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Professional Collaboration in Small Rural Schools: Teacher Perceptions of the Role of School Administrators

Brian A. Bettis
East Tennessee State University

Professional Collaboration in Small Rural Schools: Teacher Perceptions of the Role of School

Administrators

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by

Brian Austell Bettis

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Dr. Pamela Scott, Chair

Dr. Ginger Christian

Dr. William Flora

ABSTRACT

Professional Collaboration in Small Rural Schools: Teacher Perceptions of the Role of School

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The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative research study was to examine teachers'

perceptions of school administrators' support of collaborative planning in small rural schools.

Although there has been much research conducted on teacher collaboration through Professional

Learning Communities, there has been little documentation of teacher collaboration in small

rural schools (DuFour et al., 2020; Hansen, 2015; Moore, 2018). This research study examined

teachers' perceptions of collaboration and the role that school administrators play in the work to

establish, support, and maintain collaborative teaming structures.

Data collection strategies included individual interviews of practicing teachers, serving in small

rural schools. Analysis of data occurred in three phases: transcribing interviews, line-by-line

coding, and member checking. Analysis of the data revealed the following themes that highlight

the need for school administrators to (a) establish teaming structures, (b) provide needed

resources, and (c) create a culture of collaboration. Recommendations are provided for school

administrators' practice of supporting professional collaboration and suggestions for future

research are provided.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Mrs. Stamey. She worked tirelessly to support teachers in their work of educating children. She was passionate about teachers learning and refining their practice by working in collaborative teams. As a result, the teachers and administrators of our school system worked to establish a Professional Learning Community model that is unique to our small district. I am proud to have been a part of this work and am forever grateful for all that I learned from Mrs. Stamey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the role that many mentors have played in my personal and professional lives. These mentors and colleagues have taught me the power of collaboration: Mrs. Stamey, Mrs. Gold, Dr. Elliott, Mrs. Senter, Mrs. McGill, Dr. Smith, Mrs. Bell, Mrs. Thomas, and Mrs. Witherspoon (my Third Grade Teacher).

To the students and staffs of Boiling Springs Elementary School, Springmore Elementary School, and Bethel School, thank you for teaching me to love children and to learn of my passion for teaching. I am so very proud of everything that we have learned together.

I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance that I have received from Dr. Pamela Scott, my dissertation chair. I appreciate her encouragement and advice throughout my time at East Tennessee State University. I also appreciate the guidance and mentorship that Dr. Ginger Christian and Dr. William Flora have provided throughout my coursework and research.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the encouragement and support of my parents. They encouraged me to set and reach goals, helping me grow as a life-long learner. My dad was always excited when I would decide to further my education. I am thankful for my mom's gentle encouragement as I have completed my graduate studies.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

There has been a long-standing culture in schools for teachers to work in isolation (DuFour et al., 2020; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Snow-Gerono, 2005). Teachers work during scheduled planning times to design lesson plans, locate resources, and grade assignments. When this work is done in isolation, teachers are unable to benefit from the insights and energy of their colleagues (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Additionally, the isolated nature of this work has resulted in students having varied educational experiences, based on their assigned teacher (DuFour et al., 2020). For example, one third grade math teacher might be passionate about teaching fractions and will spend more time teaching fractions, while briefly teaching area and perimeter; in the neighboring classroom, the opposite might be the case (DuFour, 2004). The inconsistency of students' exposure to skills results in students being exposed to a very different curriculum, one that is dependent upon the teacher's personal interests. DuFour et al. (2020) wrote "the very reason any organization is established is to bring people together in an organized way to achieve a collective purpose that cannot be accomplished by working alone" (p. 75). This collective purpose is grounded in ensuring that all students in a class or grade level have the opportunity to learn the same skills. In order to ensure this, every teacher should work to commit to teaching the curriculum, resulting in a guaranteed and viable curriculum that is provided for all students, regardless of their teacher (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; DuFour, 2020). In order to ensure a guaranteed and viable curriculum, teachers should work in collaborative teams. The purpose of collaborative teams is to ensure teachers work to improve their practice so that all students learn at high levels (DuFour et al., 2020).

Statement of the Problem

  Educational systems throughout the United States use the Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework to guide teachers' collaborative work (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2020; Spring, 2020). DuFour et al. (2020) define a PLC as "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 10). This work has proven to be beneficial in many schools across the United States and has resulted in positive impacts on student achievement (Buffum et al., 2018; Carpenter, 2015; DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2020; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Reeves 2002). The structures for collaborative teaming that are suggested in the literature surrounding PLCs can be implemented in elementary, middle, and high schools where teachers are grouped by grade levels or content areas. However, many schools are unable to create meaningful teams because of unique grade spans or the lack of adequate staff. One example is a small school that serves students in grades kindergarten through eighth grade, often consisting of one teacher per grade level or content area. Research surrounding collaborative teams in small, K-8 schools is lacking. Limitations regarding available human resources result in school leaders struggling to establish and support teaming structures that allow teachers to unpack standards of instruction, create meaningful assessments, and identify quality instructional practices. School leaders are tasked with creating structures that ensure the success of collaborative planning and are responsible for ensuring that time spent in collaborative planning results in increased student learning. There remains a need for research on the roles that school administrators play in the implementation and sustainment of collaborative teaming structures in small schools. School administrators work to establish collaborative teams and to assign teachers to meaningful teams (DuFour, 2020). Additionally, school administrators

work to establish protocols for collaboration and to communicate expectations for collaborative planning. This research study explored teachers' views on ways that school administrators can support teachers' work to collaborate.

Significance of the Study

This study explored teachers' perceptions of collaborative planning and the role that school administrators play in this process. This research contributes to a larger body of research regarding PLCs and teacher collaboration. The findings are significant for school leaders that work to implement collaborative teams in schools that are made up of one, or only a few, teachers in a grade level or subject area. School administrators facilitate teachers' work to collaborate with teachers in their own building and outside of their school, to analyze instructional practices, and to plan instruction for students (Balyer et al., 2015; DuFour et al., 2020). This research can be used as a basis for establishing collaborative teams and setting expectations for collaborative work. School leaders may benefit from the findings of this study by learning of ways that they can support teacher collaboration. Teachers may benefit from the findings of this study through their ability to learn the importance of building strong collegial relationships with other teachers in their school and district (Shakenova, 2017). They may learn of structures that can be used to connect with teachers in their own school or outside of their school (DuFour et al., 2020). As teachers analyze their practice and learn from their colleagues, students benefit from the improved instruction that is received through a guaranteed and viable curriculum (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; DuFour et al., 2020). When teachers engage in collaborative planning and reflect on their practice, student achievement is improved. (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Kuh, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to examine teachers' perceptions of ways that school administrators, in small rural schools, can support professional collaboration. The perceived benefits and challenges of collaborative planning were examined.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study was change theory. The work of initiating and guiding changes in schools is challenging work for school administrators. Reinholz and Andrews (2002) define change theory as "a framework of ideas, supported by evidence, that explains some aspect of change beyond a single project" (p. 5). Change theory can have great impacts on school reform initiatives (Fullan, 2006; Fullan, 2008; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). "Effective change processes shape and reshape good ideas as they build capacity and ownership among participants" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 14).

The organizational structures in schools have largely remained unchanged, despite many school improvement initiatives (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019). These structures include grade level or content area structures in which teachers work in isolation to plan instruction and to assess student learning (DuFour et al., 2020). School leaders are tasked with leading change initiatives that result in increased student learning. Teachers are viewed as the experts of content, students work to achieve the teachers' educational and behavioral expectations, and instructional decisions are made by teachers. Rather than doing this work in isolation, teachers must rely on the expertise of their colleagues to provide all students with a guaranteed and viable curriculum (DuFour et al., 2020). Teachers' work to move from working collaboratively, rather than in isolation, requires a change in thinking (Snow-Gerono, 2005). School leaders are responsible for

communicating the need for teachers to change their practices of working in isolation and to establish protocols that result in teachers working in collaboration. As a result, systems will be created in which growth and innovation can occur (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Change theory guides this study in understanding how teachers perceive their work to collaborate with other teachers. As a result of their collaboration, student achievement is improved more than when teachers work in isolation (DuFour et al., 2020; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). As teachers work to change their practice and see positive results from their work, their collective efficacy is improved (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The collective efficacy of teachers is the notion that the efforts of a team of educators will have a greater impact on student learning than if these teachers worked individually. Hoy and Miskel (2013) identified that teachers' collective efficacy is built through experiencing success, learning from the success of others, verbal persuasion of colleagues, and their affective state. School leaders can foster this collective efficacy through decisions that are made regarding the assignment of teachers, professional development, allocation of time and resources, and establishing collaborative teaming structures (DuFour et al., 2020; Richter et al., 2022; Trust, 2012). This work often requires organizational change.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study in better understanding teachers' perceptions of the role of school administrators in supporting collaborative planning.

Essential Research Question

1. What are teachers' perceptions of how school administrators can support professional collaboration?

Supporting Sub-Questions

1. How can school administrators establish collaborative teaming structures in small rural schools?

2. How can school administrators support teachers' collaborative planning?

3. How can school administrators sustain professional collaboration in small rural schools?

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided to provide understanding for terms that are used throughout this dissertation.

1. *Collaborative planning* is work that is done by educators to work interdependently to analyze their professional practice and plan instructional activities that aim to positively impact student learning (DuFour et al., 2020).

2. According to Bailey and Jakicic (2012), *common formative assessments* are "assessments given by teacher teams who teach the same content or grade level - those with collective responsibility for the learning of a group of students who are expected to acquire the same knowledge and skills" (p. 16).

3. *Essential standards* are the critical skills, knowledge, and dispositions each student must acquire as a result of each course, grade level, and unit of instruction (DuFour et al., 2020).

4. A *guaranteed and viable curriculum* "gives students access to the same essential learning outcomes regardless of who is teaching the class" and can be taught in a determined amount of time (DuFour et al., 2020, p. 113)

5. *Pacing* is the sequencing of instructional skills and concepts (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012).

6. According to DuFour et al. (2020), a *Professional Learning Community* is "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 10).

7. A *rural school* is a school located in an area that has a population density of less than 250 people per square mile (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; Health Resources & Services Administration, 2021; Gomes, 2022).

8. *School administrators* are school employees that are responsible for the supervision of teachers and instructional staff; for the purpose of this research study, principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches are identified as school administrators.

9. *Singletons* are teachers, serving as the only teacher on the grade level or content area in the school to which they are assigned (Hansen, 2015).

10. A *small school c*onsists of no more than two teachers on a grade level or content area.

11. According to DuFour (2020), *teaming structures* are the criteria that are used to assign teachers to teams that support meaningful collaboration.

Limitations and Delimitations

Research studies have limitations that are beyond the control of the researcher (Patton, 2002). The researcher collected qualitative data through interviews of teachers working in rural schools in Northwest North Carolina and Northeast Tennessee. The study did not include teachers in larger urban schools. The interview participants serve as core classroom teachers in schools that serve students in kindergarten through eighth grades. As such, the experiences of other educators such as speech-language pathologists, physical education teachers, arts educators, and school administrators were not represented. As a result, the perspectives provided in this study may not be representative of the larger population of educators. Participants in this

research study volunteered to offer their perspectives of teacher collaboration. As a result, the findings are accurate only to the extent that the participants responded honestly in describing their personal experience of serving on collaborative teams.

Summary

This phenomenological, qualitative research study consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, theoretical framework, research questions, definitions, and limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 reviews literature related to teacher collaboration and Professional Learning Communities. Chapter 3 describes the study's methodology, including the research design, participants, collection of data, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the research, conclusions, implications to educational leadership, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The topic of professional collaboration has been widely researched. As a result, there is a plethora of literature surrounding teacher collaboration. Due to the fact that this research study focused on small rural schools, this literature review focuses on rural education.

School administrators are tasked with establishing a culture that ensures that all students learn at the highest levels (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; Carpenter, 2015; DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2020). Spring (2020) highlighted the fact that stakeholders continuously debate the curriculum that is taught, instructional methods that are used in classrooms, and how student learning is impacted. It is not uncommon for students to have very different educational experiences based on the school they attend or the classroom that they are assigned to. In realizing this through the analysis of student achievement, schools have responded with school improvement initiatives aimed at providing consistent curricula within a school. "The premise that every teacher must know what he or she must teach and what students must learn is found in virtually every credible school improvement model" (DuFour et al., 2020, p. 122). There is a growing body of literature and school improvement initiatives focused on creating a culture where professionals work and learn together to positively impact student learning (Carpenter, 2015; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Herrmann, 2019; Leana, 2018).

This chapter provides a review of literature that defines and provides context for the establishment of structures that allow for teacher collaboration. The chapter is organized to provide an overview of change theory, school leadership, school culture, singletons and small schools, Professional Learning Communities, collaborative planning, teaming structures, multi-tiered systems of support, adult learning, and experiential learning.

Change Theory

   School leaders are tasked with implementing school improvement models that increase student achievement. These school improvement initiatives might include adopting a new curriculum, purchasing a new program, or providing training for staff. Since the early 2000's, schools have implemented Professional Learning Communities in an attempt to increase student achievement by improving ways that teachers and school staff work interdependently to identify essential standards, plan instruction, and respond to student assessment data (DuFour, 2020). Teacher collaboration is foundational to the work of PLCs. This work requires a change in teachers' mindsets from working in isolation to plan instruction for their classroom to working collaboratively with other teachers in their grade level, school or district. Establishing a culture of collaboration in a school requires teachers and school administrators to change their beliefs, procedures, and structures for instructional planning and working together as professionals. Kotter and Cohen (2002) described that changing people's behavior is essential in leading meaningful change in an organization. "If you don't change and adapt you become obsolete or extinct" (Fullan, 2020, p. 1).

   Psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) introduced a three-step model that has been used to guide change initiatives in organizations. Figure 1 outlines the main components of Lewin's Change Model (1947). The first step of this model of changing behavior is to unfreeze the existing conditions (Kristonis, 2004). In schools, there are existing structures for planning, data analysis, and professional development. It is important that school leaders focus on the right issue (Kotter and Cohen, 2002). Once a specific change is identified for their organization, school administrators should be intentional in their work to prepare teachers for upcoming changes.

Figure 1

Lewin's Change Model
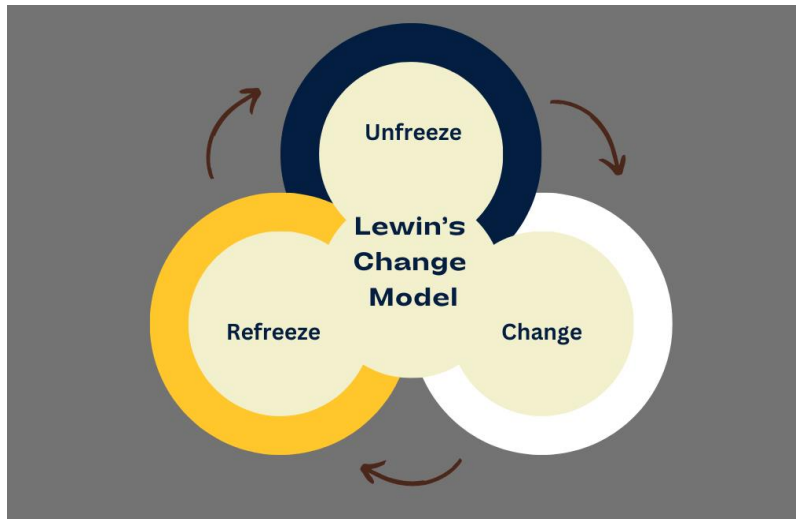
  "Employees are responsible for the implementation of change. Therefore, it is critical to assess whether they are ready to implement effective organizational changes" (Alolabi et al., 2021, p. 2). In recognizing the need to make changes in a schooling organization, decision makers must recognize the deeply held beliefs and feelings that are connected to teachers' daily work. As a result, there is fear and anxiety that is associated with change (Reeves, 2009). To minimize the stress associated with change, school administrators can be intentional in their communication of the need for and process of change. "Successful reframing depends on placing the new behaviors into perspective by identifying what does not change" (Reeves, 2009, p. 10). Lewin (1947) highlights the importance of unfreezing customs or breaking habits before initiating change. "Unfreezing is necessary to overcome the strains of individual resistance and group conformity" (Kristonis, 2004, p. 2). It is essential that school leaders work to identify issues that are in need of change, to determine teachers' readiness to change, and to plan for the change. "You can't plan for what you don't understand" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 64).

Once issues or behaviors that need to be changed are identified and unfrozen, Lewin's second step is the work to initiate and act upon the change (Kristonis, 2004). Acting upon the change requires a culture that recognizes the value of change initiatives. "Leaders in a culture of change value and see as valuable the tensions inherent in addressing hard-to-solve problems, because that is where the greatest accomplishments lie" (Fullan, 2020, p. 13). Establishing this culture cannot be accomplished through demands or through motivational speeches. "If we have learned anything about effective change in schools or any complex organization, it is that neither managerial imperatives nor inspirational speeches will be sufficient to move people and organizations from their entrenched positions" (Reeves, 2009, p. 7).

School leaders should identify staff that have the potential to lead the change. Burns (2019) reported of Lewin's findings that stress the importance of involving members of the organization that will be affected by the change in decision making. "Understanding change means understanding people - not people in general but people in specific" (Fullan, 2020, p. 45). Reeves (2009) wrote "the paradox of change leadership is the elevation of a vision far greater than the individual and, at the same time, the elevation of the individual to a place that is unique, powerful, and essential" (p. 6). In schools, change initiatives require the collective efforts of a team of individuals. "A team is needed that has the right people, a commitment to the hard task, and the capacity to work together well" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 26).

Initiating change for the sake of doing something different will not result in lasting or meaningful change. "Sustainable change requires a reorientation of priorities and values so that the comfort and convenience of the individual is no longer the measure by which the legitimacy of change is considered" (Reeves, 2009, p. 5). School leaders must be intentional in choosing areas that they will act to change. "In choosing well what to target first, you must satisfy the

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most basic criteria: achieving visible, meaningful, and unambiguous progress quickly" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 132).

The third step in Lewin's change model is to refreeze or solidify the changes into the culture of the organization. Not only is a culture that recognizes the value of change important for the work of acting to change, but is also essential to the work of refreezing the change. "We use the power of culture to help make a transformation stick" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 164). Additional support might be required through professional development or coaching to ensure that the change initiatives last. "To sustain change, leaders must refocus their energies beyond the attainment of short-term effectiveness and look toward the greater good" (Reeves, 2009, p. 123).

Michael Fullan has worked to extend Lewin's theory, particularly in education. Fullan (2020) found "changing culture is one of the hardest things that humankind faces. And if you don't change and adapt you become obsolete or extinct" (p. 1). Figure 2 outlines the components of Fullan's Components of Change Leadership (2020).

Figure 2

Fullan's Components of Change Leadership
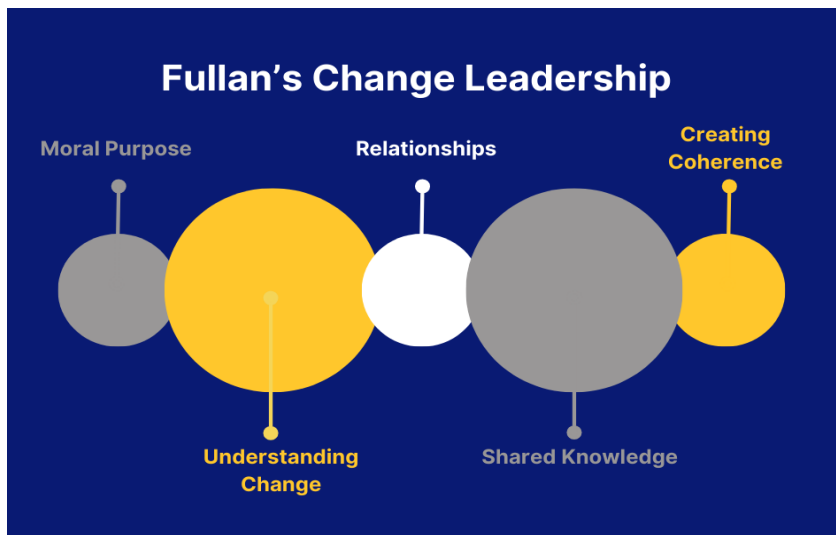
Moral Purpose

As school leaders initiate change in their schools, they work to establish a shared moral purpose. "Leaders need the ability to develop a shared moral purpose and meaning as well as a pathway for attaining that purpose" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 17). Moral purpose is the clear understanding of the meaning behind one's work. In the field of education "the moral imperative focuses on deep learning for all children regardless of background or circumstance" (Fullan, 2020, p. 17). In regards to school improvement, the identification of a moral purpose should work in tandem with a clear understanding of why change is necessary and the impact that it will have on students and their learning (Fullan, 2020). "Moral purpose is dynamically related to collaborative cultures. One could say that you cannot develop solid moral purpose in the absence of collaboration" (Fullan, 2020, p. 122).

Understanding Change

Organizations are not changed by the implementation of one initiative or model. (Wheatley, 1999). Rather than a strategy or model that is to be implemented and managed, change is something that must continually be developed; it is a process (Fullan, 2020). Change "can be understood and perhaps led, but it cannot be controlled" (Fullan, 2020, p. 44). Figure 3 highlights a list of strategies that can help leaders in initiating change. School leaders should work to learn about the process of change and to establish a culture that is willing to engage in change efforts that have positive impacts on student learning.

Figure 3

Strategies for Becoming Change Savvy

1. Be right at the end of the meeting.
2. Relationships first (too fast, too slow).
3. Acknowledge the implementation dip.
4. Accelerate as you go.
5. Beware of fat plans.
6. Behaviors before beliefs.
7. Communication during implementation is paramount.
8. Excitement prior to implementation is fragile.
9. Become a lead learner.

Note: From *Leading in a Culture of Change* (p. 46), by M. Fullan, 2020. Copyright 2020 by Jossey-Bass.

Relationships

Relationships are the root of collaborative change efforts (Fullan, 2020; Fullan & Edwards, 2022). "If moral purpose is job one, relationships are job two, as you can't get anywhere without them" (Fullan, 2020, p. 63). Fullan and Edwards (2022) introduce the idea of connected autonomy in which collaborative efforts occur when a strong sense of trust is present. "Relationships are central to success but must develop toward greater mutual commitment and specificity related to the purpose of the work" (Fullan, 2020, p. 89).

Shared Knowledge

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) described how knowledge that teachers gain from professional development rarely results in changes in their practice and consequently has no impact on student learning.

Focusing on information rather than use is why sending individuals and even teams to external training by itself does not work. Leading in a culture of change does not mean placing changed individuals into unchanged environments. Rather, change leaders work

on changing the context, helping create new settings conducive to learning and sharing

that learning. (Fullan, 2020, p. 93)

Fullan et al. (2018) developed a model for deep learning. The aspects of this model can be used

to guide educators' work in developing shared knowledge regarding their work. These aspects

include collaborative inquiry, district conditions, system conditions, school conditions,

pedagogical practices, learning partnerships, learning environments and leveraging digital

resources (Fullan et al., 2018).

Creating Coherence

Implementing change is complex and often becomes ineffective because of a lack of

focus. "In collaborative cultures, moral purpose is jointly determined by leaders and members

through focused work" (Fullan, 2020, p. 122). Fullan and Quinn (2016) described the importance

of leaders working to provide clarity and coherence. "Coherence consists of the shared depth of

understanding about the purpose and nature of the work" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 1).

Organizational Change in Schools

"Organizational change is the movement of an organization away from its present state

and toward some desired future state to increase its effectiveness" (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 1).

Educational systems are continuously changing and schools should adapt in order to remain

effective and relevant (Hargreaves, 1994). Educators play an important role in initiating

organizational change. This change is dependent upon the "capacity of teachers, principals, and

members of leadership teams to collectively detect problems in established practices, find

appropriate solutions, and implement innovations" (Meyer et al., 2023, p. 425).

Most employees of an organization prefer stability and consistency to change (Fullan,

2020; Lunnenburg, 2010). Lunenburg (2010) described forces that influence change in schools.

"For school leaders, the challenge is to anticipate and direct change process so that school performance is improved" (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 2). Change can be influenced by external factors that live outside of the school. These include "the marketplace, government laws and regulations, technology, labor markets, and economic changes" (Lunnenburg, 2010, p. 2). Just as there are outside factors that can initiate change, "the two most significant internal pressures for change come from administrative processes and people problems" (Lunnenburg, 2010, p. 3).

"It is inevitable that change will be resisted, at least to some extent by both school leaders and staff" (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 4). This resistance to change includes "uncertainty, concern over personal loss, group resistance, dependence, trust in administration, and awareness of weaknesses in the proposed change" (Lunnenburg, 2010, p. 4). School leaders have a responsibility to help their followers determine the common goals that they will work towards and to provide the support necessary for the team to achieve the goals. In implementing organizational change, authoritative leadership rarely results in sustained change. "Transformation cannot be externally mandated or directed. It can only be provoked" (Marshall, 2006, p. 35). Resistance to change initiatives occurs through communication, involvement, and support (Lunenburg, 2010). "Transformational leaders can propel followers to even greater levels of success when they have a high-quality relationship based on trust, loyalty, and mutual respect" (Northouse, p. 173).

Hiatt (2006) presents the Awareness Desire Knowledge Ability Reinforcement (ADKAR) model to aid in the implementation of change in organizations. Figure 4 outlines the five elements of Hiatt's model.

Figure 4

Hiatt's ADKAR Model
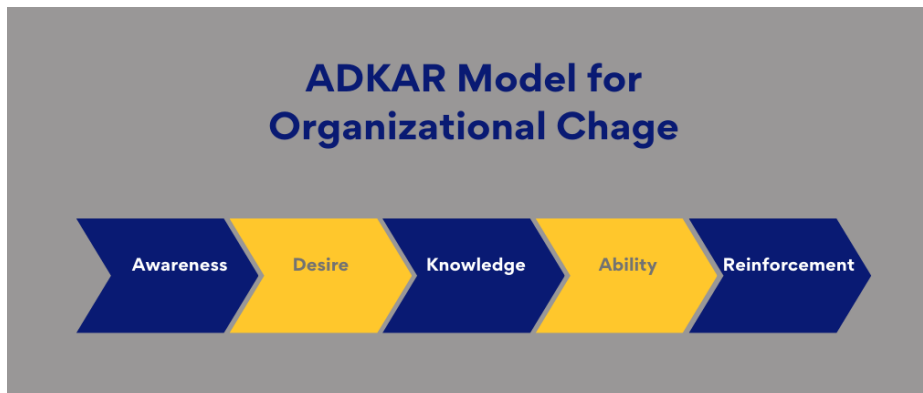
Once a change has been identified, the ADKAR model can be used to manage the human aspect of change (Hiatt, 2006). The first component of the ADKAR model recognizes the need for awareness. Stakeholders should understand "the nature of the change, why the change is being made, and the risk of not changing" (Hiatt, 2006, p.2). The second aspect of the model is that individuals need to have a desire to support the work to engage in change. The third step is knowledge, which "represents the information, training, and education necessary to know how to change" (Hiatt, 2006, p. 2). The action of initiating change occurs when "a person or group has the demonstrated capacity to implement the change at the required performance levels" (Hiatt, 2006, p. 2-3). This is known as ability, which is the fourth component of Hiatt's model. "Ability is turning knowledge into action" (Hiatt, 2006, p. 2). Finally, "reinforcement represents those internal and external factors that sustain a change" (Hiatt, 2006, p.3).

