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We Are All In This Together: The Impact of Collaborative Professional Learning Teams on 21st Century Literacy Instruction

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WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER: THE IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TEAMS ON 21ST CENTURY LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Michelle K. Thompson
Reading and Language Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Doctor of Education in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education
National-Louis University
May, 2017
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ABSTRACT

Professional learning communities and collaboration are often seen and heard in schools as important factors in educators’ work to prepare students to be college and career ready in the 21st century. This dissertation explored the impact that collaboration within professional learning communities (PLCs) has had on the literacy instruction of teachers in a large, suburban school district. Qualitative data were collected through interviews and observations of three PLC teams throughout one school year. Interviews with team members and the building administrators along with observations of team meetings painted a picture of the collaborative practices in these teams. The results show that the teachers and administrators at the schools valued collaboration in their teams and viewed the literacy instruction of team members as a benefit derived from working together. However, each of the three teams had its own systems and practices in place that led to both similarities and differences among the teams in terms of the impact collaboration had on instruction.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I began the journey of writing this dissertation, I had no idea how many people would be impacted by my commitment to this achievement. I truly appreciate all of the support I have been blessed with.

To my colleagues, friends, and research participants, I have learned so much from our experiences together in professional learning communities and from the open and welcoming approach you took toward me during this research. Thank you for providing me with insights into your practices that have helped me to grow as an educator.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

With changes to legislation, curriculum alignment, advancements in technology, and the streamlining of standardized testing, 21st century learners, the students of today, will need 21st century teachers. Teachers engage their students in learning, differentiate their instructional practices, incorporate technology, teach to more rigorous standards, mold students into quality citizens and do this all while being stellar, collaborative professionals sharing and gaining ideas from colleagues.

To gain insight into my experiences with professional learning through collaboration, let me take you back to August 2007, Institute Day of my third year of teaching. We were all chatting and catching up on our summer breaks when suddenly my principal blasted the song, “We’re All In This Together” from Disney’s High School Musical and the accompanying music video. The administrators and teachers were enthusiastically singing along.

We’re all in this together
Once we know
That we are
We’re all stars
And we see that
We’re all in this together
And it shows
When we stand
Hand in hand
Make our dreams come true

— Gerrard and Nevil (2006)

We had just made dramatic positive growth on the high-stakes standardized achievement test for the second year in a row and our school was nearing the top of the
district in academic achievement. We were in it together; we were working hard as a school and we were seeing results. A celebration mode had taken over and there was a changing atmosphere in our school; we were buzzing. Unfortunately, I have to say that I was not a huge fan of the movie (sorry Disney) but the day, the image, and the song have stuck with me. For the first time in my young career, I was realizing how true those words are.

I had been on teams since my first grade park district soccer team. Over the years, I was on cheerleading, basketball, soccer, and softball teams, the executive board of my sorority, and numerous committees. I knew how to work with people and, for the most part, I was good at it. For some mysterious reason, when I was hired for my first teaching job and was assigned a team of teachers to work with, it was as if I had never had contact with human life before. I completely isolated myself and did not work with my team. This was common practice. My team and I touched base once in a while about where we were in every unit so as to keep on pace, but that was the extent of my “teamwork.” I taught as if I was such an intelligent and effective teacher that I could successfully teach each and every one of my students all by myself. I did not appreciate or see the value of my teammates, their knowledge, and their experiences, even though they each had over 10 years of experience. Of course, this is all said in hindsight.

Halfway through my first year of teaching, my school district leaders introduced the idea of professional learning communities (PLCs). According to practitioners, a professional learning community is defined as a group of collaborative teams that share a common purpose (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This was implemented in my school by working on collaborative teams to plan for instruction and assessment, then to use the
results of the assessments to drive future instruction. For the purpose of this dissertation, my personal definition of a professional learning community is a community of educators who embrace professional learning as a natural part of their daily practice. Time for collaboration, reflection on students and instruction, and transparent, open conversations are common practice. Professional learning communities are a mindset where we as educators are never done learning and this practice drives us to do what is best for student learning. When the school I worked at implemented practices of a professional learning community, it was a learning process to begin effectively working as a PLC and it took small steps and much reflection. I will admit, I did not immediately see the power of professional learning teams but I, along with others on the team, did what our administrator asked of us. When we began to see results in student achievement, my attitude began to change.

Fast forward three years, where somewhere in the chaos of elementary school during my third year teaching, I had a change of heart. I realized the power of working on a team. I am now the biggest cheerleader of PLCs. Whether on a little league baseball team, with the Chicago Cubs, or on a team of teachers, your success is determined by those around you. No one can do it all. Team members depend on one another and build on each other’s strengths and weaknesses to win. There is a positive interdependence, a healthy reliance on those working with you toward a common goal. The same applies to a team of teachers. No one knows every instructional practice or has all the creative ideas. Teachers need to learn from and build on the knowledge of one another in order to be the best they can be.
In the 28 schools in the district, some schools were like mine and implemented the idea of PLCs straightaway; others did not. The schools that implemented PLCs saw positive results in their standardized tests scores almost immediately. Two schools that were an example of dramatic positive growth in my district saw increases of 29% and 15% in the number of students meeting and exceeding the benchmarks in reading on the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) in six years. Other schools that did not implement the PLC process saw growth of only 6% and 2% in the same six years (Illinois Interactive Report Card, 2012). More specific data will be provided in chapter three. There are many factors that may have influenced these results, but it was hard to deny that the sudden success of these schools was due in part to the shift in focus from working alone to working with a collaborative team.

My school jumped head first into the PLC idea, even though all staff members were not instantly on board, but there were directives from administrators that we could not avoid. We had to work together. Our administrators would give us tasks that would require us to collaborate on the literacy instruction and assessments we were giving. We then had to reflect on the assessment results together, plan for reteaching that involved grouping the students from all classes at our grade level, and share the teaching responsibilities. This put many teachers, including me, out of our comfort zones. We were thinking: “What?! You want me to let someone else teach my kids? You expect me to talk about my areas for growth with people I barely know?” That was a common feeling among the staff, but we were given our directions and we followed them. I will admit, some of the conversations were uncomfortable, but we committed ourselves to the mission. It did not take long doing what we called interventions, where we were
regrouping and reteaching across the grade level, before we were able to see the benefits in our students. We were collaborating together about our instruction, assessments, and students. Eventually, I caught the bug and, along with many of the other teachers at my school, I was an enthusiastic, active member of a professional learning community.

Schools like mine that were operating as a learning community, saw student achievement on ISAT continue to make positive gains year after year. The district as a whole was benefiting because of the collaboration and professional learning occurring at schools. Eighty percent of the students in our 28 schools in the district met or exceeded on the reading portion of the ISATs in 2005 and in 2011, 92% met or exceeded (Illinois Interactive Report Card, 2012) the standards. Even though it was obvious to those of us living day to day in a learning community how powerful the experience was and how empowered we were feeling, there were still schools in our district that were operating with their teachers working in isolation. As each year went on, the scores of those schools were stagnant or dropping. From talking to teachers at these schools, the teachers were growing frustrated by the lack of progress and the increasing pressure to keep up with the rest of the district. They could not understand why schools that were geographically less than a mile apart with similar student populations, were getting dramatically different results in student achievement and were having completely different experiences in their professional learning teams.

In 2010, I took a new position in my district as an instructional coach. When I agreed to the job, I learned that I would have the opportunity to work with teacher teams across the district. When my school had embraced the PLC process, I was living in a professional learning community bubble. Our school had continued on our upward trend
of growing as professionals and increasing student achievement. I was not aware that this was not happening everywhere. As it turned out, there were teacher teams across the district performing at varying levels of effectiveness. In my new role, I was charged with the task of getting teacher teams to work together to learn from each other as professionals in an effort to increase professional knowledge so as to positively impact student achievement in schools that were struggling to embrace the PLC structure and mission.

We’re all in this together  
When we reach  
We can fly  
Know inside  
We can make it  

We’re all in this together  
Once we see  
There’s a chance  
That we have  
And we take it

— Gerrard and Nevil (2006)

I wish I could say that it has been an easy process and that all the teams I worked with became high-functioning professional learning communities, but I cannot. Becoming a collaborative team is a journey and a constant work in progress. I have learned that truly working on a team means more than calling ourselves “the third grade team,” sitting around the same table, and saying that we will do lesson six tomorrow. A learning team has deep and meaningful conversations about instructional practices. My journey as an instructional coach allowed me the opportunity to learn so much from all of the teachers I worked with about instruction, collaboration, and teacher professional growth.
I was also left intrigued by many unanswered questions regarding teacher teams that plagued me daily. Why do some teams collaborate effectively while others put on a “PLC act” but continue to plan in isolation? Why are some teacher teams learning from one another and pushing the professional literacy knowledge of the team members in order to grow professionally in their instruction while others are content to maintain the status quo? Why do some teacher teams understand and appreciate one another’s professional strengths and weaknesses and why do some just complain about one another?

As an instructional coach, these questions incessantly intrigued and bewildered me. Not only was the push for teachers to work in learning communities a driving force in my district, but it was gaining momentum in schools and districts across the country. The new Learning Forward (2012) association standards for professional learning name learning communities as one of its seven requirements for professional learning. Therefore, the question is not should we work in professional learning teams; it is how do we work in professional learning teams. How do we get all teacher teams to the level of collaboration where they are able to learn and grow as professionals from their peers?

In schools, learning communities are created based on two assumptions. First, it is assumed that knowledge is situated in the lived experiences of teachers and best understood through meaningful reflection with others who share the same experience (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003). Second, it is assumed that actively engaging teachers in professional learning communities will increase their professional knowledge and in turn enhance student learning (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2006). In order to increase their knowledge of instructional practices, learning teams should have shared values and
norms, a clear and consistent focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, and a focus on collaboration (Newmann & Associates, 1996).

In my experience, these characteristics are developed through time, relationship building, and communication. Once those aspects are developed, learning teams can be an effective avenue for professional development. As we move into the new era of the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010), as 21st century educators, it is my belief that new expectations can be embraced through a learning team. Teams consistently say, “We must work smarter, not harder,” but what does that really mean? Professional learning teams are our opportunity to capitalize on that statement.

Several recent studies have examined the effectiveness of professional learning communities, the relationship between teachers’ participation in professional learning communities, and the improvement in student achievement (Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins, & Towner, 2004; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz, 2002).

Hollins et al. (2004) examined how teachers were able to develop a change in their “habits of mind” that allowed them to successfully participate in a self-sustaining learning community. As a result of this change in their habits of mind, the teachers improved their instruction of literacy by talking to and learning from one another. This change was able to occur because of the structured dialogue problem-solving approach that was put into place by the building administration. The teachers at the school in this study engaged in a five-stage process that included delineating challenges, identifying an approach to combat those challenges, implementing the approaches, evaluating the implementation, and formulating a theory for future practices. As a result of the guidance
of leadership and structure as well as teacher reflection and collaboration over the course of multiple meetings over three years, the school saw gains in student achievement that were two and three times more than the gains seen across their district from classrooms where the teachers were not participating in this structured dialogue (Hollins et al., 2004).

Supovitz (2002) studied a school reform program that looked at the difference between team-based schools and non-team-based schools over the course of four years. It was thought going into the study that organizing the teachers into teams and requiring meetings for those teacher teams would lead to better curricular and pedagogical decision making by the teachers which in turn should lead to an increase in student achievement. The study consisted of teacher teams ranging from kindergarten through 10th grade in Cincinnati Public Schools that became a part of the team-based schools on a voluntary basis. The teams were organized with a number of requirements including: (a) grouping in gateway grades (e.g., grades K–3, 4–6, 7–8, 9–10); (b) teams developing a curriculum with methods and materials consistent with their school’s program focus, but with the autonomy to choose the schedules and grouping for their students; (c) teachers were responsible for ALL students of the teachers on their team; (d) teams controlled their funding for materials, supplies, and personnel; and (e) teams had to stay together for several years to ensure maximum benefits from collaboration. It was noted by Supovitz that there were several other reforms going on in the district at the same time and that many teachers felt that teaming was not a new idea for them. For the district leaders, the motivation behind the renewed push for teaming was they “envisioned that a culture of peer pressure and competition would emerge in the effective team-based schools, propelling teachers to higher quality instructional levels” (Supovitz, 2002, p. 159).
As the study continued through three years of annual surveys that were given to 3,000 teachers at 79 schools, administrator interviews, school and classroom visits for further interviews and observations, team documents such as meeting notes and test data, Supovitz (2002) found that there was no overall statistical significance between the team-based schools and the non-team-based schools in their collaboration, deprivatization of practice, collective responsibility, and reflective dialogue. In this study, deprivatization of practice means allowing other teachers to observe one’s teaching. However, when the researcher looked more closely at the results, the determination was that in the middle school and high school, when deprivatization of practice and reflective dialogues focused on instruction, both increased significantly. It was also reported that only a quarter of the teams in the study focused their discussions on instructional practices. When this idea was explored further, Supovitz did find that the students who had teachers who were in the teams that had more dialogue around instruction performed better, although no numerical data were given by the author to support this finding.

One may be wondering at this point why I chose to include the Supovitz study in this dissertation because it is not exactly supporting my point. I think that the researcher of that study came across an important finding. It is more than just telling teachers to work in teams that will warrant results. The teams in the study reported using most of their time on administrative work (25%), student discipline issues (30%), and paperwork from the school and district (20%) thus leaving only 25% of their time to focus on teaching and learning. The Hollis et al. (2004) and the Supovitz (2002) studies show that there must be structure and guidance for the teams in order for them to work effectively. For this reason, I included administrators in my study. I sought to uncover, from the
行政点的利益，有效协作如何引导专业学习关于读写能力的。”

Strahan (2003)编写的三个小学的故事，这些学校突破了可能，至少部分的归功于教师，这些教师在专业学习共同体中工作。在这些学校，从1997-2002，学生的州级考试成绩从不足50％的熟练到超过75％的熟练。每个学校实施学习共同体的方法略有不同。一所学校专注于品格教育，一所学校专注于实施新的读写课程，一所学校专注于教学实践。学区的团队讨论了开放分享实践和责任的转移。他们正在学习并适应对方的优点和缺点。研究者和教师在本研究中承认除了其他因素外，学区教师学习团队的实施是重要的因素（Strahan, 2003）。

students passed each subject area. The following year the school received a recognized rating, meaning at least 80% of its students passed. In the final year of the study, the school received an exemplary rating, with 90% of its students passing.

Interestingly, in this study, Phillips (2003) acknowledged that a paradigm shift is required in order for this new vision of staff development to be effectively implemented, and this also needs to be accompanied by organizational structures that are put into place by the school leadership. The teachers at this school reported five themes that served as a framework for their paradigm shift as they moved to an increase in teacher learning. This framework included: (a) providing high-quality professional development with a focus on reflection and experimentation with innovative instructional strategies, (b) using research-based literature to drive their work, (c) sharing decision making about curriculum and instructional strategies for the teachers, (d) providing critical feedback from administrators and teachers, and (e) having a focus on knowing the student population. The teachers and administrators in the study attributed all of these big ideas to their success (Phillips, 2003).

The aforementioned were just a few studies that serve as examples of how students who had teachers who participated in professional learning communities benefitted instructionally as a result of the collaboration that was occurring. “When teachers get along and learn from one another, they provide models that help support student learning, and they are able to share their expertise with one another to improve the overall quality of instruction” (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness, & Beckett, 2005, p. 75).
Rationale of the Study

The studies I described highlight how professional learning communities were implemented and their importance to those schools. They also acknowledge in some cases that this was not the first time they worked in teams, and that merely working in teams alone was not the game changer for these teachers and students. This was interesting to me. At the time of this study, the district I worked in was a unique place. Our lowest-performing school had 80% of the students meeting or exceeding grade level proficiency standards on state achievement tests. Our most struggling schools would be the leading schools in other districts; however, we were not satisfied with 80% or even 90% of our students meeting proficiency standards. That meant that some students were still left behind and we, as professionals, were not doing all that we could instructionally. The structures were in place and our teachers were working in teams, but from my experiences, I was realizing that we were not really working as effective collaborative teams.

In my role as an instructional coach, I was working with as many as 10 different teams each week which provided me the opportunity to see the differences between teams of teachers. Some teams were a well-oiled machine, bouncing ideas off each other, questioning to deepen their understanding when necessary, and an equal give and take.
occurred from every member of the team. Other teams were awkward. The teachers knew it and I knew it. There were long silences, feelings of uneasiness, and a lack of confidence and comfort to share. These teams were working within the same administrator requirements. These teachers had the same training from the district in regard to working in teams. The expectations were clearly set, so why is it that some teams worked so well and some did not work at all?

It was my belief that teacher teams effectively collaborating in learning communities would change their literacy instruction, and that would positively impact student achievement. This kind of collaboration enables teacher teams to share ideas about instruction, students, and assessment along with reflecting on each of those aspects in a safe environment. The sharing of these ideas leads to an increase in professional knowledge. I acknowledge that at times collaboration may be difficult. Teachers are busy, maybe their school day or their position in the school does not allow time for collaboration. I do not deny that it may be more comfortable to work in isolation, to close the door and work to perfect your own practice. Lortie (1975) examined why individuals decided to go into the teaching profession and found that some teachers chose the profession so they would be left alone to do their work. Chapter two discusses this phenomenon in depth. However, 21st century teaching and learning calls for a shift in paradigm. Opening doors and minds is a frightening idea, but in the long run, it will pay off for the professional and perhaps most importantly, for the students. In 2010, the state of Illinois adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The mission of these national standards is as follows:

The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need
to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012)

This increase in rigor and quality of curriculum requires a multi-level paradigm shift for educators.

There are blogs and websites for teacher collaboration and books written about the power and benefit of professional learning teams in both education and business. This dissertation tells the stories of collaboration from the teachers’ and administrators’ points of view and from my observations of these teacher teams in action in an effort to uncover what effective collaboration looks like. How does it differ from team to team? Vignettes were used to capture the stories of teacher team learning. The teachers were living and working within these professional learning communities every day, and as a researcher, I sought to learn about collaboration from those at the heart of it.

A goal of this study was for schools, administrators, and teachers who are not currently putting collaboration in professional learning teams as a top priority on their list for professional development to see how vital these collaborative teams are to the effectiveness of every teacher and to the success of students. Another goal, I also hope that those who may be struggling with collaboration will learn from the research I have done. In education we know that one size does not fit all, but I believe that educators can learn from the experiences of others. Working in PLCs requires a shift in thinking and in practice as well as a shift in scheduling and time management, but all that is worth it.

The aim of this research was to demonstrate how a change in paradigms and a supportive
change in organizational structures can promote effective team collaboration that increases professional knowledge, resulting in higher student achievement.

The purpose of this dissertation was to research the professional learning that occurs in teacher teams in select schools across my district. This research was guided by the following questions:

1. What does effective collaboration leading to professional learning in teacher teams look like, and what, if any, barriers or roadblocks do teams need to overcome?

2. In what ways, if any, does job-embedded teacher collaboration in professional learning communities impact literacy instruction?

3. How do various teacher teams and administrators understand collaboration and professional learning?

This qualitative study recounted vignettes of teacher teams in my school district. The vignettes recounted team celebrations and frustrations, with the goal of getting to the heart of what makes a team. These teachers were working to break the mold of what has been traditional teaching and as a result, were unearthing the amazing possibilities that collaboration can bring forth. They were on the road to 21st century teaching and learning. It was my expectation that in telling these stories, teacher teams in schools and districts not currently utilizing each other to the greatest capacity will have the ability to shift their thinking and their practice in order to engage in collaborative team learning with the end result of providing more effective instruction to improve the success of their students.
Together, together, together everyone
Together, together, come on let's have some fun
Together, were there for each other every time
Together together come on let's do this right

— Gerrard and Nevil (2006)
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

At the center of this dissertation is the question about how instructional practices are impacted by collaborative learning teams. In this chapter, I outline the concepts behind how I believe educators best transform their instructional knowledge through collaboration with colleagues. The concepts discussed in this chapter include the theories of adult learning, history of collaboration in the United States education system, ideas behind systemic change and systems thinking, and professional learning communities (PLCs).

Theories of Adult Learning

How do people learn? More specifically, how do adults learn? Theories from various researchers are summarized in this section. As a result of this research, I discovered how collaboration impacts the literacy instruction of teachers. When and if teachers adapt new practices or try out new ideas is connected to how they learn as adults.

Age and Stage Theories

To begin, there are age theories and stage theories. Within age theory, a mid-life transition occurs in the late 30s and early 40s, which shifts a focus from perfection to a focus on wholeness. It is thought that individuals in this stage think more about their context and culture, leading them to a greater sense of membership in the community (Trotter, 2006). This is interesting because the age of teachers varies greatly within a school; therefore, there are teachers in various stages of life who are asked to collaborate together. In contrast, the one stage theory of Daloz (1999) highlighted four stages of
adult learning and development: preconventional stage of survival; conventional stage of fitting in; conforming/being accepted; and the post-conventional stage of thinking things over and evaluating critically. Moral theory focuses a person’s orientations toward him or herself and authority changing within different stages (Kohlberg, 1969). This could also have implications for one’s ability to develop as a professional because, depending on where one might be in terms of stages of moral development, he or she may be more or less open to feedback from peers or authority. When teachers are required to work in teams reflecting on student data together, it is important to have an open mind and an ability to accept criticism.

**Cognitive Theories**

There are also cognitive theories of adult learning and development. Hunt’s (1975) Cognitive Development Theory includes four components: low conceptual (concrete negativism, over generalization, focus on individual needs); categorical judgments (acceptance of a single rule, reliance on external standards); awareness of alternatives and sensitivity towards personal feelings; and reliance of internal rather than external standards, working with others, seeing multiple perspectives. The cognitive stage one is in may impact one’s ability to work on a collaborative learning team. Teachers in the low conceptual stage could focus solely on their individual needs without thinking about what may be best for the team of teachers or the whole grade level of students. They may also be unable to compartmentalize the feedback given to them in order to make specific changes. Teachers in the categorical judgment stage may struggle to take what is determined or planned in a professional learning team and make it work for their students because of their acceptance of a single rule. As teachers move into the
stages of awareness of alternatives and reliance of internal standards, they will be more cognitively equipped for collaboration because they are able to see multiple perspectives and have more empathy when working with their teammates.

Research conducted by Perry (1970) on adult cognitive development highlighted the following components: dualism (the world is seen as right or wrong), multiplicity (accepts diversity and uncertainty), relativism (knowledge is contextual and relativistic), and commitment to relativism (affirm self and process of ongoing cycles). Teachers on collaborative teams who are working in the dualism level may struggle with compromise and coming to a consensus on a team. In my experience, there are many times when teams have to make decisions based on what they feel is right for their students based on their prior knowledge and data and these decisions may not have black or white, right or wrong answers. In many of the theories discussed, the final stage or the end result focuses on working with others, seeing multiple perspectives, and having membership in a community. All of this implies that the ability to collaborate and work with others is a highly demanding cognitive skill regardless of the theory. Table 1 outlines Hunt and Perry’s stages of adult learning.
Table 1

*Theories of Adult Learning*

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<td>Low Conceptual Focus on individual needs, overgeneralization</td>
<td>Dualism See the world as right or wrong</td>
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<td>Categorical Judgments Acceptance of a single rule, reliance on external standards</td>
<td>Multiplicity Accepts diversity and uncertainty</td>
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<td>Awareness of alternatives Sensitivity toward personal feelings</td>
<td>Relativism Knowledge is contextual and relativistic</td>
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<td>Reliance of internal rather than external standards Working with others, seeing multiple perspectives</td>
<td>Commitment to Relativism Affirm self and process of ongoing cycles</td>
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These stages of adult learning were important to this research because the present stage of the adults learners on the teams in this study impacts how they interact with their colleagues. Teachers at more independent stages of adult learning may struggle in a team learning situation.

**Observations of Adult Learning**

Knowles (1990) discussed observations of the adult learner and argued that the adult learner is the “neglected species” because adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that they want to learn about. Knowles also claimed that adult learning is lifelong, self-directed, and that individualistic differences have implications for learning. Another key idea highlighted by Knowles is that experience is the main resource for adult learning. This, in my opinion, is critical in schools and for professional learning because educators need to have an opportunity to experience new
instructional practices in order to truly learn them. Smith (1982) discussed similar observations of adult learners and noted that adult learning is lifelong, personal, involves change, is a part of human development, involves experience, and is partly intuitive. The on-going nature of the learning team collaborative schedule that is built-into the schedule of teacher teams at our schools allows for teachers to gain experience and consistently bring their thoughts back to their teams.

“Adult learners are motivated to learn as the subject matter was relevant to their current role and transition period. The goal of adult education should be to promote individual development by encouraging reflection and inquiry” (Trotter, 2006, pp. 11–12). This may be important for administrators or professional growth leaders to keep in mind when planning professional development for their teachers or forming professional learning teams. When teachers are given a chance to collaborate on topics that are meaningful and relevant, the motivation is there.

“Vygotsky (1978) (as cited in Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005) emphasized that learning is highly social and mediated by one’s culture” (p. 65). Learning, regardless of the learner, has social implications. Vygotsky highlighted learning through the more knowledgeable other. In teacher professional learning teams and for the purpose of this research, the more knowledgeable other is the teacher’s peers. The sociocultural aspect is a key component in an educator’s collaboration with colleagues. Thinking about the more knowledgeable other leads one to believe that strategic teaming where all team members are able to learn something from one another will help the success of a learning community.
The context of the learning, according to Bruner (1960) must be made clear within the broader fundamental structure of a field of knowledge in order for learning to occur. When reflecting on adult learners and professional development within schools, administrators or those planning the learning opportunities for their staff members need to keep the fundamental structures for adult learning in mind so that the teachers they are asking to work together and collaborate understand why this is important. Adults may benefit from scaffolded learning opportunities. This can inform planned professional developments by providing administrators or professional development providers with a professional development plan that will be effective for the learners they are trying to teach. Collaboration takes time and teachers must believe and understand why this professional learning team time is time well spent and needed for collaboration to be done effectively.

The National Research Council (2000) devised the How People Learn framework. This framework is comprised of four different components: the Learner and his or her strengths, interests, and preconceptions; the Knowledge, skills, and attitudes we want people to acquire and how they may be able to do so in order to transfer what they’ve learned; the Assessment of learning that makes students’ thinking visible and, through feedback, guides further learning; and the Community within which learning occurs both within and outside of the classroom. Learner centeredness builds on the strengths of the learner and connects new knowledge to existing knowledge, providing a powerful boost for new learning. This is similar to what was highlighted by Bruner. “Learning occurs most effectively when all four components of the HPL [How People Learn] framework are balanced. This is useful to reflect if you are providing a quality learning
environment” (Bransford et al., 2005, p. 71). The ideas behind the How People Learn framework are the underlying strengths of teacher professional learning within a team. All teachers bring their own strengths and knowledge to share with the team. The assessment of learning within a team comes from the reflection about student data and instruction which guides future instruction. Finally, the community or environment for professional learning within a team needs to be set up as a priority in the school if the teams are to be successful. With the elements of How People Learn put into place, professional learning through teams can be an impactful tool for professional growth.

A final point about adult learning that I would like to highlight is the concept of a professional being an adaptive expert. “True adaptive expertise for a teaching professional involves a deep appreciation of the value of actively seeking feedback from many sources in order to make the best decisions for children and to continue to learn throughout one’s life” (Bransford et al., 2005, p. 366). Adaptive experts are much more likely to change their core competencies and continually expand the breadth and depth of their expertise. Bransford et al. (2005) also highlighted the usefulness of a professional learning community in aiding a teacher’s ability to be an adaptive expert. These authors explained the importance of having the ability to try to refine specific strategies with a group of colleagues in a learning community in order to effectively enact new practices. This guided my thinking on the importance of capitalizing on learning communities which I discuss in depth further on in this chapter.

The research in this study involved exploring how the instruction of teachers working on professional learning teams is impacted by the collaboration among team members. Theories of adult learners have been discussed and included age, stage, and
cognitive theories. Other observations and ideas about adult learning including the use of scaffolding through a more knowledgeable other were also shared. Previous research on how adults learn has influenced the development of this research study for the purpose of examining how the instructional practices of adult learners within team learning communities are impacted by collaboration. The history of collaboration within the field of education merits consideration.

