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The Impact of Whole Faculty Study Groups and Peer Observations on the Professional Learning Community

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THE IMPACT OF WHOLE FACULTY STUDY GROUPS AND PEER OBSERVATIONS
ON THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Educational Leadership

by

Kelvin R. Adams

B.A. Northeast Louisiana University, 1978
M.S. Xavier University, 1991

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ABSTRACT

In an era of school reform, it should not be uncommon for educators to review every strategy or tool to initiate changes that will result in increased student achievement and school improvement. The rhetoric is that the changes begin with the federal government, state board of education, local school board, superintendent, and central office, but the reality is that the changes must begin at the doors of the school. In the school, the changes must begin with and become alive with learning among the staff, students, and the parents. The school staff must see themselves as a community of learners, where the entire school learns together.

The term used to describe a school where the faculty sees themselves as a community of learners is a “professional learning community” (Hord, 2004, p. 1). The purpose of this study was to determine how one school began the process of becoming a professional learning community through the implementation of whole faculty study groups and peer observation.

Professional learning communities do exist, but the manner in which they are created is nebulous. The practitioner-researcher sought to document the work of a senior high school staff as they underwent the process of implementing whole faculty study groups and peer observation. A questionnaire was given to the staff before, during, and after the implementation of peer observation and whole faculty study groups. A comparison was made of the results from the questionnaires over time. Critical incidents create the basis for an action research case study methodology. The critical incidents in this study were ascertained through focus groups.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Educators freely use terms like No Child Left Behind, high stakes testing, charter schools, and school vouchers on a regular basis. These terms have littered the educational reform landscape over the past decade with hope for significant school improvement; however, only modest changes have occurred at our local urban schools. Educational jargon has only helped to confuse the public and taken the much-needed spotlight away from the individual school site.

School principals are constantly being challenged to improve schools but the focus is more often than not away from the school site. Decisions that affect the school site are being made at the central office or by persons who are not directly associated with the school site. Our schools are desperately in need of changes, but the changes required are complex and difficult. Change cannot simply be made by a change in the staff or organizational structure. The change in structure of middle grade schools, for example, from sixth through eighth grade schools to kindergarten through eighth grade schools, does not solve the many and varied problems of urban middle schools. One can't simply change high school from a nine through twelve configuration to an eight through twelve configuration (New Orleans Public Schools, 2003). Does a kindergarten through third grade primary school provide a better educational program and environment than a kindergarten through first grade school? So-called agents of change are simply moving the players around but not reforming the educational institution.

Do we improve our schools by buying a new program? Programs like High Schools That Work (HSTW), First Things First (FTF), and the Talent Development High School (TDHS) are supposed to make the instructional program in high schools better. Do these models alone change our large high schools? Are students better for these programs? Has the instructional staff

changed? Yes, there are new requirements and mandates, but has the staff become a community of learners or simply learners of new initiatives? If teachers become learners of the next or new initiative, they will only learn the language and terminology of these initiatives. Teachers can not learn new programs or initiatives simply because they are required to learn for someone else's approval, rather than learning to become more adaptable and to create solutions to problems (O'Neil, 1995).

In 1990, Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Dimension: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* arrived in bookstores and began showing up in the boardrooms of corporate America. Senge (as cited in O'Neil, 1995) suggested that control mechanisms paralyze employees and leaders, allowing them only to maintain their organization as machines rather than reflecting trust in those across the organization to use their creativity in order to identify localized problems and generate plausible solutions. He advocated a different organizational structure, better suited to our complex, interdependent, and fast-changing society. Such an organization structure is oriented toward learning rather than controlling mechanisms.

Senge's (1990) work and views had their genesis in the organizational reform movement of the 1980s and 1990s. This reform movement had as a common theme the centrality of organizational culture. The organizational cultures that reflected the values of bigness, hierarchy, rigidity, and rules had to be replaced with cultures that stressed flexibility, responsiveness, individual empowerment, group empowerment, and customer service (Shafritz & Ott, 1996). The reformation movement grew out of two beliefs:

- The origination of the movement was born out of the fear that accompanied widespread realization in the 1970s that U.S. companies had lost their competitiveness, and

- Organizational effectiveness, competitiveness, flexibility, and responsiveness could be improved by changing the organizational culture.

(Shafritz & Ott, 1996)

The old command and control cultures had to be transformed to encourage and support the widespread use of employee participation and empowerment, as well as individuals organized into work teams (Shafritz & Ott, 1996).

For Senge (1990), change is learning, and learning is change – for people and organizations alike. Thus, Senge believes it is possible for organizations to change because “deep down we are all learners” (p. 24). He sought to destroy the illusion that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces. Once we give up this illusion, we can then build *learning organizations*, organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they really desire. Then, new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, collective aspiration is set free, and people are continually learning how to learn and work together (Senge, 1990). Hord (2004) was among the first to explore Senge’s paradigm in educational settings. She used the term *learning community* to refer to the organization culture that supports continuous improvement through shared leadership.

Background

In 1992, the staff from Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) studied a school they believed was markedly different in atmosphere and educational results from those around it. In that school they found “an organization that was vibrant with learning – among both students and teachers” (Hord, 2004, p. 1). The school staff saw themselves as a community of learners where the entire school learned together. Four years were invested to follow this school’s work and to learn from the results of the study (SEDL, 1995).

In 1995, SEDL staff began to consider how to enable other schools to work as a community of learners like their model school. They launched an inquiry into what they called a “community of continuous inquiry and improvement” (SEDL, p. 11). This is known today as a professional learning community. The first task was to conduct a literature review, which informed them that there were other schools flourishing through democratic leadership and ongoing professional development. A number of characteristics were identified within this type of learning community. They were collapsed to five major dimensions as follows:

- Supportive and shared leadership,
- Shared values and vision,
- Collective learning and application of that learning,
- Supportive conditions, and
- Shared personal practice.

(Hord, 2004)

As part of this project, SEDL sought to find at least one school in each state from their five-state region (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas) from 1995 through 1997 that exhibited the five dimensions of a professional learning community (Hord, 2004). They sought to learn from principals, teachers, and others who were connected to these schools to determine how they went about creating an environment that supported the five dimensions.

As the new principal of Marion Abramson Senior High School in New Orleans in Fall 2003 and a doctoral student in Educational Administration, I wanted to use the framework of the learning community to alter the environment of the school. I now see my first year as the principal of the school as a foundation to creating an environment that could support the deeper changes needed to create a professional learning community.

When I first arrived at Marion Abramson Senior High School after spending three years in the central office of the Orleans Parish School Board as the Executive Director of Middle Schools, I was confronted with a school that had awesome potential but was far from a professional learning community. The first two weeks were spent meeting with selected staff, community members, and students to ascertain their concerns and desires for the school. The four major concerns that were addressed in these meetings were overcrowding, poor student discipline, poor organization, and the challenge of implementing a new curriculum.

The first major concern overcrowding, was addressed through the registration process. I personally registered all new students for the incoming school year. I reviewed all of their records to determine if they were enrolled. Returning students who were 18 years old or older were not re-registered unless they had attained enough Carnegie credits to graduate. Authorization was requested and approved to limit enrollment to 1,620 students. I continued to personally approve all new registrations throughout my first year and into my second year.

The second concern, poor student discipline, was addressed by meeting with students in orientation sessions prior to the beginning of the school year. Students were required to sign student contracts that held them personally responsible for their behavior and the school dress code. Parents of ninth and tenth grade students were required to attend these sessions. Eleventh and twelfth grade parents were invited but not required to attend. Picture identification cards were issued to all students. Students were not allowed on campus until their ID pictures were taken.

The third concern of organization was addressed by requiring students to enter the campus through one entrance. They were searched and required to present their identification card and to dress properly. Students who arrived at school tardy 15 minutes or more were

required to remain in the cafeteria until the end of the first period. These students were detained and parents were notified of their tardiness. Two lunch periods were consolidated into one lunch period. This action prevented students from cutting class and reporting to both lunch sessions. Administrators and security personnel were posted throughout the day in strategic locations on the campus.

I addressed the fourth and last major concern with the implementation of Small Learning Communities (SLC). The creation of small learning communities required that some teachers had to change classrooms. While teachers were aware of the need to relocate, they were under the impression that this movement would not occur for another year. In my initial meeting with teachers, I indicated they would need to move, and I would provide the assistance needed to start the transition to another classroom. At the end of my first year, all lockers were removed from the first floor of the building and the entire first floor was painted. All doors were painted with different colors to designate the separate small learning communities. The gym and locker room were also painted. A new school sign was purchased by the parent-teacher association, and the foyer was painted and redesigned.

While these changes were important first steps in changing the school climate, none were focused on improving the teaching staff. In my second year, the school district required that professional development sessions be held twice a week during teachers' planning and preparation period. I felt it was important in these sessions to create an environment that supported a professional learning community. Building on the previous year's work, the present study sought to examine one technique that was used to create and sustain the developing professional learning community at Marion Abramson Senior High school during my second year.

Statement of the Problem

This action research study was conducted to document the development of whole faculty study groups and peer observations and their relationship to the development of a professional learning community at one senior high school. It is based on the work of Senge (1990) and Hard (2004), and uses the action research approach.

Theoretical Framework

For Peter Senge (1990, real learning gets to the heart of what it is to be human. Individuals become able to re-create themselves; however, this applied to organizations as well. Thus, for a “learning organization it is not enough to survive” (p. 14). “Survival learning” or what is more often termed “adaptive learning” (p. 14) is important – indeed it is necessary. But for a learning organization, “adaptive learning” must be joined by “generative learning” (p. 14), “learning that enhances our capacity to create” (p. 14). School personnel must be developed to function as professional learning communities to develop and sustain their capacity to create the type of school they desire (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

The dimension that distinguishes learning organizations from more traditional organizations is the mastery of certain basic disciplines or “component technologies” (Senge, 1990, p. 14). A “discipline” is viewed as a series of principles and practices that we study, master, and integrate into our lives. The five disciplines that Peter Senge identified were:

- Systems Thinking,
- Personal Mastery,
- Mental Models,

- Building Shared Vision, and
- Team Learning.

(Senge, 1990, p. 373)

Senge adds to this recognition that people are agents, able to act upon the structures and systems of which they are a part. All the disciplines are, in this way, “concerned with a shift of mind from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, and from reacting to the present to creating the future” (1990, p. 69).

The first discipline, systems thinking, is the conceptual cornerstone. It is the discipline that integrates the others. It fuses the other dimensions into a coherent body of theory and practice. It is defined as a body of knowledge and tools that help us see underlying patterns and how they can be changed. Educators have found that making changes in one part of the system has a ripple effect on the other parts. Systems thinking must become a part of a school’s culture in order to support systemic reform instead of tinkering with parts and pieces of the school organization (Fullan, 1991).

The second Senge (1990) discipline of personal mastery is the discipline of “continually clarifying and deepening of our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively” (p. 142). People with a high level of personal mastery live in a continual learning mode. They never “arrive.” Sometimes, language, such as the term “personal mastery” creates a misleading sense of definiteness, of black and white (p. 142). But personal mastery is not something one possesses. It is a process. It is a lifelong discipline. “People with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their intelligence and strengths as well as their ignorance, their incompetence, and their growth areas” (Senge 1990, p. 142). The

commitment of the members of the organization is directly linked to the organizational capacity for learning (Senge, 1990). The organization can not exceed individual commitment.

Senge's (1990) third discipline of mental models starts with "turning the mirror inward-- learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, bring them to the surface, and hold them rigorously to scrutiny. It also includes the ability to carry on meaningful conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others" (Senge 1990, p. 9). Reflection on one's practice especially reflective conversation with other professionals, is key to organizational growth.

The fourth Senge (1990) discipline of building shared vision underscores that when there is a genuine vision, as opposed to the all-too-familiar "vision statement," (Doda & Thompson, 2002, p. 3) that is normally not genuine, people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to. The literature on school reform is replete with phrases like "moral purpose," "collective responsibility," and "democratic principles," but rhetoric does not equal practice.

The final Senge discipline of team learning starts with dialogue, the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine "thinking together" (p. 10). "To the Greeks, *dia-logos* meant a free-flowing meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually.... [It] also involves learning how to recognize the patterns of interaction in teams that undermine learning" (p. 10).

There is clearly a relationship between Peter Senge's (1990) work on learning organizations and Shirley Hord's (2004) work at SEDL on professional learning communities. This relationship provides a perspective on the professional learning community that this researcher believes must exist in an effective school.

Conceptual Framework

Senge's (1990) work on organizational learning provides a set of powerful tools for building professional learning communities. These are the tools that provided a framework for Shirley Hord's work at SEDL on professional learning communities. Hord (1995) labeled the dimensions Supportive and Shared Leadership, Shared Values and Vision, Collective Learning and Application of Learning, Supportive Conditions, and Shared Personal Practice. She noted that the dimensions are not isolated, but intertwined. They are dependent on one another and each affects the other in a variety of ways.

