to move from simply navigating through myriad challenges to confronting them comes initially from within, while sustaining motivation to see a challenge through was supported in group settings. Working with another teacher on a mutual concern and working on the larger PLC group provided teachers with opportunities to build agency and voice by improving and increasing communication and removing or ameliorating fear of taking action. Teachers entered a phase of disrupting the status quo as they moved from frequently feeling they could contribute only “token input” to making meaningful and sustained contributions to middle school and larger school-wide decisions.

Process phase III: Disrupting the status quo. Disrupting the status quo is at the heart of the work of the PLC and of the teacher-leader who possesses agency in his or her professional work. Collective power provided participants with representation in decisions regarding international student support, scope and sequence of inter-disciplinary projects, broad curricular reforms, and logistical discussions regarding improving the school-wide schedule. Responding to their own perspectives that a lack of leadership and resistance to change existed within the

school community, these participants were able to unite and embrace a model of teacher-leadership that empowered them to make suggestions and take action within the middle school by altering a multitude of curricular programs, including a newly-launched capstone research project that encompassed the entire eighth grade study body and faculty.

Language used by participants in describing how they disrupted the state of things at the site revealed the growing sense of agency they possessed as they continued to work together: *challenging, strategizing, questioning, researching, recommending, advocating, and implementing*. As participants disrupted the conventional practices in the school through their collective contributions, their individual sense of efficacy and agency grew as well.

Process phase IV: Creating agency. What does teacher agency look like? At the end of the study, participants reflected on the aspects of their individual and collective practice that made them feel effective. The presence or absence of a strong sense of self-efficacy was important to all participants in the study. Characteristics of agency emerged across the data, echoed by participants regardless of gender, years teaching, subjects taught, or any other demographic criteria gathered. Participants identified the following criteria as vital to creating and maintaining teacher agency: being part of a collective decision-making body, enjoying freedom and autonomy to make professional decisions impacting daily practice, being flexible enough to adjust to shifting needs and demands, and having consistent support from administration and colleagues.

Figure 7 provides an illustration of this process of agency development, with each step embedded within a larger framework that is the daily life of a teacher. The figure includes categories from rounds of data analysis as they speak to each step in the process.



Figure 7. Agency development process.

Theory Generation

Grounded theory is unique in that data builds theory while many other methods of both qualitative and quantitative research operate from within a hypothesis-proving framework. Hypothesis building was vital in this study, for it allowed participant voices to construct the analysis and ultimately the hypothesis (theory) that has emerged. Saldana (2013) suggested that one may evaluate the validity of an emerging theory by asking three characteristic questions:

Does it predict and control action through an if-then logic?

Does it explain how and/or why something happens by stating its causes?

Does it provide insights and guidance for improving an aspect of social life?

The proposed theory meets these three criteria. If teachers are given logistical support in the form of time and administrative positive regard for their work, they can accomplish important tasks to improve the school climate and student outcomes through a focus on mutual issues of curricular concern and program development. The theory suggests that teacher agency is a process, which begins with disenfranchisement and proceeds through a series of individual and communal actions to a position of power and voice. The theory further posits that teachers' sense of job satisfaction, comfort with colleagues, and their level of involvement in the life and growth of the middle school are improved through the process of navigation through to creation of teacher agency. The PLC figured prominently as a tool to engender group agency and build individual sense of self-efficacy and positive self-regard.

A teacher's sense of agency and voice in the decision-making processes that affect his or her daily practice may be determined by that teacher's ability to move through a change process from a position of relative powerlessness to a place of power through disruption.

Chapter Summary

This study was conducted in order to assess a model of distributed leadership as a mechanism for providing classroom teachers with opportunities to build agency and voice without leaving their positions as classroom teachers for positions in administration. The study sought to gauge participant feelings of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and sense of increased democratization in the workplace in response to the distributed leadership experience. Three research questions framed the inquiry: how do teachers view themselves as change agents; to what extent does the professional learning community (PLC) model of distributed leadership provide them with agency and voice; and how do teachers experience this process of shared leadership?