The notion of continuous change and improvement does not devalue leadership (Beycioglu & Kondakci, 2021). School leaders must initiate change and work to ensure that change is positive and lasting (Lunenburg, 2010). This is accomplished through a leader's work to create a culture that nurtures continuous change and recognizes small changes that lead to substantive change (Beycioglu & Kondakci, 2021).

Teachers also play an essential role in implementing change in their school. "Organization members who participate in planning and implementing a change are less likely to resist it" (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 7). This work cannot be done by individuals; instead, collaborative efforts must be made to identify needs and initiate change. "When teachers collaborate to improve their schools, they can collectively identify the school's needs, develop targeted and effective innovations, and, ultimately, implement innovations" (Meyer et al., 2023, p. 425).

School Leadership

The decisions that school leaders make and messages that they communicate are evident throughout their school. "Organizations that support learning, innovation, and action build a culture of growth" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 49). A culture of growth is not only evidenced by student learning, but also of the collective learning and growth of educators. As teachers plan collaboratively and leadership is developed, the skills of teachers are enhanced, their confidence is increased, and a strong culture of collaboration emerges (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

School leaders are tasked with establishing and maintaining collaborative teaming structures (Balyer et al., 2015). The process of establishing PLCs takes much time, effort, and energy. DuFour et al. (2020) pointed out that the establishment of PLCs work should be intentional, noting educators "need to learn by doing it and having mechanisms for getting better at it on purpose" (p. 23). School leadership plays a vital role in the establishment, training, support, and sustainment of PLCs. "As far as capacity development is concerned, it is more important for school principals to establish collaborative PLCs at schools than ever" (Balyer et al., 2015, p. 1340). This work begins with principals' knowledge and skills related to

collaborative teaming structures and PLCs. School leaders can work to create supports and processes that build teacher collaboration, inquiry, and teams of leaders (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

School administrators are responsible for providing opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively in self-managing teams. This work focuses on improving instruction, with the expectation of high student achievement (Balyer et al., 2015). These opportunities are not possible without the allocation of various resources. School administrators should allocate budget, time, and human resources into professional development needed for the establishment of PLCs (Balyer et al., 2015, DuFour et al., 2020).

In addition to the allocation of resources, the school principal should work to ensure a culture of collaborative work. Rodman and Thompson (2019) identified specific actions that individuals and teams take that sabotage the collaborative culture of a school. To prevent these actions, leaders should be intentional in the creation of teams, outlining expectations, recognizing successes, and following through with holding team members accountable (Rodman & Thompson, 2019). This work will not happen without a culture of trust and respect among staff members. "The principal is the key person in developing relational trust, both in demonstrating it, and in the way they foster a culture where relationships are trusted" (Balyer et al., 2015, p. 1341).

The PLC framework relies on the learning of both students and teachers. Many educators and school leaders believe that professional development for teachers happens at a conference or through workshops. While this might be true in some instances, job-embedded professional development and action research have proven to be effective (DuFour et al., 2020). One powerful result of an effective PLC is the development of the teachers that are engaged in the work. PLCs thrive on the collective learning of the group. Balyer et al. (2015) recognize the

impact collective learning can have on teacher capacity. "When professional development is in progress, shared, and closely connected to teaching and learning, teacher capacity grows accordingly" (Balyer et al., 2015, p. 1341). School leaders can influence this professional learning by remaining attuned to the needs of the teams. Some teams might need support in the logistics of PLC meetings such as creating norms and keeping agendas (DuFour, 2020). Other teams might need training in the use of protocols to analyze student data (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012). Some teams might need support in the collegial nature that is required for PLCs, such as productive dialogue or managing conflict. "It is suggested that giving teachers guided practice in conducting appropriate conversations, making decisions, and managing conflict should help strengthen trust. Therefore, it will keep the focus on building student and teacher learning" (Balyer et al., 2015, p. 1346).

There are some deeply-held beliefs and structures of schools that can often hinder the work of collaborative teams. These beliefs include scheduling, grading practices, and lesson planning. Many structures exist simply because it has always been done that way (Hansen, 2015). School administrators in small schools are often required to be creative in teaming structures and collaborative work. Given the challenges that this might pose, school administrators should commit to the important work of PLCs that can be used to positively impact student achievement, no matter the size of school.

Shared Leadership

School leaders play a vital role in initiating and implementing change in schools. The role of the school principal is complex.

The challenges of the principalship have expanded exponentially with the current emphasis on the principal as instructional leader who will somehow do everything he or

she has always done and yet find the time to spend hours in classrooms supervising and

evaluating individual teachers into better performance. (DuFour et al., 2020, p. 247)

In response to the increased demands on school principals, DuFour (2020) called on principals to

monitor student learning by engaging in the PLC process.

To engage in the PLC process, school leaders can rely on the expertise of the

professionals in their building through shared decision making and shared leadership. "A

cardinal rule of decision making in a professional learning community is that prior to making a

decision, people must first build shared knowledge, that is, they must learn together" (DuFour et

al., 2020, p. 28). Too often, this work does not occur in collaborative teams, but from mandates

from school leaders. It is not uncommon for principals to create a vision for change and dictate

the actions that will be taken to act upon this change. Conversely, professional learning

communities rely on the expertise of teachers to plan for and respond to student learning.

The National School Climate Center provides research on the impact that shared

leadership can have on student achievement (Hughes & Pickerall, 2013). "When teachers are

included throughout the decision-making process, they are more likely to implement and sustain

change with fidelity to quality practice" (Hughes & Pickerall, 2013, p. 2). This work provides

strategies that are necessary for leading shared leadership. Shared leadership is established and

sustained through the reliance on partnerships and collaboration (Hughes & Pickerall, 2013;

Printy & Marks, 2006). "When groups, rather than individuals, are seen as the main units for

implementing curriculum, instruction, and assessment, they facilitate development of shared

purpose for student learning and collective responsibility to achieve it" (Newmann & Wehlage,

1995, p. 38). Shared leadership requires a shared vision or shared purpose. "Developing shared

vision requires dialogue, not monologue, and conversations, not presentations. Shared vision

requires leaders who position themselves among those they serve rather than above them"
(DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 201). It is not enough to have shared vision without shared
responsibilities. "Empowering teachers, staff, students, and parents to work and collaborate
towards a common goal makes them aware of their responsibilities and the important role each
one of them plays in the work" (Hughes & Pickerall, 2013, p. 3). This notion of shared
responsibilities is rooted in respect for all stakeholders. "Each person in the school brings with
them experiences, skills, and ideas that are valuable to co-create a quality school climate"
(Hughes & Pickerall, 2013, p. 3). Finally, school leaders must recognize the grit that is found in
the "strength, leadership skills, and belief in collaboration to handle the adversity that comes to
us all" (Hughes & Pickerall, 2013, p. 3).

School Culture

In an organizational structure, there are elements of culture that guide the work of
professionals and influence their effectiveness. In a school setting, the effectiveness of this work
is measured by student achievement. "Schools with strong cultures of efficacy, trust, and
academic optimism provide higher levels of student achievement" (Hoy & Miskel, 2013, p. 189).
The work of establishing this culture does not happen if teachers and school administrators are
not intentional in their work to create conditions in which there is a clear focus on and
commitment to the improvement of student learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Blodget, 2022).

When a school culture is based on trust, all stakeholders benefit (Modoono, 2017). Trust
in schools is rooted in strong relationships between stakeholders. As stakeholders work with and
support one another, cooperation is increased, professionalism is supported, and student
achievement is improved (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). School administrators influence this culture of
trust in their work to develop a shared moral purpose (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Robins & Alvy,

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1995). From working together, they build a deeper understanding of their shared moral purpose, a common language for communicating more effectively, and deeper commitment (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Strong school cultures are established over time. "School culture is determined by the values, shared beliefs, and behavior of the various stakeholders within the school's community and reflects the school's social norms" (Carpenter, 2015, p. 682). School leaders work to establish and communicate a shared vision of things that are possible as a result of the school's work. Once this vision is established, leaders allow for experimentation that is connected to the school's vision (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). As teachers work to collaborate and learn together, "they internalize the concepts, share stories of success, and build commitment" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 30). Marzano and Waters (2009) highlighted the impact that cooperation can have in building a sense of community. This cooperation helps to develop an understanding of purpose for each member of the school's community.

Creating a culture that is rooted in collaborative inquiry moves beyond having a group of teachers that cooperate with one another. A culture of collaborative inquiry is established through clear goals for student expectations, curriculum, and instruction (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Given the fact that this work has the potential to positively impact student achievement, it is critical procedures be in place to allow for productive collaboration to occur. Collaborative teams will be unable to positively impact student achievement if they are not focused on the right work (DuFour et al., 2020; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Collaborative Planning

As educators work to collaborate and improve student learning, the profession as a whole "attests to the importance and power of learning by doing when it comes to educating our

students" (DuFour et al., 2020, p. 9). Educators spend much time working to learn standards, studying pacing guides, and identifying effective instructional models. Often this work is done in isolation, where individual teachers plan the instruction that will be delivered in their classroom. The isolated nature of educational systems hinders teachers' ability to collaborate with and learn from their colleagues (Rodman & Thompson, 2019). As a result of working in isolation, teachers fail to benefit from the collective knowledge of their colleagues (Hansen, 2015). "Educator teams embody an amazing potential to shape school culture, increase student and staff engagement, and accelerate achievement, yet many stymie that power by merely operating the way they always have" (Hansen, 2015, p. 18).

"Collaborative teams explore complex problems, develop deeper understandings of the challenges and opportunities of the problems present, and work to develop thoughtful solutions" (Herrmann, 2019, p. 70). The work of teachers to collaboratively solve identified problems should focus on the continuous improvement of student achievement. To accomplish this, teachers must reflect on how teaching and learning has taken place, and challenge previous instructional strategies that have not proven to be effective. This shared knowledge is achieved through analysis of student achievement data, reflection of effective instructional practices, and identifying teaching and learning that has proven to increase student achievement (Carpenter, 2015).

Simply having teachers work together will not achieve the increase in student achievement that is expected in school improvement initiatives. "The purpose of collaboration - to help more students achieve at higher levels can only be accomplished if the professionals engaged in collaboration are focused on the right work" (DuFour, 2020, p. 59).

Marzano and Waters (2009) reported of the need for collaborative teams to focus on enhancing their pedagogical skills. This work happens through teachers' reflection and collaborative planning. Teachers play integral roles in the creation of a culture that embraces collective and continuous inquiry where they explore instructional strategies that are effective. The effectiveness of these strategies are ultimately measured by student achievement on formative and summative assessments. One of the most powerful results of this collaborative culture is the impact on teachers' collective efficacy (Marzano & Walkers, 2009).

Collective Efficacy

As teachers see that their work directly affects student achievement, they become more confident and more consistent in their work of designing quality instruction on a regular basis. The notion of collective teacher efficacy is defined as a group's shared belief that through their daily, collective work, student outcomes are positively influenced (Hattie, 2012; Donohoo et al., 2018; Battersby & Verdi, 2015). In his work to identify factors that influence student achievement, Hattie (2012) identified collective efficacy as having the highest level of impact on student learning.

Collaborative teams are able to establish increased efficacy through their work to build shared knowledge of standards and instructional practices (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). As this work is completed, teachers are engaged in a cycle of continuous learning in which their own knowledge and skill is strengthened and a culture of growth and collaborative improvement is reinforced (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). As effective instructional strategies are implemented, teachers' skill sets are strengthened and student learning is improved (Donohoo & Katz, 2020). Loughland and Nguyen (2020) found that teachers developed a sense of mastery when they observed increased student learning, which they attributed to their own learning and planning.

The collective efficacy of teachers was "bolstered by the detailed lesson plans they had developed in the collaborative planning sessions" (Loughland & Nguyen, 2020, p. 152). The creation of more detailed lesson plans provides teachers the opportunity to have a better understanding of the standards and skills that students are expected to master and student learning is improved. Observations of student learning result in an increased motivation and commitment to the process of collaborative planning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Collective efficacy is established through a continuous work cycle of collaborative planning, analyzing student achievement, and a growing commitment from members of the team (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). School leaders are tasked with establishing structures that allow for collaborative planning that results in increased collective efficacy. It isn't enough to hire great teachers. School administrators should provide support for teachers to collaborate in meaningful ways (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). "We know that doing work that has meaning is more motivating than any extrinsic rewards. People have an innate desire to belong and contribute to be part of something bigger than themselves" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 50). As a result, school administrators that focus on developing collective efficacy will make the greatest contribution to student learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Teacher Collaboration and Teacher Retention

Teacher retention is a growing problem school administrators face (Evers-Gerdes & Siegle, 2021). Beginning teachers often start their career with a "sense of eagerness and anticipation with the hope of making a difference and changing the world" (Evers-Gerdes & Siegle, 2021, p. 2). Unfortunately, many of these teachers choose to leave the profession after becoming disappointed or disheartened (Evers-Gerdes & Siegle, 2021; Patil, 2023). Teachers are asked to respond to increasing demands that include student needs, staffing shortages, and

changing perceptions of educators (France, 2021). Patil (2023) identifies a trend of teachers

expressing a desire to leave the profession as a result of the increasing demands of the job. "The

COVID-19 pandemic has been identified as a major factor contributing to this trend, given the

tremendous strain it has placed on teachers as essential workers" (Patil, 2023, p. 307).

School administrators can respond to this trend by allowing teachers the opportunity to be

engaged in meaningful work. "Teachers who leave the profession cite lack of input and

opportunity as significant reasons" (Quaglia & Lande, 2017, p. 43). Teachers feel engaged in

their work when they observe student growth, are included in a collaborative culture, and are

given opportunities for growth (Fullan & Edwards, 2022; Patil, 2023; Quaglia & Lande, 2017).