**History of Collaboration**

The following section provides an overview of research regarding the collaborative opportunities and tendencies of teachers over the past century. The findings in these studies were then linked to the rationale and purpose of my research which was to find how various teacher teams and administrators understand collaboration and what effective collaboration in teacher teams looks like.

Lortie (1975) published a sociological study based on interviews with teachers in the Boston area. Lortie conducted 94 interviews with teachers from 13 schools that varied in income strata and the age of the students who were taught. The study gave a social portrait of the profession of education. The patterns of isolation that emerged in the study highlighted the norm among professionals in education that allowed isolation to persist. “Throughout the long, formative decades of the modern school system, schools were organized around teacher separation rather than teacher interdependence” (Lortie, 1975, p. 14). The fact that schools were and still are organized around separation leads to the conclusion that a major paradigm shift must occur before collaboration can become a natural part of schools.
Lortie reflected on the structural organization of schools and the influences of the physical environment. The actual physical structure of a school can restrict the amount of interchange that is possible. When the teachers are arranged in “cellular” classrooms, they are physically apart from one another. “The internal structure of an occupation is also influenced by the potency of social arrangements. The workplace of the teacher—the school—is not organized to promote inquiry or to build the intellectual capital of the occupation” (Lortie, 1975, p. 56). The teachers who were a part of my research were also working with these same physical constraints that promote isolation, but the expectation for their collaboration was to work around these barriers. The results of this study demonstrate that collaboration is a possibility despite the physical barriers.

It is quite amazing to reflect on how education has changed over the past 150 years. Schools have gone through physical and structural changes, but the habit of isolated practice has been a constant. According to Lortie (1975), the historic patterns of isolation began in the earliest days of the American school system.

Colonial teachers were employed in separate establishments dispersed throughout settlements which were in turn distributed over extensive and sparsely populated territory. Most teachers must have gone without association with other teachers for long periods of time, except perhaps in a few large communities like Boston. Each teacher, moreover, spent his teaching day isolated from other adults; the initial pattern of school distribution represented a series of “cells” which were construed as self-sufficient. (p. 14)

This shows that the isolated practices were a norm in education in the early days due to the structure of schools and the needs of communities. This research shows how the opposing view of isolation, which is collaboration, can impact the instruction of teachers and break habits of isolated practice. The lack of collaboration also continued when schools grew in size and had multiple classrooms because teachers taught multiple
subjects to one class or one subject to multiple classes (Lortie, 1975). This is more the way modern schools are structures and the patterns of isolation are still evident.

According to Lortie (1975), teachers did not see themselves as sharing in a common “memory” or technical subculture. They had not received instruction in how to collaborate; they were forced to fall back upon individual recollections, which in turn were not replaced by new perspectives. “Such a pattern encourages a conception of teaching as an individualistic rather than a collegial enterprise” (Lortie, 1975, p. 70). This again shows the paradigm shift that must be made; if teachers do not know the possibilities of professional learning that exist, they will not be inclined to seek out new possibilities. A shift must be made so as to show educators the value of collaborative work. My research gave voice to teachers who had made that paradigm shift and were engaged in collaboration with their colleagues on a weekly and sometimes daily basis.

Another interesting twist that Lortie put on the isolated practices of educators was the thought that teacher personality and attitude could factor into their lack of collaborative practice. Lortie (1975) inferred that the separation and low-task interdependence among teachers is indicative of the characteristics of people who went into the field of education. The implication of Lortie’s argument was that people went into education for the appeal of its isolation. Teachers could close their door, do their job and not be bothered. This is interesting because if modern day educators go into the profession for the same reasons, the shifts toward collaboration run counter to their identity. School leaders are asking veteran teachers who had worked in isolation for years to now shift their paradigm toward collaboration with all of their colleagues; this is highly different from what they had grown to expect. One would imagine that for
educators to shift their established practice of working in isolation to becoming a team is like asking them to stop biting their nails; it is a tough habit to break.

When conducting interviews, Lortie learned that there were some opportunities for collaboration among educators. However, on the occasion when teachers were able to work together and collaborate, they explained that they did not know how to work as a group and often fell back on their individualistic patterns. “They [teachers] find it difficult to develop strategies to raise the performance level of the group” (Lortie, 1975, p. 81). A study of this type has not been replicated since the original 1975 study; it appears that it is tough for teachers to work together if they do not really know how to effectively work together. There is a paradigm shift that must occur in order for teachers to learn and understand how to work together so collaboration can be done effectively.

Another central theme that consistently stood out in Lortie’s study was that the Five Town teachers who participated in the study claimed to adopt the practices of peers on a highly selective basis. “They qualified statements on what they had learned from other teachers and were clearly reluctant to present themselves as imitating colleagues” (Lortie, 1975, p. 77). The concepts they did learn from peers were more “tricks of the trade” rather than deeper understandings of instructional practice. Lortie argued that when strengths and weaknesses are shared, there are fewer burdens on the individual. Education during the time of Lortie’s study did not value those practices (Lortie, 1975). This value of sharing strengths and weaknesses was important in my research because the teams in this study collaborated on deep understandings of instructional practices which is a shift in paradigm from previous teacher collaboration topics.
Lortie’s (1975) seminal study provided insights into the collaborative history and structures of schools. Since the publication of Lortie’s study, the focus of education has changed. Thanks to new policies, new research, and new standards for education, schools are now expected to be learning organizations. Researchers after the Lortie study have long argued that professional learning is most successful when it is encouraged by organizational conditions such as collaborative structures (Gallucci, 2008). The features of such learning organizations are important to review.

Learning Organizations

Fifteen years after Lortie’s study was published, Senge published a book highlighting the characteristics of a learning organization. Senge (1990) discussed the importance of team learning within an organization and claimed that people have a desire to be connected to a larger purpose and to one another. “Each person shares his responsibility for the whole” (Senge, 1990, p. 198). Schools in the early 21st century began to be ranked and held to the standards of No Child Left Behind. Teachers are now responsible for their contribution toward the success of the school as a whole. This calls for an increased need for collaboration. Reflecting on what I learned from the Lortie study, teachers who do not have experience collaborating may not be effective collaborators without the paradigm shift and without being given the opportunity to learn to work as a team. According to Gallucci (2008), the term “organizational learning” was first mentioned as early as 1958 and became popularized in the 1970s. The term generally implies that an organization learns as a collective group and the individuals within that organization learn from each other. I learned from the teacher teams in my study how they learn within the learning organization.
Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) reviewed much research on teacher learning within communities. They discussed three big ideas: knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice, and knowledge-of-practice. Knowledge-for-practice involves learning about the content of what is being taught. Knowledge-in-practice is the ability of a teacher to reflect and learn when in the moment teaching. Knowledge-of-practice is generating knowledge through inquiry and interaction with colleagues. Knowledge-of-practice professional learning occurs when teachers are working together to investigate their own assumptions and to challenge their practices. The teacher teams in this study had collaborative structures embedded into their day, and this study showed the impact that had on their literacy instruction.

Expectations of teachers have changed and demands are increasing. Instead of preparing a small group of ambitious students for college and other ambitious intellectual work, teachers now have to prepare virtually all of the diverse students that now come into their classrooms (Bransford et al., 2005, p. 2). Education is different now than it was in the past decades; educators must now be members of learning communities so as to meet the increasing demands of society. This reinforces the importance of a paradigm shift toward collaboration in order to meet the new demands of education in the 21st century.

Another aspect of learning organizations discussed by Gallucci (2008) is the idea of a *Vygotsky Space*. This idea represents learning in terms of the relationships between group and individual actions that are both public and private. As new ideas and practices are discussed and reflected upon within either formal or informal group opportunities, there is potential for individual learning. This was important to my research because the
collaborative teams in this study had both formal and informal opportunities for professional growth based on the collaborative system and structure they were a part of.  

**Systems Thinking**

A key structure within learning organizations is system thinking. Systems thinking within a learning organization is key to facilitating collaboration to occur. One purpose of this study was to determine what effective collaboration looked like in teacher teams. A discussion of how a systems thinking approach is important to collaborative learning teams follows.

In order to move away from years of working in isolation, consideration must be given to (a) the ways adults learn, (b) the incoming assumptions and preferences of teachers, (c) a change in thinking about conceptual learning, and (d) a shift in how teachers define “teamwork” (Fullan, 2005). When there is a shift in thinking among members of a large organization, it is effective to look toward a systems thinking approach. Michael Fullan (2005) discussed the difficulty of change within an organization. Fullan claimed that changes in a group are tough to make without alterations to individual behaviors, changes are hard to sustain without a significant adjustment in an individual’s underlying meanings, and that we must consider a transformation in ourselves as well when expecting change in other people. This idea acknowledges how difficult it is to change one’s practices, showing how far some teachers and teams have come in order to be engaging in their collaborative practices.

Senge (1990) highlighted four aspects of a learning organization: (a) personal mastery, (b) mental models, (c) shared vision, and (d) team learning. Personal mastery is having the drive to continue to be a learner. When teachers in learning organizations
have a strong sense of personal mastery, a longing for additional learning is evident in
everything they do. They naturally ask questions and have conversations with their
colleagues that lead to professional growth.

A mental model is having the ability to make goals and ideals. This idea is vital
to research investigating teachers’ professional development because developing a sense
of community is important and one major goal of learning communities is to increase
professional knowledge. Therefore, one should have a vision or goal to work toward in
order to be more successful in professional growth. Lortie (1975) found that the teachers
entered the profession already considering themselves to be qualified teachers.
Nowadays, teachers enter the profession as highly qualified educators but through the
recertification process, there is an expectation that teachers attend professional
development sessions in order to continue to grow as educators. This idea is relevant to
this study because professional development through learning communities is a growing
trend.

To continue with Senge’s (1990) four aspects of a learning community, the
definition of a shared vision is the goal everyone within the organization is working
toward. Team learning is defined as growing as a professional within your learning team.
As discussed previously, the organizational structure of schools was not set up for teams
to successfully exist in schools. In order for a shared vision and team learning to occur
within the organization, the structure of schools must support those ideas. Senge (1990)
emphasized the importance of all these ideas within an organization.

When making a system-wide change, the principal is the key in any
implementation (Fullan, 2005). The building or district leader must have a systematic
approach to getting all members of the team to have a shared vision, disseminating information, and following through with the monitoring of implementation. “Complexity theory tells us that if you increase the amount of purposeful interaction and infuse it with the checks and balances of quality knowledge, self-organizing patterns [desirable outcomes] will accrue” (Fullan, 2005, p.19). In schools, leaders must be purposeful with their requirements and expectations. In the case of this research, leaders of learning organizations needed to be purposeful in their expectations of the teams. This research detailed what these purposeful interactions looked like in the learning teams in this study.

In relation to a learning organization, Wegner (1998) identified three key parts of a community where social learning occurs: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. The idea of having members of a community connected toward a common goal they are working on with a common language and shared understandings is similar to Senge’s ideas about systemic thinking. Organizational structures within a learning community are important to leading and sustaining professional growth. “The transformative practice of a learning community offers an ideal context for developing new understandings because the community sustains change as part of an identity of participation” (Wegner, 1998, p. 215). In this study, the teachers felt that their literacy instruction was impacted by working with their learning teams, thus demonstrating there was a mindset of change that was visible in the participants of the communities.

Fullan (2005) reflected on the sustainability of a change and found it is cyclical. Periods of full engagement with colleagues are needed as well as less intensive activities that are associated with replenishment to allow for balance. This can be seen in teacher schedules in the school district where this study took place because common time for
team collaboration and for individual work and reflection were built in. When thinking about a systemic change within a school or school district, it is hard to separate the success of the implementation from the effectiveness of the leaders in charge of the initiative. If Fullan’s argument is correct, then the key to any research on school change requires some examination of the school’s leadership.

“Informed professional judgment must be understood to be a collective quality not just an individual one (i.e., groups of teachers and others create a system of on-going collective deliberation and development)” (Fullan, 2005, p. 8). The power of a group is immeasurable. A shared vision is not an idea; rather, it is a product of hard work, strategic thinking and planning, and shared beliefs and goals. “Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision. They create a sense of commonality that permeates the organization and gives coherence to diverse activities” (Senge, 1990, p. 192). It is this shared vision that can lead to successful collaboration for professional growth. This research explored if and how the teams in this study were situated toward a shared vision and the impact that may have had on their literacy instruction.

The history of collaboration, specifically from the research done by Lortie (1975), the structures of learning organizations, and the concepts behind systems thinking as these all relate to teacher collaboration have been discussed. The need for physical structural changes in the education system was also previously discussed. One change in structures comes in the form of professional learning communities. The following section will provide a review of relevant research pertaining to professional learning teams.
Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Professional learning communities constituted the structure guiding the schools within this study. As stated previously, my personal definition of a professional learning community is a community of educators who embrace professional learning as a natural part of their daily practice. Time for collaboration, reflection on students and instruction, and transparent, open conversations are common practice. Professional learning communities have a mindset that we as educators are never done learning and this practice drives us to do what is best for student success. The teachers within these learning communities plan for instruction together, create and reflect on common formative assessments, and share an ownership for student learning across all classrooms.

The work of professional learning communities within schools today is expansive and varied; therefore, the scope of this study was limited to just a small number of PLCs. The purpose of this study was to learn within the PLCs (a) how various teacher teams and administrators understood collaboration and professional learning, (b) what effective collaboration leading to professional learning in teacher teams looked like, and (c) in what ways, if any, did job-embedded collaboration in learning teams impact literacy instruction. Although there has been little research conducted thus far on the impact of professional learning communities on the instructional practices of educators, it is evident to this researcher that structural changes in schools are a necessity. Many analysts have noted that there is little relationship between the organization of the typical American school and the demands of serious teaching and learning. “Unlike schools in many other countries, U.S. schools are typically not organized to keep students with the same teachers for more than one year or to provide extended time for teachers to plan and study.
teaching together” (Bransford et al., 2005, p. 4). This is interesting considering that it is no secret that the United States school systems are lagging behind the school systems in other countries.

Thirty years ago, Knowles (1980) addressed creating a climate conducive to learning, speculating that learning would be superior in environments in which people feel respected, trusted, cared about, safe, supported, comfortable, open, non-competitive and the like. It was determined by the research collected in this study, characteristics that are evident within effective learning teams. “So what we need to do if we are to survive into [and through] the twenty-first century is to invent new social arrangements that are able not only to adapt to change, but to promote it” (Knowles, 1979, p. 36). When teachers come together in learning teams, the competition among teachers is diminished because they are all working toward a common goal. The shift seen in the schools this researcher has been a part of is that teachers were thinking about all the students in their grade level or their school as “our” kids rather than just worrying about the students in their own classrooms. There was a shared responsibility for all of the students.

With the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, teams not only will grapple with the challenge of how to lead students to deeper understanding of important concepts, but also will consider ways to engage students in work that fosters the collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and self-directed learning called for in the Partnership for 21st Century Skills Framework for 21st Century Learning. (DuFour & DuFour, 2010, p. 5)

Teacher teams working collaboratively in this study had success understanding and implementing these new standards. School teams will need to tackle this task together.

Districts in the forefront of professional development promote “learning in context”—not just through workshops but through daily interactions in cultures designed for job embedded learning. . . . Capacity building . . . is not just
workshops and professional development for all. It is the daily habit of working together, and you can’t learn this from a workshop or course. You need to learn by doing it and having mechanisms for getting better at it on purpose. (Fullan, 2005, p. 69)

Learning by doing occurred within the professional learning teams in this study. This again required a paradigm shift regarding the school structure as a whole.

According to Bransford et al. (2005),

Schools that provide healthy environments for learning and teaching require common efforts of all of their members. Teachers must be able to function as members of a community of practitioners who share knowledge and commitments, who work together to create coherent curriculum and systems that support students, and collaborate in ways that advance their combined understanding and skill. (p. 13).

These authors argued that professional learning communities are the key to changing a school culture and that this type of thinking and preparation should begin during undergraduate course work. As teachers are being prepared to enter the work force, they should be taught to work as collaborative members of the learning community (Bransford et al., 2005). As discussed previously in this chapter, teachers were not typically taught how to work together; therefore, professional development focused on building this knowledge would be a great benefit to educators working in learning teams.

School Reform

The paradigm shift required to reform schools into professional learning communities could be comparable to the reform efforts studied by Cuban (1998). Cuban looked at criteria for judging successful reform and judged success on effectiveness, popularity, fidelity, and longevity. Cuban found that the schools most effective in their reform efforts maintained a school-wide vision, common instructional goals tied to content, structure and resources, as a unified whole. These are the criteria looked for in
professional learning communities, leading me to believe that a clearly structured learning community can be successfully implemented in a school. Cuban’s study also found that schools in which reform was successful had teachers who made their own adaptations and modifications to the reform. In my study, teacher teams adapted the PLC process differently in order to make it work for their particular team.

To further support the idea of school reform, Taylor, Raphael, and Au (2010) found some key factors when studying literacy focused reform that also are evident in this study. The key ideas that made schoolwide literacy reform successful included staff attention to improving classroom literacy practices and deepening pedagogical knowledge, principal support, a positive culture, development of a shared vision, use of data to drive decision making, and engagement and motivation on the part of the teachers to learn more about teaching literacy. Successful reading reform efforts should focus on developing collaborative learning communities that will foster teachers’ professional excitement for and commitment to ongoing improvement in the delivery of effective reading instruction for all students (Taylor, et.al., 2010). The purpose of the interviews and observations in this study were to determine how the literacy instruction of the teachers was impacted by working in their learning teams.

Social Participation

Wegner (1998) explained that learning is a part of social participation and that participation in social communities shapes who we are and what we do. Wegner believed that learning is a part of our participation in communities and organizations, and that there is a strong transformative potential that comes from participating in social communities because participation not only shapes our experiences, but it also shapes
those in the community (Wegner, 1998). This concept is interesting because as Lortie maintained, the individualism that teachers use to like about the profession of teaching is vastly different from what teachers experience now. There is a lot of social interaction at work during the course of a teacher’s day. Teachers are on grade level or subject teams, committee teams, and are a part of a larger school team. These social communities are both shaping the teacher and being shaped by the individuals within them every day. This idea is important to this study because the teams in this study were identified as high-functioning so one might infer that there is positive social learning occurring between members of these teams.

Participation and experience are two key ideas that Wegner believed are important for a social learning organization. In order for a community to be successful, the members must participate. Successful communities must also have documents, forms, instruments, and focus points in order to have clear communication (Wegner, 1998). In my experiences working in multiple schools, the building administrator dictated what these reification tools will be for the teams and these may differ depending on the team or building. This study surfaced some of these tools that help a team that is deemed as successful.

The creation, implementation, and successful execution of professional learning teams are challenging tasks. As noted in the previous discussion about systems thinking, change is difficult. “This collaborative and collective effort requires educators to function not merely as groups, but as teams-people working interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are mutually accountable” (DuFour & DuFour, 2010, p. 83). Interdependence is the key. “We are only as good as the sum of our parts” was
another popular quote from coaches when I was growing up. When thinking about school systems, there are so many more players on the team working with students. We have teachers who specialize in special education and English language learners. We have literacy coaches, math coaches, and new teacher mentors. We are blessed with many resources to support our students but to be successful, all those team members must be on the same page. No one can do it all so educators must trust, respect, and communicate with one another in order to do what is best for their students.

The Learning Forward Association (2012) outlined standards for professional learning. Establishing learning communities is one of the association’s seven standards for professional learning.

Learning communities convene regularly and frequently during the workday to engage in collaborative professional learning to strengthen their practice and increase student results. Learning community members are accountable to one another to achieve the shared goals of the school and school system and work in transparent, authentic settings that support their improvement. (Learning Forward, 2012, p. 1)

The opportunity for meeting frequently during the workday is a challenge in most schools so this requires adjustments to the school schedule or structures.

Learning communities are involved in a continuous cycle of engaging in inquiry, action research, data analysis, planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation. Members exchange feedback about their instruction, visit each other’s classrooms, share resources, and refine their collaboration, communication, and relationship skills to support student learning. The visions of the team should be aligned with the goals of the school and school system. This is another challenge in schools. There already is so much that teachers do in a day in addition to their top priority of teaching their students; therefore, it is hard to imagine adding any more responsibilities.
Learning communities share collective responsibility for the learning of all students within the school or school system. Within learning communities, peer accountability rather than formal or administrative accountability ignites commitment to professional learning. Every student benefits from the strengths and expertise of every educator. (Learning Forward, 2012, p. 1)

As discussed previously, there are many specialized educators who are all working with our students, and all of these resources were an important part of the learning communities studied in this research.

**Key Traits of Learning Communities**

Rick and Becky DuFour are a husband and wife duo that traveled the country prior to Rick’s passing, educating districts and schools about professional learning communities (PLCs) based on their experiences as practitioners. They defined PLCs as having three big ideas: (a) a commitment to high levels of learning for all students; (b) the imperative of a collaborative and a collective effort to fulfill that commitment; and (c) the intense focus on results that enable a school to respond to the needs of each student, inform teacher practice, and fuel continuous improvement (DuFour & DuFour, 2010). Each of these ideas contributes to the shift toward learning teams that is proposed in this research. A commitment to high levels of student learning guide the work of teacher teams when they know the expectation of student learning. The daily work of teacher teams in their meetings is organized around a collaborative and collective effort to accomplish those high standards and in turn, meet the needs of each student. DuFour and DuFour claimed that teams that are engaged in these big ideas are hungry for evidence of more effective instructional practices. Teachers’ support for one another and constant collective inquiry fuel continuous improvement for the individual, team, school, and district.
Senge (1990) also defined three critical dimensions of a team: the need to think insightfully about complex issues; innovative, coordinated action; and the role of team members on other teams. Regardless of the definition of a learning team, one thing is vital: “Learning team must learn how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 240). Because schools have historically been set up for the isolation of professional educators, how do we effectively foster the paradigm shift into collaborative learning teams? This dissertation allows readers to hear from teacher teams that were successful, as determined by building administrators, in shifting their paradigm in order to use their collaborative efforts to increase professional knowledge and student achievement.

The ways to be successful in learning communities require many shifts, and various practitioners and researchers have highlighted the shifts required in order to have effective learning communities. According to DuFour & DuFour (2010), teachers need to get away from teaching in isolation. They must continuously monitor and reflect on student learning. Teachers must be clear on expectations for student learning, commit to constant improvement, and have a systematic way to address students who are not learning.

There are a variety of ideas with common themes about how to be successful with professional learning communities. According to Knowles (1979), the implications for a professional organization are: (a) to expose their members (and the professional schools that train their members) to the concept of education as a process of competency development, (b) to engage relevant representatives of their profession in constructing (and constantly updating) models of the competencies required for performing various roles in the profession, and (c) to see that all pre-service and continuing professional
education is geared to competency development. These things highlight the importance of teaching educators how to work together in order for them to collaborate successfully. This study examined and analyzed which of the components of learning organizations outlined by the aforementioned theories enabled the teacher teams to be successful collaborative teams.

DuFour et al. (2010), practitioners who gave presentations to school districts around the country about implementation of professional learning communities, offered six specific steps for engaging in the team learning process and explained how to set teams up for successful collaboration:

1. Identify essential outcomes all students must learn in each content area at each grade level during this school year and during each unit of instruction.
2. Create common pacing guides and curriculum maps each teacher will follow.
3. Develop multiple common formative assessments.
4. Establish a target score all students must achieve to demonstrate proficiency in each skill on each common formative assessment.
5. Administer the common assessments and analyze results.
6. Celebrate strengths and identify and implement improvement strategies. (p. 26)

These steps give teams a set purpose for their time together giving direction and clarity to their work.

Darling-Hammond and Bellanca (2010) also explained imperative steps to take in order to set teams up for successful collaboration.
The first is constructing time for teachers to work together on the development of curriculum and assessments. Second is designing and implementing comprehensive professional development programs. This includes formation of professional learning communities, providing coaching and mentoring for teachers who have been identified as needing additional assistance, and encouraging peer support teams that address the special needs of struggling students. (p. 45)

These authors also highlighted the importance of the school leader developing the schools and teachers into a learning community. Even though Darling-Hammond and Bellanca outlined these steps, the question arises as to how, together, their thinking might be integrated to support the development of effective teacher teams.

**Environmental Considerations**

Along with the strategic process teams may go through, there are other “housekeeping” items that have been discussed by many researchers that are necessary to the success of a learning team. Knowles (1980) highlighted the importance of the physical environment and the physiological environment, stating that it must be easy for team participants to interact with one another. Knowles also argued the need for a spirit of mutual respect, support, care, and environments that are nonthreatening and collaborative, not competitive, with an emphasis on learning. School structures and schedules need to be set up to allow for team collaboration. Therefore, research exploring the construction of effective teams must consider the where and when teachers meet and the norms developed to support effective interactions.

Other research supporting the environmental aspects of collaboration includes the Learning Forward Standards (2012). Learning Forward further reinforced the importance of the physiological environment, explaining the need to develop norms of collaboration and relational trust. Senge (1990) also discussed this notion with the thinking that people
in learning organizations must suspend assumptions, see each other as colleagues, have a facilitator, and establish a common language. Bransford et al. (2005) supported this call for a common language by reinforcing the point that having a vision for learning is at the center of the learning community and that purposefully constructed professional communities need to share norms and practices. This research examined the physical aspects of the teaming structures among the teams in this study, looked for commonalities among the teams, and made comparisons to previous research.

Senge also discussed the importance of dialogue in the success of team learning. “Through dialogue people can help each other to become aware of the incoherence in each other’s thoughts, and in this way the collective thought becomes more and more coherent” (Senge, 1990, p. 225). A final point made by Senge goes back to the need for teachers to learn how to work together. “The discipline of team learning, like any discipline, requires practice. Yet this is exactly what teams in modern organizations lack” (Senge, 1990, p. 221). These points made by Senge reinforce the ideas discussed in this chapter as important ideas for making teacher collaboration successful.

Alignment

Alignment is another point to be made about the how of professional learning communities. “Alignment is necessary before empowering individuals. If individuals are empowered first, the alignment worsens and chaos ensues making management of the team difficult” (Senge, 1990, p. 218). Senge asserted the importance of team members aligning to function as a whole and complement one another’s efforts. This goes back to the idea of interdependence discussed by DuFour and DuFour. Senge compared the interdependence of a learning team to the Boston Celtics of the late 1950s and 1960s who
won 11 championships in 13 years. Teams that are successful have interdependence among the team members. They realize that with the strengths of every player, individual weaknesses are overcome. Each player doing what he does best leads to the success of the whole. The same is true in school teams. No one teacher or staff member knows everything. We all have strengths and weaknesses and that is why we are purposefully put on teams. “Individuals may work extraordinarily hard, but their efforts do not efficiently translate to a team effort. By contrast, when a team becomes more aligned, a commonality of direction emerges, and individuals’ energies harmonize” (Senge, 1990, p. 217). This is what makes a professional learning community work.

The final point I present about professional learning communities is the why behind their importance. In chapter one, I discussed some firsthand studies that were done to support the impact on student achievement when PLCs are implemented. The truth is, these learning communities are not happening everywhere. According to Barth (2006), “the nature of relationships within a school has greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else” (p. 9). Barth also discussed the reality of our current schools and saw four types of relationships between adults in schools: parallel play where adults are working in isolation even though they are in close proximity, adversarial relationships where adults are withholding ideas from other educators, congenial relationships where everyone is a friend, and collegial relationships where the adults function as a learning community. This final type of relationship is the most difficult to establish but when it is established, you see sharing or craft knowledge and support for one another (Barth, 2006). Barth also highlighted the importance of the administrator leading by example so this sharing of craft becomes the
norm. This is why I believed that taking a look at the administrative role in the school learning organizations in this study was a key component of this research.

Hattie’s (2008) study of factors that impact student learning concluded that individual teachers who reflect on their practice in isolation are unlikely to improve their effectiveness. Hattie believed that reflection leads to improved practice only when it is based on actual evidence of student learning and when it is done collectively. This reinforces the roles within the learning organization and the importance of teacher teams reflecting on their student data and instructional practices and learning together how to improve their professional knowledge.

Fullan (2005) provided further support for this reflectiveness with the idea that one characteristic identified at schools that increased student achievement was professional development that is relevant and useful, thus encouraging collaboration among staff members. Professional organizations have the responsibility to assure that its members are engaging in continuing professional development (Knowles, 1979). This reinforces the administrative role within the learning organization and the structures that may need to be put in place in order for a collaborative culture to be established. This idea also goes back to the community-centeredness in the How People Learn (HPL) framework. “When teachers get along and learn from one another, they provide models that help support students learning, and they are able to share their expertise with one another to improve the overall quality of instruction” (Bransford et al., 2005, p. 75).