The methodology utilized an emergent grounded theory qualitative design in order to generate a theory “grounded” in participant language. There was also an action research component to this study, for I am the researcher as well as a participant eager to develop fellow teacher-researchers and to address inequities experienced in my workplace and professional experience. Through four methods of qualitative coding, triangulation of findings using mid-study surveys, end-of-study interviews, and researcher analytical memo writing throughout the study, the findings and theory proposed have been validated as to this site and the experiences of these participants. While findings cannot be broadly generalized, the process of PLC membership and action by which these participants experienced growth in agency, feelings of self-efficacy, voice, positive organizational commitment, and increase in job satisfaction may be duplicated for study in another middle school setting.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative research study was informed primarily by transformative leadership theory (Shields, 2010) and guided by three research questions: how do teachers view themselves as change agents; to what extent does the professional learning community (PLC) model of distributed leadership provide them with agency and voice; and how do teachers experience this process of shared leadership? The study utilized an emergent grounded theory qualitative design in order to generate a theory “grounded” in participant language (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2013).

The findings from this qualitative action research study suggest that a model of distributed leadership (the professional learning community) can provide a mechanism for classroom teachers to build individual and collective agency and voice without leaving their positions as classroom teachers for positions in administration. Such findings provide a step toward meeting the salient goals of the site’s strategic plan, which outlined goals for improved teacher inclusion in reforming the programs and curricula of the school. A process of disruptive creation was observed as teachers moved from navigating demands and obstacles to more fully participating in school decision making to confronting and then disrupting the status quo in the workplace (Wheatley, 2006). This process created a sense of agency and inclusion, which led to increased feelings of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and increased democratization in the workplace.

The data included two rounds of participant interviews, mid-study surveys, PLC documentation, and researcher-generated analytical memoranda. Four methods of coding were

used to analyze and triangulate findings, providing a rich and nuanced analysis of the perspectives and experiences of study participants (Saldana, 2013). Initial coding revealed 5 primary categories and 18 subcategories to represent participant experiences and perspectives. Through iterations of analysis, these five categories were compared for similarity, difference, boundaries, relevance, and saturation of salient ideas and experiences.

From this continual cycle of coding, two core themes emerged across the data:

Navigating Competing Demands and *Creating Teacher Agency*. Theoretical coding, in which the sampling of participants to test validity of findings, further refined these two themes, resulting in an emerging theory that posited that a disruptive process occurs in the creation of agency and voice by classroom teachers (Charmaz, 2014). Participants begin the process by working in the status quo, amidst the state of the school as it exists and in relative isolation as they practice within the classroom. The movement into a phase of confronting demands and obstacles represents a second stage in the process, when teachers challenge the obstacles and hindrances they face, often with only moderate success. When teachers join forces with others, they enter the third step in the process, disrupting the status quo by challenging assumptions and presenting alternatives in order to successfully counter obstacles, barriers, or demands that impacted their success with students and sense of self-efficacy. The final stage in the process is the enjoyment of agency and voice in the workplace, a conscious recognition that disenfranchisement has been replaced with some measure of control beyond their immediate classrooms. These findings suggest that teacher agency requires a disruption of traditional systems of power and relationships within schools by essentially flattening some of the hierarchical infrastructures that blocked their access to power. The proposed theory below captures this process as experienced by participants in this study:

A teacher's sense of agency and voice in the decision-making processes that affect his or her daily practice may be determined by that teacher's ability to move through a change process from a position of relative powerlessness to a place of power through disruption.

This emergent grounded theory posits that group influences, including the distributed leadership model of the professional learning community (PLC), can figure prominently into the development of a creative disruption by building collegial networks that produce improved feelings of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and a more democratized school community (Borman & Dowling 2008; Farris-Berg, 2014; Shields, 2010). Teacher actions, particularly those undertaken in the collective (PLC) demonstrated that agency-building responses to obstacles by disrupting these roadblocks. Transformative leadership theory (Shields, 2010) provided the rationale for its action research goal of further democratizing the school community by challenging inequity and injustice in the workplace. Examining teacher perspectives on their work and the changing nature of their leadership through this lens of associational justice provided a mechanism for evaluating distributed leadership amongst educators in this middle school community.