"Affording teachers the opportunity for professional growth within their role fosters excitement

about their future in education" (Quaglia & Lande, 2017, p. 55). Additionally, teachers should be

given a voice in decisions that are made in their schools.

> Teachers, and their students, are at the heart of the learning environment in schools. They
>
> create its foundation and are the stakeholders most affected by change. It only makes
>
> sense that they have input into the decisions that impact their learning environment.
>
> (Quaglia & Lande, p. 43)

Teachers that feel that they have a voice are "more likely to be excited about their future career

in education and believe they can make a difference" (p. 35). Teachers that are excited about

their role and see their impact will be less likely to leave the profession (Donlan & Wilfong,

2021).

Patil (2023) reported that Finland is recognized as one of the best educational systems in

the world. "Collaboration is a cornerstone of the Finnish system, with teachers expected to work

together to address complex challenges" (Patil, 2023, p. 319). In a culture where collaboration,

rather than isolation is promoted, teacher satisfaction is improved (DuFour et al., 2020; Patil, 2023). Flowers et al. (1999) highlighted the positive influence that teacher collaboration has on job satisfaction. These collaborative cultures allow teachers the opportunity to have a voice in their schools' decision-making processes. "Providing teachers a genuine voice transforms the entire school culture and has a significant impact on areas such as teacher retention and increasing student motivation and achievement" (Quaglia & Lande, 2017, p. 24). Efforts to engage in meaningful collaboration can be used as a strategy for retaining dedicated and effective teachers.

Models of Teacher Collaboration

Studies have found that teacher learning can be improved through collaboration (DuFour et al., 2020; Meirink et al., 2007; Woodland & Lee, 2013). This collaboration includes "sharing ideas, experience, and resources, through giving feedback in order to become reflective about the teaching practice, and through supporting each other" (Shakenova, 2017, p. 35). In recent years, school leaders have worked to implement teaming structures and protocols to provide experiences for teachers to engage in collaborative work. As a result, various models have been used to provide a purpose for teacher collaboration. Ronfeldt et al. (2015) investigated models of collaboration that exist in schools including collaboration about instructional strategies and curriculum, collaboration about students, and collaboration about assessment. "Surveys revealed that the vast majority of teachers belonged to instructional teams and that they had favorable impressions about the quality of collaborations they experienced in these teams" (Ronfeldt et al., 2015, p. 493).

In addition to collaborative structures that focus on teaching and learning, school leaders have developed a number of models to guide this work. Professional Learning Communities

(DuFour, 2004) is a well-known model that provides structure and direction for collaborative planning. Johnson and Scull (1999) described a model of collaboration, Professional Learning Teams where teachers "engage in collaborative professional development practices" (p. 36). Similarly, Professional Learning Networks are systems of "interpersonal connections and resources that support informal learning" (Trust, 2012, p. 133). This emphasis on teachers' learning is in response to the changing environment of educational systems. "Only the teachers who are continual learners that work to improve their practice, skills, and instructional strategies can successfully help others learn" (p. 138).

Another model for teacher collaboration is the Critical Friends Group (CFG). Rooted in the work of United States educator Ted Sizer in the early 1990s, CFGs are a

model of structured reflective practice that has gained momentum as a professional development opportunity. CFGs focus on the improvement of individual teacher practice and learning experiences for children via sharing knowledge among colleagues. (Kuh, 2015, p. 2)

Consistent in collaborative models is the emphasis on teachers' learning and professional development (Lassonde & Israel, 2010). In each of these models, teachers engage in reflection and dialogue that is focused on improving their practice as educators.

The actual work of collaborative teams often differ, based on the focus and purpose of the group's work. Some collaborative teams may consist of teachers that teach the same grade level and their work focuses on common planning (Warren & Muth, 2016). In these teams, teachers unpack standards, share lesson plans, and create assessments. Common planning teams sometimes consist of interdisciplinary teams that have a similar purpose of sharing ideas and developing common assessments (Hansen, 2015). Another model of collaborative planning is

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vertical teams. "A vertical team is a team of teachers who all teach the same subject but at different grade levels. They form a team and focus on the common skills that they are teaching" (Hansen, 2015, p. 7).

Professional Learning Communities

The phrase *Professional Learning Community* (PLC) has been used to guide the collaborative work of educators since the early 2000's. "PLCs are not a program, a fad, or a meeting. A PLC is a way of doing business in schools - and that business is learning" (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012, p. 3). DuFour et al. (2020), define a PLC as "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 10).

PLCs recognize that the work of a school should be focused on ensuring that each student learns at high levels (DuFour et al., 2020). In their work to plan instruction, teachers focus on academic content and strategies used for teaching content, but fail to ensure that the students have actually learned the skills being taught. DuFour (2004) recognizes the need for educators to shift their attention from teaching to a focus on learning. The work of planning for and analyzing student learning is rooted in the collaborative inquiry of a team of teachers. This inquiry follows a systematic process where teachers analyze and improve their instructional practices (DuFour, 2004).

Collaborative teams that engage in the work of PLCs are clear on what it is students should learn (DuFour et al., 2020). Within the PLC framework, teachers engage in dialogue that is focused on identifying standards that are essential for all students to master. "Standards refer to the general knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students are expected to acquire as a result of the teaching and learning process" (DuFour et al., 2020, p. 115). Leane (2018) highlighted her

school's work to identify essential standards and how "narrowing our focus to essential skills could truly impact students and, when done collaboratively, how it could also impact the skills of teachers" (p. 6). As teachers work to identify these essential standards, individual teachers are likely to have strong opinions of why one standard might be essential and another one not essential. Reeves (2002) suggests three criteria that can be used to determine whether or not a standard is essential. The first criteria, endurance, measures whether or not the standard contains knowledge that students will use beyond a test or lesson. Second, leverage, determines if a standard provides skills that are used in other disciplines. Finally, readiness assesses if a standard will provide knowledge that is essential in future grades (DuFour et al., 2022). Once essential standards have been identified, collaborative teams can engage in creating assessments and instructional activities that are used to teach the identified standards. The work of a PLC not only impacts student learning, but also improves teacher effectiveness as a result of the collaborative work of educators.

As essential standards are identified, teachers work to determine how the skills will be assessed. In shifting the focus from teaching to learning, collaborative teacher conversations should focus, not on what will be taught, but on how they will know when students have learned the material (DuFour, 2004). Student learning is measured using a variety of assessments. Bailey and Jakicic (2012) highlight the benefits of common formative assessments. These assessments are administered to students to determine whether or not they mastered the skills that have been identified as essential. Collaborative teams analyze data to identify trends and to make plans on how to respond to assessment data. Teams that engage in this work are able to learn together through the creation and use of formative assessments (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012). Individuals on the teams become more familiar with and confident in their knowledge of the standards being

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taught. Throughout the process of analyzing data and unpacking standards, teachers are better able to identify and share instructional strategies that have proven to be effective (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012).

As assessment data are analyzed, teachers work to determine their response. "In schools that operate as PLCs, teams use the results of their common formative assessments to identify students who have not reached proficiency on prioritized learning targets" (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012, p. 73). Educators recognize that not all students will master a skill after it is taught the first time. Some students require additional time and intervention support. Teachers are able to gain the knowledge of which students need additional time and what additional supports are needed through teachers' analysis of common assessment data (Buffum et al., 2018). The response to these data might include reteaching identified skills, providing interventions for foundational skills, or providing enrichment for students that have clearly mastered the content. "It is critical for teachers to know what their students are learning and not learning so they can make decisions about instruction" (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012, p. 82).

A collaborative culture is foundational to the PLC process. Educators that value the collaborative work of PLCs recognize that they must work together to be successful in reaching their goals of all students learning at the highest levels (DuFour, 2004). In doing the work of identifying and assessing essential standards, "educators must work collaboratively and take collective responsibility for the success of each student" (DuFour et al., 2020, p. 11). Teachers should be given the opportunity to share their expertise, improve their skills, and rely on their knowledge and experience to make decisions regarding the instruction of students. "High quality instruction depends upon the competence and attitudes of each individual teacher, but when it is collective its outputs are greater" (Balyer et al., 2015, p. 1340).

Educators who are members of a PLC are guided by their ability to impact student learning. "To assess their effectiveness in helping all students learn, educators in a PLC focus on results - evidence of student learning" (DuFour, 2020, p. 12). This results orientation is an important pillar of the PLC process (DuFour, 2020) and is the measure by which a PLC is determined as effective. Bailey and Jakicic (2012) argue that teachers' sole emphasis on teaching content is the antithesis of a PLC. "In PLCs, it's all about what students have learned - not what teachers have taught" (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012, p. 4). This serves as the guiding premise behind the creation of common formative assessments where teachers assess student learning. Teachers use evidence of student learning to inform their practice and improve daily instruction. Teachers are also better able to respond to individual students who need intervention or enrichment (DuFour, 2020).

As educators work together to refine the teaching, learning and assessment process, the work of a PLC has the potential to positively impact student achievement (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; Buffum et al., 2018; Carpenter, 2015, DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2020; Richter et al., 2022). It is through the dynamics and the work of collaborative teams that school improvement can occur. "As educators focus on school improvement, we need to facilitate, model, and promote effective team dynamics to capitalize on student and teacher growth" (Rodman & Thompson, 2019, p. 18).

Benefits of Teacher Collaboration

Over the past few decades, research has been conducted on teacher collaboration (Battersby & Verdi, 2014; DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2020; Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This research highlights benefits of teacher collaboration. Many of these benefits include the effectiveness of teachers and their increased efficacy in their work (DuFour et al.,

2020; Graham, 2007; Shakenova, 2017). Teacher collaboration provides opportunities for job-embedded professional development in which teachers engage in a cycle of planning, reflection, and response that results in continuous improvement (DuFour et al., 2020; Shakenova, 2017). Teachers' reflection is made more powerful and more meaningful as a result of the collegial relationships that are formed through their work. "Collaborative experiences provide more opportunities for teachers to make networks of relationships which can help them to share their reflective experience, evaluate beliefs on teaching and learning and construct knowledge together" (Shakenova, 2017, p. 38). Johnson (2003) highlighted the emotional and psychological benefits that teachers gain from learning from each other. These benefits result in teachers' reporting reduction in their work overload as a result of the shared responsibilities of their collaborative team (Shakenova, 2017).

In addition to benefits related to teacher efficacy and professional development are benefits related to student achievement. "Collaboration has a positive influence on teacher learning through sharing experience, ideas and, in its turn, teacher learning affects students' performance through enrichment of subject knowledge and instructional skills" (Shakenova, 2017, p. 44). By creating collaborative teaming structures, teachers are given the opportunity to engage in work that focuses on student learning and growth. "An effective school culture must focus on continuous improvement, while empowering teachers to be active participants in school improvement as a function of student achievement (Carpenter, 2015, p. 685).

Barriers of Teacher Collaboration

Any initiative aimed at school improvement will be met with challenges, the implementation of collaborative teaming structures is no different. One of the most common barriers to effective teacher collaboration is the amount of time that can be dedicated to this work

(Lassonde & Israel, 2010; Wendel, 2022). There is a limited amount of time within a school day and instructional time should be prioritized. Non-instructional time is often used for a variety of purposes, including planning, paperwork, and collaboration. When trying to complete all of the tasks required of educators, often teachers feel obligated to work outside school hours to complete non-instructional tasks. This pressure to complete these tasks often results in teacher resistance to collaborative models (Wendel, 2022).

The actual work of a collaborative team can sometimes serve as a barrier to effective teacher collaboration. Shakenova (2017) reported of the potential for collaborative meetings to be wasteful and unproductive. These unintended consequences could be a result of the number of tasks teachers need to accomplish, team dynamics, or individual attitudes. Additional results could be that the work of the group could be controlled by administrators or individuals on the team (Hargreaves, 1994). When this occurs, teachers work to complete tasks out of compliance, rather than being driven by their desire and passion. Sometimes members of collaborative teams become comfortable working together, their work becomes very flexible, and teachers become comfortable and complacent (Hargreaves, 1994; Shakenova, 2017).

School administrators work to respond to barriers related to human resources and time. Current technologies such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Skype can be used to eliminate barriers related to time and space (Hansen, 2015; Moore, 2018). Battersby and Verdi (2015) recognize the challenge of coordinating a convenient time and place to meet and suggest virtual PLCs as a solution. Additionally, Jao and McDougall (2016) make suggestions for facilitating collaboration in response to identified barriers. These suggestions include having team goals, planning for scheduling, identifying unique opportunities for collaboration, and leveraging district-level resources (Jao & McDougall, 2016).

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Teaming Structures

Through their research on collaborative cultures, DuFour et al. (2020) suggest that school administrators work to create teaming structures. It should be the expectation that each staff member is a member of a meaningful team. These teams might include teachers that teach the same course or the same grade level; some teams might consist of members from various grades or subjects (DuFour et al., 2020). Some teams might move beyond the walls of a school to participate in virtual teams. "Proximity is not a prerequisite for an effective collaborative team" (DuFour et al., 2020, p. 61). New technologies have emerged allowing teachers the opportunity to engage in collaborative work in new ways (Moore, 2018).

Just as important as it is for school administrators to assign teachers to teams, it is imperative that time for collaborative work be prioritized in the master schedule. Leane (2018) provides information on a school's work to create a collaborative culture and points out the importance of the master schedule being changed to ensure that teachers have time to collaborate, during the school day, with teachers who teach the same subject or grade level. DuFour et al. (2020) reiterate this in writing "We believe it is insincere for any district or school leader to stress the importance of collaboration and then fail to provide time for it" (p. 64). School leaders should work to prioritize the allocation of resources and in today's schools, one of the most precious resources is time.