Within this research, I found which characteristics of the community were evident in the learning organizations that were studied.
I believe that the paradigm shift toward collaborative teaming is critical for modern day educators. Therefore, the following questions guided this research:

1. What does effective collaboration leading to professional learning in teacher teams look like, and what, if any, barriers or roadblocks do teams need to overcome?

2. In what ways, if any, does job-embedded teacher collaboration in professional learning communities impact literacy instruction?

3. How do various teacher teams and administrators understand collaboration and professional learning?

This chapter synthesized key research about the history of collaboration in the American school system, adult learning theories, systems thinking, and professional learning communities so as to provide background for the research methodology that is discussed in chapter three.
CHAPTER THREE
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to understand and explain the process of collaborative professional development in literacy instruction through professional learning communities that were identified by administrators as being highly collaborative in my school district. Through this case study, the reader will gain an understanding of the insights, processes, challenges, and the potential possibilities of professional collaboration in learning teams. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What does effective collaboration leading to professional learning in teacher teams look like, and what, if any, barriers or roadblocks do teams need to overcome?
2. In what ways, if any, does job-embedded teacher collaboration in professional learning communities impact literacy instruction?
3. How do various teacher teams and administrators understand collaboration and professional learning?

The research for this study was conducted as a case study, gathering data in three schools within one large, suburban school district near Chicago. The case study method was chosen for this study because it allowed the researcher to capture the meaningful characteristics of real-life events, organizations, processes and relationships through a variety of data collection methods (Yin, 2009). According to Yin (2009), “Case studies’ unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations” (p. 11). This was important to this study because data was collected in a variety of ways (i.e., observation, field notes, and individual interviews) in
order to gain an in-depth understanding of the professional learning through collaboration that was occurring in this school district.

**Context**

This research was conducted at three schools in a large, suburban school district near Chicago, which was the district of my employment at the time of the study.

“Sequoia District” (pseudonym) had 22 elementary schools, five junior highs, and an Early Learning Center for preschool age students. According to the 2015–2016 Illinois state report card, Sequoia District had a 22% low-income rate, 22% of the students are English language learners, and was a minority-majority district with 42% of the student population being White, 6% Black, 25% Hispanic, 23% Asian, and 4% two or more races.

During the 2005–2006 school year, the district began its journey toward becoming a professional learning community (PLC). The district hired outside consultants to train the administrators and select teachers from each school in the PLC process. The training for my district took place in fall 2005. There was a district directive from the superintendent that all schools were to become professional learning communities. Those trained were then expected to bring what they learned back to their schools to begin the implementation process. Some schools immediately adapted their structures to provide increased teacher collaboration in order to become more of a learning community. Other schools moved slower with the implementation process.

During the 2005–2006 school year, I was working as a classroom teacher at an elementary school in the district that immediately adopted the PLC process. I remember very clearly when my principal and other teacher leaders came back from the training.
Immediately, all staff members in the school were put on collaborative teams; however, at that time, only grade level teachers were members of these teams. We were given sanctioned time to collaborate and focused on student data, creating norms, and specific agendas. The focus of our meetings shifted from merely “touching base” about what lessons we were going to cover each week to creating common assessments together, administering and reflecting on those common assessments, discussing how we taught and how the students responded to our teaching, and to regrouping, replanning, and reteaching the students based on their needs. We shifted from talking about what we were going to teach and instead collaborated on how we would be teaching and how the students were responding to our instruction. This was a shift that was expected based on the teaching of effective professional learning communities.

From 2006 through 2014, the outside consultant continued to train the Sequoia District staff in the PLC process. Building administrators had the autonomy to choose which staff members would go to the training and how to implement in their buildings the structures and processes that were learned. As each year went by, more and more schools in Sequoia District were becoming high-functioning learning communities as defined by Sequoia District administrator standards. In 2010, I left the classroom to work as a district instructional coach and worked in multiple schools. I learned that each building had adapted in different ways the processes and structures to become a learning community. In some schools, structures were put into place and the implementation process was smooth. In other schools, structures were attempted but were met with resistance; consequently, the change was and still is a more difficult process.
By 2016, 10 years after the initial training, based on my experiences, I can say that almost every member of Sequoia District had attended the professional learning community training, and some had attended multiple times. The district had also offered professional development courses that staff members had the option to attend as individuals or with teams that reinforced the PLC processes. All new teachers hired into the district received an overview of the PLC process prior to beginning the school year and they were also required to attend professional learning community training in the first few months of the school year. Some administrators chose to send the new teachers with their collaborative teams to training so as to reinforce the importance of the collaborative process.

With the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the professional learning team process became even more important in our district. During the 2012–2013 school year, the district created literacy and math task forces to create a literacy and math curriculum that would address the new Common Core Standards which then became the new Illinois Learning Standards. To implement the newly designed curriculum, district leaders led professional development to introduce the new curriculums that staff members attended with their learning teams. During the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 school years, the teacher teams were given multiple opportunities, some required and some optional, to collaborate and reflect with district leadership about the implementation of the new Common Core aligned curriculums. All of the built-in, structured opportunities led to where the district was at the time of this study. Opportunities for instruction to be impacted through team learning theoretically could be occurring regularly based on the structures and teaching of collaborative practices in
Sequoia District. This research gathered an in-depth perspective into the details and impacts of those collaborative practices.

**Participants**

This study took place at three elementary schools. Each school was recommended based on the associate superintendent’s opinion that high-quality implementation of the professional learning team process was instantiated and successful collaboration on the implementation of the new CCSS aligned literacy curriculum occurred. One team from each of the three schools was chosen to participate in this study. To this end, the schools and the teams were selected by purposeful sampling (Patton, 2001) based on the recommendations of the schools from the associate superintendent of Sequoia District and the teams from the building administrators. Purposeful sampling was employed to identify information-rich cases in order to better understand the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2001). The three K–6th grade elementary schools were Acadia Elementary School, Everglades Elementary School, and Mesa Verde Elementary School (all pseudonyms). Table 2 displays the demographic statistics for each school.
Table 2

*2015–2016 School Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Ethnic Make-up</th>
<th>Low Income Rate</th>
<th>English Language Learners</th>
<th>Students with Disabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acadia Elementary</td>
<td>33% White 11% Black 23% Hispanic 28% Asian 5% Multiracial</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everglades Elementary</td>
<td>28% White 13% Black 37% Hispanic 20% Asian 2% Multiracial</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mesa Verde Elementary</td>
<td>16% White 25% Black 35% Hispanic 19% Asian 5% Multiracial</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One team from each school was chosen by the building principal because it was identified as being a high-performing team. Table 3 offers a descriptive summary of the demographic information for each participant in each of the school teams.
Table 3

Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dana (Principal)</td>
<td>-seven years junior high teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-sixth year as an administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-third year as principal at Acadia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen (teacher)</td>
<td>-nine years teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-previously taught kindergarten in a private school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-first year at Acadia Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura (teacher)</td>
<td>-six years teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-one year teaching kindergarten, five years in current grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcie (teacher)</td>
<td>-eight years teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-three years teaching second, five years in current placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margot (principal)</td>
<td>-twenty-eight years teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-taught a range of grades from second through eighth grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-seven years as an administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-fourth year as principal at Everglades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth (teacher)</td>
<td>-first year teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie (teacher)</td>
<td>-four years teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-three years teaching first/second, one year second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darcy (teacher)</td>
<td>-first year teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris (principal)</td>
<td>-five years teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-two years as an instructional mentor for first year teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-five years as administrator (all at Mesa Verde)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-second year as principal of Mesa Verde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie (teacher)</td>
<td>-twelve years teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-experience in first through sixth grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-second year as part of Mesa Verde fourth grade team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mae (teacher)</td>
<td>-twenty years teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-teaching is her second career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-ELL teacher for thirteen years first through sixth grade at another school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-seven years in fourth grade at Mesa Verde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha (teacher)</td>
<td>-six years teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-reading teacher and special education teacher experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-three years at Mesa Verde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-two years in fourth grade at Mesa Verde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tricia (teacher)</td>
<td>-two years teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-one year as reading support teacher at Mesa Verde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-first year in fourth grade at Mesa Verde</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Design

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), qualitative research can be seen as endlessly creative and interpretive; it is not easy for a qualitative researcher to write up his or her findings, yet the researcher constructs interpretations based on the empirical evidence collected. When reflecting on this research, a variety of data were collected and interpretations were made as the data were collected so as to create a detailed, authentic analysis of the collaborative practices at work. Case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within a real-life context (Yin, 2009). This study used observations, interviews, field notes, and memos to study the participants in real-world, authentic professional learning situations. By collecting field notes and doing observations of teams in action, the research in this study allowed me to see collaboration at work. According to Yin (2009), there are many variables at work within the case study relying on multiple sources of evidence. As a result of the interviews, observations, field notes, and memos collected, I was able to create a picture of what collaboration looked like in my district. Patterns emerged in the stories and in the transcriptions as well as the observations, all of which created the stories of collaboration. The research molded into a narrative case study that describes the phenomenon of professional learning through job-embedded collaborative practices.

This study was designed and analyzed as a multiple case, embedded case study (Yin, 2009). The participants chosen for this study were all members of teams that were recommended by the principals of the individual schools based on the administrator’s opinion of the success they were having in their collaborative practices thus representing the multiple cases. Each team representing a school was treated as a separate case.
because although each team followed the structural expectations of the district, each school had its own expectations which in turn influence the workings of its learning teams. The embedded design was used because the interviews and observations of each team were analyzed independently of the other teams prior to comparing the codes that were identified across schools in order to best synthesize the findings.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection included interviews, observations, field notes, and memos. Individual interviews with each team member were conducted three separate times (e.g., winter, early spring, and late spring) for a total of 30 interviews. Individual interviews with each administrator were conducted two separate times (e.g., winter and late spring) for a total of six interviews. Interviews took place at each respective school before, during, or after school, based on what worked best for each participant. The interviews were one-on-one and each lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed; the transcriptions were the basis of my analysis of the data. Appendix A describes the interview protocol. The interview questions were subject to revision based on patterns that emerged from the first round of interviews and observations. In-depth interviewing is not intended to test a hypothesis or confirm an opinion, rather it invites participants to tell their experiences and reflect on their meanings (Seidman, 2006). It was important to keep this in mind while interviews were conducted because this study sought to learn what effective collaborative practice looked like and how teams were able to accomplish those practices according to the teachers’ perspective. I heard the participants’ stories of collaborative learning and found out if their literacy instruction had been impacted as a result of those collaborative practices.
Observations of the teams in collaborative team meetings were conducted. Observations of team meetings were conducted three times throughout the length of the study within the same few weeks of the interviews and each observation lasted for approximately 30 minutes. Based on the observations, I saw what team collaboration looked like across multiple team settings and how it evolved throughout the course of this study. Field notes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) were collected throughout the observations using an observation template created by the researcher. Appendix B contains the observation template that was used. Memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) were written by the researcher following each interview and observation to aid in data analysis and reflection on the internal dialogue experienced by the researcher as the data unfolded.

**Interviews**

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggested that we live in a society where we seem to believe that interviews generate useful information about a person’s lived experiences and the meaning behind those lived experiences. The participants in this study had team collaboration built into their weekly schedules by their building administrators, making job-embedded professional development an ongoing lived experience for the teachers in this study.

The majority of the data gathered in this study came in the form of individual interviews. The participants in this study had valuable experiences to share that shed light on how professional learning through collaboration can effectively take place. According to Seidman (2006), in-depth interviewing is designed to allow participants to reconstruct their experiences and explore the meaning behind them. Narrative interviewing involves an interesting paradox. A researcher might have an idea about
where the conversation or stories will go, but the true direction of the interview prior to
the interview itself remains a mystery which requires great skill on the part of the
interviewer. There is a delicate balance between asking questions and opening the door
for valuable stories that is important for a researcher to keep in mind so as to get the best
data possible.

I approached these interviews with open-ended questions with the aim of
facilitating a conversation that enabled the interviewee to tell the stories of their
experiences in learning teams. The interviews followed a semi-structured format that
allowed for some consistency regarding the concepts covered in the interview, but also
gave the participants an opportunity to add anything they felt was relevant; this gave the
researcher the opportunity to clarify or probe further into a topic on an individual basis
(Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Seidman, 2006). Utilizing this interview structure within this
study allowed for comparisons to be made between interviewees from different schools
on the same topics. After the first round of interviews and observations, I made
adaptations to the interview questions in order to gain as much insight into the
collaboration process as possible during the second round of interviews and observations.
The same practices were in place between the second and third round of interviews and
observations.

Seidman (2006), recommended listening to the interviewee on three levels, and
the first is what the participants are actually saying. Steiner (1978) (as cited in Seidman,
2006, p. 78) posited the importance of each participant’s “inner voice.” The third level is
to remain aware of the process and how much has been covered during the interview
process (Seidman, 2006). These listening levels were relevant to this study because as a
novice interviewer, I was aware of how my participants were interacting with the questions. It reminded me that I must be aware of more than what the participant is saying; I must watch the person’s body language and how much we are covering during the interview in order to gain a full understanding of the process. Body language and really listening to someone were skills that were in the front of my mind as a researcher going into the interviews in order to invite the participants to share as many of their experiences as possible. This required a shift of mind as I approached the interviews, realizing that I am not out to collect answers but instead to hear, record, and share the stories of those deeply involved in collaborative teams because that was the purpose of this study.

As a researcher, I realized the importance of my role in the interview process. It was for this reason that I conducted interviews with a variety of participants, some of whom I had closely worked with and some of whom I had not. An interview is a social dynamic and each interview context is one of interaction and relation (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This reinforces the importance of creating a comfortable environment so the participants are able to effectively tell their stories of collaboration and teaming. To create a quality environment, I invited the participants to choose where they would like to meet for the interview and I talked with them a bit at the start to help them feel comfortable. I also ensured that I was respectful of the participants’ time so they did not feel stressed during the course of the interview about concluding on time.

Fontana and Frey (2005) also discussed the power and value of the interview and its role of discovering the hows of people’s lives rather than just the whats because this enables us to work to better understand our fellow human beings. This understanding
gets at the heart of the purpose for this study. We know that teams in the Sequoia District had team collaboration built into their weekly schedules and that they were required to meet in their teams, but in my experiences, teams have differing levels of success in this required collaboration. As a result of the interviews conducted during this study, I gained a better understanding of the *hows* of professional learning through team collaboration by learning the details that made the participants in this study achieve success as determined by their building administrators.

**Observations and Field Notes**

Adler and Adler (1994) (as cited in Angrosino, 2007) stated that observation has been categorized as “the fundamental base of all research methods in the social and behavioral sciences” (p. 161). There is much to be learned through observation. It is a powerful tool that can both support or reject ideas that are found through interviews or quantitative means. For the purpose of this study, I conducted reactive observations (Angrosino, 2007). A reactive observation is an observation in a controlled setting where the participants know they are being observed. The participants in these observations only interact with the researcher in ways that are a part of the research study (Angrosino, 2007). The participants were observed by me during a team meeting that was already scheduled into the structure of their work day. They knew they were a part of the observation and I did not interact with the participants during the course of the observations. Following a practice of descriptive observation (Angrosino, 2007), I recorded all that I saw occurring during the team meetings. This descriptive observation yielded some unnecessary data, but as a researcher, I went in with an open-mind as to
what I may discover from the teams. Following the observations, I coded the phenomenon I saw in order to have a rich amount of data to work with.

A limitation of using observation as a means to collect data is the difficulty in staying completely neutral about what is being observed. Gould (1998) (as cited in Angrosino, 2007) cautioned that unbiased observation is a myth because we can only see what fits into our mental space and what we can understand based on our experiences. Gould also noted that the description of observations includes interpretation as well as sensory reporting. This is an important idea to keep in mind. Observations are powerful tools that are rich in data, but as a researcher, I must be open-minded to the biases that I bring to the research. It is unrealistic to believe that one could study a topic without some level of bias; I continued to keep this in mind as I analyzed the data collected.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) pointed out two important reasons for conducting observations as a part of a research study. The first reason is that it is not unusual for what people say and do to be two different things. As a result of the observations made in this study, the researcher was able to see the participants in this study authentically collaborating as a part of their scheduled routine, thus enabling me to compare the ideas they had. Another important reason for conducting observations is that people are not always aware of or are able to articulate the intricacies of the interactions they have with one another (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the observations conducted in this study, the researcher watched for the natural or automatic interactions that occurred between team members.

A template was used for observations (see Appendix B), this template allowed for the descriptive actions of the team meetings to be recorded and provided an area in which
the researcher could immediately include field notes if the researcher had a thought about what is being observed. Corbin and Strauss (2008) explained that field notes are data that may contain some conceptualization and thinking about those ideas. They also acknowledged the fact that as an observation is conducted, the events are filtered through that researcher’s lens and it is inevitable that they will then begin analyzing and classifying the information. By including field notes as a part of this research study, the in-the-moment thoughts of the researcher as the observations were unfolding were captured. These field notes were complemented with memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) that were recorded after the observations were conducted outside of the observational field.

**Memos**

Memos enable the researcher to have an opportunity to begin analysis through a mental dialogue (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After each interview and observation, I recorded memos of my thinking about any major idea(s) expressed during the interview or any event(s) that took place during the observation. The memos were recorded after I left the interview or observation area and had time to reflect on what occurred during the data collection.

There are a variety of memo types that might each be used based upon the situations that may come up for analysis. The types of memos include open data exploration, identifying or developing concepts or categories, making comparisons and asking questions, exploring relationships, and developing a storyline. As the memos are written, a code or concept is given to each memo in order to sum up the overarching theme of the memo and aid in future data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the
data collection for this study, I began the analysis of the data through these varieties of memos. The memos served as a mental dialogue to begin to make sense of the data and to guide the focus of future data collection. When the data for this study were analyzed, the memos were a part of the data analysis process that is discussed in the following section.

**Data Analysis**

A cross-case analysis (Yin, 1984) was conducted to answer the guiding research questions. The benefit of the opportunity to triangulate the data generated by case study is an advantage to using this design because it enables a variety of data to be analyzed. Yin (2009) discussed the important advantage of *converging lines of inquiry* that are presented by using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). The interviews and observations of multiple teams conducted in this study provided an ample amount of data that yielded similarities and differences in behavior and thinking between the teams. The research conducted in this study provided the researcher an opportunity to analyze, reflect, and make adaptations to the ongoing research based on the patterns that emerged through the open coding practices (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) as the research data were collected. The grounded theory approach to data analysis provided a built in set of “checks and balances” as the researcher constantly looked for similarities and differences in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and adapted the ongoing data collection based on the findings.

The purpose of the study was used to guide the researcher’s thinking as the data was analyzed. How do teacher teams understand collaboration; what does collaboration look like; and how is teacher instruction impacted by collaboration with the team? I
began by analyzing the interviews, observation data, and memos one team at a time. Opening coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was used to identify and name the phenomenon that emerged from the multiple sources of the data collected. To begin the coding process, I read through each interview transcription and the memos associated with that interview to identify codes, or important ideas that emerge from the data. Codes were annotated on the transcript as the researcher read through the interview. The same procedure of open coding was used with the observations and the memos associated with them. As individual codes were identified from the interviews and observations, each code was treated as a tentative concept until it was checked out against the data from other interviews and observations through the constant comparison of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A list of codes was made from all of the initial codes that were identified.

Once the initial codes were recorded, the data was read through again and constant comparisons were made. The researcher looked for similarities and differences between the evidence leading to the initial codes that were identified (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Once these comparisons were made, codes that fit together into categories were grouped and they were given conceptual labels (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). A master list of concepts, grouped into categories, was created once all the codes were compared. Once categories and subcategories were defined, further axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was used to analyze the relationships between categories to further depict the patterns in collaborative practices and to draw conclusions based on the data. Again, constant comparison of the data through reading and rereading were employed to test the salience of the axial codes based on the evidence collected leading to each category.
Conclusions were drawn after the categories were used to synthesize the findings from the data. Multiple viewpoints that may have been contrasting were identified to relate the labels and axial codes in order to more deeply understand the workings of professional learning through collaborative teaming. It is important to keep in mind that once a concept was defined, the researcher was not “stuck” with that concept; concepts continued to be refined or adapted as further data were collected and analyzed and I continued to compare their interpretations against new data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, member checks were conducted by e-mail to increase the trustworthiness of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

As discussed previously, part of this flexibility in thinking as the data were analyzed allowed for the data to drive the next round of interview questions. Corbin and Strauss (1990) warned that “if one does not alternately collect and analyze the data, there will be gaps in the theory, because analysis does direct what one focuses upon during interviews and observations” (p. 13). This solidifies the importance of data collection, its analysis, and the modification of interview questions as the study progresses in order to draw the most accurate, thorough conclusions possible when analyzing the research in this study.

Observation, teacher interview, and administrator interview data were triangulated by analyzing individual teams first, then conducting a cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2009). The goal was for patterns to emerge from the synthesis that shed light on what high-quality collaborative practices looked like in teacher teams and how a teacher’s instruction was impacted based on those collaborative practices.
Through the variety of data collected in this case study, the researcher gained an understanding of the insights, processes, challenges, and the power of professional collaboration in learning teams. The researcher discovered how teacher teams and administrators understood collaboration and professional learning, what effective collaboration looked like, and if this collaboration had any impact on the literacy instruction of the teachers who were members of these learning teams.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter is a summary of the research data collected via interviews, observations, and artifacts from each of the three teams participating in the study. The first part of the chapter highlights common patterns that were found between schools that answer each of the three research questions that guided this study:

1. What does effective collaboration leading to professional learning in teacher teams look like, and what, if any, barriers or roadblocks do teams need to overcome?

2. In what ways, if any, does job-embedded teacher collaboration in professional learning communities impact literacy instruction?

3. How do various teacher teams and administrators understand collaboration and professional learning?

The second part of the chapter discussed the details that stood out for each school, but were unique to each building.

The research was conducted using one team from three different schools, and each school was located in the same large, suburban school district near Chicago. Table 4 highlights the years of education experience of the members in each team and the characteristics of each team.
Table 4

*Team Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School/Principal</th>
<th>Team Members/Experience</th>
<th>Team Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acadia Elementary School</td>
<td>Ellen (nine years) Laura (six years) Marcie (eight years)</td>
<td>-Teaching 1st/2nd multi-grade -Ellen is new to school and team -Laura and Marcie are fourth year teammates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal: Dana</td>
<td>-Literacy planning 30 minutes per week -Literacy planning meetings rotate between the teachers classrooms each week -Literacy coach typically absent from planning -“Divide and conquer” approach to literacy planning, individual team members share parts they planned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everglades Elementary School</td>
<td>Beth (first year) Carrie (four years) Darcy (first year)</td>
<td>-Teaching second grade -First year this team has been together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal: Margot</td>
<td>-Literacy planning 30 minutes per week -Literacy planning meeting occurs in the literacy coach’s office each week -Literacy coach facilitates meeting and is notetaker -Group approach to planning, text is read prior, group discussion through each part of planning tool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mesa Verde Elementary School</td>
<td>Julie (twelve years) Mae (twenty years) Martha (six years) Tricia (two years)</td>
<td>-Teaching fourth grade -Tricia is new to the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal: Chris</td>
<td>-Julie, Mae and Martha are working together for the second year -Literacy planning meeting occurs in Martha’s room each week -Literacy planning 50 minutes per week -Literacy coach facilitates the team meeting -Group approach to planning, text is read prior, group discussion through each part of planning tool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first section of this chapter highlights what surfaced across all three schools in response to the research questions that guided this study.
What Surfaced Across Schools

This first section is divided into the similar patterns that emerged from each of the schools regarding what effective collaboration leading to professional learning looked like in the teams. Planning for instruction, agendas and planning templates, sharing of ideas and preparation for team meetings were concepts that emerged as patterns from each of the three teams. Communication, common assessment creation and reflection, and the role of the literacy coach on the team were patterns at two of the three schools in the study; these were touched upon at the third school so the researcher thought those concepts were also worth discussing in this section. The only pattern that was seen in two of the three schools in terms of barriers or roadblocks that teams had to overcome was the issue of time. Time as a barrier is discussed in this first section and other barriers or roadblocks that appeared for teams are addressed in the second part of this chapter. The similarities are discussed by school and subdivided by major pattern.

Acadia in Action: Effective Collaboration

Planning for Instruction

The purpose for each of these teams as they came together for their weekly literacy planning meeting was for them to plan the instruction they would deliver to the students in the upcoming weeks. The expectation for each team to plan together for literacy was set by their building administrators at the start of the school year. The master schedule was built heading into the school year with time purposefully set aside for the teams to plan literacy together. All teachers or nonclassroom teachers, such as the literacy coach, were expected to participate in the planning meetings and were given schedules that enabled them to attend the weekly meetings. Each team in this study
utilized the actual planning time it had together in a slightly different way. This will become clear from the patterns that are discussed in this chapter.

According to the interviews, observations, and planning template example (see Appendix C), when planning for instruction, the team from Acadia Elementary utilized a “divide and conquer” approach to planning their shared reading instruction. As a side note, shared reading in this paper is defined as a 20 to 30 minute, whole group lesson in which the teacher models the comprehension strategy or essential outcome for the students using a text that is at the expected grade level. Teachers are expected to model the graphic organizer, ask high cognitive demand questions, and utilize a variety of engagement strategies.

At the beginning of their literacy planning meeting, members pulled up the planning template for the upcoming week that they had used the previous year. Then team members were assigned to read through and make any adjustments needed to the plans. The team also discussed the essential outcome, any anchor charts they will use, the graphic organizer, and the high cognitive demand task they will expect the students to respond to. As they went through the planning template, the team members shared out the plans they made for each text regarding think alouds and turn and talks for the students. They also worked to incorporate discussions about the way they will assess student proficiency of the standard, vocabulary, context clues, and text to use for their acceleration groups. They went through the daily plans quickly and only stopped when there were questions or concerns brought up by team members. During the three observations I did, I witnessed few changes to the planning template from previous years.
The team’s building administrator, Dana, stated that during literacy planning this year, she saw teams across the building focusing less on planning for shared reading and more on common assessments, tweaking graphic organizers, and what they expect from the students. Marcie was asked to describe a typical literacy planning meeting for her team, Marci:

We really just work through, these are our roles and we talk about our shared planning and then we assign names to the following week [showing the agenda on her computer]. We are trying this year to add in the secondary skills a lot more with like vocabulary and context clues and then we go over our literacy acceleration text, the graphic organizer, anchor chart, the common assessment date.

This activity is also evident in a sample of their planning template (see Appendix C) which shows they discuss how to introduce the text, stopping points as they read for think alouds and questions to have the students turn and talk about, where to model on the graphic organizer, and a high cognitive demand task that the students will use as a written response during independent work.

**Agenda and Planning Template**

All three teams discussed the importance of having a set agenda and a planning template to guide their collaborative practices during their literacy planning time. The agenda and planning templates had similarities but also differences for each team.

It should be noted that for each of the schools in the study, the district’s literacy task force initially created the planning templates with these lessons when they adopted the new Illinois Learning Standards in 2010. Each of these teams were working off of planning templates that were started in 2015 and over the course of the years, adjustments were made to the plans and templates based on their team preferences, their students, their teaching, and the text. Also, when asked about how effective collaboration was
structured at each of the schools, the building administrators each mentioned the importance of their teams creating roles and tweaking the planning templates they used based on what they felt was best for their team. Each administrator, Chris, Dana, and Margot talked about giving the teams in their school time during the Institute Day at the beginning of the school year to establish their roles, norms, and planning agenda expectations in order to start the year with success.

The team at Acadia Elementary school had 30 minutes weekly for their literacy planning time which they divided up according to a standing agenda (see Appendix D). They followed a similar structure each week which included beginning by spending their time discussing norms, roles, and agenda items for the next week. Then each member took a turn pointing out any changes they had made to the shared reading plans, acceleration plans, teaching tools such as the anchor charts, and finally, they discussed the common assessment that was linked to the strategy they were teaching. The team at Acadia divided and conquered the planning for literacy each week and did the preparation prior to the team meeting.