Hord's (1995) five dimensions of professional learning communities provided a framework for my actions during my second year at Abramson. Hord found that Senge's notion of systems thinking could only come about when a school provided *supportive conditions*. Supportive conditions include the physical conditions and human capacity that encourage and sustain a collegial atmosphere and collective learning. For a school learning community to function productively, supportive conditions enable teachers to share leadership and practice this means that time for collective learning must be scheduled and protected.

The parallel dimension to Senge's (1990) personal mastery is for Hord (2004) *shared personal practice*, which involves the review of a teacher's behavior by colleagues and includes feedback and assistance to support individual and community improvement. Adults in the school must personally challenge their own assumptions about teaching and learning and must be willing to try new ways of doing things in order to increase learning opportunities for all students (Thompson, 2002).

Hord (2004) used the term *collective learning and application* to parallel Senge's dimension of mental models. Collective learning and application require that the school staff at

all levels are engaged in identifying problems, seeking new methods, and applying that new knowledge to address school needs. The changes needed in schools today will not come from administrators alone. Teachers must develop skills in talking about their own mental models and coming to agreement on collective mental models. To do so, they must develop skills in collaboration (Thompson, 2002).

Hord (2004) uses shared vision as her fourth dimension as does Senge (1990), but Hord adds the term values. For her, *shared vision and values* includes a real commitment to student learning that is consistently articulated and referenced in the staff's work. The leader alone cannot "give" the vision but must truly share it and support it once it is collaboratively developed.

Hord's (2004) final dimension, *supportive and shared leadership*, is loosely derived from Senge's (1990) team learning. It requires the collegial and facilitative participation of the principal who shares leadership – and thus, power and authority – by inviting staff input and action in decision making. The teams where teachers engage in dialogue about matters of mutual concern will reflect new levels of teacher interaction and lead to the creation of new and novel solutions to problems (Erb, 1997).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to document the relationship of whole faculty study groups and peer observations to the development of a professional learning community. Secondly, I sought to study how whole faculty study groups and peer observations affected the culture of the school.

Professional learning communities, or professional communities of learners, are those in which the teachers in a school and its administrators seek to share learning and act on what they

learn, for the purpose of improving their effectiveness as professionals so that students learn and benefit (Asunto, Clark, Read, McGree, & Fernandez, 1993). A mechanism or process must exist to create or continue the advancement of the professional learning community. I found through my readings that whole faculty study groups and peer observations are directly aligned to the challenges in creating professional learning communities.

Rationale for Interventions

Whole Faculty Study Groups

The first change introduced, whole faculty study groups, are a small group of school personnel joining together to increase their capacity through new learning opportunities for the benefits of students, themselves, and the school. When whole faculty study groups are created, they provide a mechanism for the integration of individual and institutional development through personal and group relationships, thus creating conditions where members can gain understanding and learn together (Lick, 2000).

Whole faculty study groups are teacher-centered, inspire reflection, give opportunity for experimentation, and motivate teachers to go beyond traditional boundaries and to construct new learning (Murphy & Lick, 1998). In whole faculty study groups, all members of the faculty are members of study groups. In their groups, teachers design their own learning agenda and implement their findings for the benefit of their students, themselves, and the school. The whole faculty must be committed to and involved in study groups, with each separate group having particular responsibility for valuable and necessary change efforts (Lick, 2000). The strengths of the whole faculty study group are precisely supportive of the professional learning community. One strength of the study group is that all members are expected to be leaders and that the success of the study group is measured in terms of collective energy, participation, and the

powerful synergy of the entire group (Murphy & Lick, 1998). The single goal of the professional learning community is a commitment by the faculty to supportive and shared leadership and a shared vision. This commitment must be known by everyone, must be agreed upon by everyone, and must be committed to by everyone (Breedson, 2003). This commitment to success is centered on student learning and achievement. The sheer nature of the whole faculty study group accomplishes this goal.

Another natural strength of whole faculty study groups is a requirement that the faculty and staff work collectively to analyze information about the whole school and its students. The faculty decide whether to focus on several categories of student needs or on one category and address different aspects of that need (Murphy & Lick, 2000). This is exactly what a professional learning community seeks to accomplish.

Peer Observation

The second change introduced, peer observation, involves faculty peers who review an instructor's performance through classroom observation and examination of instructional materials and course design. Observations of classroom behavior are intended for reviewing the teaching process and its possible relationship to learning. The focus of the observation is on the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of both the teacher and the students in the classroom (Svinicki, 2002). Observations are beginning to be viewed as a form of collaborative professional development. This kind of observation can yield its greatest benefits when used as a means of sharing instructional techniques, strategies, and ideologies between and among teachers (Israel, 2003). A great deal of trust is required to perform peer observations. Through practice and constructive dialog about their observations, staff begin to develop a level of trust that they would not otherwise develop without peer observations. A professional learning community

must create opportunities for staff to share their practices. This occurs naturally with peer observations.

Time as a Factor in Implementing Whole Faculty Study Groups and Peer Observation

One of the enemies of the professional learning community is time. Time needed for working together may conflict with district rules and regulations, parent and educator expectations, and collective bargaining agreements (Hord, 2004). These two variables, whole faculty study groups and peer observations, are efforts which must be supported by time. Providing time for study groups to meet and peers to meet for observations is a form of pressure. Allocating resources is a form of support. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) assert that it is increasingly clear that both pressure and support are necessary for successful change efforts that alter the fundamental ways in which an organization works. Whole faculty study groups and peer observations have the potential to fundamentally alter the existing structures of schools and the roles of teachers and administrators in those schools (Murphy & Lick, 2000). They force supportive conditions.

As an experienced principal but new to the high school environment, I was looking specifically at the development of actions and structures that enabled the school staff to identify a shared vision, learn together, make informed decisions collectively, and collaborate with peers in critically examining the quality of student work. The implementation of whole faculty study groups and peer observations was intended to develop actions and structures that support professional learning communities. Establishing a professional learning community within a school does not occur quickly or spontaneously. It requires the dedicated and intentional efforts of the administrator and the professional staff (Morrissey, 2004). The intentional efforts at my

school were whole faculty study groups and peer observations which could shift the school toward becoming a professional learning community.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer two major questions:

1. How does the development of whole faculty study groups and peer observations relate to the development of a professional learning community at Abramson?
2. How do whole faculty study groups and peer observations relate to the culture of the school?

Significance of the Study

The effectiveness of schools has been questioned by governmental, educational, and various private sector reports (Ryan, 1991). These independent reports highlight the abject failure of public schools. The failure of schools to produce literate graduates, the increasing student drop-out rates, and a declining economic system have led researchers to dissect the education system in search of explanations (Murphy, 1991). Schools in the United States are at a crossroad; federal and state legislation have established benchmarks intended to improve achievement for all students – including those who in the past were part of a routine failure cycle. Standardized testing will be one measure of whether or not the benchmarks have been met. In addition, an emphasis on raising achievement in subgroups of the student population, such as English language learners and special education students, will require a more comprehensive review of disaggregated data to ensure that all students are receiving the benefits of our educational system.

Most principals and teachers took their first step down the path to educating children because they wanted to make a difference in the lives of individual students by helping them

acquire an education. Unfortunately, that dream is not being realized by all of our students. Many schools have failed to understand and undertake the reforms that could have resulted in higher student achievement. I believe they have failed because they have not understood how to enact these reforms. Time is of the essence; each minute wasted means less time is spent addressing the needs of students not achieving at acceptable levels (NAASP, 2004).

This study is important because, very simply, schools must improve. If there is truly a relationship of whole faculty study groups and peer observations with professional learning communities, and ultimately with school improvement, I hope to document and share this information with educators and theorists.

In 1995, the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools published findings on 11,000 students in 820 secondary schools across the nation. In the schools that were described as professional learning communities, the achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds were smaller and students learned more, and, in the smaller high schools, learning was distributed more equitably (Hord, 2004). Whereas many attempts to improve schools dwell on monitoring adult behavior, controlling students, assuring student achievement, and teaching prescribed skills, the central question for a community of learners is not, “What should students, teachers, and principals know and do, and how do we get them to know and do it?” Instead the underlying question is, “Under what conditions will principal and student and teacher become serious, committed, sustained, lifelong, cooperative learners” (Barth, 1990, p. 45). This study is significant in that it will provide data and insight into whether and how this type of environment can be created in an urban senior high school with low test scores and poor discipline that has previously not had a professional learning community or school improvement culture.

Overview of Methodology

This study makes use of practical action research. In action research, the researcher is part of the study (Schmuck, 1997). Action research calls for educators to involve teachers in research to study concerns in their own school or classroom and to implement site-based committees in schools to make research an integral part of daily life (Creswell, 2002). Action research allows educators to test their own theories and explanations about learning, examine the effects of their practice, and explore the impact of their approach with parents, colleagues, and administrators within their school (Creswell, 2002). In this study, I collected data at my own school. Teachers were active participants in the research. Their actions became the cornerstone of the study.

I used several sources of data in this study. A survey of the faculty at a large urban high school was conducted using a questionnaire concerning teachers' perceptions of their school as a professional learning community. The School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire (SPSLCQ; Hord, 1996) was administered in December prior to the implementation of whole faculty study groups and peer observations. The same survey was given after the implementation of faculty study groups and given for a third time after peer observations. The second source of data was from a focus group interview. The interview was used to chronicle specific actions that were believed to facilitate change in the school culture, specifically how implementation of faculty study groups and peer observation were related to the movement of the school toward becoming a professional learning community. My own informal observations and conversations with faculty also shaped my thinking about professional learning communities.

Assumptions

One assumption of the study was that all respondents answered all survey questions honestly and to the best of their abilities without being influenced by the role of the researcher. It also was assumed that the respondents in the focus group interview were not unduly influenced by their professional relationship with the researcher.

Definitions of Terms

The definitions of the most commonly used terms in this study are as follows.

Whole faculty study group is a professional development approach that has all teachers on a faculty actively involved in study groups addressing student needs. The foundational question is “what do our students need us to do so that they can most effectively learn what they need to know?” Whole faculty study groups allow teachers the freedom and flexibility to explicate, invent, and evaluate practices that have the potential to meet the needs of students and the community they serve. The goal is to focus the entire school faculty on creating, implementing, and integrating effective teaching and learning practices into school programs that will result in a increased student learning and a decrease in negative behaviors of students (Murphy & Lick, 2000).

Peer observation involves faculty peers who review an instructor's performance through classroom observation and examination of instructional materials and course design. Observations of classroom behavior are intended for reviewing the teaching process and its possible relationship to learning. The focus is on verbal and nonverbal behaviors of both the instructor and the students in the classroom. Peer observation is a useful strategy through which a team can deepen its support for each member’s practice. In the ideal situation, every member of a team would have the opportunity to be observed and to observe others several times during the

course of the year. The goal of the observations and the meetings is to frame, discuss, and address particular issues and questions about teaching, offering specific feedback and support (Robbins, 1991).

Professional learning community is a group of learners with a common vision of what the school should accomplish and what type of environment it should have. The entire staff sees themselves as learning together. Teachers are innovative and encouraged to reflect on their practices. If conflict occurs, it is shared openly and resolved. Five key characteristics describe a professional learning community. These five themes are 1) supportive and shared leadership, 2) shared values and vision, 3) collective learning and application of that learning, 4) supportive conditions, and 5) shared personal practices (Hord, 2004). The School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire was used to identify and assess faculty perceptions about their school as a professional learning community (Hord, 1996).

Organization of the Study

Chapter One presented an overview of this study. Specifically, it has attempted to present the theoretical framework for understanding the study, a basic overview of the literature, the significance of studying professional learning community as it relates to peer observation and whole faculty study groups, researcher assumptions, and an overview of the design of the study. Chapter Two presents the complete literature review. Chapter Three focuses on the research design, methodology, and instrumentation, including reliability and validity issues. Chapter Four addresses the findings of the study and Chapter Five presents a discussion of the findings and conclusions, as well as implications for future research for policymakers or researchers.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review is divided into three sections: professional learning community, whole faculty study groups, and peer observation. Each construct is reviewed in terms of conceptual definitions and related empirical research.

Professional Learning Community

The concept of a professional learning community in schools has swept across the field of education like a prairie fire fanned by the winds of educational reform and school improvement. Dozens of scholars and practitioners have used the metaphor of community to describe the link between professional learning, student achievement, and school improvement. There is no shortage of interpretations, descriptions, and definitions of the concept of professional learning community in the literature. Bredeson (2003, p. 41) cited several authors' descriptions of learning community:

- Coral Mitchell and Larry Sackney -- A learning community consists of a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward both the mysteries and the problems of teaching and learning.
- Roland Barth -- All teachers and administrators can learn. These words will become a reality when we transform the schoolhouse into a community of learners, a culture of adaptability, continuous experimentation and invention.
- Michelle Collay, Dianne Dunlap, Walter Enole and George W. Gagnon Jr. -- Learning circles are small communities of learners among teachers and others

who come together intentionally for the purpose of supporting each other in the process of learning.