Transformation became possible through disruption over the 8-month duration of this study. The shared leadership model employed here resulted in a significant change to the status quo, with heretofore marginalized voices contributing to decision-making processes, creating a disruption, what Wheatley (2006) called “a state of disequilibrium” (p. 78) that is a requisite condition for transformation. A significant change from the status quo, with new voices contributing to decision-making processes that had not included input from others, creates “a state of non-equilibrium” a sense of being “off balance” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 78). This disequilibrium is precisely the condition necessary for growth to take place.

The PLC mechanism for distributing leadership allowed teachers to move collectively beyond navigating competing demands to discussing them in a safe environment, designing interventions and methods to confront and disrupt barriers, providing them with a deeper sense of agency and voice in their workplace. Valuing the contributions of all, celebrating small successes along the way, and demonstrating a clear appreciation for the value brought to the change effort by all middle school teachers were key components to solidifying, or anchoring, this change initiative (Kotter, 2012, p. 166).

Recommendations: Implications for Practice

The five implications for practice discussed below represent understandings developed in this study of the PLC model of distributed leadership in this study. These recommendations reflect the practicalities, pitfalls, and unforeseen possibilities experienced by participants, including this participant-researcher over the course of this 8-month study.

Schedules/logistics: Keys to anchoring distributed leadership. The school schedule had a great impact on the meetings of the PLC and by extension, individual participants. Meetings with school administration prior to the launch of the study involved embedding time within the school day for PLC meetings. Despite anchoring the PLC this way with a fixed time in the school schedule, participants still felt torn at times between attending a meeting of the PLC and other pressing responsibilities. Participants in this study all agreed that the PLC met needs they had as professionals and has proven to be an important addition to an already busy schedule. As one explained, “It has been very important; we need to continue with it. I think honestly, it’s made me a better teacher. It’s made me a better colleague, because I think about what other people are doing in their classrooms” (P6). Yet, 6 of 10 participants indicated that the school schedule impeded their full involvement, despite a fixed meeting time for the PLC.

A proposed significant change to next year's school schedule at the study site will require revisiting where the PLC will fit into our bi-weekly rotation. This aspect of PLC planning must be a priority for anchoring the team within the school community. Such anchoring is vital for ensuring this mode of distributing leadership to front line employees (teachers) can become embedded within the logistical structures of the school (Kotter, 2012; Somech, 2010).

Maintaining organic nature of shared leadership. Maintaining flexibility to acknowledge and honor teacher-leadership is vital to the success and impact of a professional learning community (Best, 2014; Caudle et al., 2014). Utilizing a sparse agenda allows space for developing inquiry and action items collectively while keeping open to the fluidity that is the dynamic middle school community. Opportunities for inquiry can emerge rather suddenly, as happened in this study with the spontaneity demonstrated by participants who crafted a response to a broad curricular mandate by creatively weaving their respective disciplines and expertise into a new program of study. Maintaining responsiveness to disruption and welcoming stance toward change became standards of practice for this PLC.

A hallmark of this PLC was its adaptability to teacher needs as they emerged over the course of the study; remaining flexible to adjust to such needs allows the PLC to function fluidly and organically. Responsivity to emerging needs and the flexibility to alter focus and energies to attend those needs creates a team uniquely positioned to work deliberately and effectively on a variety of matters affecting student and school outcomes.

Administration and teachers: Recognizing perceptions as constructs of reality. An unexpected insight occurred when examining the data in terms of participants' perceptions of school administration. Participants initially indicated feeling blocked and impeded by administration when desiring participation in decisions regarding curricular or program changes.