Much of the time in the meetings, from their description and my observations, was spent sharing the work they did on planning with the rest of their teammates. The planning template they used was uploaded on SharePoint, the district’s online server, so all team members were able to access it prior to the team meeting to incorporate their changes to the previous year’s lesson plans. The template was also projected on the interactive whiteboard during the meeting so all team members could see the changes that were being made to it. This planning template guided their sharing during that portion of the team meeting. An example of this planning template can be seen in Appendix C.
The planning template includes text the teachers will use to model the essential outcome for the week and specifics for instruction such as places in the text to stop and think aloud or ask the students high cognitive demand questions. The teachers utilized this planning template to guide their daily shared reading instruction.

**Sharing New Ideas**

Another pattern that emerged when looking at the data from all three teams was the concept of being open to hearing ideas from teammates and the willingness to share one’s own ideas. When reflecting on what makes a difference between a successful learning team and an unsuccessful learning team, Ellen from Acadia Elementary shared: “Be open to new ideas. I can see how great it is to collaborate; you grow as a teacher and see other’s ideas. You give your ideas and everybody’s been really welcoming to taking new ideas from me.” The administrator from Acadia Elementary, Dana, also discussed the importance of sharing new ideas, being open to new ideas, and its relationship to satisfaction and engagement in work:

If they are sharing ideas and are open to hearing new ideas and they’re sharing their successful ideas that makes the whole team better. It empowers a teacher to know like if I’m struggling with something, I got a few ideas, I tried them, they worked; now I have some new tools in my toolbox. That really builds the trust with the team and helps keep them engaged in their job.

**Preparation for Team Meetings**

Another pattern that emerged when discussing effective collaboration with the teachers on each team was the preparation that each teacher did ahead of the meeting to help have a productive and effective meeting. Again, this looked different for each team because the three different teams set expectations for themselves in terms of what needed to be prepared prior to the meetings in order to be ready for their collaborative planning.
When asked what they felt made a team meeting successful, the teachers on the Acadia team all mentioned when everyone on the team came prepared, they had a successful meeting. It was discussed previously that their team divided and conquered the planning. Prior to the team meeting, they had set the expectations that they were each responsible for preparing the shared reading plans for two to three days of that week, the common assessment, or shared reading text for their acceleration block. During the meeting, they then shared the plans they had prepared. This kind of planning process was also evident in the three observations of this team. As they followed their agenda, each teacher took time to communicate what she had planned and uploaded onto SharePoint so it was accessible to everyone on the team.

**Communication**

Among all three teams, communication emerged as a pattern of what contributes to effective collaboration. There were different aspects of communication that the team members talked about. The first aspect was the communication that happened between the teachers on the teams who participated in the weekly planning meetings. The second aspect was the communication between the classroom teachers and the nonclassroom teachers on the team who supported the students. Each team acknowledged the importance of communicating with the team members who may not be able to attend the weekly literacy planning meetings such as the special education teacher, English language learner teachers, and Title One support teachers. Each team had a different way of going about that communication that they determined worked for them.

The team from Acadia Elementary revealed in their interviews that they felt they were able to be open and honest with one another on their team during their planning
meetings. They also talked about how often they utilized lunch time with one another to continue their communication about how lessons had gone or how the students were doing. When communicating with the teachers who were not at the planning meetings, the teachers said that they e-mailed or placed hard copies of the planning templates and graphic organizers in those teachers mailboxes. They each also communicated one-on-one with the specific teacher designated to support their classroom during guided reading.

**Common Assessment Creation and Reflection**

In the district where these teams were located, common assessments were the tools that teachers used to assess the students’ proficiency on a learning standard or essential outcome as they were commonly referred to. Some common assessments that the teams created were formal assessments with passages for the students to read and multiple choice or open response questions for them to answer. Other common assessments were more informal exit slips after a shared reading lesson where the student answers a strategy-based question about what they had just read as a class, or a graphic organizer that they completed during their independent work using a text at their reading level. During the collaborative time for the teams, the idea of either creating common assessments or reflecting as a team on common assessments came up as a practice of effective collaboration. During their interviews, each of the building administrators also discussed that common assessment creation and reflection were a part of their team’s collaborative practices. They left it up to the teams about when they would build that into their agendas, but they acknowledged that each team did focus on common assessments as a part of guiding their literacy planning and instruction.
The team at Acadia Elementary focused on the creation of the common assessments during their literacy planning time each week. According to the interviews, observations, and team agendas, one person was in charge of finding the assessment they had used during the previous year, pulling possible text they could use, and finding the district-made common assessment that matched that strategy. Then on the team agenda, members left time each week to determine their next common assessment date and create future common assessments. Part of their collaborative practices as a team was reflecting on the questions they used in their assessments from year to year. Laura described the work done on common assessments: “It seems so funny, when we look back on our common assessments, it's like, ‘Seriously, that's one of our questions?’ Or after we're done with it, we're like, ‘That was a really bad question.’ So we tweak them.”

The team spent a good amount of time during the second observation of literacy planning, working together to finalize a formal common assessment for the essential outcome they were teaching. As the team members finalized the assessments, they asked each other questions such as the following:

Okay, let’s take our first grade assessment; what would our answers be? We want to add anything else? Is there a different vocab word? If it says, if it's more than one and you say, ‘show evidence in the text’ and then a line that they have to write, how do they know? “So how about, in paragraph two, who is speaking? How do you know? Okay, we could say, how do you know? Underline in the text to show evidence. So this would be a two-point question. So then should we make it multiple choice, or do you want them to write it?

These open-ended questions were asked by multiple team members throughout the collaborative common assessment creation process.
Literacy Coach

All of the teams in this study had a literacy coach assigned to work with their team (and other teams in the school), but each literacy coach had a slightly different role within their teams. The topic of the literacy coach came up quite often on all of the teams, making it a team member worth exploring when discussing effective collaboration on a learning team. Based on the differences that were observed regarding the roles of the literacy coach on each team, the administrators at each building were also asked what they thought their coach’s role was.

The literacy coach who worked with the team at Acadia Elementary was in her sixth year working with the primary teams at that site. She had worked with two of the team members for those entire six years. Due to scheduling conflicts, she was only able to attend one of the literacy planning meetings that I was there to observe. According to the team members and roles on the agenda, the literacy coach acted as a facilitator for their team meetings. She also served as a resource for the team members. Ellen explained how she received support from the Acadia literacy coach: “If a kid's not getting it she’ll say have you ever tried this? Like, wording it this way? Or showing them this way? For some kids that are struggling, she is a great resource.” Team members at Acadia mentioned that they were hoping for more support, while team members at Everglades and Mesa Verde had many positive things to say about each of their literacy coaches and the support they provided their teams. One teacher from Acadia reflected on how the change in role for their literacy coach has impacted her:

I would love that person to collaborate with. Often times, when we collaborate as a team, we have to stick to the plans. I’m a very think outside the box person and want to try new things and want to bring in new ways to get the students engaged so I’m missing that component a little bit.
During the interviews with the building administrator at Acadia Elementary, Dana described the different expectations she had for her primary grade literacy coach and her intermediate grade literacy coach based on the needs she sees on the teams. She felt the literacy coach’s role was providing guidance when the team needed it and supporting team structures to allow teams to continue to function at a high level. She did not feel the literacy coach in the primary grades needed to do very much in terms of helping a team with accountability or follow through. She really was just keeping the team going. If they reached a roadblock, she either came and asked for the answer, or she found the answer and brought resources.

The following section highlights the same patterns, but from the perspective of the Everglades team.

**Everglades in Action: Effective Collaboration**

**Planning for Instruction**

Taking a similar approach to planning for instruction, based on the data collected, the team from Everglades Elementary spent the time during their weekly 30 minute literacy planning meeting to plan their instruction. The team members previewed the planning template (see Appendix E) that was used for that week in the previous years and the agenda (see Appendix F) that the lit coach created and sent out the prior night. Different from Acadia, the Everglades team quickly went through each day on the planning template and discussed any changes together that they felt would benefit their instruction. However, during the three observations I did, I witnessed few changes to the planning template from previous years. Also during the meeting, one or more of the teachers (each observation differed) completed a sample graphic organizer that they then
copied and distributed to all members of the team to use as an example during instruction. The literacy coach made updates to the projected document as the team discussed them. According to their planning template, the team discussed the graphic organizer, materials to use, a book introduction, stopping points, think alouds, turn and talks for the students with high-level questions, examples of the strategy in the text to use on the graphic organizer, and differentiated high cognitive demand tasks that the students would do during independent work.

When asked what makes their team successful, Carrie reflected that she felt their planning was very student-centered and that their student-specific needs were consistently in their minds so the differentiation pieces fit in too. They thought not only about what a particular skill and strategy would look like in shared reading, but also what these would look like in guided reading for the varying levels that they had.

Beth reflected on a change the team made to their planning practices during the 2016–2017 school year that they planned to continue in the next school year:

We revamped a lot of things, which was good, because we felt like we needed to push them a little bit more, and we had a lot of bubble kids that were really hard to move, and I think a lot of what we’re going to try to do is to push them a little bit harder.

Margot, the building administrator at Everglades Elementary, noticed that the teams had been working to have a clearer understanding of the standard they were teaching, planned high-level questions, adjusted materials, and reflected upon and tweaked common assessments so these were more rigorous and aligned to instruction.

**Agenda and Planning Template**

Similar to Acadia, Everglades Elementary school had an agenda they followed for their 30 minute weekly literacy planning time. The agenda was adjusted weekly to
reflect the essential outcome they were teaching and it included team norms, specific items for the team to discuss, the essential outcome, things to consider when teaching this strategy, how the team would gradually release responsibility to the students during this strategy, common language, high cognitive demand tasks, and a peek ahead at the essential outcome for the following week. An example of their weekly agenda can be found in Appendix F. This team also used a planning template that was stored on SharePoint and was sent out to the team members by the literacy coach the night prior to their planning meeting.

From my observations and the interviews, the agenda each week in the team meeting varied slightly. They always quickly discussed any changes or additions they wanted to make to the planning template then they used that modified template to guide their shared reading instruction for the week. Much like the team from Acadia Elementary, the team had the planning template projected for all to see and it included the text, think alouds, turn and talks, and high cognitive demand tasks on the planning template for each day. An example of the team’s planning template can be found in Appendix E.

**Sharing New Ideas**

The opportunity to share new ideas arose throughout the planning sessions. Darcy, from Everglades Elementary, viewed the sharing of ideas as an element of a successful learning team:

Everyone shares their ideas when they have them. They also ask questions to clarify things. We all feel comfortable to say, I think this isn’t working well for me in my classroom, what are you doing, that has been something that is really important. So being comfortable with each other has helped that because you wouldn’t really feel comfortable making yourself better and getting ideas from others; you might be closed off.
During the observations of this team, it was apparent that all of the team members, including the literacy coach, were comfortable sharing their ideas because there was a balance of participation from all.

**Preparation for Team Meetings**

The preparation prior to meetings looked different for the team at Everglades Elementary. Their literacy coach sent out their planning template and agenda the night before their team planning meeting. Prior to sending out the planning template and agenda, the literacy coach made note of suggested changes and important ideas to keep in mind when planning. The teachers in this team all mentioned that they read through the agenda and planning template prior to the meeting and tried to gather all the texts that were listed on the planning template. The teachers also mentioned that sometimes they were rushed and did not have a chance to look through the plans as thoroughly as they would have liked or to gather the text prior to the meeting; they felt this made for a less productive meeting.

After thinking about what advice she would have for a new learning team that was working toward effective collaboration, Darcy from Everglades highlighted preparation:

> Just knowing in advance what are the items that you need to take care of so that when you go into a meeting, you are prepared with questions or new texts or comments, so just kind of preparing yourself before that meeting, because when we’ve gone into meetings in the past where there’s not as much prep before, then we waste more time. So I think we’re able to make the most out of our 30 minutes knowing what we have to do, and staying on task as much as you can.

Darcy also commented that when they came prepared with books and graphic organizers, then as a team, they are able to go deeper into the specifics of instruction.
Communication

At Everglades Elementary, in an effort to communicate with the teachers who were not able to be at literacy planning, the literacy coach both posts the plans the team created on SharePoint and she e-mails them out to the teachers who support the team that included hyperlinks to SharePoint so they were able to access them for planning.

When reflecting on the communication among the teachers on the team, the teachers on the team referred to the strength of the relationships they had built with one another and the benefit those strong relationships had for their communication. Beth reflected:

We're not scared to just be like, are you okay? I felt like you were annoyed with me because I didn't have this done or that done. Nothing will go unsaid and we'll be awkward around each other, like we can't talk to each other. So that's what I like the most is that if we ever do leave meetings like that, we always find a way to communicate about it afterwards. (Interview, March 7, 2016)

During her second interview, Carrie also commented on how the relationships their team members had led to quality communication when there were tense situations at a team meeting: “You know if something's happening. What was neat is that we are friends, but it was a professional conversation. It didn't seem like a friendship thing. It was neat to be able to have that conversation and see that.” As observed, the equal participation of all members during the team meetings evidenced the comfort level the team members had that enabled them to share their ideas, communicate, and positively deal with tension.

Common Assessment Creation and Reflection

The team from Everglades Elementary created a long-term planning calendar with formal common assessment dates built in prior to starting the year. When common assessments came up in their planning, they spent time during their literacy planning
meeting to finalize the assessment they would use. The members of this team had interesting reflections about their common assessments. They felt that as the school year progressed, they really improved the quality and rigor of their assessments. They also felt that by aligning the common assessments to their instruction and to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), they were better preparing the students for success on the common assessments and now and in future years. Beth explained their assessment efforts as a team:

We’ve been trying to make our common assessments look like what the kids are going to see on PARCC; I feel like that's a huge step in the right direction. We felt like our common assessments were kind of easy at the beginning and we weren't stretching them [the students] as much as we should be.

During the first observation of the team from Everglades Elementary, members spent time during their literacy planning to reflect on and finalize the common assessment they were going to administer the following week. The teachers and literacy coach reflected on the students’ application of the essential outcome as well as on how their instruction could align to the assessment. The following statements and questions stood out in their collaborative discussion during this team observation.

So two years ago, we used the same text, different questions. They were too easy, where every single one of our students, I’m not saying, I mean, I’d like to say it was we taught it really well, but when reflecting on it, it was way too easy. So then we changed it. One way we could change it is if we wanted to add in a writing piece to it, 'cause there’s no writing piece on here. But we could easily add a writing piece to it. So whatever, how do you guys feel?

Something I do, when we go to the “I can” statement, we always do this hand signal, like compare and contrast when we’re reading it, so... It helps the kids compare and contrast.

I notice like from as we’re doing the data binders for conferences, we look at exit slips from the beginning of the year in the writing portion and the one we just got, it’s gotten so much better.
What do you think?

So are we okay with these questions?

Or author’s purpose, I like that idea.

Yeah. Cause I feel like that’s how we’ve tried to have them think about it. That’s a good idea.

Okay, so. I’ll move that other one there. So what do we think? Changing, adding?

Collaborative statements and questions similar to these were heard from all team members throughout the process of creating the common assessment. Carrie from Everglades expressed her thoughts on the importance of transparency to the success of the collaborative process:

I really do think it’s just beneficial having that collaboration, because you know, it’s not that you know what everyone is doing, but that you can have those conversations that will spark, what can we change, what can we do better, what are you doing that maybe we’re not doing? It’s very transparent, and that’s what I think makes it so successful, because none of us are nervous. Oh, my students didn’t do well on this common assessment. It’s not like, oh, what were you doing? It was, oh, let’s look at someone who did do well, what did you do to explain this? So it’s nice that the transparency’s there and that it’s not, that person’s a better teacher because they can do that standard better.

**Literacy Coach**

Everglades Elementary had two internal literacy coaches, one who focused on supporting the primary grade level teams, and another who focused on supporting the intermediate grade level teams. The literacy planning meeting each week took place in the literacy coach’s office; she was present in each meeting and served as the notetaker, adjusting the team’s planning template as they discussed the lessons. According to team members, she also prepared the agendas and planning templates prior to the team’s weekly planning meeting with notes for them to think about as they work through their
planning. She then sent this material out to the team members so they could prepare; after the plans were finalized at the meeting, she then communicated with the other teachers who supported their grade level but were unable to attend the meeting.

The team members described the literacy coach’s role as one of support. Beth described the coach’s support for the team: “She is amazing. I could not ask for a better mentor. Everything she does is strategic and student-centered. The most student-centered person I've met in my entire life. Everything we do is for kids, she gets us really motivated.” Team members also said the literacy coach was a knowledgeable and approachable teammate who guided them and kept them on track, pushed their thinking about things such as revamping the reading responses they were asking the students to do, found resources for them, pulled individual students to assess them, and gave them individual support when they needed it. Beth continued: “She’s awesome, though. I mean, honestly, she’s a huge part of our team’s successes, because she’s always there for us.” Carrie offered another viewpoint on how team members saw their literacy coach:

I feel like our literacy coach’s role is really there for support and guidance. She’s never telling us what to do, it’s always collaboration and working with us. I feel like her role that she plays is one of communication that we leave with an understanding of what the skill and strategy is, what the implementation looks like, and what it looks at different levels. I feel like our literacy coach goes above and beyond. She communicates with a support staff, so our e-mails that go out of our notes; she sends that out along with our responses that we created during that time as well. But I really honestly feel like she’s just a part of our team. She’s very knowledgeable, we go to her if we need help, and we go to her with successes.

Margot, the building administrator, discussed the role of the literacy coach and her own:

I make sure that every team meets with a lit coach for initial planning every week and I still meet with them (the literacy coaches) once a week. We talk about staff development. They do staff development, they meet with teams, and then she’s available to meet with like new teachers or individuals.
The following section highlights the same patterns but from the perspective of the team at Mesa Verde.

**Mesa Verde in Action: Effective Collaboration**

**Planning for Instruction**

The team from Mesa Verde Elementary had the longest time of the three teams in the study for their weekly planning meeting. The team met for 50 minutes every week to plan literacy instruction. The team members came prepared for the meeting having read the planning template (see Appendix G) that was sent to them by their literacy coach a week or two prior to the meeting. There were a few additional team members in the planning meeting but these team members mostly listened to the teachers’ discussion and then they left halfway through. These team members were an English language learner support teacher and an intervention support teacher.

The team then spent the meeting going through each day of shared reading instruction in detail. Based on the observations, interviews, and planning template, the team discussed: how they wanted the students to apply the strategy, common language, highly engaging strategies to use with the students, differentiation for students still progressing toward the skill and ideas for enriching it; specific details about how to introduce the strategy, text, places to stop and think aloud, ask high level questions, and model on the graphic organizer; and an after-reading question that would allow the students to reflect on what they saw their teacher do as a reader. The building administrator, Chris, explained that in an effective team planning meeting, she saw the teams had the planning template prepared prior to the meeting so they were able to spend the meeting reviewing and tweaking the stopping points and language they were going to
use. They went through each day’s plans in detail, ensuring that everyone at the planning meeting understood the purpose behind each stopping point and discussing any changes that needed to be made. During the three observations I made, one of the teammates was actively typing and changing the plans as the team members who were present talked through each day. They used the plans from the previous year as a starting point, but each time, there were many changes to the plans that all of the classroom teachers contributed to.

The teachers on the Mesa Verde team reflected during their interviews on how their planning process really helped them all to be on the same page with their instruction for the students. Mae described their literacy planning process during our interview:

We begin by reading the norms. Our literacy coach might go through the common language. If we’re just starting the tool, we will begin going over the objectives, the common language, making sure that we all understand, are on the same page as to what the outcome is and how we’re teaching the skill and strategy. Then we get into the nitty-gritty of looking at the text and the stopping points and making sure that, if it’s applicable, using that generalizable language and going into the text-specific language as well for our lessons.

Martha also commented on the benefits of their collaborative planning processes compared to previous districts she had worked in. She felt their collaborative process help them to ensure that they were all teaching the students the same thing: “Definitely the number one is that we all are teaching our kids the same thing.” Consistency and equity in education was a concept that came up often when talking to the teachers at Mesa Verde about their planning processes, which are discussed in depth further on into this chapter.
Agenda and Planning Template

The team from Mesa Verde Elementary also had a planning template that they followed throughout their weekly 50-minute literacy planning meeting. According to the interviews, the planning template was kept on SharePoint and also was sent out to team members one to two weeks prior to the team planning meeting. Each team member had printed out the planning template and referred to a hard copy that they made notes on during the meeting. Just like the teams at the other two schools, the electronic version of the template was projected for team members to see the changes that were made during the meeting. This team’s planning template included essential outcomes, content and language objectives, materials, common language, assessment, acceleration and enrichment ideas, graphic organizer teaching strategies, think alouds, opportunities for modeling, turn and talks, highly engaging strategies, text introductions, connections to writing and writing plans. An example of the team’s planning template can be found in Appendix G.

Teachers and administrators from each team discussed the importance of their agendas and planning tools in driving their collaborative practices and keeping their teams on track. When asked how team collaboration was structured at Mesa Verde Elementary, Mae offered her assessment:

Structured, structured in a good way. We have an agenda, and I write the agenda. We make sure that we are addressing the needs of the kids using the agenda to stay focused, to stay on task so that we get the lessons that we need planned done.

The format of the agendas and planning templates, although uniquely formatted to each school, allowed each of the teams to have structure during their collaborative literacy planning time.
Chris, the administrator from Mesa Verde, remarked that the planning template might have a possible limitation. Chris talked about working with individual teachers to help them realize that it’s okay to not be scripted in your instruction:

Teachers will have the planning template in front of them when they’re teaching and they are trying to make it more authentic as opposed to just, you know, okay, here’s my stopping point, I’m gonna read, exactly how the team wants it in their planning. They script out their think-alouds, which is great, so that we’re all consistent in that. But I think part of that challenge is that teachers don’t feel they have the autonomy to make it their own still. I think part of it is that some teachers don’t feel like they have the autonomy, that they have to stick to the script, and some just don’t yet know how to go off-script. Although it’s a challenge, I think for some of our newer teachers that are learning how to have your voice as a teacher, I think it is helpful to have it kinda scripted out so that until you can start thinking like that, you know, until it becomes natural for them to have that available it’s nice, but I think that that sometimes hinders the flow of lessons.

**Sharing New Ideas**

Team members from the team at Mesa Verde mentioned being open to and sharing new ideas in a variety of contexts when discussing their team collaboration. Advice they would give to a new collaborative team would be to stay open to ideas from your teammates. When asked about the benefits of collaboration, team members talked about the benefit of sharing ideas because of the multiple perspectives that go into generating new ideas and the emotional support system of knowing that you have three other teachers you can go to when you need ideas for something you might be struggling with. They also mentioned a benefit for the students because they are getting at least four different perspectives when planning for lessons. When discussing the concept of sharing new ideas, Darcy contributed her view that the sharing of ideas was an element of a successful learning team:

Everyone shares their ideas when they have them. They also ask questions to clarify things. We all feel comfortable to say, I think this isn’t working well for
me in my classroom, what are you doing? That has been something that is really important. So being comfortable with each other has helped that, because you wouldn’t really feel comfortable making yourself better and getting ideas from others, you might be closed off.

When asked what advice she would give to a new learning team working toward effective collaboration, Mae from Mesa Verde Elementary made a suggestion: “Listen to each other. I think many times we just want to hear ourselves speak and giving people the chance to share their thinking, you’re going to learn a lot more by doing that than always doing the sharing.”

Julie from Mesa Verde verbalized what she would take with her into future professional learning teams that she would become a part of when discussing ideas that team might be planning for:

There’s always something to be learned from each member of the team and remembering to always accept everyone’s participation, and that it’s okay if we take someone’s input and not somebody else’s, and it’s not gonna reflect like you didn’t do your homework. So sometimes you have to be like, well, let’s just go with what Michelle is saying right now, and it’s okay, we’re in this together and it’s not a competition.

From what I saw during each of the team literacy planning meetings at Mesa Verde, what the teachers characterized as making a successful planning session was observable.

During each team meeting, there was an equal dialogue where each teacher team member had the opportunity to share ideas and ask questions. As discussed previously, the structure of each team’s collaborative time differed slightly based on the needs of the team, and this impacted how the teachers discussed ideas and asked questions. Regardless of the structure, it was evident through observations and interviews that sharing and hearing of ideas was a pattern of effective collaboration.
Preparation for Team Meetings

The team from Mesa Verde Elementary prepared for their team meetings differently than the teams from Acadia and Everglades Elementary. According to the teachers, the literacy coach at Mesa Verde sent the team members the planning template they would use for their instruction one to two weeks prior to their literacy planning meeting. The coach made notes of important ideas to remember and suggested changes for the team to consider. Each of the teachers printed out the planning template and had read the template and the text prior to the team meeting. They came prepared with notes of their thoughts to share with the team. The building administrator, Chris, added that she saw similar patterns among the teams across the school where someone on the team was responsible for preparing and sharing the planning template prior to the team meeting and that the team members came prepared for the meetings having read the text and template prior to the planning meeting.

Team members at Mesa Verde articulated during the interviews that everyone on the team committing to preparation for the meeting was a celebration and success of their team because it helped meetings to run more efficiently. Julie made the assessment that “being prepared for our meetings, it always makes it more successful and efficient. If we’re not prepared, then it just takes us longer to do the task. And we can come to the table with more ideas.” It was evident from seeing the printed planning templates and the available text and notes team members had made, that preparation for planning was something this team took seriously.
Communication

Regarding the topic of communication, there were a few additional elements to communication that were evident from the observations and interviews with the team from Mesa Verde Elementary. As mentioned, all of the nonclassroom teachers who supported the team were able to participate in the first 25 minutes of the literacy planning meeting each week. This enabled them to ask questions and offer insights into the planning process. At the conclusion of the meeting, the literacy coach linked the planning template to an e-mail and sent out the plans via e-mail.

The team at Mesa Verde also participated a few times a year in a reflection process as a team, which they felt helped to open the lines of communication. When asked in her interview how their collaborative practices had become so efficient, Mae attributed it to the honest communication on the team:

I think being honest with each other. We do have checkpoints where we do a quick reflection as to how we’re doing as a team, and we talk about, well, maybe this is what we can do to make things go better. The honesty that exists within our team, I think to really think about what can we do so that we’re doing what’s best for kids has really helped.

In her interview, Julie offered her perspective on the efforts of a successful learning team:

Being positive and having lots of communication. A successful team collaborates well in terms of communication and always has students first on their top of their list and what we can do to meet students with where they’re at the moment, ensuring their success.

Although each team conducted their communication differently, it clearly emerged as an important part of effective collaboration in professional learning teams.

Common Assessment Creation and Reflection

Each of the team members from Mesa Verde Elementary discussed common assessments at some point during their interviews. Brief statements about planning
aligning with the common assessments came up during the team planning observations, but according to team members, they usually used time outside of their literacy planning time to create and reflect on the common assessments. Martha described the process they use for common assessment reflection during an interview:

So after our common assessments, we will do our common assessment reflection; so I’ll put in our class average, what we noticed, common trends that students had, and then we’ll just list the students who didn’t meet the criteria. And then we have like a list of 10 questions that we answer, if there are any modifications that need to be made to a common assessment to align across tiers, just a list of, did the graphic organizer work well? Those are some of the questions that we reflect on, but yeah, it’s always after the common assessment.

Other teammates contributed that they were given a list of questions to use to guide their reflective conversations. They then remained cognizant of the reflections they had the next time they were planning for that essential outcome.

**Literacy Coach**

At Mesa Verde Elementary, the literacy coach had a similar role to the literacy coach at Everglades Elementary. There were also two literacy coaches at Mesa Verde, one focused on supporting the primary teams, and one focused on supporting intermediate teams. The literacy coach for the 4th grade team was present at all three literacy planning meetings that I observed and was the facilitator as they worked through their literacy planning. According to interviews with team members, she also prepared the planning template and text prior to the team meeting with notes for the team to consider when planning and teaching. The literacy coach then ensured that the planning template and text was distributed to the team members one to two weeks prior to their planning meeting so they could be prepare. Once the plans had been completed for the
week, she also communicated with any of the teachers who supported the team and were not able to attend the literacy planning meeting.

In their interviews, the teachers on the team described the literacy coach’s role as one of facilitation and support. When the teachers described her role, they said that she helped them to differentiate for different tiers of instruction; she helped them regroup students based on common assessments or Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing; she helped ensure all instruction, assessments, and teachers were aligned; she provided individual teacher support for whatever they were reaching out for; and she also taught small groups of students during acceleration, so she knew the kids on the team very well, which helped with reflections and planning. Mae described the coach’s role: “It’s really about helping us becoming instructionally sound. It’s not evaluating, it’s not judgmental, it’s all about supporting us to be excellent and expert teachers.”