- Thomas Sergiovanni--A community is a group of people who share certain purposes, values, and beliefs, who feel a strong sense of place, and think of the welfare of the group as being more important than that of the individual.
- Ernest Boyer --The school becomes a community for learning when it is a purposeful place, a just place, a disciplined place, a caring place, and a celebrative place.
- Peter Senge--A professional learning community is one that continually expands its capacities to adjust to new realities, create new structures and processes that move people and the organization to higher levels of performance.

These definitions of professional learning community seek to make clear and distinct its meaning, but only give us a perspective of the term based on the authors' experiences and understandings. The definitions do not settle the question of "What is a professional learning community and how does one emerge?" To further remove some ambiguity or misunderstanding created by the variety of definitions of a professional learning community, a review of the characteristics and the necessary conduct and habits of the people who work within them is examined.

Hord's (1997) literature on the professional learning community lists five attributes of these organizational structures: supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of that learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. These dimensions were defined in Chapter I but are described below with a focus on the people and habits within professional learning communities.

Supportive and Shared Leadership

In the early 1950s, supporters and reformers of public education focused firmly on the central administration of local systems. School boards and superintendents were seen as the most effective agents for change, and the school district was considered the appropriate unit for analysis and reform. In the decades that followed, attention shifted to the all-powerful federal government, and then to the individual states, believing that they were the best agencies situated to improve local schools. The assumption was that these centralized agencies had enough money, the right sort of staff, the moral authority, or more and better ideas. The principal was viewed as a middle manager, responsible for taking the plans of those outside the school and ensuring compliance by those within the school (Barth, 1990).

Today, school change and educational leadership literature clearly recognizes the role and influence of the campus administrator on whether change will occur in the school. Transforming a school organization into a learning community can only be done with the clear sanction of the school leader (Hord, 1997). Barth (1990, p. 64) captures the principal role particularly well: “Show me a good school, and I’ll show you a good principal.”

Attention in recent years has shifted to the school principal because an able principal has the ability to create conditions that bring out the best from students, teachers, and parents, most of the time. Principals can arrange the school’s collection of unique needs and resources so that everyone gets what is needed. Principals also have the capacity to stimulate both learning and community (Barth, 1990). Thus, a look at the principal of a school whose staff is a professional learning community seems to be a good starting point for describing what these learning communities look like and how the principal learns to share leadership, power, and decision making.

Leaders matter. What leaders think and do and how they interact with others has a profound effect on the level of performance of the organization in which they work. Leaders' influence comes not from power to direct behavior but from a wide-ranging set of behaviors that "perturb" (Sparks, 2001, p. 37) the system and focus the organization on achieving its highest purpose. Only the leader has this unique ability. Change is always personal, so leadership is about feelings, commitment, and, most importantly, relationships, as much as it is about altering specific processes or practices (Fullan, 2001). Fullan argues that because significant change often involves feelings of loss, anxiety, and struggle, the importance of addressing the human dimensions in the change process cannot be overemphasized. Significant changes in schools begin with significant changes in what leaders think, say, and do. Change in thought begins with deep understanding of important issues and adoption of beliefs. Deep understanding typically requires that we elaborate our learning through processes such as discussion, writing, applications in real-life situations, teaching the subject to others, and reflecting on the results of actions. A change in beliefs requires placing ourselves in situations that produce cognitive dissonance (Sparks, 1997).

The message to principals that is particularly confusing is the area of leadership styles. On the one hand, the importance of the principal serving as a strong instructional leader has almost become a cliché. On the other hand, there are increasing calls for principals to delegate, collaborate, and empower others to make decisions (Lezotte, 1997; Lieberman, 1995). What are principals to do? They must move beyond the cookie cutter traditional roles to a role that includes actively sharing leadership. In order for principals to share leadership effectively, there must be a high level of trust among all stakeholders who are involved in the school. Before teachers and other staff members commit their time and energy to learn new practices, they must

trust their administrator and school system to provide the opportunities necessary for them to become confident users of the new knowledge (Hord, 2004).

There is a natural level of conflict and tension that exists for principals as they seek to share leadership and move beyond the traditional model of principalship. Ackerman, Donaldson, and Van Der Bogert (1996) indicate two fundamental values that help make the most of the tension of school leadership. The first of these is trust in community; the second of these is trust in oneself as a leader. Tension exists in the uncomfortable coexistence of differing philosophies, values, interests, and personalities. Schools thrive when they honor these differences.

Schools where people learn from one another are schools that foster trust, open inquiry, and democratic ideas. The principal must trust in the school community's collective judgment and authority to resolve its own questions and problems. This is very difficult when they have not been trained to trust the school community. Trust is engendered by helping others discuss and decide who should have responsibility and authority in matters pertaining to students and programs. A more precise definition of trust, drawn from Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (1998) comprehensive review of the literature, includes four key components commonly used to measure trustworthiness. The four components are:

1. Benevolence: Having confidence that another party has one's best interests at heart and will protect those interests is a key ingredient of trust.
2. Reliability: The extent to which individuals can depend upon another party to come through for them, to act consistently, and to follow through.
3. Competence: Similar to reliability, competence has to do with belief in another party's ability to perform the tasks required by his or her position. For example, if a

principal means well but lacks necessary leadership skills, he or she is not likely to be trusted to do the job.

4. Honesty: A person's integrity, character, and authenticity are all dimensions of trust.

The degree to which a person can be counted on to represent situations fairly makes a huge difference in whether or not he or she is trusted by others in the school community.

The notion of trust is critical to the development of the school as a professional learning community. Every effort must be made by the principal to foster and develop this valuable and necessary component in a school. Trust remains a difficult quantity to measure, let alone link causally to concrete outcomes such as scores on standardized tests.

The new relationship forged between administrators and teachers leads to shared and collegial leadership in the school, where all grow professionally and learn to view themselves as "all playing on the same team and working toward the same goal: a better school" (Hoerr, 1996 p 96).

In examining the characteristics of struggling schools that have made significant gains, researchers have verified what most educators already knew to be true --- the quality of the relationships within a school community makes a difference. Again, this relationship cannot be developed without the open leadership of the principal. In schools that are improving, where trust and cooperative adult efforts are strong, students report that they feel safe, sense that teachers care about them, and experience greater academic challenge. In contrast, in schools with flat or declining test scores, teachers are more likely to state that they do not trust one another (Sebring & Bryk, 2000). Relationships among teachers and principals, in particular, are being held out as important indicators of a school's or district's readiness for reform and ability to sustain it. The

U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive School Reform Program (CSR), for example, emphasizes that if improvement efforts are to be successful over the long term, school leaders must first build a solid foundation for school-wide reform (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). For a school community to work well, it must achieve agreement in each role relationship in terms of the understandings held about personal obligations and expectations of others (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Louis and Kruse (1995) identified the supportive leadership of principals as one of the necessary human resources for restructuring staff into school-based professional communities. The authors referred to these principals as "post-heroic leaders who do not view themselves as the architects of school effectiveness" (p. 234). Prestine (1993) defined the characteristics of principals in schools that undertook school restructuring as a willingness to share authority, the capacity to facilitate the work of staff, and the ability to participate without dominating.

Sergiovanni (1994, p. 214) explained that "the sources of authority for leadership are embedded in shared ideas," not in the power of position. Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, and Snyder (1996) asserted that it is also important that principals believe that teachers have the capacity to respond to the needs of students, and that this belief "provides moral strength for principals to meet difficult political and educational challenges along the way" (p. 19). Senge (as cited by O'Neil, 1995, p. 19) adds "that the principal's job is to create an environment in which the staff can learn continuously."

When the staff is fully involved in the decision-making processes of the school, administrators pose questions, delegate authority, create collaborative decision-making processes, and provide the staff with the information, training, and guidance they need to make good decisions. School improvement is then viewed as a collective and collaborative

responsibility of the entire school community (Professional Learning Community Continuum Rubric, 2003).

Shared Values and Vision

A true learning community is identified by a collective commitment to principles and beliefs that guide long-range plans and day-to-day learning of all its members. These principles and beliefs were best described by Ackerman, Donaldson, and Van Der Bogert (1996). They listed four basic values that support the professional learning community: 1) modeling democracy, 2) creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, 3) nurturing healthier relationships, and 4) meeting the leader's needs. The authors asserted that schools were founded on democratic principles and, as such, need to reflect those principles in how adults interact and how children learn. Specifically, teachers should engage in participatory decision making in an open, respectful manner. Further, they should teach students to be critical thinkers, to be respectful of one another, and to take responsibility for the good of all.

With regard to creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, Ackerman, Donaldson, and Van Der Bogert (1996) found that teachers in schools in which practices are open feel greater commitment and experience decreased isolation. The authors also contended that school relationships are healthier when doors are open and students have greater freedom of movement. Finally, Ackerman et al. warned principals that they had to attend to their own needs in order to best serve their schools. Building community within the school helps principals meet their needs for inclusion while also relieving them of some responsibility.

The tensions that surface in a school day are more creatively and effectively resolved when adults work together as a healthy community with shared values. In a learning environment with shared values, many of these tensions never really surface for schools. When values are

sustained in a professional learning community, the values of the school are embedded in the school culture. These shared values are evident to new staff and to those outside of the school. They influence policies, procedures, and daily practices of the school as well as day-to-day decisions of individual staff members.

Building a shared vision and a collective commitment to act in ways that advance that vision and commitment are two of the most important responsibilities in learning communities. When teachers have reached consensus on the questions, "what do we want our school to become," and "what are we prepared to do to get it there," principals can exercise a "loose-tight" leadership (Dufour, 2003, p. 33). They can be "loose" on strategies to promote the vision, but must be "tight" on upholding the vision and requiring commitment to it. Principals can then begin to provide staff with a sense of direction by promoting and protecting shared vision and collective commitment rather than emphasizing rules or resorting to the authority of the position to control the work of staff.

“Vision is a trite term these days, and at various times it refers to mission, purpose, goals, objectives, or a sheet of paper posted near the principal’s office” (Issacson & Baumberg, 1992, p. 42). The *sine qua non* of a learning community is shared understandings and common values. A learning community is separated from an ordinary school in that it has the collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create. These guiding principles are not just articulated by those in positions of leadership but more importantly, they are embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Louis and Kruse (1995) maintained that a core characteristic of the vision must be an undeviating focus on student learning in which each student’s potential achievement is carefully

considered. These shared values and vision lead to binding norms of behavior that the staff supports. These binding norms in essence create the climate and culture for a professional learning community. Barth (1990) indicated there are three reasons to restore, uncover, and honor the vision of school people. First, there are bound to be commonly held beliefs among staff members. Visions formulated around these beliefs have the best chance to be effectively implemented. Second, according to Barth, researchers typically gather limited data on large samples, “frequently with all the effect of a tea bag swished through a bathtub” (Barth, 1990, p. 142). But the school visions are based on rich and deep insights formulated over many years of practice. Vision cannot be researched into existence. Finally, teachers and principals receive considerable satisfaction from sharing their vision and skills.

Many researchers are finding a consistent relationship between the presence of teachers’ and principals’ visions and effectiveness of their schools. Lipstiz (1984, p. 216), for instance, concluded that, “Extracting effective school practices from one setting and replicating them elsewhere may make a bad school better. To become a good school requires a change in vision from within.” After extensive observation of eight very good and very different elementary school principals, Blumberg and Greenfield (1980) concluded that one characteristic shared by all of them was that they had a vision for their schools that was noble, realistic, and clear.

One definition of school is “four walls surrounding a future” (Barth, 1990, p. 42). This image captures the essence of what school improvement means. The character, culture, and quality of schools will dramatically improve when, and if, those who work in schools develop a positive relationship, come in touch with one another and their personal vision, and with the way they would like their schools to be, and then take deliberate steps to move toward it. This is

school improvement emerging from within the four walls of the schoolhouse. According to Barth (1990), visions come from within us – or they don't come at all.

When the vision is sustained in a professional learning community, staff members routinely articulate the major principles of the shared vision and use those principles to guide their day-to-day efforts and decisions. They honestly assess the current reality in their school and continually seek effective strategies for reducing the discrepancies between the conditions described in the vision statement and their current reality.

Collective Learning and Application

People from different and multiple constituencies at all levels who collaboratively and collectively work together can create and demonstrate a learning community (Louis & Kruse, 1995). They work together in collaborative teams that engage in collective inquiry into both best practices for accomplishing their aims and the current reality of the conditions in their organization (Dufour, 2003). Such collaborative work is grounded in what Newmann (cited in Brandt, 1995) and Louis and Kruse label reflective dialogue, or inquiry in which staff conduct conversations about students, teaching, and learning, and identify related issues and problems.