Upon further discussion with participants, it became clear that school administration did not regularly block access to teacher participation based on a desire to keep teachers from being involved in decision-making. In fact, official school leadership relied on teachers to take on many roles, perhaps too many roles to feel empowered in any one. Rather, the logistics and procedures designed *by* administration made the disenfranchisement of teachers a consequence of the day-to-day operation of the school. Such phenomena have been observed in other schools and workplaces settings (Berry et al., 2013; Borman & Dowling, 2008). A participant discussed feeling stuck due to feeling she could not participate in an activity that was technically-speaking “open” to her, simply because her schedule contained no prep period. Her response was echoed by other participants who perceived being blocked from enjoying fuller agency and voice in school changes and initiatives.

When teachers are saddled with multiple, time-consuming duties and responsibilities in addition to their primary teaching roles, they are excluded from participating in other reform efforts or initiatives (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Shields, 2010). Attention to the structures that frame daily practice—practice—ancillary duties, course loads, and schedules—can aid in identifying the unintentional barriers to fuller participation by teachers in the many aspects of school decision-making to which they would like to participate. Such attention to these logistical structures may result in the added benefit of improving communication between administrators and teachers, thus building stronger, more collegial relationships that will further foster the shared leadership dynamic.

Bank on broad interest. Great interest and eagerness in the PLC was shown by staff in other divisions of the school, a phenomenon that was not anticipated so early in the process. Within weeks of the launch of the PLC, inquiries from lower and upper divisions began to arrive

via email, in hallway conversations, and in department meetings. Study participants described their colleagues becoming interested when hearing that there was a space and time allotted for “teacher talk” and “having your voice heard, meeting regularly, sharing ideas” (P1).

In final interviews, several participants suggested opening the PLC beyond the middle school division next year. The potential is great for strengthening vertical integration and broadening cross-curricular discussions and expanding the use of this distributed leadership model beyond one school division (Berry et al., 2013; NAIS 2007; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013a, 2013b). Building strong networks of teacher-leaders across disciplines and divisions can further empower them with voice and agency in the daily life of their school.

Comradery and community-building. The degree to which participants felt the PLC meetings built comradery and community in the middle school was very strong. It was expected that the PLC may contribute to making the middle school team a bit stronger, it was not predicted that all 10 participants would indicate comradery as one of the strongest aspects of the experience. Several participants extrapolated from the community-building that occurred within the PLC a sense of individual growth in agency, motivation, and desire for even more participation (Campbell, 2014; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). A participant explained the extent to which the PLC has impacted his sense of job satisfaction and commitment to the school, saying:

I would say to a good degree. Even to a great degree I would say. Good to great. It just makes you feel like you're part of a team and that you have a voice and I think that's an important thing for professionals to feel because we don't you know our job is not as cut and dry as some others. (P10)

Implications for Future Research

Continued study of teacher perceptions regarding their experiences with distributed leadership, particularly as it impacts their sense of agency and voice, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, will require additional data collection and analysis over a longer period of time. The PLC model utilized in this study has become embedded in the study site and will provide a means for additional study in this setting. Similar studies at other middle schools may provide a structure to study the proposed theory elsewhere.

Scheduling adequate time for teachers to meet collectively needs to be deliberately addressed and reassessed as the school year progresses; this aspect of the study became a concern despite the fact that a fixed meeting time was embedded in the school schedule. Easing some teacher duties and creating other pockets of time for meeting with students can help to alleviate the stresses faced by teachers who wish to participate fully in each meeting of a PLC but feel compelled to miss some meetings for issues of great importance, such as working with students. Teachers should not be forced to choose between attending a meeting of their professional learning community and working with a student; such forced dilemma negates the very goals of the PLC as a structure to support teachers in their work to improve student outcomes.

Further study of the distributed leadership model as it is embraced or restrained in schools may develop our understanding of its merits as a method for building classroom teacher agency and voice. Additional study of the limitations of distributed leadership in schools can build upon the work presented in this study (particularly as to scheduling and logistical support) and that of Wright (2008), whose concise critique of the distributed leadership model employed

in schools provides an outline of the merits and pitfalls of this method of shared leadership in schools.