Chris, from her perspective as the building administrator, positioned the literacy coach’s role as one of support for administrative efforts:

I kind of see it being two-ways, first one being, they are sort of the bridge between administration and teams in that whatever the message that I have shared out with staff during the staff development and Institute Days, making sure that the teams are understanding the message and interpreting that message correctly. Then the second thing is the big picture of instruction, because they work with multiple grade levels, they have the big picture of how the skill progresses over time.

Another part of this research was questioning if any barriers or roadblocks were evident for the teams to overcome. The next section highlights one roadblock that came up in the interviews for two of the three teams.
**Team Barriers or Roadblocks Across Schools: Time**

A barrier discussed by two of the three teams was the idea of time. The team from Everglades had 30 minutes weekly for their literacy planning time and the team members mentioned that sometimes there were things they needed to do literacy wise that would take them longer than those 30 minutes, so they felt frustrated by that. Some of those items that are literacy related, such as student groupings for guided reading, took up the time they needed to plan for instruction. As a way to combat this roadblock, the Everglades team mentioned that they tried to come into the meetings as prepared as possible so they could get everything done, and they were working to prioritize agenda items that had to be taken care of with the whole team such as instructional planning as compared to something that might only pertain to two teachers and could be talked about outside of the team meeting. They felt that by taking this approach, they were able to avoid this roadblock as often as possible.

Mesa Verde team members mentioned two different aspects of time that were barriers, one being there was so much to plan and so little time to plan it. They felt they came up with so many great ideas as a team that sometimes they did not even have enough time to share all of their great ideas. The second aspect of time that some of the team members felt was a barrier or roadblock to overcome was that, at times, they choose to come together as a team so much that their time in their classrooms to prepare or do things for their students was impacted. The team members that felt this way also shared how valuable the time with their team was so it is a trade-off they were willing to make.

The building administrator, Chris, also surfaced the idea of time as being a roadblock. She said that no matter what, there will never be enough time for everything
teams want to accomplish; however, she also said that she was trying to work with her teams to prioritize what they did when they were together. Rather than overanalyzing small details, Chris felt confident in the instruction they planned and liked to make sure they were making the most of the time they had together:

I guess it’s a roadblock but it’s more just them being cognizant of their time. And we did some long-term planning on the last day of school and we talked a lot with them about, your literacy planning at this point is at 100%. Stop trying for 130%, it’s okay. That’s just a natural part of the staff that I have, that they need to start then focusing on other areas that maybe they haven’t focused on. They still want to sit and talk about literacy for hours.

**Impact of Job-Embedded Teacher Collaboration on Literacy Instruction**

To review, the interviews, observations, and artifacts uncovered many patterns that showed what effective collaboration leading to professional learning looked like in teams that were identified as high-performing teams. As can be seen, there were similarities and differences in how each of these teams exhibited the patterns. This section focuses on patterns that emerged from all three schools regarding how job-embedded teacher collaboration in professional learning communities impacted the literacy instruction of the teachers on the teams. Planning lesson delivery, reflection on students, confidence and cohesion in instruction, and materials are highlighted as patterns that emerged from all three schools based on the interviews that were conducted with each teacher and building administrator.

**Acadia in Action**

**Planning lesson delivery.** When asked if team planning meetings influenced their next lessons or their instruction, the team from Acadia Elementary shared that they relied on one another to make the plans better from year to year. They liked knowing that they were getting insights from their teammates that informed their teaching. The team
members felt they got ideas from their teammates about how to engage their students in
the lessons as well as ideas for materials they used that they felt impacted their
instruction. When thinking about how the team planned, Dana, the building
administrator, pointed to the fact that the team shared the workload:

You know, if you’re gonna rewrite plans or make copies or pick a graphic
organizer and then make a key and decide what the ideal answer from kids . . . to
do that on your own, there’s no possible way you could meet the needs of the kids
in the classroom and so coming together, they could have that discussion, divide
and conquer and work together to get it done as a team.

Each of the teams from the three schools were observed having collaborative
conversations focused on planning instruction, the depth and length of the conversations
did vary depending on the team. The collaborative structures each team put into place
and the time for planning I believe were factors that played a role in the planning
conversations. In an effort to provide a brief glimpse of a meeting’s exchange of ideas,
Table 5 presents a selected excerpt from the team’s meeting that highlights conversation
surrounding planning.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marcie</th>
<th>Sometimes I did the first way, like this on Monday, but then today I did, let’s talk about the central message. Sometimes it’s hard to find evidence when…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>When you don’t know what the message is. I did the same thing. We had our talk, what do you think the central message of this lesson is or of the story is? And then we came up with the evidence. And then a lot of times if they do it the other way around, they just want to tell beginning, middle and end for those boxes and that doesn’t always apply.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This conversational exchange in Table 5 recounts the teachers from Acadia sharing how they implemented the strategy instructionally with their students as they reflected on how to approach the teaching of the strategy as it is came up in their scope and sequence for a second time.

**Reflection on students.** The teachers from Acadia Elementary discussed with their teammates the importance of the reflection they did regarding students. This occurred mostly during lunchtime or at other times outside of their literacy planning time due to a lack of time within the 30 minute designated literacy planning. They mentioned how beneficial they felt the reflection about their students was because they all were experiencing the same problems that they could brainstorm on together.

**Everglades in Action**

**Planning lesson delivery.** The team from Everglades Elementary reflected on the influence their teammates had on their lesson delivery on a few different levels. The veteran teammate, Carrie, admitted that having to explain concepts and really talk through the lessons they were planning because her two other teammates were new teachers helped her to become a better teacher. Multiple team members also mentioned
how helpful it was to meet with one another on Mondays, after they had taught the current essential outcome for one day, because then they were able to reflect briefly and make tweaks to their instruction that they could apply immediately the next day. They also felt their instruction as a whole had improved in terms of the teaching of context clues, the use of a variety of genres in their instruction, and the rigor with which they were teaching each essential outcome. Beth also discussed the direct impact the team’s planning template had on her instruction:

I use the plans. At the beginning of the year, I would actually open them up. But now I'll put sticky notes in there for important parts. You can just pull the paper out. Here's the question. Turn and talk about this. Or what do you think about this? And if it's right there, it definitely improves your instruction.

The building administrator from Everglades discussed the ability to plan as a team as a benefit of team collaboration because then she was able to see teachers take what they discussed back to their classrooms to meet the needs of the wide range of students in the classroom.

To impart a sense of the give and take dynamic of team planning, Table 6 presents selected excerpts from the team’s meeting that highlight conversation surrounding planning.
Table 6

_Notation From Everglades Team Observation_

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>What do you guys think about having two problem-solution and central message, one in the beginning, one in the end? Or does that make, or should I just say the problem, you know, lion gets stuck in the tree, solution, the mouse saves him, central message, little, size doesn’t matter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>I feel like we tried to identify what the central conflict is in this story, cause I feel like we ran into that, especially in those texts, they had more than one conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darcy</td>
<td>Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Coach</td>
<td>So what’s that central one (conflict) that’s linked to the central message?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Yeah, so you agree that one is probably the central, the lion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darcy</td>
<td>The lion. . . or is the conflict that the lion laughs; wouldn’t the conflict really be that the lion laughs at the mouse when he says he can help him?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>And he helps him. That’s tricky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Or the lion, the lion gets stuck in a net and doesn’t think, and laughs at the mouse, or the lion laughs at the mouse because he’s too small but then gets stuck in the net, I don’t know . . . like linking both of them together I think, like the lion laughs at the mouse for being too small but gets stuck in a net and needs the mouse’s help. The solution, the mouse chews through the net and releases the lion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>Basically, the lion gets stuck in the net.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darcy</td>
<td>Earlier, he had laughed at the. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>It’s like there’s two conflicts, really.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This conversational exchange in Table 6 recounts the teachers from Everglades discussing how the strategy they are teaching is applicable in one of the texts they are planning to use. As the teachers discussed the strategy application, one teacher on the team was filling out a graphic organizer for the team to use as a reference when modeling the strategy with the students.

**Reflection on students.** In contrast to Acadia’s team, the teacher team at Everglades Elementary noticed changes in their literacy instruction when they were able
to discuss students during their literacy planning time. The teachers felt they were able to discuss how the students did on a lesson and then make tweaks for the following day. They found as a team that the more they got to know their students, the better lessons they were able to plan because they knew their students’ likes and dislikes. They realized as a team through reflection that they were meeting the needs of their struggling students and should plan to push their students through their high cognitive demand questions. The theme of increased rigor came up often in discussions with everyone on this team and they were proud of the changes they had made.

Carrie from Everglades spoke about how their reflective practices benefited the students immediately:

We have conversations of, okay, well how did they do on this lesson, if they’re not understanding this, is it gonna be difficult from them to get to here? I feel like we’ll do something to change our teaching that next day, not wait ‘til the next week or ‘til the next day that comes. So I feel like that’s beneficial because the way that we’re planning together and the conversations that we have allow us to be able to make those changes kind of as needed verses, okay, we’ll write that down to view it in the future. I feel like it happens right away.

**Mesa Verde in Action**

**Planning lesson delivery.** As evidenced in the previous sections, the team at Mesa Verde put a lot of time and effort into creating their planning templates for their shared reading instruction each week. The team members reflected that, using a variety of methods, they each then took those planning templates and followed them directly during their instruction. Some of the team members cut up the planning template and taped it into the text they were using so it was right there as they were teaching. Some of them wrote the stopping points they had planned as a team on sticky notes and put these in the text they used as they were teaching. Some of the teachers used technology to
project the text and the stopping points for the students. Each teacher did what worked for her. However, they used what they had planned together from the planning template because they felt they were very purposeful with everything they had planned and wanted to execute it in their classrooms.

The team members shared insights into how their collaborative processes had impacted their teaching. Mae offered this insight: “Sometimes we explain how we would teach something, so then we end up getting something, and we channel each other’s inner selves and take that to the classroom as well so the students benefit from that experience.” When asked how the team planning meetings have impacted her instruction, Martha explained: “A lot of my teaching has changed this year, based on our conversations in the team planning, because hearing what other teachers are doing and how it’s been working so well in their class definitely has changed my teaching.” When Mae was asked how their team planning meetings had impacted her instruction, she credited being purposeful as making a positive impact:

So really being mindful and thoughtful and very purposeful. Like my lessons were purposeful before, but now, the purpose is so specific for every single minute of the lesson that it has just made a difference. So that specific purposefulness, you know? Has really, it changed my instruction and I think it changed the students’ learning as well.

The administrators of all three buildings reflected on how each of their teams really thought about how the students were doing on an essential outcome within their lessons, then brought their thoughts to the planning meetings and planned their lessons based on what they saw. Chris, Dana, and Margot noted that they saw specific strategies for student engagement and high-level questions that then transferred directly into the teachers’ instruction after their collaborative team meetings.
Table 7 displays a selected excerpt from the Mesa Verde team’s meeting that provides a small sample of conversation surrounding planning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notation From Mesa Verde Team Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy Coach</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No graphic organizer, who’s done in the past, sticky-notes, and then using the language to stem in turn-and-talks. Anything so far? Anything with differentiation? If your data, going back from last . . . to text structure, CA data and reading data shows that kids were still developing this skill, you might want to go back to starting the week with texts where they can focus on one at a time verses like every two paragraphs it shifts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mae</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To differentiate by only giving them two options . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy Coach</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mm-hmm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mae</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To choose from. Usually one of the options . . . a sequence, because they’re really strong in a sequence, so they can tell . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy Coach</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Martha</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just to clarify, if we’re doing it, we do the same text structure in shared and guided, or is it good to use a different text structure in guided for those kids that struggle?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy Coach</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For kids that are really struggling, I would say if you know that they know sequence but they struggle with description then I would probably model description in shared. Even down to the type, like a job or the location and then give them a text with description, if you can. Again, don’t go crazy trying to find the perfect text, but for those lower kids, it does help cause then they’re literally doing exactly what they started doing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tricia</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shall we give them a variety of texts too with different types of text structure, and usually the Treasures books aren’t that great and they’re just description, just a variety of short passages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This conversational exchange in Table 7 recounts the teachers from Mesa Verde discussing ways to differentiate for the various levels of students in their groups. The information they decided upon then went into their planning template which could then
be referenced by the other teachers who were teaching those groups but may not have been at the team planning meeting.

**Reflection on students.** The team from Mesa Verde Elementary began every meeting with celebrations that typically revolved around the students. During the first observation, Tricia reflected on and shared her experience with her students:

Well, I think the kids are getting the hang of the way we’re doing the main idea this time around. Even though it’s just the first day, I can see it in their eyes. It was like, for some of them, it was like an ah-ha moment and they were like, yeah, I get this now.

Martha concurred with Tricia’s observation: “I saw that too. It was funny, cause I was thinking the exact same thing. They weren’t stressed when I was teaching them.” Mae’s reflection, expressed during the second observation, was full of pride in her students:

One celebration I have is what amazing writers my group is, they are able to read a story and write an essay, probably four hundred words in less than seven minutes. I’m impressed with their organization, their traits as transferring.

Martha also reflected during her interview that she felt the team was always ensuring they were using information on how the students were currently performing to inform their next lessons.

The literacy coach at Mesa Verde shared this reflection she had about her students:

I had my kids talking to a task and turning the book upside down and then I said, tell your partner what you read. They all did the task. None of them could talk about what they read. They’re just being compliant. So then when they went back and reread, they were more successful. And I said, what was the difference? So I guess maybe that’s what we’ll do, more active than passive.

This reflection on her students began with Mae sharing that her students “will be so compliant and they’ll do the work, but they’re not thinking.” This led to other team members agreeing that they were seeing the same things from their students. This
resulted in a team conversation about how to plan for instruction that would get the students engaged in more meaningful ways to be active readers.

Other reflective noteworthy quotes that were recorded during various team planning meetings include:

- “I celebrate Jimmy and Yvonne. Their organization in their writing, although it still needs to add some specific details, their organization has really, really improved and they’re doing a really great job.” (Literary Coach)

- “I notice from doing the data binders for conferences, when we look at exit slips from the beginning of the year in the writing portion and the kids got so much better.” (Carrie).

- “With main topic and key details, they’re really good at the details, they come up with the main topic, and it’s so short and not detailed. I’m like, that’s not gonna work. But they are good at the details.” (Beth)

The following section addresses the pattern of confidence in instruction rooted in team cohesion and then the pattern of ideas for materials and resources. All three schools are discussed together because of the similarities in evidence among them regarding the way their teams exhibited each of these two patterns in their instructional planning.

**Acadia, Everglades, and Mesa Verde in Action**

**Confidence in instruction rooted in team cohesion.** When discussing the impact that collaboration had on their literacy instruction, teachers at each of the three schools reflected on the confidence they had in their instruction and the cohesion they felt with their teammates in terms of instruction. At Acadia Elementary, Ellen revealed that she felt more confident in her understanding of the standard after collaborating with her
teammates, and that confidence helped her explain the essential outcomes to her students better. Darcy, at Everglades Elementary, reflected on the confidence she gained from the alignment between the planning they did for shared reading, guided reading, the graphic organizers, written responses and the common assessments. Tricia, from Mesa Verde, explained how she gained confidence in herself as a teacher because the team members were so open to hearing her ideas for instruction even though she was a first-year teacher.

Another important note that surfaced from the teams and the building administrators in terms of the cohesion that resulted from the teams’ collaborative practices was the communication with the teachers who supported their students but were not able to be at the literacy planning. Teams felt that the strategy with which they planned and communicated gave them confidence in the instruction students were receiving regardless of who their teachers were for their acceleration lessons. Carrie from Everglades pinpointed the reason for her confidence:

I know that they're getting that same teaching and acceleration when they meet with different teachers. I feel like that communication piece makes it, I don't know, it makes me feel more confident in my teaching then, because I know, I'm like, okay, so this is where our expectation is; here is how we're pushing them; and having that understanding makes you feel more confident when you're even teaching it, that you know, okay, this is making sense in how it's building off of each other.

**Materials and resources.** Another pattern that emerged from all three teams when reflecting on how collaboration with their teammates influenced their literacy instruction was the area of materials and resources. Teachers and administrators in each of the teams commented on the ideas for new resources and materials they got from their teammates and reflected on how nice it was to have more than one person looking for text. The teachers from Acadia spoke about the texts and video clips they had learned
about from their team members. In several interviews, the teachers from Everglades spoke about the increased rigor in the text and the variety in genres that they had learned about from their collaboration with their teammates. Finally, the team from Mesa Verde discussed the insights they got from their teammates into the text that had been chosen regarding how to teach the essential outcome.

The interviews, observations, and artifacts uncovered patterns in how teachers and administrators identified how literacy instruction was impacted by the collaborative practices of professional learning teams. The section that follows highlights patterns that emerged regarding how teacher teams and administrators understood collaboration and professional learning.

**Working Together: Team and Administrator Understanding of Collaboration and Professional Learning**

When talking to the teachers and administrators about how they understood collaboration, one major pattern emerged across all three teams and that was the idea of working together. The following section highlights how the teachers and administrators in this study explained the concept of working together in each team.

**Acadia**

When asked to define collaboration, the teachers on the team at Acadia Elementary all responded with the words “working together.” They went on to explain that for them, working together meant sharing the workload and responsibilities and getting the job done. They also talked about sharing their knowledge, hearing each other’s ideas, and respecting one another’s opinions and ideas in order to make lessons better for everyone. In Mary’s words, collaboration was “every person on the team sharing the workload and responsibilities, while also respecting each other and each
other’s opinions and ideas.” The building administrator, Dana, also added that when the teams work together to create products and everyone has a voice, those are successful collaborative practices.

**Everglades**

The team at Everglades Elementary described collaboration as working together towards a common goal or to accomplish a task. They also described that common goal or task as being student-focused and putting all of their ideas together to identify what was best for their wide range of students. Carrie described collaboration as the pooling of ideas:

> And we all put in our own idea of what we think is going to work. And then once all of our ideas are in there, collaboration is picking and choosing which ones you're going to use together. So basically like brains spilling into a pool, and then taking whatever's in there and deciding what's best for the kids and working together to find that common understanding of what's going to work for them.

**Mesa Verde**

The team members from Mesa Verde had similar ideas when asked to define collaboration. The teachers described collaboration as a team effort, many minds coming together to produce what was best for student learning, working towards the same goal which was for students to succeed, making mutual decisions, and being there for one another to share ideas and struggles. Over the course of the interviews, the team members from Mesa Verde reflected on the amount of time that was required to be a productive and effective member of a collaborative team took. In discussing her thoughts about collaboration, Julie summed up her commitment:

> I think the most effective way is collaborating as a team and setting it up in a structure like our district has, because we’re constantly taking data and based on the data is how we can move kids to where they need to be to ensure their success. So I am completely, despite all the work and everything like that, I just feel really
committed about what I’m doing and why I’m doing it, and I know that this system and this way can blow any traditional system out of the water.

This concludes the review of the patterns that emerged between the three teams in regard to what effective collaboration looked like, how collaboration with their team impacts their literacy instruction, and how the teachers understood collaboration. In the midst of these similarities, patterns emerged that were unique to each team in the study.

**What Differed Between Schools**

The previous section explored all of the patterns that emerged between the three teams when answering each of the research questions. It is also important to hone in on the concepts that emerged that were unique to each team when reflecting on each research question. To facilitate this examination, this section is organized to allow for a focus on each team one at a time. Keep in mind that each of the unique patterns discussed for the individual school are concepts that emerged as being just as important to the teams as the patterns that were highlighted across schools in the first part of this chapter.

**Acadia Elementary**

**Effective collaboration leading to professional learning in teacher teams.**

When reflecting on what effective collaboration looked like for their team, the teachers from Acadia had two patterns that stood out as being different for them when compared to the other two schools. The concepts of roles and a shared workload emerged when examining the data. The team from Acadia Elementary had a specific way they had determined works for them in terms of making the most of their 30 minutes of weekly literacy planning time. The team members explained that in the beginning of the year, they had a teammate who was new to the school and grade level so they felt like a lot of
the beginning of the year was helping their new teammate to get acclimated and to understand all the structures and expectations. Even Ellen, this new teammate, admitted that she kind of sat back in the beginning of the year and had to take the time to figure out what her place and role in the team were because Laura and Marcie had been working together for so long.

About halfway through the year, the team decided that they needed to revamp the way they were structuring their literacy planning because they felt as though they were not collaborating as effectively as they could. The team created specific time frames, norms and roles on their weekly literacy agendas. Each week, at the start of their team planning, they assigned roles for the following week so that everyone left knowing how they needed to prepare for the next meeting. The team members reflected on the roles they all had, which included revising shared reading plans, common assessments, and planning the shared text for acceleration. These roles were also stated and assigned on their agenda (see Appendix D). The teachers also reported in their interviews that the person who was in charge of plans for a certain area was also responsible for finding and sharing the materials that went along with their plans. The teammates all informed me of the restructuring of their literacy plan time that they undertook just before the first round of my interviews. They all felt the new structure they put to their plans really helped their team efficiency. Laura described the changes they made:

Just recently we revamped, gave new roles for everybody. We did that in our math and literacy, and it makes you feel good at the end. I feel like one good thing about our team is we share the workload all the time. Once I feel like, everybody’s doing their part, and we’re doing exactly what we are expected to do, I do feel good about it at the end.
The team members reflected quite a bit on how the way they divided up the planning helped them to share the workload as a team. The team divided and conquered across all subject areas, whether it was each one taking a unit to plan for EIE (engineering is elementary), or taking days of shared reading or math planning, or each planning units of writing, they were always assigning one team member to do the plans, then they shared them with one another. Marcie pointed out another benefit of structuring their collaboration this way:

We all help each other so that’s the best part of collaboration to be honest . . . feeling like you can lean on someone when you need to or go to them and ask them a questions and its kind or nice because when somebody writes the plans for something, it is like they are the expert on it so we can go to them and ask questions and it’s like we have our own little mini-experts in the area that we plan in so that’s nice.

Their newest team member, Laura, also described how good it felt to have the rest of the team accept her ideas and be so open to her thoughts and questions. She felt the team members had strong relationships that enabled them to share the workload so well.

The team and their building administrator also confided that it took a level of trust and open-mindedness to function this way as a collaborative team. They acknowledged that you had to trust that your teammates were going to get their portion of the planning done and that they would do it well. According to Laura, this trust required a letting go of control on the part of the team members and realizing that other people brought great ideas to the table as well:

I know sometimes, especially teachers, we're control freaks, and we want to do everything our way. If you want to be a good teacher, you have to share the workload and get new ideas from other people. It can't be just your ideas. It has helped me so much to see other people's views. Many times I never would have thought of that, and it makes your teaching so much better.
When I interviewed the building administrator, Dana discussed what she did to set up the teams for success in the beginning of the school year on Institute Day before school started. She shared that they started the year off by reviewing what it meant to be a PLC and she gave the team members time to connect as people. They planned some icebreakers to do with their planning teams so they got to know who their team members were outside of school. She found that helped during the meetings because it just made it more of a family instead of all business. She also asked them to have conversations about their norms and agendas. Dana felt that it was important to start off the year this way regardless of whether the team was new or had worked together for 10 years. Starting off with those structures in place helped make for a successful year.

**Barrier or roadblocks for teams to overcome.** The team from Acadia Elementary had a few patterns emerge as roadblocks when talking to the teachers and administrator. The concepts of changing teams, relationships, and accountability were patterns that are highlighted in this section. During the year of this study, two of the members from the Acadia team had been working together for years prior and the other teammate was new to the school and grade level. The two veteran team members confided in me about how close their previous team was and that it was upsetting for everyone that some of the old teammates were moved to a new grade level for this school year. Marcie mentioned that their team prior to this year used to go out together socially and were close friends. They did not feel that same relationship with their team this year and they felt this was a roadblock for them collaboratively.

One teammate discussed the fact that their school had three separate lunchtimes so they only had about six classroom teachers that eat lunch together and most of them
usually work through lunch. This she felt hindered their ability to build strong personal relationships. Marcie felt building personal relationships among the team was important:

Sometimes things are more tense. Like someone says something and you’re like taking it to heart more because you don’t have that connection. Whereas, if you’re hearing about their families and like talking, and then they might say something and you might just brush it off because you’re more like a friend.

Although the veteran teammates were really missing their old teammates this year, their new teammate, Ellen, had an interesting perspective on teaming. She came from a school where she was the only teacher at her grade level and she was craving teammates to work with. She did feel the need to kind of take a back seat at the beginning of the year so as to find her place on her new team now that she had teammates, but she said that Laura and Marcie had always been so open to her and very patient as she learned all of the structures and expectations at Acadia. She was so appreciative of how welcoming and supportive her team had been to her because she knew all teams are not like that.

In terms of relationships, the building administrator, Dana, also pointed to negativity in the personalities of teammates or among the team members as being a roadblock. She also discussed the concept of the relationship that the teammates or herself had and the impact it had on making change among teammates. She mentioned that sometimes you need teammates to do something that you can only ask or convince them to do if you have a strong relationship with that colleague. She also acknowledged that the team I was studying was probably upset with their change in team this year. Dana brought the whole building perspective to the situation though and said the switch was needed to help strengthen other teams in the building because their previous team had very strong collaborative practices that she needed to spread to other teams as well.
The other major roadblock that the teachers and building administrator reflected upon was the idea of accountability. When discussing accountability, this meant team members being present at meetings, following through with their roles and responsibilities, and doing their part of the work well. Team members confessed that they had experiences in the past when their teammates were not able to attend planning meetings because of other meetings they were pulled for; this was difficult because then these absent members felt out of the loop on what was planned during the team meeting. They also recalled times in the past when teammates did not do their part of the plans, or times when they instead did something different in their rooms then what was planned in team planning so when their students came to acceleration lessons without the same background, it was difficult to teach the group, or these students did poor quality work that had to be redone. Each of these past negative experiences had been barriers or roadblocks for teams the teachers had previously been a part of, but were not a concern for their current team.

**The impact of job-embedded teacher collaboration on literacy instruction.**

When reflecting on what was unique to Acadia Elementary outside of the patterns that were discussed previously that were seen across all schools, the only additional pattern to discuss that came up among the team multiple times was the idea of reflecting on previous lessons. This concept came up in two different ways during the interviews. One way the team reflected on previous lessons was when they divided and conquered the planning for shared reading. They were looking back on the lessons from the previous years and made tweaks. They specifically shared that they tried really hard each year to plan opportunities for student engagement and to choose high-quality text.
Marcie also affirmed that they really did count on each other to help improve their lessons from year to year.

The building administrator, Dana, reflected on how the teams were really critically thinking about the lessons they used in previous years: “I think this is the first year that their conversations became more thoughtful and critical and really thinking, is this text, does it fully, is this best text for this standard?”

The other aspect of reflection members referred to was the more immediate reflection they engaged in with their teammates at lunch each day. Multiple teammates spoke about spending time at lunch naturally reflecting on the lessons they taught, hearing ideas from teammates, and making immediate adjustments to their instruction the following day. They felt this impromptu reflective time really helped them to reflect on their own lessons and take ideas back to their instruction to immediately improve it.

According to Laura,

a lot of times, and this is what happens more at lunch time than during our team meetings, I will say, this has really worked well for my class, and kind of sharing. Then they're like, I did the exact same thing, and that did not work for my class at all. Just brainstorming, to see what works, and what doesn't work.

The other schools’ team members in this study did not mention using their lunchtime to further discuss students; instead, they utilized time either after their literacy planning was completed or discussed students during another team meeting.

Team and administrator understanding of collaboration and professional learning. Working together was the pattern that came across between all of the schools and that was the big idea the teachers on the team at Acadia Elementary alluded to as well. According to Laura, collaboration was “working together to get the job done and then just dividing up the workload, and then coming together to share our knowledge of
what we know of the lessons and how we could make it better for everyone.” To Marcie, collaboration was “a team working together, a PLC. Every person on the team sharing the workload and the responsibilities, while also respecting each other and each other’s opinions and ideas. Hearing each other, listening.” Ellen described collaboration as “working well together productively, listening to each other, giving like good feedback or staying positive, and listening to your colleagues.”