Donaldson (2001) notes “collaboration and teamwork are more likely to occur around students, curriculum, and the improvement of their own teaching than around the more global challenges facing the school as a whole” (p. 79). Collaboration is viewed by researchers and advocates of school reform as the key to complete and lasting school improvement (Barth, 1999; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Sizer, 1984). According to Goodlad (1984), American teachers feel that their work is more satisfying when they are involved in problem solving that influences teaching and school-wide decisions.

Collaboration develops over time and with trust, and becomes the way in which a school operates. Unfortunately, in schools that endorse the idea of collaboration, the staff's willingness to collaborate often stops at the classroom door. Some school staffs equate the term collaboration with congeniality and focus on building group camaraderie. Other staffs join forces to develop consensus on operational procedures, such as how they will respond to tardiness or supervise recess. Still others organize themselves into committees to oversee different facets of the school's operation, such as discipline, technology, and social climate. Each of these activities can serve a useful purpose, but none represents the kind of professional dialogue that can transform a school into a professional learning community.

The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systemic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement (Dufour, 2004). Rosenholtz (1989) found a reciprocal relationship between teacher collaboration and teacher certainty (efficacy). This means that the greater the collaboration, the stronger teachers' efficacy, which then circles back to strengthen their collaborative efforts. Low-efficacy teachers, who used only routine instructional practice, believed that low-achieving students were simply not smart enough to learn. Routine practices were defined as existing in non-collaborative settings. Those embedded in more collaborative cultures were more likely to define students' learning potential as alterable and indeterminate. In conclusion, Rosenholtz (1989) argued that when collaborative norms in achievement-oriented groups yield more creativity and collective knowledge that is more fruitful than any one person's success when working alone. In other

words, collaborative settings stress norms of continuous school- and self-renewal. Thus, improvement in teaching is a collective rather than an individual enterprise.

Participants in reflection and learning conversations apply new ideas and information to problem solving and are therefore able to create new conditions for students, whether it is through establishing a new curriculum, revising instructional practices, or stepping up instruction and expectations. The key to the importance of this inquiry is that it is a continuous, ongoing process that focuses on students and their benefits. Collective inquiry and learning allow a staff to develop in ways that can produce the kinds of changes necessary for increased student learning and school improvement. Staff spend time assessing whether they have been effective and decide what they need to learn to become more effective in their efforts to help students become successful learners (Hord, 2004).

Principals must recognize that a collaborative culture is essential to a learning community, but inviting people to collaborate will not create such a culture. Principals must develop structures and strategies that systematically embed collaboration into the daily life of the school. They must help each learning team develop effective working relationships by facilitating the development of protocols for how members will operate with one another (DuFour, 1999). School leaders shape the conversation's space within their circles of influence and they can have tremendous influence on teachers' mental models and the collective meaning regarding innovation and change held by those with whom they work (Sparks, 2004). "How we converse with one another is fundamental to the way we work together, the decisions we make, and the results we create," write Ellinor and Gerard (1998, p. 59).

Leaders must replace assumptions that limit the potential of teachers and students with others that support them, affirm high expectations, and provide guidance for action. When

teachers learn to reflect on and discuss their experiences, they begin to question old assumptions and require that leaders take actions to create change (Sparks, 2004).

Sparks (2004) regards the specialized form of conversation known as dialogue as one of the most effective conversation modes in affecting underlying beliefs and assumptions. Ross, Smith, and Roberts (1994) identify this dialogue as public reflection--members of the team talk about their assumptions and beliefs and challenge each other gently but relentlessly. “I particularly value conversations which are meetings on the borderline of what I understand and what I don’t, with people who are different from my self,” (p. 216) observed Zeldin (2000). He believes a new type of conversation that provides awareness of choices and inspires courage can transform the person. Zeldin tells us, “Ordinary people can make big changes by improving the way they relate to each other in daily life” (p. 99).

Barth (2001) also advocates conversation. “Conversation has the capacity to promote reflection, to create and exchange craft knowledge, and to help improve the organization. Schools, I’m afraid, deal more in meetings – in talking at – than in conversation” (p. 68). Senge (1990) believes dialogue is the form of conversation that is most likely to transform mental models and behavior. Dialogue is most effective when teachers suspend assumptions, make their views open to influence, and see one another as colleagues in a quest for deeper understanding and clarity.

Dufour (1999) proposed that people in a true professional learning community are relentless in questioning the status quo, seeking new methods, testing those methods, and then reflecting on the results. Not only do they have an acute sense of curiosity and openness to new possibilities, they also recognize that the process of searching for answers is more important than

having an answer. Ross, Smith, and Roberts (1994) referred to the collective inquiry process as "the team learning wheel" (p. 50) and identified four steps in that process:

1. Public reflections: members of the team talk about their assumptions and beliefs and challenge each other gently but relentlessly.
2. Shared meaning: the team arrives at common ground, shared insights.
3. Joint Planning: the team designs action steps, an initiative to test their shared insights.
4. Coordinated action: the team carries out the action plan. This action need not be joint action but can be carried out independently by the members of the team.

After Step 4, the team analyzes the results of its actions and repeats the four-step cycle.

This process enables team members to benefit from what Senge et al. (1994) called "the deep learning cycle ... the essence of the learning organization" (p. 18). This collective inquiry enables the team members to develop new skills and capabilities, which in turn lead to new experiences and awareness. Gradually, the heightened awareness is incorporated into fundamental shifts in attitudes and beliefs. Ultimately, it is this ability to examine and modify beliefs that enables team members to view the world differently and make significant changes in the culture of the organization. When collective inquiry is sustained, staffs are fully involved in the decision-making processes of the school. When administrators pose questions, delegate authority, create collaborative decision-making processes, and provide staff with the information, training, and parameters they need to make good decisions, then and only then will school improvement be viewed as the collective responsibility of the entire staff (Hord, 1997).

Supportive Conditions

Several kinds of factors determine when, where, and how the staff can regularly come together as a unit to do the learning, decision making, problem solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community. In order for learning communities to function productively, the physical or structural conditions and the human qualities and capacity of people

involved must be optimal (Boyd, 1992; Louis & Kruse, 1995). The supportive conditions referred to are separated into two distinct factors: physical factors and human resources.

Physical factors. Louis and Kruse (1995) identified the following physical factors that support learning communities: time to meet and talk, small school size and physical proximity of the staff to one another, interdependent teaching roles, well-developed communication structures, school autonomy, and teacher empowerment. Boyd (1992) presented a similar list of physical factors that result in an environment that is conducive to school change and improvement: the availability of resources; schedules, and structures that reduce isolation; and policies that encourage greater autonomy, foster collaboration, enhance effective communication, and provide staff development.

Some studies point to physical changes in the workplace as a key factor to successful organizational learning. Schedules and assignments should allow time for collective inquiry. Joyce and Calhoun (1996) argued that significant reform is “nearly impossible” (p. 44) in a typical school workplace; at best, people will move forward individually but they will be unable to form a learning community. Without time for teachers to work and reflect, they cannot cause significant change. Some schools, using dismissal one afternoon a week, have been able to clear out significant blocks of time. Time must be reclaimed for teachers to reflect and discuss if we want school culture to be different (Wheatley, 2002).

As is true with other aspects of public education, the arrangement of the school day is deeply entwined with tradition. In addition, lack of time and other resources serve as convenient excuses to deflect responsibility and rationalize inaction. Aldelman (1998) concludes, “Time or the lack of it is often a barrier, an excuse, a scapegoat and a defense for everyone not to change” (p. 98).

Collective inquiry may be strengthened by more democratic forms of governance. Joyce and Calhoun (1996) advocated the formation of “responsible parties” to lead the school community in improvement efforts. The responsible parties, composed of administrators, teachers, parents, and community members, would not be acting in their traditional parliamentary decision-making role, but would act as advocates for extended inquiry (Lashway, 1998). These people would be responsible for forcing exposure of participants’ assumptions and sharing multiple perspectives that open the way to collective learning. A whole-faculty study group can be one such “responsible party.”

Human resources. Individuals in a productive learning community must be willing to accept feedback and work together toward improvement (Louis & Kruse, 1995). The primary role of building relationships between principals and teachers, among the teachers, and between teachers and students is crucial to the learning environment. The quality of such relationships in a school is an indicator of the learning environment (Taylor, 2002). True learning communities have a pervasive philosophy and belief system that can inform staff member selection in two ways. First, a collaborative recruitment and selection process can enhance existing relationships and improve the school climate. Second, it makes sense to hire professionals who can emulate the philosophy and beliefs that support the learning community concept (Taylor, 2002). These two processes can affect the new teacher. Finally, for experienced teachers, learning communities are committed to continuous improvement; therefore, quality professional development relevant to the school’s unique needs must be used to enhance staff members’ skills and commit them to improvement.

Shared Personal Practice

In a professional learning environment, review of teacher practice is commonplace (Louis & Kruse, 1995). This practice is not evaluative but is part of the “peers helping peers” process. In this practice, teachers regularly visit one another’s classrooms to observe, script notes, and discuss their observations. This process is based on the desire for individual and community improvement and is enabled by the mutual respect and trustworthiness of staff members (Hord, 1997). Just as most school reform efforts seek to provide an appropriate learning environment for students, they must provide such an environment for teachers as well. Teachers also need “an environment that values and supports hard work, the acceptance of challenging tasks, risk taking, and the promotion of growth” (Midgley & Wood, 1993, p. 252). Reviewing another teacher's behavior is the norm in the professional learning community. Barth (1990) says, as teachers observe each other and discuss practices, good teachers get better and bad teachers can’t hide.

Whole Faculty Study Group

In December 1986, Murphy, Murphy, Joyce, and Showers had their first conversation about how to increase student achievement through staff development (Murphy & Lick, 2000). The first decision they made was that their work would involve the whole school. They would not offer a staff development program at the district level where teachers from different schools would volunteer to enroll. The program instead would be offered to whole faculties, and every teacher in these schools would participate in all phases of the program. They required that all teachers vote to participate. According to Murphy and Lick, this understanding of whole faculty participation became the central feature of what is today called the whole faculty study group approach.

Organizing school personnel into small study groups to promote collegial interaction is not a new idea. Individuals have formed such groups since the beginning of time. The study group concept is an important approach to learning. Although teachers working together in small groups is common, organizing the entire school faculty into study groups to bring about school-wide improvement is unusual.

Whole-faculty study group is a term used when each faculty member at a given school is a member of a study group. In this context, a study group is a small number of individuals joining together to increase their capacities through new learning for the direct benefit of students. These study groups not only develop a specific focus for their group but also an organizational focus for their school (Murphy & Lick, 2000). Members of a study group might study a book or formal course together, review research relating to a common aspect of their work, or explore new curricula and teaching methods. Professional study groups provide an instrument to integrate individual and school development through personal and group relationships, creating conditions where members can gain understanding (Lick, 2000).

According to Murphy and Lick (2000), whole faculty study groups seek to create conditions for the staff to gain understanding in six different ways. First, teachers talking to one another helps them to improve their skills. The deeper understanding required to teach a subject is enhanced by sharing knowledge about the topic. According to Blythe (1998), understanding a topic sufficiently to teach it requires that one can do a variety of thought-provoking exercises with the topic. These might include explaining, finding evidence, generalizing, applying, and analyzing.

A second benefit of whole faculty study groups is that they support the implementation of curricular and instructional innovations. When teachers hear others talk about how they perform

certain tasks, they learn new skills, increase confidence in their own ability, and are more likely to implement the new learning (Murphy & Lick, 2000).

Murphy and Lick (2000) cite as a third advantage of whole faculty study groups the articulation of a school's various programs and practices. Because faculty discuss how programs are similar or dissimilar and their various research bases, they are more likely to reject the new and glitzy program in favor of the research-proven method. There is greater likelihood of creating coherence among programs.

A fourth benefit of whole faculty study groups is that teachers become familiar with the research on teaching and learning. They find that teaching is not so personal an endeavor that teachers cannot learn new methods from one another. Instead, they become more open to new ideas and less isolated. When teachers become more open in their practice, they also start monitoring the effects of their teaching on students' learning. Using data to monitor student learning is the fifth benefit of whole faculty study groups found by Murphy and Lick (2000). The sixth benefit they cite is the provision of time to examine student work. Through the students' work, teachers can see their own work.

Each of these six characteristics of whole faculty study groups has inherent benefits, but each also places new demands on faculty and administrators. Finding time in an already busy school day is perhaps one of the greatest challenges. As earlier noted, however, the excuse of lack of time can also be one of the greatest deflectors of responsibility. Finding the balance is crucial. Getting teachers to overcome the initial fear of exposing their practice is also difficult. But the study group process focuses the administration's and faculty's attention on imperative changes, prepares faculty and administrators to be effective change agents, produces a powerful, broad-based advocacy for innovation, and increases the change-adaptability level of all

stakeholders. The study group process establishes new school norms including research and improvement, and changes the school and educational culture, allowing for the critical re-examination of basic assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors (Murphy & Lick, 1999).