Reflections on the Role of Participant-Researcher

As a participant-researcher in the study, I remained vigilant regarding my status and my potential for bias. My interactions with participants, involvement in the work of the PLC, and processing of data through analytical memo writing and coding activities nonetheless filtered each document, conversation, and label within the body of data (Adler & Adler, as cited in Saldana, 2013). My position as researcher and participant is, however, a hallmark of the qualitative methods used in this study. Saldana (2013) wrote:

For the individual researcher, assigning symbolic meanings (i.e., a code) to data is an act of personal signature. And since we each most likely perceive the social world differently, we will therefore experience it differently, interpret it differently, document it differently, code it differently, analyze it differently, and write about it differently.

“Objectivity” has always been an ideal yet contrived and virtually impossible goal to achieve in quantitative research. So why should qualitative inquiry carry its baggage? We do not claim to be objective because the notion is a false god (p. 39).

Indeed, my goal was not to remove myself from the study, but to be part of it while remaining cognizant of that duality in which I resided for its duration. The use of frequent member checks, peer review, and constant cycles of researcher reflexivity in the form of journal writing helped to mitigate, but could not remove, the potential for bias. As Saldana and others have pointed out, it is imperative within this methodology and framework that I remained present in the data, and that I interpreted it through my lens and experiences. As a colleague of the participants in this study and one keenly familiar with the setting, I was positioned uniquely to

conduct a study steeped in knowledge about a people and a place. This closeness creates a model of case study that can reveal a depth of insight not possible for the researcher for whom all variables, sites, and participants are unknowns. I term this the *Close Case Study*, for it reveals much to the researcher about herself as she learns about those participating in her study.

The salient goal of this study was to better understand the factors that impact classroom-based teachers' sense of agency and voice. By exploring participants' perspectives and views as they engaged with a model of distributed leadership, a nuanced understanding of transformative teacher-leadership was developed. A process of creation through disruption was observed; it begins when teachers move beyond navigating competing demands to confronting obstacles to their participation in decision-making. These teachers became more powerfully positioned, thus enjoying more agency, voice, and self-confidence in the workplace as they worked collectively to affect fundamental change in the organization by disrupting frameworks of knowing and traditional hierarchical operations. In so doing, these participants took action to continue the transformative work of effecting deep and equitable change in order to further democratize the school community.