**Everglades Elementary**

*Effective collaboration leading to professional learning in teacher teams.* In addition to the patterns seen across schools regarding what effective collaboration in teacher teams looked like, the team from Everglades Elementary also discussed focus and productivity during meetings, reflection on lessons, and relationships as keys to effective collaboration leading to professional learning. The team members admitted that one of their frustrations was only having 30 minutes a week for literacy planning. This will be discussed further in the section on roadblocks, but this time factor caused the team to put structures in place that allowed them to work efficiently in order to feel that they were walking away from each literacy planning meeting having accomplished their agenda items. To make their time together as productive as possible, they realized that they rarely got all the stretch goals on their agenda done, but they divvied up the left over tasks such as copying or gathering materials so that each teammate did some of the extra work after the meeting.

When reflecting upon what makes a team meeting successful, the team members related that when they came prepared, stayed focused, got their agenda items done, they
could go deeper into their conversations because they were prepared and organized.

Carrie elaborated on the idea of what was needed for successful meeting time:

I would say kind of all being on the same page. So understanding what we want to get done during that time. And then all being focused and looking and discussing with that, as well. One of the things that we found was happening was that we did kind of divide and conquer at times. We'd be at the same table and we thought initially, oh this is a good idea, because we're able to get more done. But we realized we weren't getting more done because we weren't finishing things because we would need everyone involved in that conversation or we would need maybe input that we weren't getting.

The teachers on this team also discussed their reflective practices quite often. This included reflection about students, on lessons from previous years, and on lessons they had just taught. They began the planning for each of their essential outcomes by using the lesson plans from the previous year as a starting point. The literacy coach sent these previous plans out with some questions to ponder, and then the team came together and reflected upon the lessons and made changes. They asked themselves questions such as: Do we want to change the gradual release? Is there any academic vocabulary we would like to change? Is there something we could make better or throw away? Carrie also reflected upon how nice it was to have two new teammates because she felt that sometimes, because she had been planning and delivering these lessons each year, she was on “autopilot”; however, she felt this year having fresh new ideas reading the plans had been eye opening and really helped to ensure everything made sense and that they were using the most effective practices.

Another aspect of reflection this team practiced was immediately following the lessons. The teachers noted that they were able to reflect with their teammates after school or at lunch and their conversations naturally involved how lessons went and how certain students reacted to them. This reflection allowed the teachers to make immediate
changes that positively impacted the students. Also, thinking about the students, the members of this team made reference to all of the students in the grade level being their responsibility. They found their conversations with one another about students very beneficial because the teammates shared kids across classrooms for shared reading and acceleration. They also found that because of their reflections, they had shifted their thinking in planning to be more about the kids and less about the essential outcome or the text. Beth reflected upon how their meetings had evolved from the beginning of the year: “Now, it's more focused on our kids and what they need. We're thinking more about them and what they're going to see in third grade, what they need more of, what they need less of. I've noticed that shift.” Other teams in the study did not mention the quick impact that their reflective conversations had on their next lessons; therefore, it is unclear if this was occurring on all three teams.

The building administrator, Margot, contributed a reflection regarding collaborative practices on the teams at Everglades:

The teams are proactive, passing along great ideas, but yet being open to their (teammates) ideas and just, talk about supporting each other and working with the kids and helping each other with some of those tougher kids and, yeah. And truly, all the, I can’t think of a team here though that isn’t willing to do that. They’re so good. And even as new teachers have come and gone, that has stayed. I mean, with the tough kids, we’ve sustained that high level of, you know, trying to push the kids to grow and get good results and maintain that high culture.

Another concept this team felt was important to their collaborative practices was the relationships they had built during the school year. Two of the three teammates, during the year of this study, were brand new to teaching so it was a completely new team. The building administrator had the two new teammates come at the end of the previous school year so they could all meet. The teachers mentioned how valuable this
was for their team. They ended up going to Starbucks to talk together before the 2014–2015 school year ended; they began long-term planning together over the summer; and they felt these early interactions really helped them begin to build their relationships with one another. Their relationship grew into a friendship where they socialized together outside of work; this was in contrast to the Acadia members who used to socialize together but then, because of new members, came to struggle with including that aspect within their new team dynamics. The Everglades members felt the relationship they had really helped them to be comfortable with each other and that led to strong professional conversations even if these were about something tricky like team functioning. The team members did acknowledge that by being close friends, sometimes this could cause them to get off track in meetings, but they were aware of this and it is a roadblock they had to work through as a team. This effort will be discussed further in the section on barriers and roadblocks.

When reflecting with the building administrator, Margot, about what she did to set up the collaborative practices for the teams in the building, in addition to having teams meet each other and begin relationship building as early as possible as was discussed previously, she talked about ensuring at the start of the year, that all teams had agendas, planning templates, norms, and jobs that were rotated throughout the year. She also acknowledged that, each year, the way collaborative teams were set-up shifted a bit to meet the needs of the whole building, and she tried to find the best way to structure teams so that as many teachers as possible, both classroom and non-classroom, were able to be connected and informed.
Barriers or roadblocks for teams to overcome. The team from Everglades had two main roadblocks that emerged from their interviews. Those two roadblocks are internal conflicts and time. Time was discussed previously in this chapter because it was a roadblock that was also experienced by Mesa Verde. When discussing internal conflicts, the teachers on the team reflected on the fact that they had such close relationships with one another, but that a few of them personally were self-conscious and sensitive; this led to internal conflict for them. The team members admitted that they felt bad when they had to leave at 3:00 p.m. when the school day and their meetings were technically supposed to be over because they felt they were letting their teammates down. They also mentioned feeling bad if they were not working as quickly on something that one of their other teammates was also working on; for example, if one teammate ended up planning two weeks ahead, the whole team felt bad if they were not there too. All three teammates agreed that whenever they felt that they were having these internal struggles, they were comfortable enough to realize it was acceptable to have these kind of struggles, or they were comfortable enough to talk to their teammates about what they are worried about.

The building administrator, Margot, had another roadblock that was worth consideration. Prior to the 2015–2016 school year, the school was a multi-grade building so the teacher teams were larger. For example, there were large teams of six classroom teachers who all taught first-second grade classrooms. Then that team of six was broken down into a team of four teachers and a team of two teachers for planning purposes. For the 2015–2016 school year, the school went back to straight grade levels with an average of three teachers at each grade level, thus making teams of three. Margot remarked that
she felt the small teams helped teachers work more efficiently because they are not always waiting for their teammates to catch-up, or worrying about them keeping up.

The impact of job-embedded teacher collaboration on literacy instruction. When reflecting on how their instruction had changed from collaboration with their learning team, in addition to the patterns that emerged between teams regarding materials, reflection on students, planning lesson delivery, cohesive instruction, and confidence in instruction, this team felt that their transparency and conversations with one another positively impacted their literacy instruction. They felt their thinking about instruction was not only validated by working with their teammates but also at times, their thinking was challenged when someone brought up an idea they had not thought of, or when common assessment scores between classrooms differed. Their building administrator also confirmed that this team was highly reflective about their student data and this impacted their instruction as individuals and their instructional planning as a team. Carrie, the veteran teacher on the team, affirmed the role of transparency in this collaborative process:

It’s not that you know what everyone is doing but, you can have those conversations that will spark, what can we change, what can we do better, what are you doing that maybe we’re not doing? It’s very transparent, and that’s what I think makes it so successful, because none of us are nervous. Oh, my students didn’t do well on this common assessment. It’s not like, oh, what were you doing? It was, oh, let’s look at someone who did do well, what did you do to explain this? So it’s nice that the transparency’s there and that it’s not, that person’s a better teacher because they can do that standard better. So that’s how I like that transparency piece of it.

Team and administrator understanding of collaboration and professional learning. When reflecting with the team about how they understood collaboration, they focused on having a common goal that they were all working toward together and the
benefit of having contributions from all the members of the team. Beth offered her thoughts on collaboration: “Collaboration, I think, is when everyone's voice is heard and when you're working towards a common thing. Like, we're working for our students. So if we all have that understanding in our head, like, what's best for our kids?” Carrie described collaboration as, “I would say it's effective communication, working together, working towards a common goal.” Darcy focused on collaboration as active listening and participation:

Collaboration is more than one person working together to accomplish a task. So kind of making sure that everyone’s being an active listener and participating and that not one person is doing all the work, you’re collaborating, you’re all talking, you’re all listening, and they all feel like they were a part of the task or whatever you have done, make you feel like they’re a part of it.

Mesa Verde

Effective collaboration leading to professional learning in teacher teams. The team from Mesa Verde had a few additional patterns emerge that were unique to their team when reflecting on what effective collaboration looked like. The first was the importance that their norms and roles had for the team. Each team had mentioned norms and roles to some extent, but the team members at Mesa Verde really attributed the tight following of these to their team’s collaborative successes. At the start of every meeting, the team was observed having one team member read the norms aloud to the group. Their team norms read: “We will be guided by our mission of ensuring student success; we will follow the agenda by respecting the time parameters; we will be prepared for our roles and responsibilities; we will bow to the contributions of all team members.”

I could observe how their norms drove their collaborative practices and gave them each roles and responsibilities. According to team members, they began the year without
having clear cut roles to prepare for their team planning and it was a bit tough for them. Once they decided as a team to have clear roles for preparation for team meetings, they felt the meetings ran more efficiently and smoothly. They also revisit their roles at the end of each trimester to see if anything needed to be changed or added, if anyone wanted to switch, or if the needs of the students had changed. The roles the team members articulated during their interviews included someone to prepare an agenda/planning template for each subject they planned for (reading, writing, math, science, and social studies), a norm reader, and a time keeper.

When I interviewed Mesa Verde’s building administrator, Chris, about how she set the teams up for collaboration at the start of the year, she described giving the members time on Institute Day to set up their collaborative practices as a team. She asked them to turn in what their planning templates will look like and a list of their norms and roles to make sure they can “hit the ground running” at the start of the year. She also acknowledged the importance of her role as an administrator to monitor the teams’ progress throughout the year. Chris built in time periodically for members to reflect as a team on their collaborative practices and checked in with them in order to provide the support they needed.

Another pattern that emerged on the Mesa Verde team was reflection on students and the previous year’s lessons. Team members told me that at the end of each year, they had time to reflect back across their year and make notes in their long-term planning for the following year about what they might want to shift or change regarding the graphic organizers, text they used, or how they taught each essential outcome. According to Mae, this gave them a starting point for the following year:
If we have good instruction that transfers over from last year, then we tweak it. Based on the reflection we had last year at the end of the year, we decided that there were some things we wanted to change, and those we pretty much started from scratch. So it depends on last year and how we revisit things.

Team members and the building administrator also discussed how they reflect on the students. The building administrator, Chris, set up the expectation that the team utilize a data tracking tool for both literacy and math, and the teams are expected to update those tracking tools together every two weeks. They also utilized their common assessments to compare scores with one another and to determine if they were each doing something different that could be shared. Mae described the process they used to reflect on their assessment scores:

After we did a common assessment quick check, we asked how we all taught it because the range in scores was varied. Then after we shared those ideas, now this time that we’re teaching POV, we’re doing it totally different from the last time that we did it.

A final pattern that emerged from the team at Mesa Verde when describing effective collaboration was the idea of equity in instruction. The team members felt that their consistency, cohesion in planning, and communication with team members who were supporting students but were unable to be at all of team planning meetings really helped to ensure consistent instruction and common language was used for all of the students. Mae thought that the teachers felt this was important considering the population of students that they work with:

The other thing it does is there is equitable education for all our students. Because we’re all on the same page, one classroom is not getting more or less than another classroom. So for our population, it’s very important that we have a PLC for that reason.

Martha, who had worked in three different districts, really noticed a difference in instruction and the success of the students because of their team’s collaborative practices,
including planning for common language and differentiation. The building administrator, Chris, also reflected that at the end of the school year, they have had new staff members for next year coming to visit and they were blown away by the consistency and common language they saw among the teams.

**Barriers or roadblocks for teams to overcome.** When reflecting on roadblocks a team might need to overcome, the team from Mesa Verde discussed fixed mindsets and relationships. Julie described the idea of fixed mindsets and their impact on collaboration: “If you come in with a positive growth mindset, it’s always gonna be a win-win. There might be a limitation if there’s a negative fixed mindset. But I know at this school, all I see is positive and growth.” The teachers on the team reflected on the importance of having an open mind and being accepting of ideas and constructive criticism. They saw this concept going hand in hand with the relationships they had built as a team. According to Martha and Tricia, if there were not strong relationships among team members, it would be difficult to have critical conversations. Julie also added that there is a give and take in any relationship and you have to be willing to bend and not take it personally if your idea is not used that time. Julie provided an example of this dynamic: “Sometimes a team member or two might feel strongly about a lesson. And sometimes the other one or two members have to agree to accept because in any relationship there’s give and take, there’s differing opinions.” The teachers clarified that this was not a current issue for their teams, but that they had experiences in the past that led them to feel that way.

**The impact of job-embedded teacher collaboration on literacy instruction.**

The team members at Mesa Verde all came from diverse backgrounds; however, when
thinking about their literacy instruction, they each felt that it had improved since working as a collaborative team. The team members agreed that, from conversations they had in planning meetings, they were able to take ideas their teammates had and implement them immediately. They also explained that, in previous districts where they had worked or student taught, there was much less structure and differentiation to the day and instruction lacked a clear scope and sequence to the learning. Consequently, they did not feel they were meeting their students’ needs as much as they were now because it was more of a guessing game if they were teaching the right things. When asked if she noticed a difference in her instruction after team meetings, Tricia responded: “Yes. I know I teach everything a lot, like a thousand-percent better than I would have if it were just me. It's incredible.” Their building administrator, Chris, also added that she noticed teams improving their instruction as they moved through the essential outcomes each year and teaching each one better as the year went on based on what they were seeing from the students and learning from their collaborative conversations.

**Team and administrator understanding of collaboration and professional learning.** The team from Mesa Verde reflected on two things in addition to the pattern of working together that was discussed across all schools. Those two big ideas were a lack of isolation and reflecting on students. Each of the team members had experience working in isolation whether it was in our district prior to the implementation of professional learning communities, in another district that did not work in collaborative teams, or in their student teaching experiences. Each team member reported she felt overwhelmed and did not feel she was as effective as a teacher as she was now. Martha
described the differences in experience between her Mesa Verde team and a previous experience she had in another district:

Teaching is not isolated for me, and it just makes teaching and coming here a lot easier and a lot more relaxing when we’re at team planning. Because teaching like in the past has just been, I’ve been so isolated. And it was very hard in the beginning, when I was in different districts. But here, it’s definitely made me happier.

From interviewing each of the teachers, I found they were very focused on putting themselves aside and doing whatever they could for their students. Mae described their team’s approach:

I just think that, especially with the population that we serve, for instruction and education to be equitable, collaboration is the way to go. Other than that, kids are missing out on great teaching because it’s happening in one classroom and not in others. And when you collaborate, then everyone is showing those great ideas and then all students are exposed to that instruction; so collaboration is the way to go. We were in it for the students, and if that’s what’s gonna benefit them, we have to put whatever egos or issues or attitudes that we have aside, and stay positive, and to be honest, it just works for the best for everyone around because we benefited, because we divided and conquered, and the kids benefit because we had great instruction that both went along with that.

When asked to define collaboration, the teachers all had a different answer but their thoughts were aligned. Julie described collaboration as, “a team effort. Many minds combining together to produce a product or to work on a process that is for the best student learning” Mae echoed the theme of needing to put self aside:

For one, it’s working together towards the same goal, and that’s for the students to succeed. And you have to put yourself aside when you’re collaborating and think about, the goal is for the students to succeed, so you’re collaborating to that end. It’s not collaborating to meet your needs.

According to Martha, “I would define collaboration as coming together, making mutual decisions. Everyone just is always there for each other and making sure that it’s in the
best interest of the students.” Finally, Tricia defined collaboration as “working together, sharing ideas, and supporting each other.”

**Conclusion**

There were many patterns that emerged between schools regarding the collaborative practices of professional learning teams and there were some differences that were evident between schools regarding their collaborative learning team practices and the impacts on literacy instruction. Chapter Five provides further analysis of those patterns that emerged regarding collaborative learning teams and literacy instruction and discusses the findings of this study.
CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The schools selected for this study were identified by district leaders as having high-quality professional learning teams. The team selected from each of the schools was identified by the building principal as being highly effective in their collaborative practices. Each school was a part of the same large, suburban elementary school district, and similarities and differences in collaborative practices emerged based on the interviews, observations, and artifacts that were used for data collection in this study.

This chapter summarizes the findings of the research conducted during the 2015–2016 school year and includes a discussion of the research. The discussion is organized by research question, sharing professional research that correlates with the patterns that surfaced from each of the teams answer to the questions that drove the study. Recommendations and limitations of the study are also addressed.

**Effective Collaboration Leading to Professional Learning and Barriers**

When looking at what effective collaboration leading to professional learning in teacher teams looks like, the following patterns were seen across teams: (a) planning for instruction, (b) the use of an agenda/planning tool, (c) being open to/sharing new ideas, (d) preparation for team meetings, (e) communication, (f) common assessment reflection and creation, and (g) the role of a literacy coach. In addition to these concepts that were shared across teams, each of the teams had patterns emerge that were slightly unique to their team. When reflecting on effective collaboration, the team from Acadia Elementary also discussed the importance of roles and a shared workload. When discussing barriers or roadblocks, Acadia team members spoke about relationships, changing teams, and
accountability. In terms of effective collaboration, the team from Everglades Elementary talked about focus and productivity in meetings, reflection on lessons and students, and relationships. Time and internal conflicts emerged as roadblocks for that team. In terms of effective instruction, the team from Mesa Verde also discussed roles and norms, equitable instruction, and reflection on lessons and students. Roadblocks that emerged for Mesa Verde team included time, having a fixed mindset, and relationships among team members.

A seminal research study conducted by Lortie (1975) presented an interesting finding that teachers do not see themselves as sharing in a common “memory” or technical subculture. They have not received instruction on how to collaborate. “Such a pattern encourages a conception of teaching as an individualistic rather than a collegial enterprise” (Lortie, 1975, p. 70). “They [teachers] find it difficult to develop strategies to raise the performance level of the group” (Lortie, 1975, p. 81). Forty years ago, teachers who participated in Lortie’s study did not know how to collaborate with one another. Teachers on the teams that participated in this study had received training at the district level, the school level, or both on how to effectively collaborate with one another. The number of patterns of what that effective collaboration looked like for these teams that emerged from the data that were collected shows evidence that the paradigm has shifted for these teachers in terms of their ability to know how to collaborate with one another. The following sections discuss my thoughts about each of the patterns that emerged between teams and the unique ideas that stood out for the individual teams.
Planning for Instruction

Each of the teams structured their planning for instruction and use of an agenda/planning template differently, and each team found a system that worked for them. In each of the teams, it is evident that they worked to get on the same page regarding the application of the strategy, common language, and the graphic organizer that they would use. Each team also went through the plans for each day which included text they would use, think alouds, turn and talks about high level questions, and effective places to model the graphic organizer. What really differed was the level of depth each of the teams went into when discussing their literacy instructional plans. The teams from Acadia and Everglades went through the daily plans quickly and only stopped when there were questions or concerns brought up by team members. The team from Mesa Verde went through each day’s plans in detail, ensuring that everyone at the planning meeting understood the purpose behind each stopping point and discussing any changes that needed to be made.

It is my belief that the amount of time each team had for their literacy planning impacted the depth with which they were able to plan and talk about their instructional practices. The two teams that had 30 minutes together had to work more efficiently to get the same amount of literacy planning done as the team that had 50 minutes of planning time together. Based on my experiences working in the district, the factor of time is a product of two things: the building master schedule and how teams decide to use their scheduled planning time. According to the district’s teacher contract at the time of the study, the administrators could designate 90 minutes of a teacher’s 240 weekly planning time minutes for team planning; the teacher could then decide how they wanted
to use the remaining 150 minutes they had throughout the week. My experience with some teams across different buildings is that the teachers choose to meet together for all or most of their planning time minutes during the day, which is well over the 90 required minutes. This was the case on the Mesa Verde team. The building master schedule was structured so teachers would have an hour together as a team if they chose to use it, but they were only asked to plan literacy for the first 30 minutes of that hour. The master schedules at Acadia and Everglades had the team together for only the 30 minutes of literacy planning. This leads me to question how the depth of conversations on each of these teams would be impacted if their time to collaborate on literacy instruction was either shortened or lengthened.

**Planning Template/Agenda**

The tools used to guide each of the teams through their literacy planning process were their agenda and planning templates. Each team used a planning template and agenda of some sort that were decided upon by the team. Wegner (1998) discussed the keys to a social learning organization; participation and reification were two key ideas that Wegner believed were both important. In order for a community to be successful, the members must participate. They must also have documents, forms, instruments, and focus points in order to have clear communication (Wegner, 1998). The planning templates that each team utilized were important tools for the teams to use as they planned. Each of the planning templates that the teams used originated from a template that was started by a literacy task force at the district level in 2013. Each teams then annually adapted the original planning template since its beginning to meet the needs of their teams. The planning templates for each team can be seen in Appendix C.
E, and Appendix G. There are some similarities in the planning templates including that each planning template started with the essential outcome, “I-can” statements, materials, and graphic organizer. The team from Mesa Verde also added in celebrations, notes, ideas for tier two and tier three instruction, ideas to differentiate, and common language (see Appendix G). Those additional items were included and updated by the literacy coach before she sent the planning templates out to her team members. Celebrations and notes were discussed by the team at the beginning of the planning meetings. According to the interviews conducted in 2016, the teachers on each of the teams used the planning templates to then guide the instruction in their classrooms.

The teams from Acadia and Everglades both had official agendas they followed for their literacy planning meeting. The team from Mesa Verde used the planning template as their agenda for the meeting. The agenda from the Acadia team had a standing agenda that the team created together to guide their time (see Appendix D). It shows that they spent time reviewing the norms and the lessons they prepared, discussing the graphic organizer, anchor charts, and acceleration plans, and finally, they devoted time to any upcoming common assessments. The agenda from Everglades (see Appendix F) was created and sent out each week by the literacy coach and it had specifics about the essential outcome they would be teaching the following week, including teaching points to consider, common language, a plan for a gradual release of responsibility, and high cognitive demand tasks.

As a member of the literacy task force and coaching team that helped develop these original planning templates, it is very meaningful for me to see how the teams had adapted them and made them their own. The amount of clarity these templates provide
for teachers planning for classroom instruction and for non-classroom teachers planning for their small group support is very valuable. They appear to help get everyone on the same page to provide cohesive instruction for the students. The way the district structured literacy support, students might have a different teacher for shared reading, guided reading, and their acceleration lesson; therefore, having common language and the same graphic organizer providing cohesion between everyone was important to providing quality instruction for the students.

Another thought I have about the planning templates is the time it takes to create them. Each of the teams in the study used the template they had worked off of the previous year as a starting point for their planning and discussions. I believe it would negatively impact their literacy planning and roles if they had to create these lessons from scratch each week. If teacher teams had to start over from scratch planning for new texts and lessons, I have to believe that the collaborative conversations they have would suffer because of the amount of work required to get through in terms of planning.

One concern that was brought up in the interviews was that instruction could feel scripted or teachers could feel that they were losing their autonomy when they had such detailed planning templates to follow. Chris, the administrator at Mesa Verde, reflected in her interview that she found some teachers did not know how to go off script. This is such an interesting thought to me because in my experiences as an administrator and coach, I find that sometimes teachers are afraid to go off script because they do not want to do something wrong or get into trouble, and consequently, instruction suffers because teachers are not making appropriate professional decisions. I believe the administrator sets the tone for that autonomy in the building.
Members on each team also commented on the cohesion and clear communication they felt existed among their teammates because of their planning templates and agendas. Mae, from Mesa Verde, noted the benefits of cohesive instruction among team members:

I just think that, especially with the population that we serve, for instruction and education to be equitable, collaboration is the way to go. Other than that, kids are missing out on great teaching, because it’s happening in one classroom and not in others.

It is clear from this study that utilizing the planning template and agenda is key to these teams for cohesive instructional planning, communication, and sharing of responsibilities.

Reflecting on the collaborative practices I have discussed thus far, including planning for instruction, the planning template, and agendas, the ideas established by each of these collaborative practices are reinforced by the Learning Forward Standards (2012) and Senge (1990). Learning Forward further reinforces the importance of the physiological environment, thus explaining the need to develop norms of collaboration and relational trust. Senge (1990) also discussed this notion with the thinking that people in learning organizations must suspend assumptions, see each other as colleagues, have a facilitator, and establish a common language. Each team in this study created those norms of collaboration and common language and this helped them to become effective learning teams.

**Literacy Coach**

Senge (1990) asserted that learning organizations must have a facilitator. Even though each of the teams in this study had a literacy coach assigned to them, the members’ roles looked different based on the needs of the team, the building, and the expectations of the building administrator.
When I reviewed my notes on the literacy coach for each of the teams, it is clear that I did not get to observe much of the literacy coach’s role at Acadia Elementary. She was only able to attend one of the three team planning meetings I observed due to the need for her to help with assessments. The team members who worked with this coach over the past few years did say that her role and the support she had been able to provide them had shifted in recent years. She was not able to give as much support as they were used to in prior years. This is interesting to me because, according to Dana the building administrator, a purposeful shift in the responsibilities of the literacy coach assigned to this team was in order because the team members had strong collaborative practices and she felt that the team members only needed someone to check in with them rather than provide intense support. I got the impression from the veteran team members that they were frustrated with this change in support. I think it would benefit all if Dana had a positive conversation with the grade level team members so they could understand why they were receiving less support.

The literacy coaches from Everglades and Mesa Verde acted as facilitators in the team meetings. Both teams of teachers saw their literacy coaches as mentors and great sources of support for them. The literacy coaches on both teams prepared the agenda and planning template and sent these out to all the team members prior to the team meetings. After the meetings, the coaches also communicated with all of the team members who were not able to be present for planning meetings. The literacy coaches also provided text suggestions, kept the teams on track during planning, offered instructional suggestions, and were seen by team members as someone they could go to for individual support with students or instructional questions. These were also the expectations that
had been set up by the building administrators in terms of how they expect the coaches to provide support for the teams. Another aspect of the literacy coaches’ role mentioned by all three building administrators was the meetings the literacy coaches have with the building administrators. Chris, the building administrator at Mesa Verde, explained that she saw the literacy coach’s role as a bridge between the teams and the administrators so a part of that role involved ongoing communication with the building administrator.

From observing the role of the literacy coach in relation to the three different teams and from interviewing the teachers on each team, some differences in collaboration on literacy instruction can be seen between teams with a more involved compared to a less involved literacy coach. The teams with more involved literacy coaches appear to go more into detail during their team planning meetings when discussing their plans for literacy planning. Team members at Acadia expressed their hope for more support, while team members at Everglades and Mesa Verde had many positive things to say about each of their literacy coaches and the support they provided their teams. One teacher in particular from Acadia reflected on how the change in role of their literacy coach impacted her in a negative way that left her wishing for more support. It appears that the teams with involved literacy coaches benefitted instructionally from having a knowledgeable resource that worked with the students and was also able to provide instructional ideas for the teams.

**Preparation for Team Meetings**

The planning templates, agendas, communication, and literacy coaches all contributed to the alignment and clarity of instruction that the teachers were able to provide for their students. Senge posited the importance of team members aligning to
function as a whole and complement one another’s efforts. “Individuals may work extraordinarily hard, but their efforts do not efficiently translate to a team effort. By contrast, when a team becomes more aligned, a commonality of direction emerges, and individuals’ energies harmonize” (Senge, 1990, p. 217). Another pattern that surfaced in the interviews with the teachers was the preparation they all did for their weekly team planning meetings and how their preparation contributed to the efficiency of the meetings. The energies and efforts of the individuals on the team outside of the meeting come together during the meeting to allow for effective collaboration.

Teachers on each of the teams reflected on the preparation they did prior to the team meetings. The teachers on the team from Acadia planned for the days or lessons they were assigned, uploaded their lesson plans to the team’s planning template located on SharePoint, gathered the text they needed for the lessons they were assigned to, and came to meetings prepared to share what they had planned with the rest of the team. The team from Everglades prepared for meetings by reading the planning template and agenda prior to the meeting, but the team members admitted that there were times when they did not have a chance to read and prepare as well as they would have wanted to. They also found that during team meetings when they did not come prepared, they were not able to accomplish as much and did not feel as effective in their team planning. The team from Mesa Verde read the text and the planning template prior to the team meeting. Each team member was observed having notes written on the planning template that they utilized to make changes during their team meetings.