Peer Observation

Peer observation involves faculty peers who review an instructor's performance through classroom observation and examination of instructional materials and course design. These observations of classroom behavior are used to review the teaching process and its relationship to learning (Svinicki & Lewis, 2000). The teacher who invites another teacher in is referred to as “the inviting teacher” (Robbins, 1991, p. 2) and steers the process. The inviting teacher identifies the focus of the observation, the form of data collection, and guidelines for the inviting teacher in the classroom during the observation. The role of the observer teacher is to provide specific feedback on some aspect of teaching that has been chosen in advance by the observed teacher (Acheson & Gail, 1997). The feedback is in the form of objective data that have been recorded by the observer and which the observed teacher reflects upon during a post-observation conference. The observer offers insights only if the observed teacher is insistent in the post-observation conference. Judgmental statements on the part of the observer lead to a failure of trust between the two teachers and must be avoided (Munson, 1998).

Peer observations are preferred according to one study, because the emphasis is observation, not evaluation which makes teachers uncomfortable (Strother, 1989). Most teachers do not like the typical classroom observation process and may react in a variety of ways--with anxiety, fear, and even hostility. Teachers normally view observation by an administrator as evaluative of their performance and possibly negative. Professional advice in these types of observation is often rejected or ignored (Munson, 1998). Research has demonstrated that new teachers involved in a

mentoring program that includes peer observations are more likely to remain in the teaching profession four years beyond that of teachers not involved in the program (Odell & Ferraro, 1992).

Teaching is rooted in a tradition of isolation. From the original one-room schoolhouse to the current large high school structures, the physical characteristics of schools impose barriers to communication (Glickman, 1990). Despite years of collective expertise in individual schools, teachers rarely tap the expertise of their colleagues (Robbins, 1991). Robbins provides a compelling rationale for peer observation. It reduces isolation, creates collaborative norms, celebrates individual work while allowing teachers to learn from one another, promotes the transfer of new skills, makes staff development more meaningful, and provides needed time for reflection.

Research and practice suggest that teaching involves a constant stream of decisions (Jackson, 1968) made before, during, and after teaching. With this rapid-paced reality of classroom life, teachers rarely have time to reflect. Yet reflection time is precisely what teachers need to gain new insights about teaching and learning. It provides not only the time but also the opportunity for colleagues to discuss those reflections.

Peer observations are one tool to help reduce teachers' isolation, create a collegial and professional environment in the school, provide a forum for problem solving, and promote the transfer of skills from training sessions to the workplace. These observations have the potential to enable teachers to learn from and with one another, and to reflect on crucial aspects of their practice (Little, 1985).

There is no one right approach to peer observation, but it is most successful when the teacher and observer work together and reflect on the teaching behavior (Israel, 2003). Teacher

observation is least successful when the observer spends hours watching without analysis or dialogue with the teacher (Israel, 2003). In-classroom peer observation involves colleagues working together around the observation of teaching. In these instances, there is generally a pre-conference, an observation, and a post conference (Robbins, 1991). The cognitive coaching approach (Costa & Garmston, 1990) offers a useful model. The model includes the following activities:

- The pre-observation conference: The visiting teacher meets with the inviting teacher to discuss what will be observed and what questions will be answered. The approximate time is 20 minutes.
- The observation or classroom visit: The visiting teacher spends about 30-40 minutes making observations and taking notes related to the questions agreed upon.
- The post-observation conference or the debriefing conference: The visiting teacher spends about 40-50 minutes sharing his or her observations, asking questions, and making constructive suggestions.

Peer observation should be a voluntary activity. When mandated, it runs the risk of becoming what Hargreaves (1989) has appropriately labeled “contrived collegiality” (p. 56). Hargreaves defines contrived collegiality as “an activity that forces unwanted contacts among unconsenting adults, consuming already scarce time” (as cited in Robbins, 1991, p. 27). It is imperative that the commodity of time is not further wasted in another activity perceived by teachers as an ineffective mandate.

School Culture

When we implement professional learning communities by developing whole faculty study groups and peer observations, we hope to change the culture of the school. The culture is

defined in many ways, such as the unwritten expectations and norms that influence how people think, feel, and act, as well as all the decisions of the school community (Peterson, 2002); a pattern of basic assumptions that has worked well enough to be shared with new members as the correct way to do something (Schein, 1985); the shared beliefs and values that knit a community together (Deal and Kennedy, 1982); the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors which characterize a school (Phillips, 1993); shared experiences both in school and out of school (traditions and celebrations), a sense of community, of family and team, and the learned patterns of unconscious thought manifested in the organization (Wagner, 1999).

Regardless of the definition, culture must be changed to support a professional learning community. Professional learning communities are schools where the leaders intentionally shaped the culture and acted to ensure that all faculty members -- adults and students -- are learners. Teachers and other community members are addressing challenges and issues, particularly those related to student learning (Taylor, 2002). School culture is extremely important because healthy and sound school cultures correlate strongly with increased student achievement and motivation, and with teacher productivity and satisfaction (Stolp & Smith, 1994). Coyle and Witcher (1992) said that culture is one of the most important components of school effectiveness. An examination of school culture is important because, as Goodlad (1984) points out, "...alike as schools may be in many ways, each school has an ambience (or culture) of its own and, further, its ambience may suggest to the careful observer useful approaches to making it a better school" (p. 81).

Krueger and Parish (1982) studied five districts implementing and then discontinuing programs, and postulated that the key to program implementation and continuation is "the interactive relationships that teachers have worked out together regarding 'how we gets things

done here' " (p. 133). Depending upon how well leaders understand and use this notion, culture can assist school improvement efforts for at-risk students, or act as a barrier to change (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Krueger & Parish, 1982; Patterson, Purkey, & Parker, 1986; Sarason, 1982).

Cultural Norms that Facilitate School Improvement

Researchers have found particular cultural norms that can facilitate school improvement. In her study of nine primary schools in Belgium, Staessens (1991) found that a school culture with these norms was instrumental in the school's ability to sustain school improvement. Norms such as introspection, collegiality, and a shared sense of purpose, vision, and collegiality, combine to create a culture that supports innovation.

Introspection

Saphier and King (1985) noted that good schools have a belief that any school has areas of strength and weakness. This belief helps to create openness to accepting and changing imperfections, suggesting that the school has high expectations for itself and the capacity to improve. Barth (1991) believes, based on his experience, that the most important change to bring to schools is the cultural norm of continuous adaptability, experimentation, and invention. Everyone in the culture must be free and willing to express ideas they view as counter to the group norms (Sarason, 1982).

Druian and Butler (1987) reviewed the literature on effective schools and practices that work for at-risk students. They found that successful programs do not suppress criticism but instead provide a positive and constructive atmosphere in which criticism can occur. A barrier to the norm of continuous improvement is the silencing of criticism by schools, which contributes to resistance to change and the dropout problem, according to Fine (1991). Howe (1987; p. 44)

found the "hidden curriculum" of silence to underlie the structure of the school and emphasize conformity.

Shared Vision

A norm of protecting what is important evolves from a shared vision of what beliefs are important. Researchers have found that sharing a common vision increases the likelihood that school improvement efforts will succeed (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Carlson, 1987; Deal, 1985; Lewis & Miles; Norris & Reigeluth, 1991; Schlechty & Cole, 1991). A shared vision among students, faculty, parents, and the external community is a feature of schools in which all students are most likely to succeed academically. If this shared sense of purpose exists, members of the school community are able to articulate what constitutes good performance in a precise and consistent way. Without a shared vision, students, teachers, administrators, and parents do not know what is expected of them (Smey-Richman, 1991). A shared vision helps point out what is important to develop and protect in the school.

A shared vision is one to which many people are truly committed because it reflects their own personal vision. A vision that is not consistent with values by which people live continuously will fail to inspire and often will foster cynicism (Senge, 1990). Miles (cited in Fullan, 1991) found that vision involves two dimensions: "The first dimension is what the school could look like; [this vision] provides the direction and driving power for change, and the criteria for steering and choosing...The second [dimension] is a vision of the change process: What will be the general game plan or strategy for getting there?" (p. 82). Both dimensions of the vision are both sharable and shared.

Collegiality

Just as the attitudes and beliefs of persons both inside and outside the school environment affect change and the norms of the school, relationships between persons and groups of persons are part of the school culture that can either facilitate or impede change. The relationships teachers have with each other, their students, and the community affect change. In the same way, the relationships between students and their peers, teachers, and the school as a whole can help or hurt school improvement efforts (Boyd, 2002).

Developing collaborative work cultures helps reduce the professional isolation of teachers, allows the sharing of successful practices, and provides support. Collaboration raises morale, enthusiasm, and the teachers' sense of efficacy, and makes teachers more receptive to new ideas (Fullan, 1991; Simpson, 1990; Smith & Scott, 1990).

Collegiality which, according to Barth (1990), is frequently confused with congeniality is difficult to establish in schools. Little (1982) describes collegiality as a norm exhibited through four specific practices of the adults within schools: 1) talking about their professional practice; 2) observing one another in the practice of teaching and administration; 3) engaging together in work on curriculum by planning, designing, researching, and evaluating; and 4) teaching one another what they know about teaching, learning, and leading.

Barth (1990) suggests that a number of desirable outcomes are associated with collegiality. These include better decisions, greater implementation of decisions, higher levels of trust and morale among staff, and even greater motivation and achievement of students. Collegial relationships facilitate change because change involves learning to do something new, and interaction is the primary basis for social learning. New meanings, new behaviors, new skills, and new beliefs greatly depend on whether teachers are working as isolated individuals

(Goodlad, 1984; Sarason, 1982) or are exchanging ideas, support, and positive feelings about their work (Fullan, 1991). Deal and Kennedy (1982) reinforce the idea that those interested in change must be aware that peer group consensus will be the major influence on acceptance or willingness to change. People will change more readily as a result of a desire to have personal relationships with others.

The opposite of collegiality is faculty factions undermining efforts to successfully implement change by sidetracking, stalling, or stopping the change process (Corbett, Dawson, & Firestone, 1984). Collegiality is needed by those who hope to initiate change. Schlechty and Cole (1991) note that the ways in which changes are introduced may breed rivalry among teachers. Therefore, an important leadership responsibility of leaders who work within the cultural perspective is supporting collegial interactions between teachers (Sergiovanni & Corbally, 1986).

Summary

Fullan (1992) notes that developing collaborative work cultures to help the staff deal with school improvement efforts is a major responsibility of the principal. He asserts that "the message for both the school and district is captured in Schein's (1985) observation: 'The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture'" (p. 20). An additional challenge for principals is that they are also part of the culture of the school through their attitudes and relationships with others. People follow how they act and respond. The principal's contribution to program implementation lies in giving moral support to the staff and in creating a culture that gives the project "legitimacy" rather than in "how to do it" advice (Sarason, 1982, p. 77). Teachers need the sanction of their principal to the extent that the principal is the "gatekeeper of change" (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975, p. 20).

As a new high school principal, I attempted to create and manage a culture of continuous improvement through the development of a professional learning community. Two specific mechanisms for such change were whole faculty study groups and peer observations. The literature on both culture and professional learning communities supports these approaches.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

I employed action research to address the development of a professional learning community at the senior high school to which I was assigned as principal. I attempt to describe how we attempted to move from the laissez-faire structure I found when I arrived to a professional learning community. My intended outcome was a professional learning environment composed of staff and administrators who are committed to working together to learn and change the school. The mechanisms I chose for achieving this outcome were whole faculty study groups and peer observations.

Research Questions

The purpose of this action research study was to document my attempt to create a professional learning community at one large urban high school. Two strategies I implemented during this process were whole faculty study groups and peer observation. Observed changes in the culture of the school also were documented. The overarching research questions were:

- Does the implementation of whole faculty study groups and peer observations appear to be related to movement toward becoming a professional learning community?
- Do whole faculty study groups and peer observations appear to affect the culture of the school?

Research Design

Action research is one of those terms that we hear quite often in today's education circles. Typically, action research is undertaken in a school setting. It is a reflective process that allows for inquiry and discussion as components of the research (Ferrance, 2000). The linking of the

terms ‘action’ and ‘research’ highlights the essential features of this method--trying out ideas in practice as a means of increasing knowledge about and/or improving curriculum, teaching, and learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982).