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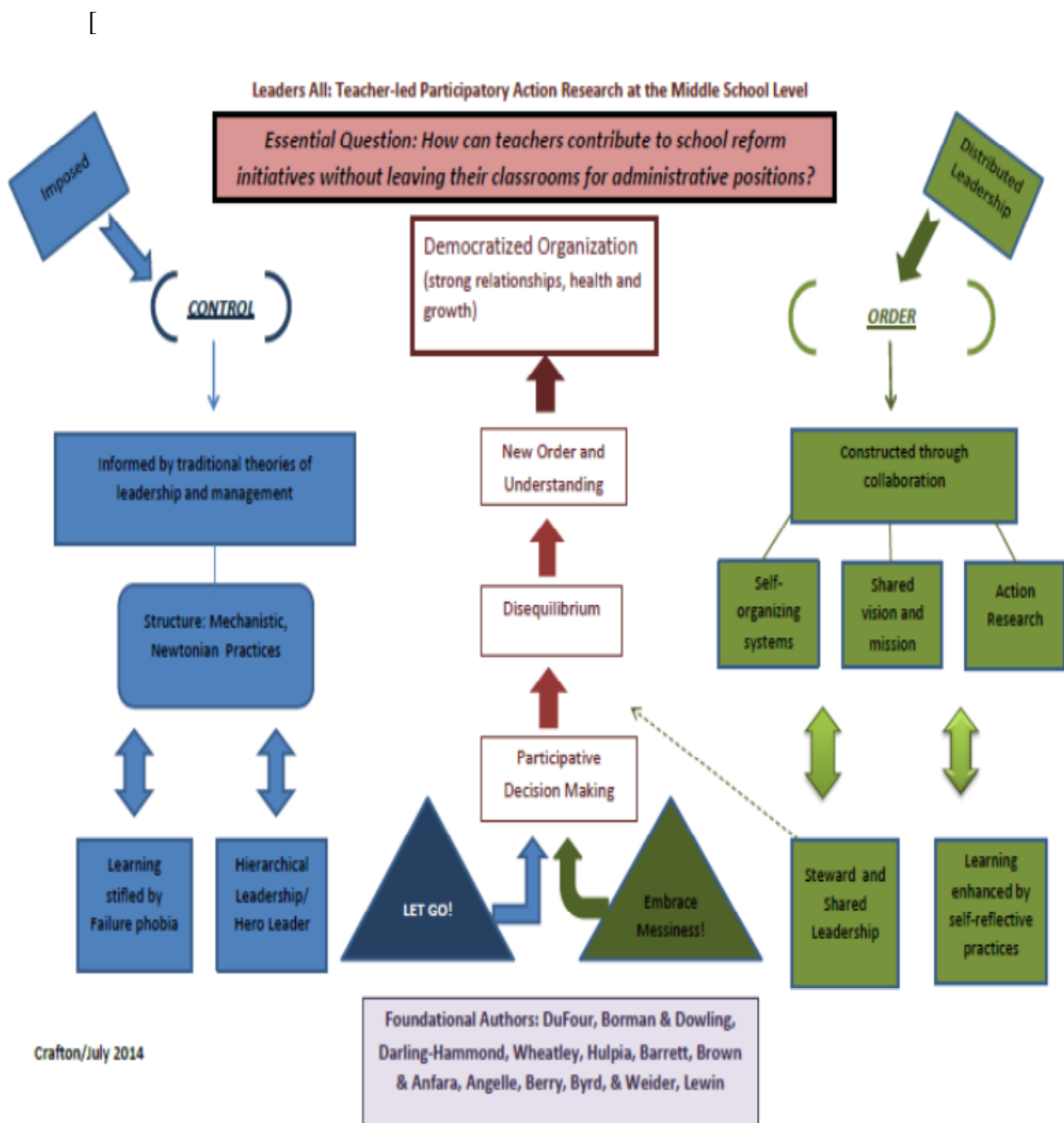
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APPENDIX A

TEACHER CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCHOOL REFORM



APPENDIX B

INVITATION TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

August 2014

Dear (Colleague Name),

As a partner in our school community, I am writing to invite you to contribute to an action research study to examine teacher participation in professional learning communities. You are uniquely positioned to contribute to this study as a member of the school's teaching faculty. In our work to move forward the mission and vision of our school, we are presented with many change initiatives and often seek ways to be more involved in the implementation of reform efforts. This study will thoroughly examine the professional learning community model of distributed leadership and how teachers perceive their participation in this model. The following information is provided for your review in considering participation in this study.

Project: Teacher-led Participatory Action Research at the Middle School Level

Purpose: This purpose of this qualitative participative action study is to document teacher perceptions of their efficacy in a distributed leadership framework (professional learning community) to better develop teacher leadership opportunities in schools so that classroom teachers do not feel compelled to leave the classroom for administrative positions in order to participate more fully in school reforms and changes. The study is designed to examine the impact of shared leadership on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and the democratization of school communities.

Procedures: Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. The study will consist of two interviews (one at the start and one at the conclusion of the study), and meetings of a professional learning community (PLC) to be held once during each rotation. The study will run from September thru December, 2014.

Confidentiality: Your privacy is to be fully protected during and after the conclusion of this study. The researcher is fully committed to protecting your privacy and meeting all ethical and professional standards as required by law and in accordance with the University of New England's *Policies, Procedures, and Guidance on Research with Human Subjects* (March, 2010/Rev. August, 2010).