I agree with the teams when they acknowledged the importance of preparing for the team meetings. From my observations of these three teams and from my own
experiences as an instructional coach, when teachers come having read the text and with notes ready, the conversations at the team planning meeting are highly instructionally focused and collaborative. I also see it taking a level of preparation or organization that allows teams to effectively prepare for the meetings. The team from Acadia used time each week to explicitly lay out who was planning for what days and what text. The team from Everglades received their planning template from the literacy coach the night before their planning meeting so they could prepare. The team from Mesa Verde received their planning template and text from their literacy coach a week or two prior to the planning session so they could prepare. I learned that teams who have communication and time to prepare are able to effectively execute team planning meetings, that lead to instructionally focused collaborative conversations.

Common Assessments

Learning communities share collective responsibility for the learning of all students within the school or school system. Within learning communities, peer accountability ignites commitment to professional learning. Every student benefits from the strengths and expertise of every educator (Learning Forward, 2012). An aspect of effective collaboration that each of the teams talked about was the creation of and reflection on common assessments. From working in the district, I know the use of these team-created common assessments is a requirement. Teams are expected to make assessments that are focused on the essential outcome they are teaching and to align their assessment and instruction to ensure student success. Each team had different expectations for analyzing their common assessments. The team from Mesa Verde used a spread sheet to input their assessment data and had questions from their administrator
which they used to guide their discussions. The team from Acadia said that their administrator’s requirements for common assessment reflection had changed this past year; this change gave them more freedom to discuss the assessment as they saw fit rather than having a form they were required to fill out.

During my observations, some teams were seen preparing and finishing the creation of the common assessments. None of the teams were observed during a common assessment reflection because these took place during collaborative team time outside of their literacy planning time. Regardless of the structure the teams followed for common assessment creation and reflection, the important thing was the reflective conversation that comes from the practice of creating and reflecting on the common assessments and the impact it has on the literacy instruction of the teachers involved.

Although I was unable to observe any common assessment reflection, it was evident in the interviews that the relationships, trust, and communication that were a part of the culture of each team enabled effective collaborative practices surrounding common assessment creation and reflection.

**Being Open to Sharing New Ideas**

The give and take of sharing ideas was a pattern that emerged for every team when they discussed effective collaboration on their learning teams. Tricia from Mesa Verde reflected on the value of her team’s idea sharing practices:

> We come up with new ideas, so it’s not just one, my way of thinking, and it helps the students out a lot more. They’re not just seeing my perspective, but they’re hearing all these other voices too. It may just be coming from me, but I’m getting all these ideas from four other people, so it’s really nice.
This is an idea that came up for the teachers on all of the teams; they reflected that when they have open lines of communication and trusting relationships with their team members, they feel comfortable to give and take ideas from their teammates.

As a researcher, I question a few things regarding the sharing of ideas on the collaborative team. The first thing is whether or not the actual amount of time a team has for their literacy planning and collaboration has an impact on how ideas are shared on the team. Of the teams in the study, two had 30 minutes for literacy planning and one had 50 minutes for literacy planning. When coding the interviews, I found that the team from Mesa Verde, that had literacy planning for 50 minutes, spoke about being open to and sharing new ideas twice as much as the teams from Everglades and Acadia that had only 30 minutes for literacy planning each week. The other thing I question is the role of the literacy coach on the team in terms of guiding the team toward the sharing of new ideas. Again, the team members from Mesa Verde had a coach they spoke highly of and they talked about the sharing of new ideas and more flexibility with time. This appears to clearly indicate that an active literacy coach makes for more collaborative, instructionally focused conversations that impact literacy instruction.

Communication

Communication is a pattern of effective collaboration. The need for quality communication was voiced by all three teams and had been woven throughout the discussion of all the patterns. Clear communication came in the agendas and planning templates the teams used; it came in the literacy coach’s communication with the classroom teachers and non-classroom teachers who support the teams. Communication is seen throughout this study’s data, in written form through the planning templates and
also in the observations of the verbal dialogue during the team planning meetings. Communication is seen in the clarity of understanding about what the team members needed to do to prepare for team meetings. It is evident in the literacy plans, in the stopping points to think aloud, high level questions, and modeling of the graphic organizer. Communication is seen in the open conversations the teams talked about having during the common assessment creation and reflection. Finally, communication is seen in the open-minded willingness to share and receive new ideas from teammates. Based on my observations, the positive relationships of the team members have a positive impact on how effective their communication was.

**Patterns Unique to Teams**

When reflecting on effective collaboration, the team from Acadia also discussed the importance of roles and a shared workload. When discussing roadblocks, they talked about relationships, changing teams, and accountability. The team from Acadia structured the roles on their team differently than the other two teams in the study. They determined roles each week that shared the workload with a divide and conquer approach to planning their literacy instruction. This study’s observation data provide evidence that they each planned for a few days and then shared what they planned with one another during the literacy planning meetings.

In terms of barriers or roadblocks, the Acadia team from the previous year had experienced an unwelcome switch that involved colleagues of the two veterans on the team moving to a different grade level, and this change really came as a surprise to the team. I believe the patterns of relationships, changing teams, and accountability were highlighted by the two veteran teachers on this team because of their experiences in
previous years being on either unsuccessful teams, or their experience of being a tight-knit and successful team that was split apart. When reflecting on the research, I can see the Acadia team’s point about maintaining a team’s membership from year to year because of the consistency and comfort level with collaborative practices that have been developed over time. However, if every year the team members have to start over with building trusting relationships, new norms, roles, and expectations, this can have a negative impact on student learning because of the learning curve time required for a new team to get to those deep, thoughtful levels of collaboration.

In terms of effective collaboration, the team from Everglades Elementary talked about focus and productivity in meetings as well as reflection on lessons and students and relationships. Time and internal conflicts emerged as roadblocks for the Everglades team. It appears to me that the makeup of that team led to the additional patterns that emerged for them collaboratively and in terms of the team’s limitations. The Everglades team had two first-year teachers and a fourth-year teacher. Based on my observations, each of these team members had sweet, friendly personalities so I am not surprised to learn that, as the school year went on, the team had developed close friendships with one another, even saying they would socialize outside of work. The close relationships they built led them to realize that focus and productivity in meetings were the keys to their success. The team members reflected that at times, they would get off track or lose focus; however, they realized at the end of the year that they really needed to prioritize and prepare for their 30 minutes of literacy planning so they would be able to get everything done and not feel bad when they had to leave at the end of the meeting time.
Another pattern that stood out for the Everglades team was reflecting on their lessons and students. They realized as the year went on, that they were not planning for enough rigor in their instruction or in their common assessments. I can see this being a product of having two new first-year teachers on the team. In the beginning of the year, they were trying to get acclimated and probably just trying to survive. Once they got more comfortable in their own practices and in their teams collaborative practices, they were able to reflect and converse more in depth about their instructional planning.

When thinking about the limitations that were specific to the Everglades team, multiple team members talked about the idea of internal conflicts or struggles with feeling as though they were letting their teammates down because they became such close friends. Also, this personal internal struggle may be because of the kind-hearted nature of the team members; these were individuals who would never want to let their teammates down so they put extra pressure on themselves to stay late or constantly felt like they had to be prepped to the same extent as their teammates. They did mention that their strong relationships helped them to open lines of communication when they were feeling that way which helped overcome that roadblock to some extent.

The team from Mesa Verde also discussed roles and norms, equitable instruction and reflection on lessons and students when talking about effective instruction. Time, fixed mindsets, and relationships emerged as roadblocks for this team. The additional patterns that emerged during the interviews from the team at Mesa Verde are evident in the observations that were made of their team planning. It is clear that it was a norm for the team to have read the text and planning template and have prepared notes on the previous year’s instruction that they then discussed during the planning meeting. They
also were observed beginning every meeting with celebrations surrounding the progress they saw in students which showed the importance of reflection on students for them.

The roadblocks that emerged from the Mesa Verde team make sense when thinking about the makeup of the team and the structure of their collaborative practices. Some of the members of their team had many years of teaching experience, some of them prior to the implementation of professional learning communities and some of them on teams that were not highly effective. They reflected on the teachers they had worked with who did not have open minds when it came to sharing and taking ideas. The idea of time also came up in terms of missing their personal planning time during the day because they made the choice as a team to spend all of their collaborative time that is built into their day together. This was a team choice, but it did come up in reflection from the newer teachers who were still trying to get a strong handle on their personal classroom management and organization.

Thinking about the roadblock this team reflected upon about being open-minded reminds me of Dweck’s research on mindset. Dweck identified two major mindsets people have in their lives that impact how they approach their daily interactions. Those with a “fixed” mindset believe that intelligence and talents are a part of genetics; you either have them or you do not. Those with an “open” mindset seek challenges and learning opportunities because they believe that you can always get better through effort and practice (Dweck, 2007). The mindsets of teachers on a learning team could potentially have an impact on their team’s collaborative practices, not only when thinking about planning for students and how much students can learn, but also in thinking about their own opportunities for professional learning and what they are open to.
Setting the Stage for Collaborative Practices

While talking to each of the teachers and administrators and noticing the differences and similarities between each of these teams that were identified as highly effective collaborative learning teams, I found myself questioning how these collaborative practices were put into place.

“Complexity theory tells us that if you increase the amount of purposeful interaction and infuse it with the checks and balances of quality knowledge, self-organizing patterns [desirable outcomes] will accrue” (Fullan, 2005, p. 19). It is clear from talking to all of the teachers that there were specific guidelines given to them from their building administrators. Each of the three building administrators discussed building in time on the Institute Days at the beginning of the year to allow teams to meet and establish their team practices and commitments. For example, they were expected to establish their norms, roles, planning templates, and anything else their team needed to set the stage for effective collaborative practices.

When reflecting overall on the collaborative practices of these teams and their relationship to professional literature, similarities in the patterns can be seen. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek (2010), practitioners who give presentations to school districts around the country about implementation of professional learning communities, gave specific steps explaining how to set teams up for successful collaboration. DuFour et al. (2010) outlined six steps for engaging in the team learning process:

1. Identify essential outcomes all students must learn in each content area at each grade level during this school year and during each unit of instruction.

2. Create common pacing guides and curriculum maps each teacher will follow.
3. Develop multiple common formative assessments.

4. Establish a target score all students must achieve to demonstrate proficiency in each skill on each common formative assessment.

5. Administer the common assessments and analyze results.

6. Celebrate strengths and identify and implement improvement strategies. (p. 26)

There are many items on the DuFour et al. list that are evident in each of the team’s practices, such as utilizing essential outcomes, pacing guides and curriculum maps to drive their weekly agendas and planning templates, creating and reflecting on common assessments, and sharing ideas as improvement strategies. Thiers (2016) interviewed Richard DuFour wherein DuFour reinforced two conditions that must be in place for teacher collaboration to help improve achievement and their professional lives. These are first, having clarity about what teacher teams are collaborating about, for example, about a common goal or common outcomes; and second, having supports so people can succeed at what they are expected to do, such as providing time or a systematic intervention block. Each of the teams in this study had those systems clearly established in their team practices.

Another concept when thinking about setting the stage for collaborative practices is the idea of relationships among team members. The idea of relationships came up for teams in terms of what effective collaboration looks like and also as a potential roadblock. More than 30 years ago, Knowles (1980) spoke about creating a climate conducive to learning, speculating that learning would be superior in environments in which people feel respected, trusted, cared about, safe, supported, comfortable, open, and
non-competitive. One of my goals was to determine by the research collected in this study if these are characteristics of effective learning teams within my district. “So what we need to do if we are to survive into [and through] the twenty-first century is to invent new social arrangements that are able not only to adapt to change, but to promote it” (Knowles, 1979, p. 36).

Knowles (1980) also highlighted the importance of the physical environment and the physiological environment and stated that it must be easy for participants to interact with one another. Knowles also argued the need for a spirit that is mutual respectful, supportive, caring, unthreatening, and collaborative not competitive, with an emphasis on learning. School structures and schedules need to be set up to allow for team collaboration. After conducting this research, I believe that it is imperative for building leaders to help teacher teams create positive professional relationships on their teacher teams in order for them to effectively collaborate. The idea of the relationships between team members came up many times during the interviews. The team from Acadia was struggling because they had such incredibly strong relationships with their previous team that, in their opinion, their new team was not functioning as well. Could it be that they did not have the time to get to that level as yet? Also, the team from Everglades was in the process of forming such strong relationships that their communication was getting to a level that would allow for open communication no matter how difficult the topic, and they felt this was a huge benefit for their team collaborative practices.

The size of a team also came up when reflecting with the administrators. For example, Margot from Everglades Elementary felt that groups that were too large made it a bit more difficult to collaborate because the teams were always feeling like they had to
wait for all of their teammates. Goodwin (2014) discussed the dynamics of group size in terms of collaboration. “The larger the group, the higher the likelihood of social loafing [sometimes called free riding] and the more effort it takes to keep members activities coordinated. Small teams are more efficient and far less frustrating” (Goodwin, 2014, p. or para. ?). I think this is important for building administrators to keep in mind when forming their teams so as to maximize the potential for team collaboration and effectiveness.

**Question 1 Findings: Effective Collaboration Leading to Professional Learning in Teams and Barriers/Roadblocks**

When looking at what effective collaboration leading to professional learning in teacher teams looks like, the patterns that emerged across all three teams in the study are: (a) planning for instruction, (b) the use of an agenda/planning tool, (c) being open to/sharing new ideas, (d) preparation for team meetings, (e) communication, (f) common assessment reflection and creation, and (g) the role of a literacy coach. There are also some individual differences that emerged between schools that include roles, norms, reflecting on previous lessons and students, and relationships. When discussing roadblocks and the individual differences that emerged in collaborative practices, the patterns seen are also evident in the team observations that were done. When reflecting on roadblocks the teams talked about relationships, changing teams, accountability, time, and internal conflicts.

As a researcher reflecting on the differences in effective collaborative practices of these teams, I believe the amount of time a team has built in for collaboration makes a difference in their collaborative practices. For example, if the teams have more time together, the structure of their literacy planning meetings and the quality and depth of
conversations the teams have about students and instructional strategies will be able to get to a more detailed level.

I also notice a difference between the time teachers and other team members spent prior to and during their team meetings and its impact on instructional practices. Each of the teachers on the teams felt the structure of their literacy planning and preparation prior to meetings worked for their team. I believe that instructional planning meetings for teachers on teams such as Mesa Verde, where they spent 50 minutes talking through specific details of instruction, have a more significant impact on the instructional practices of the team members than on teams where they quickly shared details of their plans in 30 minutes. Overall, it is evident that each of these teams that were identified as highly effective by their building administrators had different practices but similar focuses, and each team made their collaborative practices work for them and the structures within their school.

**Question 2 Findings: How Job-Embedded Teacher Collaboration Impacts Literacy Instruction**

The key in professional learning communities is the idea of professional learning. Educators are regularly participating in professional development opportunities because it is a requirement of their schools, or it is by choice, or it is for recertification. The question remains regarding what makes an effective learning experience for adult learners. One of the purposes of this study was to uncover how job-embedded teacher collaboration within teacher learning teams actually impacts their literacy instruction. I wanted to find out what, if anything, teachers learn from collaborating with their teammates that actually translates into a change, hopefully for the better, in literacy instruction.
The schools that were a part of this study had structures for team collaboration in place. As discussed previously, collaborative time was built into the school day for each of the teams and expectations had been set by the building administrator at each school.

Bransford et al. (2005) described the communal nature of collaborative environments:

Schools that provide healthy environments for learning and teaching require common efforts of all of their members. Teachers must be able to function as members of a community of practitioners who share knowledge and commitments, who work together to create coherent curriculum and systems that support students, and collaborate in ways that advance their combined understanding and skill. (p. 13)

The Learning Forward Association (2012) outlines standards for professional learning. Learning communities is one of their seven standards for professional learning.

Learning communities convene regularly and frequently during the workday to engage in collaborative professional learning to strengthen their practice and increase student results. Learning community members are accountable to one another to achieve the shared goals of the school and school system and work in transparent, authentic setting that support their improvement. (Learning Forward, 2012, p. 1)

When reflecting on teachers as adult learners and what works most effectively for them to make changes to their instruction, one must keep in mind the motivation level of adults to increase their knowledge and learning. Knowles (1990) discussed observations of the adult learner and argued that the adult learner is the “neglected species” because adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that they want to learn about. Knowles also claimed that adult learning is lifelong, self-directed, and that individualistic differences have implications for learning. Another key idea highlighted by Knowles was that experience is the main resource for adult learning. The following sections highlight the patterns that emerged regarding how teacher’s literacy instruction
was impacted by their professional learning teams and then ideas that were unique to each school are presented.

**Materials and Resources**

In the interviews, the teacher teams reflected on the new materials and resources they learned about from their teammates. The teams from Everglades and Mesa Verde discussed the value of the text and resources. Darcy from Everglades described her team’s process for selecting books:

> We get a lot done in that 30 minutes when there’s four brains working in the room as opposed to one person trying to come up with five different books because we are familiar with some books that we can maybe use in a lesson plan, and obviously Carrie has a lot of experience that she can bring, and our literacy coach, she knows the whole book room by heart, so you know, together we’re pretty good at whipping out what books we think are best.

The team at Acadia also spoke about the value of the videos and other teaching resources they were able to learn about from their colleagues.

As the researcher and fellow educator reflecting on how the materials used impact their literacy instruction, I see this selection process as a valuable task for learning teams because when the text and other resources that are used fit well with the strategy or concept being taught, instruction is more effective for the students.

**Reflection on the Students**

Hattie (2008) studied factors that impact student learning and concluded that individual teachers who reflected on their practice in isolation are unlikely to improve their effectiveness. Hattie believed that reflection leads to improved practice only when it is based on actual evidence of student learning and when it is done collectively. This reinforces the roles within the learning organization and the importance of teacher teams reflecting on their student data and instructional practices and learning together how to
improve their professional knowledge. Trotter (2006), who studied theories of adult learning, stated that “adult learners are motivated to learn as the subject matter was relevant to their current role and transition period. The goal of adult education should be to promote individual development by encouraging reflection and inquiry” (pp. 11–12).

It appears from the research literature that much of the reflection and inquiry among the teacher teams occurs when reflecting on the students. From interviewing the teachers on each of the teams in this study, this reflection includes, but is not limited to, observations from the teachers about how the students did in a particular lesson, noticing the student’s work on a graphic organizer, written responses, or exit slips. Previously in this chapter, I discussed how the teams reflected upon the common assessments they create. There is also evidence of informal reflection on the students among all the teams. There are definitely parts of the observations of team planning from each point in the year that were focused on reflecting on students. I question how these conversations evolved from the beginning of the year as the teams grew in their trust and relationships. I did not see a difference between the qualities of reflective conversations in the December observations compared to the May observations. The conversations are relatively similar each time, with just a different essential outcome focus.

The teams in this study were highly reflective about how their students were able to grasp their previous lessons in order to drive their instruction. I am still left questioning how time, structures, and relationships played into the picture with the length, amount, and quality of collaborative conversations that were had.

Gino and Staats (2015), authors of Why Organizations Don’t Learn, listed a few interesting challenges to organizational learning that impede progress. One of those
challenges listed was a lack of reflection. The authors studied two different groups of new trainees during their first 16 days in training at a technology company. The control group worked and trained straight through each day; the variable group spent the last 15 minutes of every day reflecting and writing about what they had learned. The study found that the group that had built-in reflection time performed an average of 20% better than those in the control group. The authors also stated that several other studies of the same nature produced similar results (Gino & Staats, 2015). In this study, it appears from my observations that Mesa Verde, the team with the longest planning time, had the deepest reflective conversations about students that in turn they felt impacted their instructional practices.

**Planning Lesson Delivery**

Wegner (1998) maintained that learning is a part of social participation and that participating in social communities and organizations shapes who we are and what we do. Wegner also believed that there is a strong transformative potential that comes from participating in social communities because participation not only shapes our experiences, but it also shapes those in the community. This idea also relates to the community-centeredness espoused in the How People Learn (HPL) framework. “When teachers get along and learn from one another, they provide models that help support students learning, and they are able to share their expertise with one another to improve the overall quality of instruction” (Bransford et al., 2005, p. 75).

The teachers in each of the teams felt that their instruction was impacted from the collaborative work with their teams due to the process they chose to plan for their lesson delivery together. This is also evident in the conversations that were observed in the
team planning meetings. Again, it appears that, in time spent together, collaborative
structures and relationships all play a part in the quality of collaborative conversations the
teams had surrounding lesson planning. For example, the team from Acadia divided and
conquered the planning of lesson delivery then shared at the meetings what they each
planned individually. The team from Mesa Verde talked through each teaching point
together as a team and the idea that planning lesson delivery impacted their instruction
came up three times more during the interviews with the teachers from Mesa Verde
compared to the teachers from Acadia, as can be seen in the School Coding Charts in
Appendix H, Appendix I, Appendix J, and Appendix K.

When examining the conversations that occurred during team planning, there are
clear differences in the depth and length of conversations based on the team. For the
team from Acadia, based on the three observations, at the start of the team planning
meetings, members discussed planning surrounding how they would apply the strategy
and text they would use, and then the meetings focused on sharing the individual parts
they had planned. As each team member shared, they focused mostly on telling about
any changes they made regarding the teaching points. During the third and final
observation, the team was about to complete the scope and sequence provided by the
district, so they spent a good amount of time during that meeting trying to decide what
they would use and focus on after they finished the materials from district.

The team from Everglades started their meeting talking through strategy
application and how the strategy applied to each text. They were inconsistent from
meeting to meeting in terms of how detailed they went into the teaching points of turn
and talks and think alouds. It is clear that by the last observation, they had spent more
time on logistics and materials because they had completed the scope and sequence provided by the district. Once they had to decide on the materials and their strategy on their own, that took up a majority of their planning time.

During the three observations of the team from Mesa Verde, the literacy coach began each meeting leading an explanation of strategy application and instructional tips. A majority of their discussion every literacy planning time was focused on planning the teaching points for each of their shared reading lessons. Materials and other logistics had already been decided upon, and everyone on the team knew and had read the text prior to the meeting.

In reflecting on the team planning meetings and their focus on lesson planning in order to impact instruction, each team had the potential to have conversations surrounding instruction that impact instruction. It appears that the time the team had together impacted the depth and length of those conversations. It also appears that the role of the literacy coach in terms of the amount of support and organization they provided for the team and the collaborative structures, such as deciding as a team to divide and conquer, impacted the way teachers talked about instruction as well. Each team, however, created a system over the year that worked for them. It is also evident that the level of preparation and organization prior to the meeting helped the overall effectiveness of the meeting. For example, when a team was finished with the scope and sequence provided by the district, they spent a majority of their meeting trying to decide what they would teach instead of how they would teach it, and this took away from the level of depth they were able to achieve when discussing instruction.
Confidence in Instruction Rooted in Team Cohesion

A final pattern emerged when reflecting on the data is the teachers sharing the confidence they had in their instructional practices because of their planning processes and the cohesion in all of their instruction. Wegner (1998) defined three key parts of a community where social learning occurs: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. The idea of having members of a community connected toward a common goal they are working on with a common language and shared understandings is similar to Senge’s ideas about systemic thinking. These organizational structures within a learning community are important in order for it to lead and sustain professional growth. “The transformative practice of a learning community offers an ideal context for developing new understandings because the community sustains change as part of an identity of participation” (Wegner, 1998, p. 215).

Each of the teams discussed the confidence they felt in their instruction and the cohesion they felt between all of their team members, including those who could not be at the team planning meetings. Mae, from Mesa Verde, explained the cohesion they had in their instruction as “equity in education for all students.” She felt that by guaranteeing that all students are getting the same instruction, we can help close the achievement gap because regardless of what teacher a student is assigned, they are getting high quality instruction.

Based on the research, there are a few things I see that go into creating that confidence and cohesion in instruction that the teachers experienced. One of these things is the part of their team planning meeting where members determine and record on the planning template what the essential outcome or strategy focus is for their lesson plans;
this, along with the common language they will use, is how they will expect the students to demonstrate proficiency with the strategy. Another key thing I saw teams doing that leads to cohesion is the common assessments the teams created and reflected upon. They gave the same common assessment to all students that then allowed the teachers to reflect upon all students on a level playing field and see who is struggling and how they can provide further support for those students. An additional element of their cohesive instruction is the communication they had between the classroom teachers and the non-classroom teachers who supported the grade level. Each school had a different strategy for this communication, such as the teachers or the literacy coaches posting their planning template on online, e-mailing team members, or putting plans and graphic organizers into mailboxes. The teams all decided upon a system that worked for them; the key seems to be that the system was put into place.

**Concepts Unique to Teams**

Each of the teams also had one or two additional unique ideas relating to how their literacy instruction is impacted based on the collaboration with their learning teams. The team from Acadia felt that the reflection they did on previous lessons and their informal reflections outside of team meetings at times such as lunch impacted their instructional practices. The teachers also felt that by using the plans they had from previous years as a starting point, they were making the plans the best they could by improving them each year. This is interesting to me because one of the team members also reflected that because they had been doing the same plans for a few years in a row, she struggled to feel motivated and excited about what they were teaching. This seems to be a double edge sword because at the same time the teachers are feeling that their
lessons are getting better and better each year as they reflect and make adjustments, they may not be as excited about teaching them because they are not novel.

The team from Everglades also reflected on the transparency they felt in their instructional practices, reflection, and the conversations they had as a team that sparked change in their instruction. As a researcher and practitioner, I believe that the trusting relationships that the Everglades team had built throughout the year enabled them to be able to have those transparent conversations that sparked the change in their instruction.

The team from Mesa Verde reflected on the improved instruction they saw in themselves based on the collaborative practices they had with their teammates. One of the team’s new teachers, Tricia, reflected on the experience she had instructionally at Mesa Verde compared to in the previous school she student taught in. She talked about how much she had learned from meeting with her teammates to plan instruction which was in contrast to what she had previously experienced where she was just given materials and told to follow the program. Tricia confided “I just feel like I have grown so much as a teacher. I would be teaching like main idea in the worst way.”

Summary

There are patterns that emerged in terms of how the teachers in this study felt their instruction had been impacted by their collaboration with their collaborative teams. These include learning about new materials and resources, reflecting on students, planning for instruction, and having a confidence in providing cohesive instruction for the students. A few ideas stand out to me as a researcher that might impact the literacy instruction in some teams more than others. In thinking about how the team from Acadia divided and conquered their work, Acadia was the only school that did not have a lot of
reflection in terms of how their instruction was changed by their teammates. I believe this limited reflection is the result of just sharing out information instead of having the critical conversation about instruction and relates to the issue of the collaborative time a team has impacting the quality of its collaboration. Conversely, the team from Mesa Verde had the most specific information about how their team planning impacted their instruction and that team had the longest time for their literacy planning. It is also evident in the observations of the Mesa Verde team that it had the most detailed and specific conversations when they were together for literacy planning about how they would deliver the instruction.

I also am left questioning how Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development fits into the impact that collaboration has on literacy instruction of the teachers. Thinking about the more knowledgeable other on the teams in this study brings me to think about the teams from Mesa Verde and Everglades. The team members on the Mesa Verde team all acknowledged how much their literacy coach had helped them not only in meetings, but when they sought her out for individual support with instruction and reflection on students. The team members from Acadia felt that they were missing the support of their literacy coach this year who I believe contributes to their professional learning. Team members missed the ideas and resources that came from working with a literacy coach regularly. This also raises the idea discussed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle of teacher learning Knowledge-of-practice. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), within these structures, the expert-novice relationship is replaced by collaborative relationships which involve colleagues of all levels of experience reflecting upon teaching and
learning. All of the teams in this study were comprised of teachers with a variety of experiences, and they all worked together effectively.

Also, in thinking about the team from Everglades, they had one veteran teacher and two new first-year teachers. One would think that the veteran teacher would be the more knowledgeable other, but Carrie, the four-year veteran teacher commented during her interviews about how much she had learned from the new teachers on her team as well. This makes me question the reality of Vygotsky’s theory verses the personality makeup of a team in terms of the impact that collaboration might have on literacy instruction. While Carrie’s teammates acknowledged learning from her, she also talked during her interviews about learning from the two new teachers as well in a way that positively impacted her instruction.