Lewin is credited with coining the phrase “action research” to describe work that did not separate the investigation from the action needed to solve the problem” (Mc Farland & Stansell, 1993, p. 14). His process was cyclical, “involving a non-linear pattern of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on the changes in the social situations” (Nofflke & Stevenson, 1995, p. 2). While the concept of action research can be traced back to the early works of John Dewey in the 1920s and Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, it was Stephen Corey and others at Teachers College of Columbia University who introduced the term action research to the educational community in 1949 (Johnson, 1993). Corey believed that the value of action research is in the change that occurs in everyday practice and the generalization to a broader audience. He saw the need for teachers and researchers to work together. However, in the 1950s, action research was attacked as unscientific, little more than common sense, and the work of amateurs (Mc Farland & Stansell, 1993, p. 15). Interest in action research declined over the next few years as true experimental designs and quantitative data collection became the norm for research (Ferrance, 2000).

Action research is again becoming visible today and increasingly becoming a tool for school reform for its very individual approach to educational change (Ferrance, 2000). Action research is an approach that has proven very attractive to educators because it is directed towards greater understanding of the phenomenon under study as well as improved practice (Bell, 1987). Action research is not finished when the research project ends; action research projects most often continue as the data are reported (Cohen & Manion, 1981). This type of school research

expands the researcher's role as inquirer about teaching and learning through systematic school research (Cooper, 1990). The approach is naturalistic, generally using participant-observation techniques of ethnographic research, collaborative, and typical of case study methodology (Belanger, 1992).

There were two specific processes used in this study that, according to the literature, could have possible beneficial effects on the development of the professional learning community. The first was the whole faculty study group and the second was peer observation. I sought to explore the possible linkage between these two processes and the development of a professional learning community using action research methods.

Participants

The accessible population for this study consisted of all teachers in one large urban senior high school. The school was staffed with 78 teachers, 3 administrators, and 4 counselors. There were 34 (43.6%) male teachers and 44 (56.4%) female teachers. There were 45 (57.7%) African American teachers and 32 (41.0%) Caucasian teachers. The sample might be considered a non-probability or convenience sampling in which participants are selected because they are willing and available to be studied (Creswell, 2002). However, this is consistent with how participants are selected in action research studies, Twenty-five teachers (32%) had less than two years of teaching experience. Sixteen teachers (20%) were new to Marion Abramson Senior High school.

Instrumentation

The School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire (SPSLCQ ; Hord, 1997) was used to measure the relationship of whole faculty study groups and peer observations to the perceptions of the faculty of their school as a professional learning community. The first administration of the instrument occurred in December. The second administration of the

instrument occurred in February after the implementation of whole faculty study groups, and the third administration occurred in March after the implementation of peer observations.

School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire

The *School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire (SPSLCQ)* was designed to assess the existing degree of implementation of the components of a professional learning community in operation in a school staff (Hall & Hord, 1987; Hord, 1997; Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987). The instrument is recommended for use as a screening, filtering, or assessment tool to ascertain the maturity of staffs as a learning community. The instrument consists of 17 items in a 5-choice Likert format.

Reliability. Hord (1997) demonstrated adequate internal consistency and stability reliability of the instrument. The alpha reliability coefficient was .94 for the total instrument and ranged from .62 to .95 for the sub-scales. The stability or test-retest reliability coefficient was computed with a sub-sample of four high school faculties. Problems in administration yielded a very small sample ($n = 23$), but the coefficient of .61 was deemed adequate.

Validity analyses. Validity analyses consisted of three types -- content, concurrent, and construct (two methods). Content validity was established by a review of the business/corporate literature (Hord, 1997) and field research with schools that functioned as professional learning communities. Items were checked by a team of experts who made minor revisions, and then the author rechecked them. Concurrent validity was assessed through correlation ($r = .75$; $p < .001$) with a school climate instrument.

Construct validity – whether the instrument actually measures the construct called "professional learning community"—was assessed by comparing the scores of teachers in a school that were known to be functioning as a professional learning community with scores of a

general population of teachers. The scores of the teachers in the school that were known to be a learning community were statistically higher than those of the general population. Given these results, Hord, Meehan, Orletsky, and Sattes (1997) concluded that the instrument is a valid and reliable measure of professional learning communities.

Focus Group

The focus group consisted of participants being interviewed regarding their perception of the school culture. The face-to-face interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interview was audio-taped for transcription purposes.

Part of the design of action research is that it allows for researcher bias to emerge. Also, because the researcher was the school principal, teachers might have felt that they could not give negative feedback. To help alleviate this problem, I assured the participants that any information provided would not negatively harm them or hurt their current or future employment. I tried to help them see how they could benefit from the opportunity to openly reflect on and critically analyze their experiences. Their participation was entirely voluntary and they were given the option to terminate participation at any time without any threat of consequences.

The names of all participants were kept confidential at all times. Only I as Project Director and my dissertation advisor had access to full copies of the interview data. The content of the conversation was confidential although identity could not be protected from disclosure by other group members. Audiotapes were transcribed by a reputable, well-established transcription service that promised to offer confidential, professional services. Pseudonyms were used when referring to participants in writing.

The purpose of the focus group was two-fold. First, it would help to determine the extent to which peer observations and whole faculty study groups were implemented in the school. This

assured that the implementation was as intended. Second, it would help to validate the findings of this study by comparison with the data collected from the SPSLCQ.

Focus group questions concerned the elements of school culture and the level of implementation of whole faculty study groups and peer observation. The central interview question was “what is the culture of the school like now and how has it changed over the course of the school year?” Elements of effective school culture and questions about implementation of whole faculty study groups and peer observation were used as probes. The follow-up questions about culture included:

- How are problems identified and addressed in the school? Is debate encouraged?
- What is your vision for the school and how has it changed?
- Describe the relationships within the school and whether they have changed.

Questions regarding implementation were:

- What types of classroom observations occurred during the school year and did that differ from past years?
- Who participated in faculty study groups and how often? What specifically did the groups do?

Procedure

The Dissertation Committee, headed by the researcher’s major professor, Peggy Kirby, approved this action research study. Next, the researcher secured permission from the University of New Orleans’ Human Subjects Committee (see Appendix A) prior to conducting the study. In the Fall semester of 2004, the researcher provided the Abramson faculty with an introductory letter and the SPSLCQ. All teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire. Respondents also were asked to indicate their years of experience as teachers in the profession and in the school.

The ranges of years were coded as 0-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12, and 13 and up. Teachers were asked to complete the SPSLCQ again in February and March 2005. To protect teacher identity, they were told not to give their names on the forms so scores were not matched by individuals from one administration to the next.

Whole faculty study groups were implemented in the Fall of 2004. The senior high school teachers were required by the school district to meet for 45 to 60 minutes during their planning and preparation period every Tuesday and Thursday. Teachers who had a common planning period were in the same faculty study group. I, two curriculum coaches, a staff developer, and four academy leaders led the whole faculty study group sessions. The focus of the sessions was data analysis, book study, peer observations, small learning community, academic walk throughs, and any other subject introduced by the faculty that focused on the improvement of student achievement.

Peer observation was introduced in three steps. First, teachers reviewed the research on peer observations during whole faculty study group sessions. They then developed an observation form which included items they believed to be important. Their first observations used these forms in “walk-about” observations during their planning periods. They were asked to visit two other classrooms during their planning periods and fill out the forms. In study groups, teachers discussed how they benefited from performing observations in their colleagues’ classes. The second peer observation opportunity was at other schools. Teachers conducted classroom observations in two other high schools then shared their findings with the rest of the faculty. The third step was the requirement that teachers perform one formal peer observation in March 2005. Teachers selected the teachers they would observe, but the researcher determined the focus of these peer observations and the questions. This deviated from the research in that there were no

pre-observation and post-observation conferences. The researcher found two barriers to requiring the pre- and post-observation conferences. Teachers already were pressed by competing demands for their time and they did not seem to have a firm enough grasp of the skills required to implement these components.

The focus group interview was conducted with teachers in March 2005. According to Gay and Airasian (2003), interviews have a unique purpose, namely, to acquire data not obtainable in any other way. There are certain things, which simply cannot be observed or quantified, including (but not limited to) past events, events which occur outside of the researcher's sphere of observation, and mental processes. Interviewing more than one person at a time sometimes proves very useful. Some people need company to be emboldened to talk, and some topics are better discussed by a small group of people who know one another. The questions used in these focus group interviews were structured but open-ended. This is one form of interviewing used in a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2002). It is designed to give the participants a feeling of exploring the subject and to elicit answers that build upon previous statements of respondents. The interview sessions were intended to take on the appearance of a conversation with a purpose (Kahn & Cannell; 1957, Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The questions presume neither neutrality nor objectivity, but instead reveal the researcher's personal interest in the subject as well as the overall project (Mishler, 1986).

Implementation Fidelity

Because this study concerned the introduction of two new interventions, it was critical to document the implementation of the interventions. Research demonstrates that successful implementation is not guaranteed by a site's decision to adopt a best practices program. Many programs have been adopted in different settings with varying outcomes. In fact, a high quality

implementation of a poor program may be more effective than a low quality implementation of a best practice program (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Czeh, 2000). In order to demonstrate the degree to which whole faculty study groups were implemented, selected academic leaders were asked to summarize each meeting and review agendas. Each whole faculty study group designated an academy leader to document what happened in each meeting. They were selected by the whole faculty study group members. In order to demonstrate the degree to which peer observations were implemented, samples of observation forms and the number of times teachers observed one another were documented and filed. Degree of implementation also was assessed through the focus group interview.

Data Analysis

The data from the SPSLCQ was scored using a mean for each dimension of professional learning community and an overall mean for each questionnaire. Data were aggregated to the school level and descriptive statistics reported for questionnaires for the three administrations. Because the SPSLCQ was completed anonymously by the teachers, the researcher could not match the responses from one administration to the next as would be required to analyze the results from a repeated measures perspective. Therefore, an independent samples *t*-test was used to compare the three sets of results to determine whether progress was made in creating a professional learning community. The independent variable was the order of administration—first, second, or third.

The focus group interview was recorded and transcribed. All data were coded in one of three valiative categories: positive, negative, or neutral with regard to the central elements of school culture (introspection, vision, and collegiality). Supporting evidence was recorded in a matrix under the valiative category. For example, if a teacher said that she felt that her voice was

dismissed as too controversial, her comment was recorded under the dimension “introspection” and with a negative value. Data not related to these issues were coded separately using emerging themes. These findings were compared to the quantitative results from the SPSLCQ to strengthen the validity of the study conclusions.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings that emerged as a result of action research regarding how teachers' perceptions about whether faculty study groups and peer observations influenced the climate and culture of a school to create a professional learning community. Findings in this chapter are based on data collected through a focus group interview, notes, the professional learning community survey (SPSLCQ), observations and agendas from whole faculty study groups, summaries of peer observations, and summaries of whole faculty study groups. Participants' words are used as much as possible from the focus group session, the summaries, the whole faculty study groups, and peer observations in presenting the teachers perceptions. Participants' profiles providing detailed descriptions of the individuals who took part in the focus groups are included to assist the reader in formulating a mental image of each participant. To ensure confidentiality, aliases are used and generic descriptions of classroom settings are included in the focus group profiles. The data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed manually.

The following descriptions include 1) how the interventions, whole faculty study groups and peer observations, progressed over the period of study, and 2) what effects the interventions were perceived to have on participants. The outcomes were ascertained through focus group interviews and the administration of the School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire.

Whole Faculty Study Group Implementation and Progress

In August 2004, the superintendent of schools in the New Orleans Public School district, Anthony Amato, implemented or continued the implementation of three instructional models in

all senior high schools. The models were Talent Development High Schools (Kemple & Herlihy, 2005), High Schools That Work (Brady & Dykman, 2003), and First Things First (Quint, Byndloss & Melamus, 2005), Marion Abramson Senior High School followed the Talent Development High School model.

A Talent Development High School was designed to break down the faculty into smaller learning communities. These communities were designed to focus teacher attention on a smaller group of students. The model required that teachers meet three hours a week during the time designated as planning times (Orleans School Board Agenda, December 2004). These meetings were to be led by the principal, staff developer, curriculum coaches, or the academy leader. The school day was divided into four 90-minute periods. Teachers had a 90-minute planning period each day.

Key Players

I was the school principal and researcher in this project. The two curriculum coaches, staff developer, and four academy leaders became actively involved in what would become the whole faculty study group sessions. The curriculum coaches were two teachers assigned to our school by the school district to assist mathematics and English teachers and to assist in the implementation of the district's new instructional model. They were former teachers with over 20 years of classroom experience. One was African-American and the other Caucasian; both were female. The school's staff developer was an African-American female with ten years of experience as a teacher. She was responsible for managing the Title I budget, completing the School Improvement Plan, securing grants, and scheduling professional development workshops. This was her third year in the position. The academy leaders were four African-American female teachers with two planning periods. The additional planning period was used to schedule

meetings with teachers in their academy, meet with business partners, secure internships for students, meet with the principal, and plan for meetings with teachers in their academy.