Once collaborative teams are created and time is allocated for collaborative planning, structure must be provided for this time to be productive. Moore (2018) suggests that protocols be used to allow collaborative teams to take ownership of their work. "Using protocols allows for equity of voice, ensuring that everyone participates and the session is not dominated by a single voice" (Moore, 2018, p. 613). One protocol that can be used to focus the work of a collaborative

team is the creation of team norms. "Teams increase their likelihood of performing at high levels when they clarify their expectations of one another regarding procedures, responsibilities, and relationships" (DuFour et al., 2020, p. 72). Another example of a protocol that could be used is creating agendas and maintaining meeting minutes. Collaborative documents such as Google Docs can be used to provide a resource that team members can refer back to as needed to access information that was shared during planning sessions (Rodman & Thompson, 2019).

DuFour et al. (2020) warn against assigning teachers to groups for the sake of creating teaming structures. "Unless educators are working interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are mutually accountable, they are not a team" (DuFour et al., 2020, p. 86). It is not uncommon for school leaders to identify singleton teachers that are not members of a collaborative team and establish a new team that groups these singleton teachers together. These teachers often represent various disciplines or teach a wide range of students. This unintentional grouping results in teachers not functioning as a team. School leaders should work to ensure that all teachers are members of meaningful teams, even if the team that they are a part of consists of members from outside of their assigned school (DuFour et al., 2020).

A culture of collaboration is not found immediately following the creation of collaborative teams. School leaders should be intentional in their work to cultivate a collaborative culture. As teachers engage in the work of collaborative planning, relying on the expertise of their colleagues, and observing growth in student achievement, they will work more interdependently and the work of collaborative planning will become an integral part of the culture of the school (Dufour et al., 2020).

Singletons and Small Schools

One aspect of PLCs that requires further research is their implementation in small

schools. There are many schools that are made up of singleton teachers, where there may be only

one teacher in a grade level or one teacher teaching a given subject. "In small rural systems,

teachers may work in isolation, where a single math teacher serves all students in the middle and

high school grades" (Reeves & DuFour, 2018, p. 38). Much of the literature on PLCs calls for

collaborative teams, composed of teachers that teach the same grade or subject. School

administrators might read literature or attend professional development, and be quick to return to

their school and promptly work to create structures for collaborative planning. However, school

leaders should be mindful of collaborative structures created for the purpose of simply having a

meeting, that will not be effective, and in turn frustrate teachers. This is especially true in small

schools where available human resources present a challenge in creating meaningful

collaborative teams.

Hansen (2015) described ways that teams can be organized to help singletons and small

schools participate fully in the PLC process. "While the common imperative is collaboration,

each district and school should be free to engage in variations on this theme" (Reeves & DuFour,

2018, p. 38). The focus on learning, a collaborative culture, and a results orientation should drive

the work of various teaming structures (DuFour, 2020). Hansen (2015) presents five structures

that can be used for teachers to engage in the work of PLCs. These structures include "vertical

teams, interdisciplinary teams, singletons who support, virtual teams, and structural change"

(Hansen, 2015, p. 3). These structures identify the fact that it is sometimes challenging to ensure

that singletons are members of effective teams such as vertical or interdisciplinary teams, but

singleton teachers have the ability to support the work of a PLC and can initiate structural changes. This provides an avenue for all teachers to be assigned to meaningful teams.

School leadership teams might consider vertical teaming structures. Vertical teams consist of teachers that all teach the same subject, but at different grade levels. (Hansen, 2015). These teachers are able to focus their attention on common skills that can be found throughout the grade spans. Their work to create common formative assessments might focus on consistency in determining mastery on assessments, sharing instructional strategies, or designing flexible interventions (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; Hansen, 2015).

Grouping teachers into interdisciplinary teams is another structure for professional learning. Interdisciplinary teams are groups of teachers who all teach different content, however work together to develop common assessments around essential skills that have been identified among their content areas (Hansen, 2015). It is important that these teams focus their attention on identifying these common skills, share instructional strategies, analyze assessment data, and plan on how they will respond when students have not mastered these common skills.

Schools that consist of singletons might consider virtual teaming structures. Recent advancements in technology have made online collaboration tools available to teachers. "By using technology readily accessible to almost anyone, singleton teachers can find others who do exactly what they do and meet virtually to do the work of a collaborative team" (Hansen, 2015, p. 45). Moore (2018) completed a study to determine technologies that are effective for educators to use when working collaboratively. Online chat platforms, Skype, Wimba, Google+, and Zoom were evaluated to determine the technologies that best supported the work of collaborative teams. Moore (2018) found that "tools that move farther away from face-to-face, the more work and facilitation is required" (p. 616). As a result, protocols and team norms are beneficial to the

productiveness of a collaborative team. It should be noted that "teachers who collaborate online are engaged with the group, develop a sense of community, improve their knowledge of subject and pedagogical content, and intend to modify their instructional practices accordingly" (Moore, 2018, p. 616).

Adult Learning

The work of collaborative planning gives teachers the opportunity to learn from and with their colleagues. The importance of this adult learning should be recognized in the work of collaborative planning teams. Research on the topic of adult learning is not new. Lindeman (1926) wrote of adults being motivated to learn through their work to identify needs that should be met. In schools, teachers often identify needs related to student achievement and work to learn of instructional strategies or deepen their own content knowledge to better address the need. Each day, teachers face challenges of addressing the varying levels of student knowledge, using a variety of strategies to engage students, and addressing student behaviors. These daily situations that teachers face result in their learning being self-centered, due to the fact that there is potential to impact their day-to-day work (Lindeman, 1926). As a result, teachers' own learning must be individualized and self-directed. This work of identifying needs and learning of strategies that can address needs is ongoing and cyclical. As teachers work together, the "cycle of learning simultaneously builds knowledge and skill while reinforcing the culture of growth and collaborative improvement" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 56).

Not only should teachers engage in professional collaboration and learning, but school administrators should work to identify needs and learn of ways that needs can be addressed. School administrators work to assess needs in their school and district. They collaborate with teachers and leadership teams to identify strategies for school improvement. Through their work

to collaborate and learn with other educators, they establish a culture that fosters an expectation of learning for all stakeholders (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

DuFour et al. (2020) provided a guide for school leaders in the implementation of PLCs and assert that teachers are better able to learn about the PLC process through doing the actual work of collaborative planning. This notion of experiential, adult learning is foundational to this research study. The experiential learning theory focuses on the fact that adults can learn through their own experiences (Dernova, 2015). "Significant learning includes a personal engagement at the affective and cognitive levels" (Dernova, 2015, p. 53). Rather than reading about a topic, or attending a workshop, teachers are provided the opportunity to engage in the work of identifying essential standards, creating common formative assessments, analyzing student work, and engaging in discussion of how student needs can best be met (DuFour et al., 2020). This research study focused on the experiences of teachers in small rural K-8 schools and their work to collaborate with other teachers in planning instruction. By learning about the impact that this collaboration can have on their professional practice, they are better able to work with their colleagues to plan and deliver quality instruction.

Research has suggested that "school improvement and student achievement have been positively connected to teacher professional learning communities" (Carpenter, 2015, p. 682). This improvement is the result of teachers' attention to their daily work of teaching. Teachers are more knowledgeable of the standards they are expected to teach, they are able to share and learn about instructional strategies that can be used to teach these standards, and are more aware of what students should know and be able to do (DuFour, 2020). "The school that operates as a professional learning community recognizes that its members must engage in ongoing study and constant practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement"

(Balyer et al., 2015, p. 1342). The work of establishing a PLC is difficult and requires much time. Through a commitment to collaborative work, teachers are better able to meet the needs of all learners.

The Professional Learning Communities framework supports teachers in their work to ensure that all students learn at the highest levels (DuFour, 2020). The success of teachers' work in a professional learning community "depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school - the commitment and persistence of the educators within it" (DuFour, 2004, p. 11).

Technology and Teacher Collaboration

Advancements in technology have resulted in changes in the ways that educators work. Instructional technology tools have transformed daily instruction in classrooms (Fisher & Frey, 2023; Kilbane & Milman, 2023). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were required to deliver instruction and collaborate with stakeholders using a variety of virtual tools. In addition to tools that are used for daily instruction, teachers have been provided the opportunity to engage in virtual learning communities (Nikiforos et al., 2020). Teachers use social media, the internet, and other virtual tools to connect with other educators, learn of resources, and to explore common professional interests (Thompson, 2018).

> Using platforms such as Twitter, blogs, webcasts, and so on, one can communicate with
> and tap into the insights of experts who had previously been logistically challenging to
> connect with. There are no longer boundaries associated with geography or time.
> (Quaglia & Lande, 2017, p. 99)

As technology continues to advance, teachers will no longer be bound by the walls of their classroom or school in their work to engage in meaningful collaboration that influences their work.

Kieschnick (2017) highlighted the importance of educators adapting to changes in our world. "We are living in a computer and machine-based world. This has put an emphasis on networks and knowledge, and it has enabled collaboration that can now span across the globe through the skilled use of technologies" (Kieschnick, 2017, p. xv). These technologies can be used to provide a time, space, and platform for teachers to engage in professional development and to network with fellow educators.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present a review of the existing literature related to teacher collaboration. This chapter included an overview of change theory, organizational change in schools, school leadership, and shared leadership. Literature regarding school culture, collaborative planning, collective efficacy, and teacher retention was reviewed. Additionally, information on Professional Learning Communities, benefits of teacher collaboration, barriers of teacher collaboration, teaming structures, an examination of singletons and small schools, review of adult learning, and technology and teacher collaboration were shared. This literature review provided an understanding of the impact that teacher collaboration can have on student learning. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in this research study. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the research study and outlines the findings. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 3. Methodology

The purpose of this research study was to examine teachers' perceptions of ways that school administrators, in small rural schools, can support professional collaboration. This study was designed to investigate the benefits and challenges of collaborative planning and the roles that school administrators can play in teachers' collaborative work.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study was guided by one essential research question and three supporting sub-questions. The questions were used to examine teachers' experiences and beliefs of ways that school administrators can support collaborative planning.

Essential Research Question

1. What are teachers' perceptions of how school administrators can support professional collaboration?

Supporting Sub-Questions

1. How can school administrators establish collaborative teaming structures in small rural schools?

2. How can school administrators support teachers' collaborative planning?

3. How can school administrators sustain professional collaboration in small rural schools?

Research Design

This research is a phenomenological study designed to examine teachers' perceptions of collaborative planning. This approach to qualitative research studies how people describe things and their experiences related to the topic (Patton, 2002). The design of this research study was to examine teachers' perceptions of ways school administrators can support professional collaboration. The work of instructional design and planning is an everyday expectation of all

teachers. Within PLC models, school administrators have created structures and developed protocols that guide the work of collective inquiry aimed at improving student achievement. Administrators of small schools often face challenges in establishing meaningful teaming structures. This research study used interviews of teachers in small rural schools to determine their experiences in collaborating with other teachers to plan instruction and to analyze student learning.

Site Selection

The researcher used teachers from six small rural schools that serve students in grades K-8. This study used schools in northwest North Carolina and northeast Tennessee, from three different school districts to provide a variety of experiences and perspectives from participants. It is not uncommon for school districts or states to adopt initiatives that aim to improve student achievement. These initiatives consist of newly adopted standards, curricula, assessments, or professional development.

Sample

Qualitative research is rooted in sampling methods that recruit participants that provide insights and an in-depth understanding of the topic being studied (Patton, 2002). In this study, the researcher used purposeful sampling to include participants that have engaged in collaborative planning.

It was essential that the researcher conduct in-depth interviews with teachers that have directly engaged in the work of collaborative planning (Patton, 2002). Participants in this study were full-time teachers, employed in small rural K-8 schools, in which there were no more than two teachers in their grade level or content area. This study was limited to core content teachers

because of the likelihood that these grade-level or content specific teachers have engaged in meaningful collaborative planning and analysis of student achievement.

Purposive sampling was used to identify and select teachers for this research study. The researcher identified six K-8 schools in northwest North Carolina and northeast Tennessee to recruit full-time teachers for participation in interviews. Online directories were used to identify teachers that are full-time employees of schools where there are no more than two teachers in a grade level or content area. Appendix A provides the recruitment emails that were sent to identified teachers in six school districts. Of the 152 individuals who were sent a recruitment email, 12 indicated an interest in participating in the study. These individuals were sent a follow-up email to schedule an interview and informed consent forms were provided for review. Participants included full-time elementary and middle school teachers, in schools serving students in grades K-8. The 12 participants included one middle school English language arts teacher, three middle school science teachers, one middle school social studies teacher, one middle school math teacher, and six elementary teachers.

Data Collection Strategies

The data collection process started with the researcher obtaining permission from the Institutional Review Board at East Tennessee State University. After approval was granted, the researcher obtained directory information for employees of school districts in northwest North Carolina and northeast Tennessee. Online directories were used to identify teachers that are full-time employees of schools where there are no more than two teachers in a grade level or content area.

Prior to the interviews, questions were designed to provide a background of each participant and to address the identified research questions (Anfara et al., 2002). One-on-one

interviews were scheduled by email and conducted via Zoom (Oliffe et al., 2021). All participants returned the informed consent, in which they confirmed that they had the opportunity to have information regarding the research study explained and that they were able to ask questions and have all of their questions answered. They confirmed that they met all requirements for participation and that they freely and voluntarily chose to participate in the research study. They also confirmed that they were physically present in the United States at the time of the interview and that they were employed as a full-time teacher in a K-8 school, teaching a grade level or content area in which there is no more than one other teacher in the grade level/content area. The participants in this research study represent three rural school districts in northwest North Carolina and northeast Tennessee.

In an attempt to build a positive rapport with each participant, the interview was presented in a conversational manner (Brinkmann, 2011). This allowed the researcher to ask probing questions, resulting in deeper responses of the participants' experience with collaborative planning. Before beginning the interview, the researcher provided an overview of the research study (Appendix B). Participants were asked a series of background questions before being asked interview questions. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and were recorded to provide a record of the interview and allow the researcher to transcribe the interview. Each interview was transcribed manually and all identifying information was removed and pseudonyms were used for all participants, colleagues, and schools (Stuckey, 2014).