According to Gallucci (2008), Vygotsky Space is also at work in the professional learning seen in this study. This represents learning in terms of relationships between group and individual actions that are both public and private. Researchers suggest that as new ideas and practices are discussed and reflected upon within either formal or informal group opportunities, there is potential for individual learning. This is evident for all teams in the study because they had formal opportunities for learning within their weekly literacy planning meetings and informal opportunities that arose during their lunch times or daily conversations. Each of the three teams in the study acknowledged learning from their teammates which would fall into the idea of learning within Vygotsky Space.

Glazer and Hannafin (2006) presented their thinking about a structure called collaborative apprenticeship, a model that has four progressive phases of professional learning: introduction, developmental, proficient, and mastery. Teachers in these phases
range from discussing and reflecting on teaching and learning experiences, implementing new learning, sharing experiences with peers, and finally, to becoming leaders for developing and designing new learning tools. From my observations, the teams from Everglades and Mesa Verde worked together to create and implement new learning applications. Specifically, the team from Mesa Verde had time each week to really dive into their instructional planning. This research finds that the team from Acadia did not have the collaborative time or structures in place for it to achieve that mastery level. In summary, I believe that time for collaboration, relationships, and collaborative structures all influence how teachers’ instruction is impacted by the collaborative practices of the team.

**Question 3 Findings: Team and Administrator Understanding of Collaboration and Professional Learning**

The final question I sought to answer during this study was how teacher teams and administrators understand the concept of collaboration in relation to professional learning. There was one pattern that emerged from each of the three teams and that was collaboration means working together to find what is best for the students.

**Working Together to Find What is Best**

When reflecting on the data from all of the interviews, one pattern emerged between all the teams when thinking about how teacher teams and administrators understand collaboration. Districts in the forefront of professional development promote “learning in context,” not just through workshops but through daily interactions in cultures designed for job-embedded learning. Capacity building is not just workshops and professional development for all. It is the daily habit of working together, and a
person cannot learn this from a workshop or course. A person needs to learn by doing it and having mechanisms for getting better at it on purpose (Fullan, 2005, p. 69).

The teachers on the teams reflected on the realization that their collaborative practices as a team when planning for literacy and their other subjects really are to find what works best for kids. Everyone comes with their own ideas and experiences; they have strong relationships and communication skills that allow them to feel comfortable to share their ideas; and then, as a group, they decide what will work best for that strategy, text, and group of students. The power of a group is immeasurable. A shared vision is not an idea; rather, it is a product of hard work, strategic thinking and planning, and shared beliefs and goals. “Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision. They create a sense of commonality that permeates the organization and gives coherence to diverse activities” (Senge, 1990, p. 192). Teachers also discussed feeling comfortable with the fact that their suggestions might not always get chosen but they know that going with what the group decides is best; having cohesion in their instruction is what will be the best and provide equitable education for the students.

**Concepts Unique to Teams**

There were not many clear patterns that emerged in terms of how teachers understand collaboration and professional learning, but there were a few that did stand out. As presented in chapter four, each of the teachers and administrators had valuable insights and thoughts about what collaboration meant to them. Teachers from Everglades Elementary mentioned collaboration as having a common goal, while teachers from Mesa Verde shared that reflection on students and the absence of isolation were how they understood collaboration.
When thinking about why there were fewer patterns that emerged in terms of understanding collaboration and professional learning, I will admit I was a bit surprised that more specific new instructional practices teachers had learned from their teammates did not surface in the interviews I conducted. I believe that everyone comes with their own unique experiences and perceptions that could lead to differences in opinion. For example, many of the teachers in this study were rather early on in their careers. PLCs had been in place in the district in this study for 11 years; therefore, only a few teachers who came from outside of the district or had started teaching in the district prior to the implementation of learning communities could share that teaching was isolated for them prior to PLCs. I also think the way the teams understand collaboration comes a lot from the routine of their collaborative practices. For example, as the team from Mesa Verde planned, there were multiple times throughout each observation when they would naturally reflect upon how the students had done with the strategy the previous time it was taught, or how they did with a graphic organizer so as to effectively plan what they wanted the students to do the following time. The team from Acadia would occasionally share thoughts they had about the students, but more of their meeting time was focused on sharing the parts of the plans that they each had prepared. I will not say whether either of those practices is right or wrong; it is just a different approach to collaboration and I think the team members got different professional learning opportunities out of each collaborative structure. In my opinion, the teams that are able to reflect on students as they plan for lessons and not feel so pressured to get through a planning template or agenda have more authentic conversations that can make a positive impact on their literacy instruction. Because the team from Mesa Verde had more time together, they
spoke in detail about how they were going to teach and how the students were performing. The time and agenda structure that allowed their team to have those quality conversations was valuable for the professional learning of the teachers on their team.

**Limitations of the Study**

As with any qualitative study, there were a number of limitations that could impact the results of this research. The first limitation is that, at the time of this study, I worked in the district in which the research was conducted. I also worked as a literacy coach at both Everglades and Acadia elementary schools. Even though it had been more than three years since I worked at either of those buildings, I still had relationships with a few of the teachers on each team that I felt led them to speak freely with me regarding their thoughts. Also, being an administrator in the district, I had a relationship with each of the administrators in the study and that may or may not have impacted their interviews. In the case of both the teachers and the administrators, we began with a specific set of questions, but I let the interviewee guide the conversations.

Another limitation of the study is that the schools and teams in the study were identified as highly functioning teams by a district administrator and then by the administrators at each building. The concepts and ideas that came out of the study may not be generalizable to all schools and teams. Also, the research was conducted in one large suburban school district. The context of the study may impact how generalizable the results are to other schools and districts.

**Further Research**

As one conducts research, it always seems to open up possibilities for further research and generates more questions to be answered than may have actually been asked
and answered in the study. One thought regarding future research is the idea of following how a team evolves over multiple years together. The teams in this study reinforced the importance of relationships and expressed discontent that they had either been split up from a team they felt was highly effective in years prior, or were about to be split up for the following school year. It would be valuable to see how a teacher’s instructional practices might be impacted if the teachers on the teams were able to build upon two years’ worth of relationships and collaborative structures.

Two other interesting perspectives to gather in terms of collaborative practices that were not addressed in this study would be getting data from two or more teams within the same building to see, for example, if their perspectives, organizational structures, and relationships are different even when held to similar expectations by the building administrator. The other interesting perspective to obtain would be that of a team that was not identified as highly functioning. I question what their collaborative structures, relationships, and communication practices look like and what they think creates the difference between a team identified as highly effective versus a team identified as struggling with their collaborative practices.

The role of the building administrator would also be a beneficial topic to explore further. This study left me wanting to see firsthand how the administrators set up their collaborative structures, how they hold teams accountable, and what their day-to-day interactions with teams look like in their effort to continue to promote highly collaborative practices. It would also be helpful to learn more about the training those administrators received in order to effectively implement and sustain professional learning communities within their schools. Also, as an administrator myself working in a
school to refine its learning community structures, it would be fascinating to follow the journey into collaborative learning teams from both the administrator and teacher points of view.

**Recommendations for Creating Professional Learning Teams**

Reflecting back and synthesizing all of the insights I gleaned from the interviews, observations, and artifacts of these three teams was an interesting process. There are some overall recommendations that I can make regarding teacher learning through professional learning teams that should serve as a guide for teachers within learning communities and for administrators implementing PLCs in their schools. These recommendations focus on team collaborative structures that include the role of a literacy coach or team leader, the role of the building administrator, and the relationships among team members.

These recommendations take the form of eight key ideas that surfaced from my research that I believe are difference makers when creating effective learning teams. The first key idea is having the time for teams to collaborate built into their schedule. The teams in this study all had their literacy plan time during the school day while their students were at music, art, physical education, or library. Team members did not have to find their own time to meet before or after school. I know from my experience that teams still do use their time before school, after school, or at lunch, but that is for additional collaboration, not for literacy planning.

The second key idea is that all of the teams should use some kind of planning template or agenda to guide their planning so as to effectively communicate with teachers who were not able to be at the meeting and to guide their instruction for the following
week. These agendas and templates that the teams in this study created together make the
expectations for instruction clear.

A third key idea that should be in place when creating a strong learning team is
having clear expectations for team structures, such as roles, norms, and expectations for
meeting preparation, that the team members establish at the start of the school year and
reflect on and refine as the year progresses. Each team in this study had clear
expectations that were decided upon and communicated as a team that helped team
planning to run efficiently. Each team had set structures that they had decided upon in
terms of their literacy planning meeting structure and how they would go about planning
for lessons. These structures were slightly different for each team, but it was decided
upon as a team at the start of the year so all team members were on the same page
concerning expectations.

A fourth key idea is ensuring clear communication; this important concept arose
from the research relating to the incorporation of team structures. Each team had
structures and expectations in place for communicating with one another and with their
support staff who could not be present at team planning meetings. This positively
impacted the cohesion in instruction that each of the teams experienced.

A fifth key idea is creating a way to reflect on student data is a must for
professional learning teams. Reflection on students was an important collaborative
structure that each team built into their work. Whether team members were reflecting on
common assessment data, graphic organizers, written responses, or their observations of
student performance, the students were a continuous part of their conversation, and it was
clear they were using what they learned from and about the students to drive their instructional planning.

A sixth key idea that stood out that I recommend is having a literacy coach or team leader of some kind to help facilitate the preparation for meetings, to be a resource to the team members, and to help with communication between the teams and the support teachers that cannot be present at team planning. The teams that had literacy coaches who were involved in the team meetings, preparation for meetings, and collaborative structures shared that they felt highly supported by their literacy coach not only in terms of team planning, but also with support when reflecting on individual student needs, or with needed support with instructional pieces.

The seventh background key idea that was implicitly woven throughout many of the patterns that emerged from this study is the importance of the leadership from the building administrator. The principal of the building is the person who sets the stage for these collaborative practices, and a strong leader with an understanding of what makes for a solid system of collaboration is imperative to professional learning. The building administrator creates the teams, establishes the schedule for planning and collaboration, sets the expectations, provides the time for collaboration, and sets the stage and environment for relationship building and collaborative practices. The high expectations and clear communication by the leadership of the building is the foundational base upon which teams launch their collaboration.

The eighth and final key idea is the relationships among the team members. I believe meaningful collaboration is not even possible without quality relationships among teammates. I realize that teammates do not need to be great friends and socialize outside
of school in order to have quality professional relationships. The teachers in this study who had been on less effective teams attributed some of that ineffectiveness to a closed mindset or personality issues among team members. Clear communication, the ability to feel comfortable asking questions and honestly reflecting on data, and the giving and taking of ideas all come from having an open, trusting relationship with the members of a team. Some of the teachers and administrators in this study reflected on ways relationships were established on their teams, but there was no one way that those relationships were established.

A resounding theme from this study was *similar but different*. There were many things each of the teams did the same way that made them effective in their collaborative practices; however, there were other things that some teams did differently. Whatever the choices and decisions, the important thing is that each team made it work for them. One thing I believe each team would not change is the collaboration they have with one another because the benefits to the students and teachers were clear. As education continues to shift for 21st century learning and teaching, working together to keep up with the changing demands will be key to the success of our schools.

*Everyone is special in their own way*
  *We make each other strong*
  *Were not the same*
  *Were different in a good way*
  *Together's where we belong*

— Gerrard and Nevil (2006)
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Teacher Interview Questions: Round 1

1) Tell me about your background/experience in education (i.e. Number of years in education, number of years at current school/position).
2) How long have you been working with your current team/how long has your current team been together?
3) How is team collaboration structured at your school?
4) Describe a typical literacy planning meeting for your team.
5) How do you know when a team meeting has been successful?
6) What are the benefits/limitations of team collaboration?
7) How do your team planning meetings influence or inform your next lessons or interactions with students?
8) Can you talk about any road blocks your team has encountered?
9) What was planning/teaching like for you prior to implementation of Professional learning communities?
10) What advice would you have for new professional learning teams?

Teacher Interview Questions: Round 2

1) When you reflect on the course of this year, how are your team planning meetings similar or different from the beginning of the year?
2) At this point in the year, what makes a team meeting more or less successful?
3) At this point in the year, what are the benefits/limitations of team collaboration?
4) What differences do you notice in your instruction after team planning meetings?
5) Can you talk about any road blocks your team has encountered since we last talked?
6) What, if any socio-emotional impacts of team collaboration within yourself or your team members?
7) How would you define collaboration?

Round 3 Interview Questions

1) When you reflect on the course of this year, can you share any specific way your instruction has changed as a result of working with your collaborative team?
2) Can you talk about any road blocks your team has encountered since we last talked?
3) What do you think makes a difference between the efforts of a successful learning team and an unsuccessful learning team?

4) Did your team learn anything from its collaborative practices this year that you would use moving into the next school year or your next learning team?

5) What do you see as the literacy coach’s role in your team planning meetings?

6) What does your preparation/work look like after the team meeting, prior to executing the instruction with your students?

7) Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences or thoughts on collaborative professional learning teams and its impact on literacy instructional practices?

**Administrator Interview Questions: Round 1**

1) Tell me about your background/experience in education (i.e. Number of years in education, number of years at current school/position).

2) How is team collaboration structured at your school?

3) Describe a typical literacy planning meeting for your teams.

4) What structures do you put in place to try to help your teacher teams be successful in their collaborative practices?

5) How do you know when a team meeting has been successful for your teachers?

6) What are the benefits/limitations of team collaboration?

7) How do you see team planning meetings influence or inform your teachers’ next lessons or interactions with students?

8) Can you talk about any road blocks your teams have encountered?

9) What was planning/teaching like in your experiences prior to implementation of Professional learning communities?

10) What advice would you have for new professional learning teams?

**Administrator Interview Questions Round 2**

1) When you reflect on the course of this year, how are your teacher teams’ planning meetings similar or different from the beginning of the year?

2) At this point in the year, how do you know a team meeting has been successful?

3) At this point in the year, what are the benefits/limitations of team collaboration?

4) After your team meetings, do you notice any changes in your teachers’ upcoming lessons or interactions with students?

5) Can you talk about any roadblocks your teams have encountered since we last talked?

6) What do you think makes a different between the efforts of a successful learning team and an unsuccessful learning team?
7) Did you or your teacher teams learn anything from its collaborative practices this year that you would use moving into the next school year or your next learning team?
8) How would you define collaboration?
9) Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences or thoughts on collaborative professional learning teams and its impact on literacy instructional practices?
Appendix B

Team Meeting Observation Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Location:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographics (team members years of experience, years the team has worked together, grade level):

Context of Meeting (focus, agenda items):

Materials (what materials are present at the meeting that the team members are using):

Other:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Actions observed (non-verbal and verbal)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# APPENDIX C

## Acadia Team Sample Planning Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC Team:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Unit 6 Week 5</th>
<th>Team Members Present:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### What We Are Teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st grade</th>
<th>2nd grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essential Outcome</td>
<td>Essential Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1R1.3: Describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.</td>
<td>1R1.3: Describe the connection between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can statement</td>
<td>I can think about people, events, ideas and explain how they are connected.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st grade</th>
<th>2nd grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared Reading: Informational</td>
<td>Shared Reading: Informational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Cool Jobs (Student Anthology Unit 6 pgs 290-291)</td>
<td>- Kil Inventions Then and Now (Student Anthology Unit 1 pgs 290-291)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The World of Insects (Student Anthology Unit 6 pgs 190-193) readings, diagram</td>
<td>- African American Inventors (Student Anthology Unit 6 pgs 252-262)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- So You Want to Be an Inventor (Read Aloud Anthology pgs 14-15)</td>
<td>- Be You Want to Be a Inventor (Read Aloud Anthology pgs 14-15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided Reading: Informational</td>
<td>Guided Reading: Informational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The Pilot (I)</td>
<td>- Telephones Then and Now (K)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The Architects (M)</td>
<td>- Gas Then and Now (M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Computers Then and Now (P)</td>
<td>- Computers Then and Now (P)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Word Work

### How We Are Teaching It

#### Graphic Organizer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st grade</th>
<th>2nd grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Monday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next: Cool jobs (250-297) (newspapers, photographs, captions)</td>
<td>Next: Kil Inventions Then and Now (pgs 290-291)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Introduces I can statement and graphic organizer. Throughout the year, we have thought about the ways the events like life to recycle plastic ideas (Ben Franklin’s inventions), and people the kids inventors. We read about all connected.</td>
<td>Introduction: Introduces I can statement and graphic organizer. Throughout the year, we have thought about the ways events like the life to recycle plastic ideas, and people we read about are connected. You are definitely experts as you are able to develop key questions. Identify key details in the text and think about how the ideas, events, or people are connected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycles</td>
<td>Cycles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As we developed our key questions, we have learned a couple strategies that might help think about the topic of life. Let’s talk to you about them.</td>
<td>As we read our key question will be: What job do they do?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

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APPENDIX D

Acadia Team Roles and Literacy Planning Agenda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team Members:</th>
<th>Laura, Marcie, Ellen, Literacy Coach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team Norms</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Speak with positive intent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Come prepared</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Stay on-task/topic- Stick to weekly agenda topics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Respect everyone’s opinions, ideas and work time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Be reflective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team Roles/Responsibilities</th>
<th>Literacy Coach</th>
<th>Ellen</th>
<th>Marcie</th>
<th>Laura</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meeting Leader</strong></td>
<td>Create meeting agenda, e-mail reminder to team</td>
<td>Lead out meeting agenda</td>
<td>Time Keeper</td>
<td>E-mail updates to staff members not present at meeting (plans, G.O changes or common assessment dates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Materials</strong></td>
<td>Gather text for Monday’s shared during Lit. Acceleration</td>
<td>Xerox and distribute lesson plans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HCDT, Respond to Reading, Anchor Charts &amp; G.O</strong></td>
<td>Bring copies of week’s G.O, HCDT, respond to reading &amp; or anchor charts for team.</td>
<td>Print common assessments (if needed)</td>
<td>Xerox materials for team when needed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common Assessment</strong></td>
<td>Find copies of CA</td>
<td>Look for district CA</td>
<td>Pull text for new CA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1st Grade Literacy Agenda continued

Team roles will rotate monthly
(Adjust roles as needed to best support team)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review Norms, New Roles &amp; Agenda</td>
<td>2 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any changes needed?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas for agenda structure/time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes of roles if needed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Planning</td>
<td>5-7 Minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assign plans to review for the following week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share changes made to plans for the next week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share Out</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share out Lit. Acceleration Text</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share out G.O., anchor chart, HCDT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share out CA information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Assessment</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next common assessment date</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull old common assessment for future team reflection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What date will team create?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Topics for Next Week’s Agenda
# APPENDIX E

**Everglades Team Sample Planning Template**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What We Are Teaching</th>
<th>2nd grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Essential Outcome</strong></td>
<td>RL.2.3 Describe how characters in the story respond to major events and challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I can statement</strong></td>
<td>I can identify and describe how the characters in the story respond to major events and challenges.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Materials** | Shared Reading: Literature  
- Pushing Up the Sky (Student Anthology Unit 6, p. 196-212)  
- Why Sun and Moon Live in the Sky (Student Anthology Unit 5, p. 196-197)  
- Guided Reading: Literature  
  - A: Sky Color (I)  
  - Q: Why the Sky is Far Away (H)  
  - S: Sky Seeds (P) |
| **Word Work** | |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How We Are Teaching it</th>
<th>2nd grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graphic Organizer</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pacing, Slipping Points, High Cognitive Demand Questions/Tasks</th>
<th>2nd grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Monday** | Text: Pushing Up the Sky (Student Anthology Unit 6, p. 196-212)  
Introduction: Introduce graphic organizer and I can statement. “Today we are going to read a play. A play is a story that can be acted out. This play is about the Shoshonis people who lived in a village in Washington a long time ago. The Shoshonis people are faced with a challenge and discover that they need to work together in order to respond to their challenge. Let’s read to find out how the village comes together to solve their problem.”  
Read through page 203.  
Think aloud: “The text says the sky is too close. I know that this is a challenge for the Shoshonis.” |
# APPENDIX F

## Everglades Team Meeting Agenda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Today's Agenda Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agenda</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Finalize planning unit 5 week 1 plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Discuss common language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Identify gradual release of responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Discuss common language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Determine High Cognitive Demand Question</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit 5 week 1 – teach the week of 3/7/14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RL.2.3</strong> Describe how characters in the story respond to major events and challenges.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**I Can Statement:** I can identify and describe how the characters in the story respond to major events and challenges.

**Things to Consider:**
- Literature text must be used; this is a two-week skill.
- We administered a Common Assessment last time, we taught this standard back at the beginning of the year in Unit 1 week 2.
- Do we need to adjust or change anything when teaching this standard again for the last two weeks of this school year?
- Teachers to give major event or problem for each group. Students should include page numbers after listing evidence on how character responds.
- Do the shared plans make sense? Do we need to adjust anything? Team adjusted plans to align with common understanding and clarity through the text. Team does not want to have too many stopping points that will chop up the flow of the text. Reduction of stopping points was needed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gradual Release of Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beginning of the week:</strong> teachers to provide major event or challenge, think aloud – finding a piece of character response evidence, turn &amp; talk – finding additional character response evidence; whole group discussion – identification of what character learned (within the text)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>End of the week:</strong> teachers to provide major event or challenge, turn &amp; talk finding character response evidence, turn &amp; talk – identification of what character learned (within the text)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character response:</strong> what the character does or says in reaction to the challenge or major event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character learned:</strong> what the specific character learned within the text based on his/her experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central message/lesson/moral/theme:</strong> what lesson can we apply to our own life based on what the character learned in the text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Cognitive Demand Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character Traits:</strong> What words could you use to describe the character? What evidence in the text supports your thinking?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Appendix G

## Mesa Verde Team Planning Template

### Shared Reading

#### What Are We Teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Celebrations</th>
<th>Spring Breaks around the corner. Students in A group are great writers--a lot of words per minute. J and S organization has improved.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

#### Notes

- 4th Grade Tuesday 3/14
- Common Assessment on Monday 3/18 during extra hour.

#### Essential Outcomes

**Content Objective:**
- I can identify the text structure of a paragraph, section, and/or entire informational text.

**Language Objective:**
- I can justify my thinking using a compound sentence.
  - Example: I know this is a cause and effect because the author said what happens when a tomato hits the ground and the how and why the tomato is eaten.

**Great readers:** readers because they understand the information by predicting what will come next and understanding how sentences and paragraphs are connected. (For example, if the author presents a problem, I can anticipate a solution that leads to a solution or proposed solutions.)

#### Shared Reading:

- Informational Nonfiction
  - At Work in the Coral Reef - Unit 4, p. 319-333
  - Coral Reef - Unit 4, p. 310-311
  - Iceberg, Rocking, Snowy, Coneys, Midge

#### Materials

- A Teacher's Guide
- A Teacher's Guide

#### Task 2

- Select a variety of topics (more than one sentence per topic)
- If necessary, model the same text structure as shared in class.
- Reduce supports to foster independence.
- Include CA practice for guided and practice in guided (2-3 questions daily)

#### Annotate

- Expose students to a variety of topics.
- CA practice in shared
- Interactive student helping answer questions
- Guided group-CA practice 1-2 questions (not daily)

#### Differentiation

- Some students may still need the teacher to provide stepping stones where the structure ends.
- Remove the text structure resource towards the second half of the week.
- 1-2 CA format questions to help students test format and text formation.

### Developing the Skill

Students should be noting organizational shifts on their own.

- Remove supports
- Remove based on data, include CA format questions with beyond/needs student

### Common Language

- Text Structures: way the details are organized within a paragraph, paragraph, paragraph, and/or page to page. Text structure is the "guide" that holds the details together.
- Text structure is a part of the sentence level. For example, a paragraph is a description and 1 sentence is a combination, that is not an organizational chart. The composition a text structure is own.

- Text structure resource on SharePoint
  - The signal words are in the last column because we noticed last year that the kids overwhelmed on signal words and didn’t understand the concept of the structure. Signal words can be used as a verification after determining the sentences are connected (e.g., I also know this sequence because the author uses the words list, then, and last.

### Overall of Main Text Structure (of a chapter, article, book)

The text structure the author mainly/historically

- Organizational shifts in the text structure changes.

### Text Structures - Refer to Resource on SharePoint

- Sequence: the author tells the order of events in a linear or chronological order. Focus on actions, not the chronological order.
- Comparison and contrast: the author lists similarities and differences between two or more topics.
- Cause and Effect: the author tells what happens (science, happened...), and why the author or event happened (inclusion).
- Problem & Solution: the author tells a problem (may have been the effect of a cause), followed by action steps (in sequential order) that solve a problem or help solve it (a solution).
- Description: the author describes the physical appearance, job, purpose/function, characteristics, features, qualities, properties, location, etc., of a topic.
- Hypothesis: something about the topic that distinguishes text from others.

Teach students to use a process of elimination for description. Only select description as the main text structure when the other structures have been eliminated.

Phrases: About 3-4 continuous words within sentences.
# APPENDIX H

School Coding Charts: Effective Collaboration in PLC Teams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept Discussed</th>
<th>Teacher Total</th>
<th>Admin Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agenda</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask questions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear communication</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear expectations (set by team or admin)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common assessment creation and reflection</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency in instruction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find solutions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to your colleagues</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy coach (resources, facilitation, internal meeting, guidance, differentiated based on team needs, resources, accountability)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials and resources</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No more isolation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms (commitments and agreements, revisit)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to/ Sharing new ideas</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation from all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Trust (that work will get done, follow through)</td>
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<td>Listen to your colleagues</td>
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<td>Literacy coach (communication, at meetings, prep prior to meetings, works with students, resources, share knowledge, internal meetings, individual help)</td>
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<td>Materials and resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open to sharing new ideas (willing to make changes)</td>
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<td>Ownership of all students at grade level</td>
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<td>Literacy coach (present at meetings, preparation ahead of time, materials, increase rigor, personal help, improves instruction, works with students, bridge between admin and team, support school vision)</td>
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<td>Relationship (fair responsibility, understanding personal issues or cli)</td>
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<td>Roles (shared responsibilities)</td>
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APPENDIX I

School Coding Charts: Barriers to Overcome

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<td>All team members present</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Feeling disconnected from team</td>
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<td>Giving up your ideas for others' ideas</td>
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<td>Lack of structure</td>
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<td>Larger teams</td>
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<tr>
<td>New teammates (change in teams)</td>
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<td>Off-topic conversations</td>
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<td>Personalities</td>
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<td>Relationships (tension)</td>
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<td>Same lessons each year (less conversation)</td>
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<td>Stress</td>
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<td>Unclear curriculun</td>
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<td>Understanding role on new team</td>
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### Everglades Elementary School

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<tr>
<td>Differing opinions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Efficiency in meetings</td>
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<td>Include all ideas in the plans</td>
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<td>Internal conflicts</td>
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<td>Larger teams (multigrade)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negativity (not open to new ideas or reflective)</td>
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<td>Fixed-mindsets (negativity)</td>
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<td>Internal conflict</td>
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<td>Lack of preparation for meetings</td>
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<td>Lack of respect among teammates</td>
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## APPENDIX J

School Coding Charts: PLCs and Impact Literacy Instruction

### School A

**Acadia Elementary School**

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<td>Planning lesson delivery (student engagement, meaning of standards, rigor)</td>
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### School B

**Everglades Elementary School**

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<td>Confidence in instruction</td>
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<td>Conversations that spark change</td>
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<td>Reflection on students</td>
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APPENDIX K

School Coding Charts: Teacher Understanding of Collaboration

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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused during meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving each other feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improving instruction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone giving and taking ideas respectfully (listen to your colleagues, everyone contributes)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for team meetings</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set time built into school day</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared knowledge</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing materials</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared workload</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-focused</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team productivity/efficiency</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Workwell as a team</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Everglades Elementary School</th>
<th>How do teachers understand collaboration?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concept Discussed</td>
<td>Teacher Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking Questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clear communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common goal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindset shift (mine time vs team time)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Putting in extra effort</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing ideas</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing materials</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-focused</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working together (to find what’s best), everyone contributes</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept Discussed</td>
<td>Teacher Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clear structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equitable education (consistency across teachers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Everyone contributes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guidance in objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honest communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Less stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mindset shift (time spent grading vs planning)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No more isolation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organized</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ownership of all kids</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning and preparing for instruction (shared workload, teach in-depth)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Putting yourself aside</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflect on student performance (data, student-focused)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared decision making</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing ideas, open-minded, learn from everyone, Working together (to find what's best, shared decision making, toward common goal)</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support system</td>
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</table>