Questions: Should you have any questions about this study and/or your participation, you may contact the principal researcher directly via email at ccrafton@une.edu or via phone at 732-986-7800 or you may contact Dr. Michelle Collay, Director at mcollay@une.edu or via phone at 207-602-2010. Thank you for your valuable participation in this research study.

Sincerely,

Corinna Crafton, Principal Investigator

University of New England Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title:

Leaders All: Teacher-led Participatory Action Research at the Middle School Level

Principal Investigator(s):

Corinna Crafton, M.Ed.

University of New England

Doctoral Candidate, EdD

Advisor(s):Dr. Ella Benson; Dr. Michelle Collay, Dr. Debora Clifford

You have been invited to participate in a study that documents teacher perceptions of their efficacy in distributed leadership frameworks. In this study, the professional learning community (PLC) is the model of distributed leadership to be examined. Approximately 16 teachers will participate in the PLC during this study.

The goal of this study is to contribute to development of teacher leadership opportunities in school so that classroom teachers do not feel compelled to leave the classroom for administrative positions in order to participate more fully in school reforms and changes. The

study is designed to examine the impact of shared leadership on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and the democratization of school communities.

The purpose of today's interview is to explore your experiences as a classroom teacher, particularly in terms of change initiatives and program implementation over the past year.

Please read this form. You may also request that the form be read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision. You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete by speaking with the principal investigator, Corinna Crafton (ccrafton@Une.edu, 732-986-7800).

As we prepare for our interview today, please be advised of the following:

- You can decide whether or not you want to participate; kindly, make your decision within two weeks of receipt of this invitation.
- Your participation is voluntary, and your responses are confidential.
- Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of New England or your employer.

- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.

- If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

- During our time together, you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences as a classroom teacher. You may decide to withdraw your participation at any time, and you are not obligated to answer any question that you are not comfortable with.

- Your name, institution's name, and all identifying information will be removed, in accordance with Federal Laws surrounding student records. No individually identifiable information will be collected.

- Today's conversation will be recorded and transcribed. A transcription service may be retained to assist with transcription of interviews. All notes and recordings will be securely locked and only accessible to the researcher. At the conclusion of this research, all recordings and transcripts will be destroyed.
 - Please note that the IRB at the University of New England may request to review research materials.

- There are no foreseeable risks or hazards to your participation in this study.
- The location of today's interview is mutually agreeable and in a location that assures a level of privacy.
- At the conclusion of the study, you will receive a small gift card; there are no other financial benefits to your participation in this research. Your participation will, however, indirectly inform the independent education community of important practices.
- The results of this research will be used for a doctoral research study at the University of New England. It may be submitted for further publication as a journal article or as a presentation.

A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least three years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location off school property that only the principal investigator will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.

If you would like a copy of the completed research project, you may contact the principal researcher directly.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call:

Olgun Guvench, M.D.

Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review

Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu

You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant's signature/Legally authorized representative Date

Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Researcher's signature

Date

Printed name

SUPPLEMENTAL CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title:

Leaders All: Teacher-led Participatory Action Research at the Middle School Level

Principal Investigator(s):

Corinna Crafton, M.Ed.

University of New England

Doctoral Candidate, EdD

Advisor(s): Ella Benson, Ed.D., Michelle Collay, Ph.D., Debora Clifford, Ed.D

You have been participating in a study that documents teacher perceptions of their efficacy in distributed leadership frameworks. You have been interviewed by the researcher once in order to learn more about your experiences and perceptions regarding teacher agency and voice. A brief follow-up interview is being conducted today in order to clarify and refine information collected during the first interview.

Please read this form. You may also request that the form be read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision. You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete by speaking with the principal investigator, Corinna Crafton (ccrafton@Une.edu, 732-986-7800).

As we prepare for our interview today, please be advised of the following:

- You can decide whether or not you want to participate; kindly, make your decision within two weeks of receipt of this invitation.
- Your participation is voluntary, and your responses are confidential.
- Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of New England or your employer.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
- If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- During our time together, you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences as a classroom teacher. You may decide to withdraw your participation at any time, and you are not obligated to answer any question that you are not comfortable with.