Introduction of Whole Faculty Study Groups

As principal and researcher, I introduced whole faculty study groups to Marion Abramson to help create an environment that empowered the staff to take ownership of their school. Teachers met in the library for 45 to 60 minutes every Tuesday and Thursday during their planning period. These meetings were initially led by the principal. Tuesdays and Thursdays were selected because Mondays and Fridays were days with lower teacher attendance. Wednesdays could not be utilized because an advisory period for students modified the normal schedule.

On the second Tuesday only of each month, students were dismissed two hours early and the entire faculty met to address district concerns or directives. These meetings were called professional development sessions and were not identified as whole faculty study group sessions.

Teachers were required in the whole faculty study group sessions to sign in at each session, but they were not initially required to bring any items to the meetings. They were supplied with snacks, juice, and coffee as refreshments. These meetings were mandatory and teachers were only excused if they were required to substitute the class of an absent teacher. The implementation and progress of the meetings are discussed below in two-month intervals because the purpose and structure of the meetings changed throughout the school year.

September-October

Twelve whole faculty study group sessions were held in September and October. In nine of the sessions, the principal led the group. In the remaining three sessions, the staff developer

and the curriculum coaches led the groups. Two days were professional development sessions and one day was used for report card conferences.

The first four whole faculty study group sessions in September were directed at understanding the components of teams. The Tuesday sessions were led by the principal/researcher but the Thursday sessions were led by the curriculum coaches. Teaming activities were the focus of the sessions and teachers were involved in discussing how effective teams functioned. Team spirit and ten steps to effective teaming were some of the topics addressed in the sessions. Teachers also were involved in learning various instructional strategies. Teachers were told that they would select topics for future sessions and would be responsible for leading those sessions.

The fifth and sixth sessions were devoted to school district mandates. I led the session on Tuesday and the curriculum coaches led the Thursday session.

In mid-October I felt the faculty understood what we were seeking to accomplish in the whole faculty study group sessions. At that time, a book study was introduced by the staff developer to assist the faculty in collectively focusing their efforts. The book, entitled *Becoming a Successful Urban Teacher* by Dave F. Brown, was purchased, and a copy was given to every teacher. Teachers were required to bring the book to the sessions. Teachers discussed the information in the book and gave their input and opinion regarding how the book related to the situation at their school. Teachers participated in gallery walks, jigsaws, readings, and role playing in an effort to relate the information in the book to their school environment.

November-December

Six whole faculty study group sessions were held in November and December. The number of sessions was impacted by the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays and the number

of teachers absent on Tuesdays and Thursdays during these months. Three sessions were cancelled due to the number of teachers absent. About twenty-five percent of the teachers were absent on those days. Three of the sessions were led by the principal; the staff developer and the assistant principal led the remaining groups.

The sessions in these months focused on walk-through observations after we were visited by three representatives from the State Department of Education called “Distinguished Educators.” They were assigned to provide assistance to low-achieving schools and felt we needed to observe our classrooms, with an emphasis on examining the classroom practices of teachers.

During this time, teachers were asked to review data from a survey administered the prior year by the representatives from Talent Development High Schools. Teachers concluded that they needed to evaluate the structure of the weekly student advisory period which was designed to take place on Wednesdays at the second period of the day. To improve discipline, teachers made recommendations to change the time of the advisory period from the second period to the first period and to change the grouping of the students. This change was recommended because students were originally required to move from their second period to an advisory period which created too much movement of students.

January-February

Twelve whole faculty study group sessions were held in January and February. The principal led four of the group sessions and the curriculum coaches, staff developer, and assistant principal led the remaining groups.

The sessions in January were restructured because teachers expressed a desire in earlier whole faculty study groups to work with the teachers who were in their academy. They felt the

conversations in prior sessions were too general and needed to be more specific to the students they were responsible for teaching. Whole faculty study group sessions were therefore scheduled to continue to meet on Tuesdays. On Thursdays, the academy leader would meet with the members of their academy. This meant there were four separate meetings held each Thursday with four different academy leaders.

To make the Thursday whole faculty study group sessions more relevant to the specific needs of the teachers, an agenda was provided and the meetings addressed the issues and concerns of the teachers in that particular academy. These meetings were still considered whole faculty study group sessions but were much smaller and focused on the students in the academy and not just teachers who happened to have a particular planning period. The sessions held in September through December had been structured to establish a dialogue with teachers and to establish the type of rules needed for whole faculty study group sessions. Once this had been established, teachers were ready to begin working on more substantive issues.

Another reason for the change to smaller-group meetings was the increased number of absent teachers. In September, 42 teacher absences were recorded on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In October, 60 teachers were absent on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In November, 73 teachers were absent on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In December, with only three weeks of school, 45 teachers were absent on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The large number of absent teachers meant a large portion of the teachers missed sessions because they were absent or they were substituting for teachers who were absent. To assure more teacher involvement, the Thursday sessions were separated into smaller groups of teachers within the same academy, with facilitation by the academy leader.

The Tuesday sessions during January and February were focused on student data. The data discussed and analyzed in these sessions included attendance, LEAP scores, ITBS scores, and discipline. Teachers were responsible for selecting the specific data. Teachers collaborated and recommended changes in their lesson plans and the school structure to address the information presented.

In order to determine the efficacy of whole faculty study groups, one teacher was selected by the group at the conclusion of every whole faculty group session to answer four questions. These questions were structured to determine if the whole faculty study group sessions were effective in meeting the intent of the specific session. The questions were:

1. What was the topic of discussion?
2. What was actually discussed?
3. What sources of information were used?
4. What decisions were made?

Comments from the teachers' notes suggested that the topics were appropriate, that the teachers stayed on point, and that they made decisions that were relevant to school improvement.

With regard to the topics of discussion, teachers selected LEAP scores, ITBS scores, graphic organizers, e-mail for students, and how teachers could better help students. They discussed test scores using data they provided from prior years as well as data provided by the principal. They brought in sample graphic organizers and discussed how to implement prior training in Teenbiz 3000 to create useful e-mail accounts for students. The respondents believed that they had made gains in knowing how to focus instruction based on test data.

The answers to the questions appeared to support the objectives of the whole faculty study group sessions: focusing the faculty's attention on change, preparing the faculty and

administrators to act as more effective change agents, and increasing the change-adaptability level of all stakeholders. The study groups began the process of establishing new school norms for improving learning systems, and changing the school and educational culture.

Peer Observation Implementation and Progress

Peer observations were introduced to the faculty in a three-step process during the whole faculty study group sessions: 1) walk-through observations, 2) other school observations, and 3) formal peer observation. I introduced the concept to help break down the feeling of isolation that occurs in a large faculty such as in our school. This process started with the initial step of introducing the concept of walk-through observations to teachers in November. Teachers were provided a walk-through planning guide and an observation checklist. Observing teachers selected two partners from their whole faculty study group session. They were then assigned to observe their partners. The teachers constructed a 17-question observation checklist which was used in the observation. The observation checklist identified 17 standards that they were to assess. Every teacher was expected to demonstrate the 17 standards in their lesson plans and in their teaching practices. Some examples were: Lesson steps on the board, “Do Now” on the board, objectives on the board, teacher used re-teaching, etc. Teachers were required to spend a minimum of 20 minutes in the classrooms observed.

Teachers recorded the results of the walk-through observation on the checklist and discussed the results of the walk-through observations with their partners and in two of the whole faculty study group sessions. Twenty-six (36%) of the classrooms were visited. Seventy-three teachers were scheduled to participate in the walk-through observations, but only 64 teachers participated because of teacher absences. Whole faculty study group sessions to discuss the peer observations were led by the staff developer. The staff developer divided the comments into

three separate sections: needs improvement, impressive, and strengths. The comments for each section follow:

- Needs Improvement

- Too much frontal teaching
- Teachers were not moving around the classroom to monitor students' work
- Lack of student engagement
- Low level of questions
- Few lesson steps
- No indication that students use chalkboard
- Lack of teaching from bell to bell

- Impressive

- Substitute teachers instructing
- Activities in "I CAN Learn Lab" (a computerized math instruction system)
- Behavior of students
- Cleanliness of school
- Most teachers have students actively involved
- Teachers standing

- Strengths

- Word Walls (walls posted with subject-specific vocabulary words)
- Teachers were instructing and had students actively engaged
- Curriculum coaches were assisting with instruction
- Increase in use of overheads
- Efforts made to display visuals, charts, and student work

The second step was the observation of other schools by members of the faculty.

Teachers participated in visiting other local high schools in the district to gather data and observe classrooms in the schools. In December, eight teachers were asked to volunteer to visit four local high schools. The principals of the schools selected were notified and the teachers paired with a colleague to visit each school. Two teachers were absent on the day of the observation. Thus, one or two teachers visited each school for three hours. The teachers completed an observation form similar to the walk-through observation form they used in the classroom visits performed at Marion Abramson. Teachers from each team listed positive attributes of Marion Abramson and positive attributes they found in the school they visited. The teachers returned to the school and

shared their results in a subsequent whole faculty study group session. Positive attributes of each school were compared and discussed. Key comments are listed in the Table 1.

The third and final step was the introduction of formal peer observations on Tuesday, March 8, 2005 during a whole faculty study group session. After discussion of the definition and purpose of peer observations, teachers were asked to select a teacher from another whole faculty study group session to perform a peer observation. The teacher they selected would also perform a peer observation with them. Teachers were given a peer observation form that was created by the researcher/principal.

On Wednesday March 9, 2005, teachers visited the classroom of their peer for 15-25 minutes during their planning period. On this day, teachers were preparing students for the upcoming LEAP test. After observations, students were dismissed one hour early and teachers were required to meet for thirty minutes with their peer. They were then required to report to one of four designated areas to report their findings to the group and to turn in the completed form. The staff developer collected and compiled the results of the peer observation form.

Table 1

Positive Attributes of Other High Schools Visited as Compared to Abramson

TEAM 1	
Marion Abramson	School A
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appearance • All teachers are doing the DO NOW'S • Teachers actively involved in teaching • A dedicated staff and faculty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students aware of achievement • Large number of computers • Student/teacher ratio • Student self motivated
TEAM 2	
Marion Abramson	School B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal presence • Lighting • Good student attendance • Principal knows students • Punctuality on time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal presence • Students on task in classroom • Principal knows students • Security was present
TEAM 3	
Marion Abramson	School C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competent teaching staff • Building space • Library • Objectives listed • Teachers helping each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear Halls • Small student/teacher ratio • Student culture • Student attire and discipline • Parental involvement
TEAM 4	
Marion Abramson	School D
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objectives posted • LEAP friendly curriculum • Many teachers post objectives and agenda on board • More resource rooms • Teachers communicating with each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active security • Consistent procedures and rules enforced • Detention list posted • Clear halls • "Bustling office"

Three sets of questions were addressed on the form. The first questions were identified as focus questions. The focal point of the peer observation was the LEAP test so these questions asked about whether the teacher had physically prepared the room for testing. The questions were:

- a) Is the door open?
- b) Are all materials covered or moved that may be used inappropriately to assist students on the LEAP test?
- c) Is there sufficient space between students so that they will not be able to see another student's test?
- d) Can the room be viewed from the outside?
- e) Is there a "do not disturb" sign on the door?

These questions required only a yes or no response from the teachers.

The second question was a clarifying question, designed to clarify the purpose of the peer observation. The clarifying question was:

When you observe this classroom, what evidence do you see that students are receiving instruction that prepares them for the LEAP/IOWA testing?

Some examples of responses provided by teachers were:

- Students are engaged in LEAP prep assignments.
- Teacher instructed from overhead with great detail.
- Working on LEAP-like info resources packet.
- The class was working on a Do Now that prepared them for LEAP.
- Teacher reviewed the rules and guidelines regarding the LEAP/IOWA test.
- Students were writing.
- Students learning how to express their opinion.
- Teacher is having students think through questions related to numbers in Spanish.
- Students are being pushed not to go for quick answers.
- Critical thinking activities were discussed.
- They are working on solving equations.
- Students are doing a quiz.
- Students on task.
- Great use of student interest area to teach LEAP content.
- Students are engaged in class discussion centered LEAP format.
- I liked the fact the students were working on Spring 2005 LEAP 21/GEE 21 take-home packet.

The third question was a probing question. This question was designed to probe for additional information and to force teachers to dialogue about the observation. The probing question was:

What is something I liked about the classroom and/or I was surprised to see in the classroom?

Some examples of responses provided by teachers were:

- Students were called upon to review and explain problems on the board.
- I liked the student to student interaction.
- I liked the creativity in the lesson.
- The children were really good.
- The classroom was well lit and the students were on their best behavior.
- The teacher promotes social skills.
- Using antonyms and synonyms in the computer class setting.
- I like that the teacher commands respect from the students.
- Everyone was paying attention and listening.
- I didn't know there were classes that functioned in such a quiet and respectful manner at ABE!
- Students have love and respect for their teacher.
- I was surprised to see some of my current and past students quietly doing their work with minimal redirections.
- I was impressed with the involvement of each student during the class period.
- Students were very active.
- Good classroom management.
- The class is very clean and workable.
- Students were engaged with some difficult vocabulary.
- Teacher speaks clearly and is obviously prepared for the lesson.