Data Analysis Strategies

Qualitative research provides opportunities for the researcher to codify the experiences of participants (Williams & Moser, 2019). This phenomenological study consisted of collecting data from interviews of full-time teachers in small rural K-8 schools. These data were collected

through interviews that were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Line-by-line coding was used, as patterns of teacher perceptions of collaborative planning were identified, the researcher color-coded the patterns to identify themes that emerged from the data. "Central to the coding process is ensuring that coding procedures are defined, rigorous, and consistently applied in order to conform with validity and reliability standards associated with qualitative research" (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 47).

The transcripts were shared with participants to allow for member checking. "Member checking provides a way for the researcher to ensure the accurate portrayal of participant voices by allowing participants the opportunity to confirm or deny the accuracy and interpretations of data, thus adding credibility to the qualitative study" (Candela, 2019, p. 619).

Assessment of Quality and Rigor

Throughout the research study, trustworthiness was ensured through selection of participants and through the analysis of interview responses. The researcher worked to ensure that the findings were accurate, transferable to other contexts, able to be replicated, and were dependable (Patton, 2002). Roulston and Shelton (2015) described how the trustworthiness of a study can be threatened as a result of the selection of participants, the researcher contaminating data, preconceived perspectives, or interpreting data in ways that support their own beliefs. The researcher has worked to address any limitations of this study. Limitations include the small sample-size of participants in a relatively small geographic region. Additionally, recruitment focused on a narrow population of core academic teachers in small rural schools. Participants may differ in their experience with collaborative planning based on school and district-wide initiatives and in varying levels of experience. Identifying these differences allowed the researcher to identify any unique experiences regarding collaborative planning. As a result, the

researcher was proactive in addressing any bias of the role of collaborative teams in educational settings.

The researcher documented his reflections throughout the process of interviewing participants by writing a conceptual memo. A conceptual memo was written to guide the analysis of interview data. This reflection acknowledges the potential biases that the researcher has regarding previous work surrounding PLCs and the findings that will serve as recommendations for future research studies.

Ethical Considerations and Role of the Researcher

Throughout the research study, potential ethical compromises were considered. Interviews were conducted and data were collected after approval from the Institutional Review Board at East Tennessee State University. Participants' identities were kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms of participant names. The names of schools and districts were also changed to maintain confidentiality of all participants.

It was important that the researcher work to provide a true representation of participants' experiences regarding collaborative planning. After interviews were transcribed, they were shared with the participants to allow them the opportunity to check for accuracy and to make clarifications or modifications.

Since 2010, the researcher has worked with teachers to plan instruction and to analyze student achievement data. The researcher has facilitated numerous professional development sessions on content knowledge, delivery of instruction, and Professional Learning Communities. As a result, the researcher was careful to not include participants from schools and districts in which he has worked.

Summary

   Chapter 3 outlines the methodology that was used in this research study. This phenomenological qualitative research study examined teachers' perceptions of collaborative planning and to identify ways in which school administrators can support collaborative planning. This chapter includes information on the selection of sites and recruitment of participants, data collection process, data analysis strategies, and assessments of quality that were used throughout this research study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study and Chapter 5 includes a discussion of findings, implications for educational leaders, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 4. Analysis of the Data

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the study and presents the findings in terms of themes that were identified through data collection. The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative research study was to examine teachers' perceptions of ways that school administrators, in small rural schools, can support professional collaboration. This study was guided by one essential research question and three supporting questions.

Essential Research Question

What are teachers' perceptions of how school administrators can support professional collaboration?

Supporting Questions

1. How can school administrators establish collaborative teaming structures in small rural schools?

2. How can school administrators support teachers' collaborative planning?

3. How can school administrators sustain professional collaboration in small rural schools?

Research Findings

Findings of this study were determined through the process of gathering and analyzing data from interviews where teachers spoke of their experiences related to professional collaboration. Approval for this study was obtained through East Tennessee State University's Institutional Review Board. The researcher recruited full-time teachers, working in small rural schools that serve students in grades K-8. Each participant taught in a setting where there are no more than two teachers in a grade level or content area. Teachers in three rural school districts in northwest North Carolina and northeast Tennessee were sent emails to recruit their participation. After determining that teachers met the qualifiers for the research study, twelve teachers were

selected to participate in the interview. Interviews were conducted from July to December, 2022.

Teachers were interviewed virtually in a semi-structured setting. After providing an overview of

the research study, participants were asked a series of background questions before being asked

nine questions aimed at gathering information about their individual experiences related to

professional collaboration.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded, allowing the researcher the

opportunity to transcribe interviews and use line-by-line coding. The interviews were reviewed,

color-coded, and analyzed for emerging themes. Any identifying information including names of

individuals and schools were removed and replaced with pseudonyms. Interview participants

were provided with a copy of their individual transcript to allow for member-checking and

validity.

The teachers' willingness to share their perspectives related to professional collaboration

allowed the researcher to analyze individual responses to identify common themes based on their

individual experiences. As the data were analyzed and themes were developed, the researcher

used memoing to document trends among the data and thoughts related to next steps as

additional interviews were conducted.

Interview Participants

Participants in this research study represent three rural school districts in northwest North

Carolina and northeast Tennessee. All participants taught in K-8 schools and served in a grade

level or content area in which there are no more than two teachers. Table 1 shows a demographic

breakdown of the participants.

Table 1

Interview Participants

Name	Grade Level/Content Area	Years of Experience
Participant 1	Middle School Science	17
Participant 2	Middle School Science	21
Participant 3	Middle School Social Studies	32
Participant 4	Second Grade	22
Participant 5	Middle School Math	7
Participant 6	Fifth and Sixth Grade Math	3
Participant 7	Middle School Science	14
Participant 8	Kindergarten	8
Participant 9	Middle School English Language Arts	21
Participant 10	Fifth Grade	2
Participant 11	Fourth Grade	19
Participant 12	Kindergarten and First Grade	24

Interview Results

Data collected through individual participant interviews were recorded using zoom, transcribed using Microsoft Excel, and line-by-line coding was used to identify emerging themes. Themes emerged from the individual responses of participants. Member-checking was used to provide the participants the opportunity to confirm that their thoughts were accurately documented, which strengthened the credibility of this study.

Interview data were analyzed to determine what teachers say that school administrators can do to support their work to collaborate. Three themes that emerged indicated that school administrators should work to (a) establish teaming structures, (b) provide needed resources, and

(c) create a culture of collaboration. Figure 5 summarizes the interview responses and highlights the three themes that emerged from this research study.

Figure 5

Interview Responses

INTERVIEW RESPONSES

Involvement 6.1%
Teaming Structures 17.7%
Culture/Value 18.2%
Time 13.3%
Expectations 13.3%
Flexibility, Autonomy 9.9%
Training 8.3%
Protocols 6.1%
Budget 3.3%
Communication 3.9%
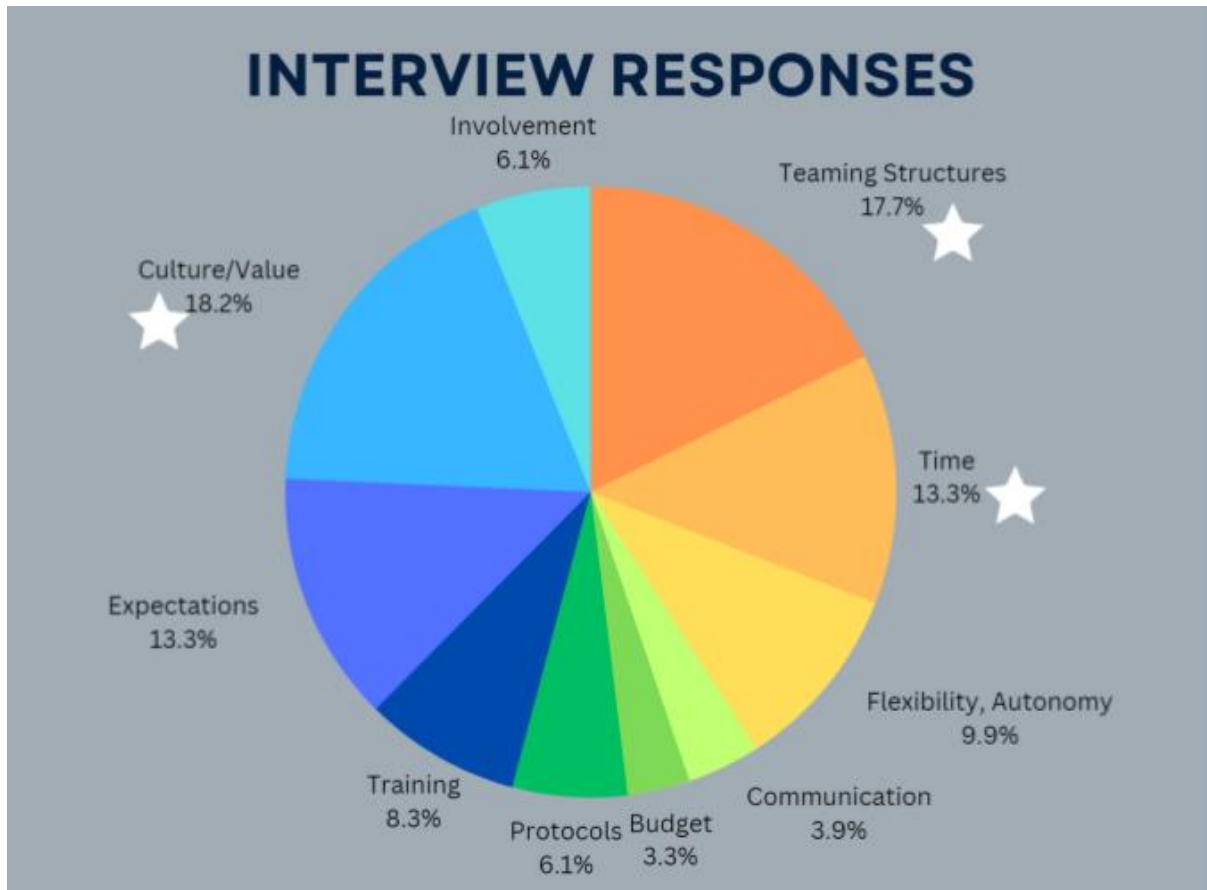
Supporting Question 1

How can school administrators establish collaborative teaming structures in small rural schools?

Classroom teachers described their work to engage in professional collaboration throughout their career. Participants shared about their experience of serving on teams and their thoughts on the focus of the work of collaborative teams. Participant 1 commented, "the work should be to bring together experience, knowledge, wisdom, and skills, because everybody

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brings a little bit of different things to the table and then through that, become more effective than any individual teacher could do." In order for this collaborative work to occur, school administrators should establish structures that result in teachers being a part of meaningful teams. Participants in this study shared their experiences in working with grade level teams at the school level, multi-grade/subject teams at the school level, and collaborative teams at the district level.

Multidisciplinary Collaborative Teams. It is not uncommon for small rural schools to be made up of only one or two teachers on a grade level or that teach the same content area. Participant 8 shared her experience of being a singleton: "Coming from a school where it was just me, I was kind of floating, figuring things out myself." In a school that consists of singletons, the creation of collaborative teams is challenging. School administrators can create teams where teachers from multiple grade levels in the same school meet to plan instruction or analyze assessment results. Participant 3 shared of her experiences working with a multi-grade/subject team within her school:

> When there's collaboration at the building level, it doesn't have to necessarily be a grade level if it's a small building. Everyone who is in that child's life during the day can be on a team, working to improve the communications and the expectations for everyone to be successful.

Similarly, Participant 9, a 21-year veteran, told of her experiences regarding multidisciplinary collaborative teams:

> This is really my first truly rural school that I have taught in, I have taught in small schools that haven't had as much opportunity for collaboration. I definitely feel that I have a team right now, even though it is a multidisciplinary team. I feel like we very much help each other out. For example, in our PLCs, I might be helping our math

teacher look at student work and evaluate what his students are doing and he might be

helping me pinpoint issues with essays. So, we kind of collaborate in that way, even

though there is actually one other teacher that teaches the same discipline that I teach.

Multidisciplinary collaborative teams are often established based on shared student rosters or

common grade spans that are located in the same area of the building. Participant 9 went on to

say:

I think the team came about, not spontaneously, but because we are all on the same

hallway. You know, we are on the big kid hallway, I am at a K through eight school, so

we are, you know, on the big kid hallway and teaching middle school is just a completely

different animal, so that has led to relationships that have been really supportive.

Collaborative teams that are made up of teachers in multiple grades or subject areas, but teach in

the same school allow teachers the opportunity to identify needs, plan instruction, and monitor

student achievement through their shared knowledge of individual students.

Grade Level/Content Area Collaborative Teams. In some small schools, there may be

two teachers on a particular grade level or content area. In these schools, there is opportunity for

teachers to be assigned to teams that are based on shared content standards. Participant 8 shared

her experience of a school based, grade-level team where she and the other kindergarten teacher

were able to plan together and team teach. She commented that "it was effective, I felt like I was

able to lesson plan and meet my students' needs." Due to this research study's focus on small

rural schools, teachers' experiences of serving on grade or content specific collaborative teams

were rare.

Cross-District Collaborative Teams. The majority of participants shared experiences

where they were assigned to cross-district collaborative teams where they work with teachers

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from other schools. Participant 7 spoke of a formally structured team where teachers in her school and district were assigned to professional learning community teams based on the individual needs of teachers: "when I was teaching seventh grade science and math, having a history in teaching science, and being new to teaching math, I was assigned to the math PLC team." In small districts, these collaborative teams are often established by assigning teachers from multiple schools to the same team. Participant 7 goes on to say:

> In my experience, it's just been really subject specific, subject-based. It would be interesting for me to see how that happens at a district level, particularly in this kind of setting, when so many different people teach so many different things, and how those decisions are made, and really how the teams work together… I've been on three teams: seventh grade science, seventh grade math, and now in eighth grade science and they all, so far, have been really different, but still focused hugely on collaboration and student learning.