- Your name, institution's name, and all identifying information will be removed, in accordance with Federal Laws surrounding student records. No individually identifiable information will be collected.

- Today's conversation will be recorded and transcribed. A transcription service may be retained to assist with transcription of interviews. All notes and recordings will be securely locked and only accessible to the researcher. At the conclusion of this research, all recordings and transcripts will be destroyed.
 - Please note that the IRB at the University of New England may request to review research materials.

- There are no foreseeable risks or hazards to your participation in this study.

- The location of today's interview is mutually agreeable and in a location that assures a level of privacy.

- At the conclusion of the study, you will receive a small gift card; there are no other financial benefits to your participation in this research. Your participation will, however, indirectly inform the independent education community of important practices.

- The results of this research will be used for a doctoral research study at the University of New England. It may be submitted for further publication as a journal article or as a presentation.

A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least three years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location off school property that only the principal investigator will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.

If you would like a copy of the completed research project, you may contact the principal researcher directly.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call:

Olgun Guvench, M.D.

Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review

Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu

You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant's signature/Legally authorized representative Date

Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Researcher's signature Date

Printed name

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions–Round One (September 2014)

1. Please state your name and position within the school.
2. How long have you been employed in this position?
3. How long have you been working within K-12 education?
4. Please review the list of activities provided (Document A) and circle any activities with which you have had a planning, leading, or chairperson role.
5. Briefly explain your role in each activity you have circled on Document A.
6. Describe your current involvement in school-wide or middle-school level decision making processes that impact your classroom activities.
7. Describe your involvement in decision making regarding technology use in the classroom.
8. Describe your involvement in decision making regarding curricula and programs.
9. In what way(s) have you been involved in decision making that affects your daily classroom practice?
10. Do you feel you have a voice in decisions that impact your work?
11. Do you feel you have a voice that impacts the growth and direction of the school?
12. Do you feel teachers are agents of change in the school?
13. How do you share ideas for school improvement?
14. Do you feel that this method (question 13) is effective? Why or why not?
15. Have you worked on a team or in a group with other teachers and administrators to contribute to school reforms, curricula changes, technology implementation, and/or other programmatic initiatives?

“Document A”

Curriculum Development
Professional Development Planning
Setting Teacher Performance Standards
Evaluating Teachers
Hiring Teachers
Collaborating with Colleagues
Building and Communicating Vision
Attending Division Faculty Meetings
Attend Department Faculty meetings
Attend Whole School Faculty Meetings
Parent Engagement
Student Advising
Leadership Team Meetings
Informal Colleague Meetings
Professional Learning Community (PLC)
Technology Use/ Implementation
Pedagogy Research
Curriculum Alignment

Supplemental Interview Questions (October 2014)

1. What factors have supported your involvement in contributing to school reform or change efforts over the past few years?
2. What factors have inhibited your involvement in school reform or change efforts over the past few years?
3. What are the most serious issues facing the school at this time?
4. Do you feel you have a role in solving any of these issues? If so, please describe that role.
5. How would you describe ideal professional development for teachers?
6. Have you been involved in designing or developing professional development for teachers?

Interview Questions (Round Two/February-March 2014)

1. Did the schedule of PLC meetings work with your schedule?
2. Were you able to attend all meetings of the PLC?
3. Did the PLC discuss issues of importance to your classroom practice?
4. Did the PLC determine action steps to take on an issue of important to your classroom practice?
5. Did the PLC take action on this issue of importance?
6. Were you satisfied with the overall result of this action?
7. Do you feel your voice was heard during meetings of the PLC?
8. To what extent did the PLC provide you with access to participation in school improvement initiatives?
9. To what extent did you experience the PLC as a form of teacher leadership?
10. Do you feel the PLC provides you with agency beyond your classroom?
11. Would you continue to serve on a PLC in order to contribute to school changes and reform initiatives?