Participant 8 spoke of her experience of serving as a singleton, kindergarten teacher, moving to a school where there was another teacher on her grade level and being assigned to a district grade-level collaborative team

> becoming part of a school where I had a teammate, being collaborative with them was super helpful, and now adding the PLC team on top of it, I have learned so many strategies, so many ideas, interventions that are helping my students. So, just being able, just little things that teachers can share with each other has had a major impact on my students' learning.

Multiple teachers commented on the impact that cross-district teaming structures have had on their professional development and on student achievement. For example, Participant 12 commented:

> I just love meeting with my PLC because they are from different schools, but they are all in first grade. You know, not only do we talk about math, we talk about a lot of stuff… a lot of teacher collaboration to where I just feel like I get so much out of our time, to help me as a teacher know that I am either on the right track or some things that maybe would help me, that I need to revamp.

Through their work to collaborate and learn from educators in cross-district teams, teachers are given the opportunity to learn about strategies and programs that are being implemented in other schools. Participant 2 stated "you're talking through stuff that's going on in other places, and you try to help figure out how to build something like that in your own school."

Supporting Question 2

How can school administrators support teachers' collaborative planning?

A theme that was identified in this research study is the school administrator's ability to provide resources for collaborative planning. These resources include available human resources, materials for collaboration, technologies, and time. If teachers are expected to plan collaboratively with other teachers, they should have adequate training. Participant 6 spoke of the importance of professional development regarding the work of her collaborative team. She said "we can kind of learn how we work together, and what our strengths and weaknesses are, and how we can help each other." Participant 7 spoke of her training regarding professional collaboration:

Here in this rural district, there has been a big push to use *Learning by Doing* by the

DuFours. And a lot of our PLC work has come from that. In my doctoral program, that

was a big piece of our work as well, not necessarily specific to PLCs, but just leading

adult learning and adult collaboration.

As teachers work in collaborative teams, their work should be focused on student

learning and how to determine impacts of student learning. Participant 8 told of her experiences

of training related to collaborative planning by saying "we did have some PD on being a

facilitator and how to collaborate together." She went on to comment on how this training has

focused on creating and analyzing formative assessments. Similarly, Participant 1 spoke of

training that he had received that "included things like structures of how to organize, ways to

manage data, collect, data, and share data" as he works with collaborative teams.

Participants in this research study spoke of different teaming structures that they have

been assigned to: grade level, multidisciplinary, and cross-district teams. Many rural

communities face geographical challenges in providing opportunities for teachers to meet for

collaborative planning. When teachers are assigned to cross-district teams it is often difficult to

find time and space for teachers to collaborate due to the travel time that it would take to meet

with other teachers. Hansen (2015) described technologies that can be used to provide virtual

collaborative planning sessions. Participant 3 recognized the impact that virtual resources can

have on meaningful collaboration by saying "it doesn't always have to be face to face." She

commented that tools such as Zoom or Google Meet could be used to "take out the stress of

getting there." As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers are more comfortable and

willing to attend meetings virtually. School administrators should work to ensure that technology

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resources, such as Zoom or Google Meet are available to teachers and that there is a consistent expectation for using these tools.

School administrators are responsible for managing the school budget and providing human resources that support effective collaboration. Participant 11 shared her experience where a school administrator used grant funding to provide substitute coverage for special areas: art, music, PE and Spanish teachers to have coverage so that they could collaborate with core-content teachers to plan integrated instruction.

The most common resource that was referenced throughout this research study was time. All twelve interview participants made reference to the importance of school administrators providing a dedicated time for collaborative planning. Participant 5 commented that her principal "takes the role of not only forming our teams, but also giving us the time to meet as a team." Similarly, Participant 8 said "it's super helpful that our principal gives us common planning time.

Participant 4 shared that principals can "ensure that we have time for planning and discussion." She went on to say

> I certainly feel more effective when I've had that block of time where my mind is rolling. Even if I take a break to walk down the hallway, it's kind of like kids having a brain break, when I come back, I'm ready to continue with what I was working on. The collaborative planning time is a very purposeful piece of the master schedule.

Participant 9 also made reference to the master schedule: "I know scheduling is probably one of the most difficult things because we don't necessarily want to take away from instructional time, however, forty minutes is really not a very long time." She spoke of the time that it takes to transport students to other classes prior to her planning time, which shortens the amount of

available time for collaborative planning. She suggested that school administrators provide extended blocks of time for planning. "Something that could be very valuable is maybe once a month, once every other month, providing a time for some extended collaboration because that period of time is so short and goes so quickly."

Participant 2 commented on the need for principals to support collaborative planning by providing "protected time during the workday, for planning with our local middle school team." Participant 2 spoke of a successful experience of collaborative planning:

> The part that really made it work is that we have got that time protected every week that we can use and because it is protected, nothing else shows up that we have to go take care of real quick, so there is a time for us to get together and deal with what we need to deal with.

Time that is set aside for the purpose of collaboration results in teachers being able to remain focused on planning instruction and analyzing assessment results.

Participants shared their experiences of having collaborative meetings during the school day, after school, on teacher workdays, and on scheduled early release days that are set aside for professional development. Participant 5 spoke of a district expectation that PLC meetings be scheduled after school:

> Everyone needs to set aside Tuesdays after school, like, do not make plans, this is the time that's set aside for it. It allows uninterrupted time for us to collaborate. During the work day would be preferable, but I know that's not a reality that can always happen, especially with a small district where we do not always have common planning time with everyone on the team.

Participant 5 spoke of the "allowing time for collaboration to happen, setting aside time, whether

it be during a teacher planning day or on early release days that are set aside for professional development."

It is important that time that is dedicated to collaboration has a clear purpose. Participant 10 said:

> Time is always the answer. I think being respectful of that time, you know, make it meaningful. Let's have a purpose; sometimes, I think we get bogged down in sort of talking about what that purpose is and then at the end of the day, we don't have time to work on the purpose.

Participant 6 spoke of the need for teachers to have "time to be able to discuss particular students that need additional support."

School administrators are able to provide resources that can be used to ensure effective collaboration occurs, whether teachers participate in school-level or district-level teams. School and district administrators can work to provide adequate training, technology resources, human resources, and time to allow teachers the opportunity to engage in professional collaboration.

Supporting Question 3

How can school administrators sustain professional collaboration in small rural schools?

School administrators can work to sustain professional collaboration in small rural schools through their work to establish a culture of collaboration. The researcher identified a theme related to the culture of a school, particularly a culture that fosters, encourages, and supports teachers' work to collaborate.

Teachers in small rural schools often feel isolated due to the limited number of staff that teach the same grade level or content area. School administrators should work to establish a culture in which teachers are encouraged to share successful lessons. Participant 9 shared her

experience of collaborative planning and the benefits that she has experienced throughout her career. "I think one of the best things about teaching is that it is very collaborative in nature and I think most teachers are very generous in being willing to share what they are doing in their classroom." Teachers are able to share their lessons and ideas in both formal and informal settings. As teachers recognize opportunities to learn from their colleagues, they are better able to improve their own practice. Participant 9 commented "I really feel like some of my best teaching moves have just come from listening to other teachers, I mean, picking up on what they are doing, it's really helped me to hone my skills." Participant 11 shared her thoughts on the benefits of collaborative planning by saying that she has learned to be

> open to new ideas and different ways of thinking about things. I know, going through the pandemic, and even these last three years, teaching virtually has really opened my eyes to ways that things could be done totally differently. I think just seeing things in a different view is helpful.

As a culture is established where teachers learn to value collaboration, they become more dedicated to the work of collaboration. Participant 2 commented that his work to collaborate with other teachers within his district "puts more tools in your box to help your students". He shared experiences where he learned effective lessons from other teachers.

> Would I have gone and found that by myself? Maybe. But when you've got five people working together that's five times more, you know time on the internet, looking for things. If you have a young teacher and that young teacher is in there with experienced teachers, that's years-worth of knowing things that work and things that don't work… and you know, we've tried that.

When sharing her work to collaborate with other teachers, Participant 3 recognized the collegiality that is found in sharing resources because "we're in this together."

This culture of collaboration is built over time, but once it is established, stakeholders recognize the collective efficacy that occurs as a result of this work. Participant 4 said "there's a feeling of community; we all feel connected and show camaraderie, I think the kids see it too." Likewise, Participant 5 commented that "when the team functions together, the students feel that."

A school or district that works to establish collaborative teaming structures should foster a culture that ensures that teachers' work remains focused on improving student learning (DuFour et al., 2020). Participant 4 recognized this in saying collaborative teams should:

keep that shared perspective. They need to remember that, regardless of your personal feelings towards the situation, you've got to keep those kids in the central part of that conversation. And be sure that you have a shared vision or shared goal for what you want the outcome to be for those students and that everything comes back to them.

Participant 12 also referenced the impact that her work to collaborate with other teachers has on student learning in saying that it has "made me a better teacher, and helped the students; it's really all about the students, but you have to first look at yourself to see how you can improve yourself."

Multiple teachers commented on the benefits that collaborative planning has had on their professional practice. Participant 7 said "working positively with teachers has only made me a better teacher." Participant 5 said "my colleagues are the reasons why I love what I do again; I found the joy again because the collaboration is there, the caring is there."

Conclusion

  Three supporting questions were used to guide the data collection of this research study to identify teachers' perceptions of the role school administrators play in their work to collaborate. School administrators can establish collaborative teaming structures by ensuring that teachers are members of meaningful teams. These collaborative teams can be multidisciplinary, grade level/content area, or cross-district in design. School administrators can support teachers' work of collaborative planning by ensuring they have the resources needed. These resources include professional development, technologies, budget, and time. Finally, school administrators can work to sustain professional collaboration by working to establish a culture of collaboration.

Summary

  Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the data of this research study. The purpose of the study and guiding research questions were presented. Data collection and data analysis strategies were included in this chapter. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings, implications for educational leaders, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5. Discussion of Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative research study was to examine teachers' perceptions of ways that school administrators, in small rural schools, can support professional collaboration. This study was guided by experiential learning theory which focuses on the opportunities that adults have to learn through their own experience (Dernova, 2015). Teachers spend much time unpacking standards, planning lessons, and analyzing student achievement data. When this work is done in isolation, teachers are unable to learn from and rely on the expertise of their colleagues. Participant 1 recognized the value of learning from his colleagues in saying "the work should be to bring together experience, knowledge, wisdom, and skills, because everybody brings a little bit of different things to the table and then through that, become more effective than any individual teacher could do."

While there is much research available on PLCs and teacher collaboration, there is little research surrounding collaborative teams in small, K-8 schools. As a result, the researcher hopes to add to the literature regarding the establishment of collaborative teaming structures in small rural schools. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

Essential Research Question

1. What are teachers' perceptions of how school administrators can support professional collaboration?

Supporting Sub-Questions

1. How can school administrators establish collaborative teaming structures in small rural schools?

2. How can school administrators support teachers' collaborative planning?

3. How can school administrators sustain professional collaboration in small rural schools?

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this research study identified three themes regarding school administrators' support of professional collaboration in small rural schools. These themes highlight the need for school administrators to (a) establish teaming structures, (b) provide needed resources, and (c) create a culture of collaboration. These themes aligned with the supporting questions of the study. Figure 6 summarizes the findings of this research study.

Figure 6

Professional Collaboration in Small Rural Schools Findings

PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION IN SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS: TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Establish teaming structures
- multidisciplinary collaborative teams
- grade level/content area collaborative teams
- cross-district collaborative teams

Provide resources
- time
- materials and technology
- human resources

Strong culture of collaboration
- emphasis on learning
- interdependence
- built on trust

Supporting Question 1 Discussion

How can school administrators establish collaborative teaming structures in small rural schools?

The findings indicate that the establishment of teaming structures is essential to the effectiveness of collaborative teams. Administrators in small rural schools are faced with the challenge of assigning teachers to meaningful teams. Many schools create collaborative teams by grouping teachers based on their grade level or content area. Participant 3 discussed a model of grade-level teaming. "If you are in an elementary building and you have, maybe, four teachers at each level, those grade levels have meetings. I've seen that work nicely." Small rural schools do not always have the human resources to create such teams. Often, teachers in small rural schools work on grade levels or content areas that contain only one or two teachers. In these schools, it is impossible to create a kindergarten or 5th grade team. Participant 8 told of her experience as a singleton teacher by saying "I was just kind of floating, figuring things out myself". She went on to share her desire to collaborate with other teachers that teach the same grade. After being assigned to a cross-district PLC, she commented that "just little things that teachers can share with each other has had a major impact on my students' learning." Participant 3 shared her experiences of working on collaborative teams in a small school by saying "when there's collaboration at the building level, it doesn't have to necessarily be a grade level if it's a small building."

The analysis of data revealed three teaming structures that school administrators in small rural schools might consider when planning for professional collaboration. These include:

- multidisciplinary collaborative teams
- grade level/content area collaborative teams

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- cross-district collaborative teams.

When establishing collaborative teams, school administrators should work to "put the right people together" as Participant 3 stated.

Once collaborative teams are established, school leaders should work to communicate expectations for the work. Participant 7 shared her experience in a cross-district collaborative team: "I think our PLCs have pretty clearly communicated goals that are student centered. I feel like we truly collaborate, rather than just meeting for the sake of meeting, which has been my experience prior to this PLC." These expectations might include structures to "manage data, collect data, and share data" as Participant 1 highlighted. He also commented that "in the end, the teachers and administrators need to make sure that whatever is happening, has the students' interests in mind and is going to be effective for them to increase student learning."

DuFour and Marzano (2011) highlighted the importance of collaborative teams focusing on increased student achievement. "If we are to help all students learn, it will require us to work collaboratively in a collective effort to meet the needs of each student" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 23). This research, regarding the establishment of teaming structures, is consistent with the findings of this research study. Educators should be "organized into meaningful collaborative teams in which members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which they are mutually accountable" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 24). DuFour et al. (2020) highlighted the need for collaborative teams to focus on student learning in writing "if we are to fulfill the moral imperative of our profession, we can no longer settle for simply giving students the chance to learn; we must ensure high levels of learning for each student in our collective care" (p. 257).

Supporting Question 2 Discussion

How can school administrators support teachers' collaborative planning?

The findings of this research study indicate that school administrators of small rural schools should work to provide resources for teachers to engage in professional collaboration. These resources include materials and technology for collaborative planning, human resources, and time. Throughout this research study, many participants indicated that they had not received training on professional collaboration. School administrators should work to provide training for teachers so that they can unpack standards, plan instruction, and analyze assessment data. Participant 7 referenced training that she had received using the text *Learning by Doing* (DuFour et al., 2020), which was foundational to the literature review of this study. DuFour et al., (2020) provide educators with a guide for implementing Professional Learning Communities. The writers provide a definition of PLCs, outline a purpose for professional collaboration, and provide resources for educators to use in collaborative planning.

Small schools are often faced with the challenge of creating meaningful collaborative teams. Oftentimes, administrators might look beyond the walls of their school to find other teachers that teach the same grade level or content area. Administrators of rural schools work to overcome geographic challenges in providing opportunities for teachers to meet for collaborative planning. Hansen (2015) described the role that virtual teams can play in providing an avenue for teachers to meet for collaborative planning. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the notion of virtual team meetings seemed idealistic, but unrealistic. After teachers learned to deliver instruction via Zoom or Google Meet, they became comfortable with these virtual tools. As a result, teachers of rural schools are now more willing to use technologies to effectively collaborate. School administrators should work to ensure that these technologies are available to teachers.

Each interview participant referenced the importance of school administrators providing a dedicated time for collaborative planning. When asked how school administrators can support collaborative planning, Participant 5 said that principals should "allow time for teachers to meet". She added that, "especially in a very small rural school, teachers wear a lot of hats." It is not uncommon for teachers in small rural schools to serve on a number of committees or have teaching responsibilities outside of their core courses. As a result, teachers' availability for common, collaborative planning is limited. School administrators can be creative in creating a master schedule. Participant 6 recognized this in her comments regarding the need for teachers to have a dedicated time to discuss student needs:

> I think just setting the expectations that you need to talk and you need to, at some point, have some kind of common time that you can get together and have either those discussions about the kids that you need to talk about or the parents that you need to reach out to.

She added that this time should be used to discuss the needs of individual students and brainstorm additional supports that are needed. Participant 8 shared her appreciation of her principal for providing common planning time for her grade level collaborative team to have scheduled time during the school day.

Participant 4 spoke of the benefits of collaborative planning. She commented that school administrators can be supportive by providing time, as a result "within the school, there's a feeling of community. The kids feel that, if we all feel connected and show camaraderie, I think the kids do too."

Supporting Question 3 Discussion

How can school administrators sustain professional collaboration in small rural schools?

Findings from this research study show that in order for professional collaboration to be sustained in small rural schools, there must be a strong culture established where teachers value collaboration. Participant 1 shared that the work of collaborative teams "should be to bring together experience, knowledge, wisdom, and skills because everybody brings a little bit of different things to the table and then through that, become more effective than any individual teacher could do." This emphasis on teacher learning and collaboration requires teachers to work interdependently to plan and respond to student learning. "In a PLC, collaboration represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school" (DuFour et al., 2020, p. 12). Participant 3 recognizes this interdependence in saying that teachers should have the mentality of "let me share this with you" and "we're in this together". This perspective requires members of the collaborative team to have a shared purpose in their work. Participant 4 recognized this in sharing about the need for "a common goal, common understanding, and willingness to listen to other people and hear what they have to say." She continued by sharing her experience of having "really good, transparent conversations about helping kids grow and learn and make their potential".

School administrators play a vital role in fostering a culture of collaboration. Participant 3 commented that when the school principal is of a "collaborative mindset, and not dictatorial, I think it becomes a very powerful thing." A culture of collaboration requires a team of teachers to "buy in to the work" as Participant 10 shared. In discussing the shared commitments of his collaborative team, he said "we're team players in the sense that, when we have an issue, we are

trying to work through the problem as a group." School administrators should use their influence

and perspective to encourage this buy in. Participant 10 commented:

> Having a principal that is open and honest and treats you as a professional right off the
>
> bat, I think gets some of that respect. That respect is sort of earned and then as a teacher,
>
> as a member of that team, I know that whatever task the principal or administrator has
>
> given me, I don't question the purpose of it because I know the intent is going to be
>
> meaningful, it's not going to waste my time to make someone look good or to check off
>
> some boxes. It is really going to be impactful; it's going to have meaning.

A culture of collaboration in schools is built on trust of colleagues and administrators. School

administrators can build this trust through their own work to model collaboration. Participant 12

recognized this in saying:

> I ask a lot of people for help. My principal's there, the coach is there, there's nobody in
>
> my grade, but me, there's only me. We collaborate all the time, but these other teachers
>
> help me think about my own classroom and how things might work.

> A culture of collaboration results in improved teaching and increased student

achievement (DuFour et al., 2020). Participant 9 share of the benefits that she has received from

collaborative planning:

> I think one of the best things about teaching is that it is very collaborative in nature and I
>
> think most teachers are very generous in being willing to share what they're doing in
>
> their classrooms. So, you know, my work collaborating with others, when I get input
>
> from others, maybe suggestions, when I hear practices that they are using in their
>
> classroom that I might not have considered or a different way of approaching something,
>
> I definitely incorporate those into my classroom and give them a try, and I really feel like

some of my best teaching moves have just come from listening to other teachers, I mean, picking up on what they are doing, it's really helped me to hone my skills.

Fullan and Edwards (2022) wrote "we believe that understanding how culture, relationships, and shared beliefs interweave with productivity and happiness is essential for students and teachers to thrive" (p. 14).

A school culture where teachers value professional collaboration is established over time. School administrators should work to establish a culture where structures are in place for collaborative planning to happen, where teachers are supported in their work and student achievement is celebrated.

Implications for Practice

The researcher made the following recommendations for school administrators in small rural schools:

- Establish meaningful teaming structures, based on the demographics of the school. Teachers should be assigned to teams where they are able to collaborate with colleagues that have something in common and are able to discuss instructional practices that aim to improve student learning. School administrators in small rural schools should consider:
  - multidisciplinary collaborative teams where teachers in a school collaborate with teachers that teach different subjects, but teach the same children,
  - grade level/content area collaborative teams where teachers collaborate with teachers in their school that teach the same grade level or content area,
  - cross-district collaborative teams where teachers collaborate with teachers in other schools that teach the same grade level or content area.

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- Provide resources so that teachers can work collaboratively. If the necessary resources are not in place, teachers will become frustrated and effective collaboration will not occur. School administrators in small rural schools should consider:
  - training to educate teachers on the purpose of collaboration and protocols that can be used to unpack standards, plan instruction, and analyze student learning,
  - technology to be used for productivity when working collaboratively and, if necessary, to meet virtually,
  - human resources to ensure that all teachers are able to be assigned to meaningful teams,
  - scheduling to provide teachers with scheduled, uninterrupted time for professional collaboration.
- Establish a culture in which collaboration is valued. School administrators should work to:
  - built trust among the staff so that they value the perspectives of others and are willing to work together.
  - ensure that staff work interdependently to plan instruction and to assess student learning.
  - emphasize the fact that teachers and their work to collaborate is guided by their ability to impact student learning

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations are made for future research:

- It is recommended that a qualitative study be designed to explore teacher perceptions of school administrators' role in professional collaboration in small schools in an urban setting.

- It is also recommended that a qualitative study be designed to examine the perceptions of teachers of the role of school administrators in professional collaboration in a larger geographic region.

- It is recommended that a qualitative study be designed to explore the perspectives of teachers who do not teach mathematics, reading, science, and social studies, recognized as the core four academic courses. These roles include, but are not limited to, physical education, arts, career and technical education, and exceptional children teachers.

- It is also recommended that a qualitative study be designed to examine the perceptions of teachers serving in a high school setting, as this study was limited to K-8 educators.

- It is recommended that a quantitative study be designed to explore the impact that collaborative planning has on student achievement, in small rural schools.

Summary

School administrators work to implement structures and initiatives that result in increased student achievement. Since the early 2000's, educators have relied on Professional Learning Communities to provide a structure for collaborative planning (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2020). School administrators in small rural schools are faced with a challenge of establishing meaningful teaming structures when their school consists of grade levels and content areas in which there are only one or two teachers. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological, qualitative research study was to examine teachers' perceptions of ways that school administrators, in small rural schools, can support professional collaboration.

Three themes were established through the analysis of teachers' perceptions of how school administrators can support professional collaboration. The first theme highlights the need for school administrators to ensure that teaming structures are intentionally established, particularly in small rural schools. It is important that teachers be a part of teams in which they have something in common, e.g., grade level or content area. This can be challenging given the fact that many schools are made up of singletons, where there is only one or two teachers in a grade level or content area. DuFour et al. (2020) identified the impact that collaborative teaming structures can have on student achievement. Collaborative teams are tasked with working interdependently to learning content standards, share resources, plan instructional activities, and assess student learning (DuFour et al., 2020).

The second theme is that school administrators can support collaborative planning through the allocation of resources. Each interview participant commented on the need for time being set aside for the sole purpose of collaborative planning. Teachers also commented on their desire to have professional development on collaborative planning. Providing professional development requires school administrators to allocate financial resources for training and materials that are aimed at providing teachers with a deeper understanding of teaming structures, planning, and assessment analysis.

A third theme that evolved is the notion that a culture of cooperation and teamwork is essential for teachers to be successful in their work to collaborate with colleagues. Fullan and Edwards (2022) highlighted the impact that a shared purpose can have on the work of collaborative teams. "Shared purpose, connecting people to their work together, for, and with each other is a powerful force (Fullan & Edwards, 2022, p. 16). Interview participants commented that the task of planning for multiple classes, subject areas, and skills seems

daunting, but having colleagues with whom they can share the load makes the work seem

manageable.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment E-Mail

K-8 Educator,

I am a doctoral student at East Tennessee State University (ETSU), and I am conducting a research study that involves exploring teacher perceptions of ways that school administrators, in small, rural schools, can support collaborative planning for teachers. I am looking for people who are currently employed as a full-time teacher in a K-8 school, serving on a grade-level or content area that consists of no more than two teachers. This study involves an in-person interview which should take about 30-45 minutes. The interview will take place via Zoom. Please think about participating. Participation is voluntary. If you have any questions please contact me at bettisb@etsu.edu or 704.466.8396.

Sincerely,

Brian A. Bettis
Doctoral Student
East Tennessee State University
bettisb@etsu.edu

Introduction and Overview of Research Study:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. My name is Brian Bettis and I am completing a research study as a doctoral student at East Tennessee State University. I have provided you with an informed consent form. Please know that all information that you share will be kept confidential and that your participation in this study is voluntary, you may decide to stop participating at any time. This interview will take approximately 30 minutes. I will record our conversation.

You have been identified as a teacher in a small, rural K-8 school. I appreciate your perspective as a teacher at _____ School. This study does not aim to evaluate your work as a teacher nor does it evaluate your participation in collaborative teams. Your responses will be used for me to explore teachers' perceptions of school administrators' role in collaborative planning and for me to identify trends regarding the collaborative work of teachers.

Participant Background:
- How long have you had a career in education?
- How long have you served in your current school?
- What grade level or subject area do you currently teach?
- What grade levels or subject areas have you taught throughout your career?

Interview Questions:
- Describe a time in your professional career that you have been a member of a team.
- Would you consider this team to be effective? Why or why not?
- Was this team structured formally or informally?
- What, do you feel, should be the focus of the work of collaborative teams?
- What role did your principal or school administrator play in the establishment of this team?
- Have you received formal training on collaborative planning?
- What role should your principal or school administrator play in the collaborative work of your team?
- How does your work to plan with other teachers impact student learning?
- How can your principal or supervisor support your work to collaborate with other teachers?
- How can your principal or supervisor help sustain your work to collaborate with other teachers from year to year?

*Additional questions may be asked as a follow-up to the participants' responses or to clarify a point that is made.

Interview notes, comments and/or observations:

VITA

BRIAN AUSTELL BETTIS

Education: Ed.D., Educational Leadership, East Tennessee State University,

Johnson City, Tennessee, 2023

Ed.S., Educational Leadership, Appalachian State University,

Boone, North Carolina, 2016

Graduate Certificate, School Leadership, Appalachian State

University, Boone, North Carolina, 2015

M.A., Elementary Education, Appalachian State University,

Boone, North Carolina, 2008

B.S., Elementary Education, Appalachian State University, Boone,

North Carolina, 2005

Professional Experience   Director of Elementary Education, Watauga County Schools,

Boone, North Carolina, 2023-Present

Adjunct Instructor, Appalachian State University, Boone, North

Carolina, 2022-Present

Principal, Bethel School, Sugar Grove, North Carolina,

2017-2023

Assistant Principal, Springmore Elementary School, Shelby, North

Carolina, 2015-2017

Adjunct Instructor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte,

Charlotte, North Carolina, 2013-2017

Curriculum Technology Coordinator, Springmore Elementary

School, Shelby, North Carolina, 2010-2015

Adjunct Instructor, Cleveland Community College, Shelby, North

Carolina, 2010-2014

Teacher, Boiling Springs Elementary School, Shelby, North

Carolina, 2005-2010

Honors and Awards   Principal of the Year, 2020

Boone Chamber of Commerce, 4 Under 40 Honoree, 2019 & 2021

Appalachian State University, Cratis D. Williams - Outstanding

Graduate, 2016

Teacher of the Year, 2008