The peer observations required each teacher to review their colleagues' instruction and to examine instructional materials. These observations of classroom behavior were important in examining the teaching process and its relationship to learning. The observations were also important in addressing the tradition of isolation. Teachers were accustomed to staying in their classroom and closing the door. They were now required to leave their doors open for their colleagues or anyone to enter. Teachers were able to see their own practices through a different

lens because in-classroom peer observation involves colleagues working together around the observation of teaching.

Focus Group Interview

During a whole faculty study group session in March, the staff developer asked teachers to participate in a focus group interview. She provided them with a letter explaining the purpose of the focus group interview and a consent form for the focus group. Their participation was strictly voluntary. Teachers were asked to sign the consent form if they chose to participate. They could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. They were told all information from the project would be confidential and would be used for research purposes only. The content of their conversation would be confidential although their identity could not be protected because other participants would know who said what during the meetings. Participants were assured that any information provided would not negatively impact or harm their current or future job position.

Six teachers volunteered from the faculty for the focus group interview by signing the consent form indicating they would participate. On the day of the interview five teachers participated; the sixth participant was absent.

Participant Profiles

The five participants in the focus group were teachers with a total of 40 years of teaching experience. Fourteen of those years were at Marion Abramson Senior High school. Three participants were female and two were male. Two were Caucasian and three were African-American (see Table 2). A description of each participant is provided along with selections from their responses to the main focus group questions. Pseudonyms replace actual names.

Table 2
Focus Group Participants

Participant	Ethnicity	Gender	# of years of experience at school	# of years of total experience
Larry	Black	Male	3	9
Samuel	White	Male	4	4
Susan	Black	Female	2	17
Jane	White	Female	2	2
Mary	Black	Female	3	8

Mr. Larry. Mr. Larry is an African-American male English teacher with nine years of teaching experience in three different senior high schools in Orleans and Jefferson Parishes. He had been a teacher at Marion Abramson for three years.

Mr. Samuel. Mr. Samuel is a Caucasian male special education teacher with four years of teaching experience, all at Marion Abramson. He is a former Teach for America teacher who decided to remain at the school after his two-year commitment to the school district.

Ms. Susan. Ms. Susan is an African-American female Algebra teacher with 17 years of experience in the school district at two senior high schools. The last two years of experience were at Abramson as an “I CAN LEARN” teacher.

Ms. Jane. Ms. Jane is a Caucasian female American History teacher with two years of experience, both at Abramson High School. She is a former Teach for Greater New Orleans teacher.

Ms. Mary. Ms. Mary is an African-American special education female teacher with eight years of teaching experience, three at Marion Abramson Senior High School. She saw the change more in the ways students responded.

Overall, participants were representative of the faculty at Abramson. They were 60% black compared to 70% black of the faculty, 60% female and 40% male compared to 70% female and 30% male of the faculty. In my judgment, their attitudes and work ethic are comparable to the faculty.

Perceptions of Changes in School Culture

The purpose of the focus group was two-fold. First, it helped to determine the extent to which peer observations and whole faculty study groups were implemented in the school. Second, it helped to validate the findings of this study by comparing data collected from the SPSLCQ. Questions concerned the elements of school culture and the level of implementation of whole faculty study groups and peer observation. The central question was “what is the culture of the school like now and how has it changed over the course of the school year?” Elements of effective school culture were used as probes.

1. How are problems identified and addressed in the school? Is debate encouraged?

All of the participants felt there were different processes for identifying problems but they all felt one of the vehicles was the whole faculty study group. Ms. Mary captured several of the methods used to identify problems.

Well, normally sometimes teachers during our focus group, during that time, may mention what’s going on or a concern they may have or notify an administrator on the hallway to express their concern or put something in writing.

2. What is your vision for the school and how has it changed?

Teachers' visions for the school were as different as the people themselves but all their visions focused on students. They wanted to see things different for students. Mr. Samuel was concerned with expectations.

My vision for the school is for everyone at the school to not think things are inevitable. To not think that kids cursing teachers out is inevitable and we just have to deal with it. To not think that kids not caring about school is inevitable, to not think that certain things we don't like, that we don't have control over it. And sort of go in with the attitude that it is completely possible for this school to look like what we think a school should look like. And I guess that just starts with the attitude at every level.

Ms. Mary saw the vision as not only a school vision but also as a vision for all the stakeholders in the school. Ms. Mary's vision included students, teacher, parents, and the community.

My vision is centered around student success. The hope that I have is that students can graduate in four years, without going to summer school, by passing the LEAP 21 test with advanced or proficient. In the classroom students would be actively engaged and I would have input in the curriculum, and it would be relevant to my students. I see parents and the community as active participants in their children learning and being taught.

Each participant felt that students could do better, but demands must be made on them.

Mr. Larry expressed the view that the school may not be able to meet the needs of all students.

My vision for the school is that we are able to help every student become successful. That may mean that some students may have to leave our school to become successful. If that is what it takes, then we must do it. This will also help teachers teach better.

3. Describe the relationships within the school and whether they have changed.

Relationships were coded as positive or negative. Every participant viewed the relationships in the school as positive, but they also saw the relationships as being strongest in

their academy or in their whole faculty study group. Mr. Samuel believed that his academy had the best relationships and described why he felt that way.

The freshman academy I feel is the most functional part of the school. Maybe it's just been separated the longest. Like things on my team -- anytime teachers on my hall have a problem, we see each other first 'cause we have a strong cohesive team with the same off period. We talk you know, we've all been doing this 2 years, some of us 5, 10, 15 years on my team. After that we see an administrator with issues or concerns so, by the time anything gets to a level of the principal, we have already discussed amongst ourselves, brought in parents, and administrators. So we have a smaller community. So we function more as a community. I feel the upper class communities are more communities in theory, and sometimes they don't feel as concrete. Part of it is when you wear another uniform from everyone else, you're obviously separate and in another part of the building.

Ms. Mary also expressed a territorial view of the relationships in the school.

I'm in special education and we kind of work together as well. But we try to work it out ourselves and then we may ask an administrator. I really think our department binds together. From the people I kind of talk to we are all kind of on the same page kind of. If there is a problem or issue, like someone causing a problem in another class, they kind of let their neighbor know what's going on so they kind of work together. I don't get out as much as I would like so I don't know about the other part of the school.

4. What types of classroom observations occurred during the school year and did that differ from past years?

All of the participants conveyed that more observations were performed in the study this year than in the prior year. Those participants with more than two years of experience expressed that the number and quality of observations were better than in than any previous year. An example of the comments expressed was articulated by Ms. Jane.

First, a select group of teachers was sent off campus to look at some places that were equivalent to ABE, some a little worse than, some a little better than ABE. I think it was good to have that range so we could see what we are doing right, what we could do better. Then we went out to like 3 classrooms in like a 30 minute span---10 minutes, 10 minutes and 10 minutes and then recently before LEAP we went out and looked at 1 classroom for about 15-20 minutes. That's like potentially 4 mandated observations. I have had people observe my classroom a lot.

Observations were becoming more routine. These teachers viewed observations as a normal part of the school and the culture of the school seemed more accepting of observations. These teachers felt more comfortable with persons entering their classroom, and they felt better prepared for the observations.

5. Who participated in faculty study groups and how often? What specifically did the groups do?

The participants all described the whole faculty study group function and participants. Their comments were nearly identical. They agreed that the study groups included the principal, assistant principal, support staff, and all teachers as participants. Their comments all mirrored comments by Mr. Larry.

One day per week was dedicated to one text for awhile on how to improve teaching in an urban school, to feel better about your experience, and to be more effective. Other times we looked at data with LEAP and IOWA data. That was interesting . . . like we now know what those tests entailed and what we were lacking, and other times was like a brainstorm session, like a diversity session where you were like breaking down where you thought our student population came from . . . probably made some people look at assumptions they were making.

The central question was: What is the culture of the school like now and how has it changed over the course of the school year? All of the participants felt the culture was different but they all did not attribute the change to the same factors. Mr. Larry described the change in this manner:

Yes, it has changed slightly, for the better I think. My first year was pretty negative. It's not where it should be, but it is not where it was. An example of the change is, unlike previous years, we are stressing getting here on time for the LEAP and the importance of the test and so forth. I am not saying it was not stressed my first two years but it was not stressed nearly as much as it is now.

Mr. Samuel saw the change more as a two-year process, but as a positive two-year process. This process he felt started with the change in how students are treated and our expectations of one another and our students. He explained:

I would say it has changed more from two years ago to last year than it did from last year to this year. I feel we have sort of plateaued a little bit in just maybe getting the entire faculty to buy in to what does or does not have to happen. In other words, to get the entire faculty to buy into [the idea that] kids actually should be coming to school on Friday and that there should be instruction going on or we should be at our doors before lunch. I do feel one thing about the culture, more decisions are made now with students in mind that would not have been made before because it would be too difficult. We do things now sometimes that may inconvenience adults because we decided as a faculty it is best for kids. I think this is a step in the right direction.

Ms. Jane and Ms. Susan viewed the change more from a personal perspective. They were both moved to new rooms from the previous year but one saw the change as positive and the other saw the change as negative. Ms. Susan saw the change as positive and portrayed it as follows:

I think the school culture has improved primarily because I think that I have changed positions. I am no longer in the freshman hall. The culture there is a whole lot different than the upper level, but overall I think it has improved because the students now know what the policies are and they follow them.

Ms. Jane viewed the changes as negative in her statements.

Seeing that last year was my first year and going and being out in the portables, I was much more isolated from what was going on in the school and it seemed like last year was much more stable because maybe it was because I was isolated outside. There was security at the door, and it could be I was much more idealistic. I think it is a lot more crazy upstairs so I would say it is a lot more negative for me.

Four of the participants viewed the culture as more positive. One, Ms. Mary, expressed her comment about the school culture differently from the other participants.

I think it has changed for the positive. My first year here it was kind of unclear and now it is more focused and now the kids know better what is going on. I see a change also in the special education children. Their demeanor and attitude

about school has changed. A lot of them want a high school diploma now. And I think it is a big part of them being included in programs and not excluded.

A change in the culture was perceived by all the participants but they viewed the change as having occurred over a two-year period. While the independent variables, whole faculty study groups and peer observations, were interjected into the school culture, they were not perceived as the only variables that changed the culture. Most importantly, the commits reflect the beginning of a shared vision around what is best for students.

School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire

The School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire (SPSLCQ) was administered to the teachers on three separate occasions. To assure teachers that they could respond truthfully without repercussion, questionnaires were completed anonymously on all occasions. The initial questionnaire was completed on December 7, 2005 in one of the whole faculty study group sessions. Sixty-three teachers, 87% of the 72 teachers on staff at the school, were present in school on that day. Fifty-five teachers attended the whole faculty study group session because eight teachers had to cover for absent teachers. Fifty of the 55 teachers (90%) completed the first questionnaire.

Teachers completed the questionnaire for a second time on February 8, 2005 during an early dismissal professional development session. Three teachers were absent. A total of 69 surveys were returned to the staff developer. The response rate was 96%.

Teachers completed the last questionnaire on Wednesday, March 9, 2005 after they completed their formal peer observations. Students were dismissed an hour early to give teachers time to discuss their peer observations and time to complete the questionnaire. A total of 69 questionnaires was completed and returned to the staff developer. The response rate was 96%.

Participant Demographics

It was not possible to match questionnaire responses by teacher due to the anonymity guarantee. Therefore, the demographics are reported from the second administration when 69 teachers participated. These responses match the first and third administrations very closely since the response rate was high. About 60% of the participants were female which is consistent with district demographics for senior high schools (see Table 3).

Table 3
Gender of Teacher Respondents to SPSLCQ, 2nd Administration

Gender	<i>f</i>	%
Male	28	40.6
Female	41	59.4
Total	69	100.0

About three fourths of the teacher respondents had less than six years experience at Abramson (see Table 4). Half had less than six years total teaching experience (see Table 5).

Table 4
Years Experience at School of Teacher Respondents

Years at School	<i>f</i>	%
(0 – 3)	42	60.9
(4 – 6)	10	14.5
(7 – 9)	5	7.2
(10 – 12)	1	1.4
(13 –or more)	11	15.9
Total	69	100.0

Table 5
Total Years of Teaching Experience of Teacher Respondents

Total years experience	<i>f</i>	%
(0 – 3)	77	41.0
(4 – 6)	28	14.9
(7 – 9)	15	8.0
(10 – 12)	10	5.3
(13 –or more)	58	30.9
Total	188	100.0

School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire Results

In order to determine whether whole faculty study groups and peer observations may have influenced the development of a professional learning community at Abramson, the SPSLCQ teacher means were compared for the three administrations of the instrument: before, during, and after implementation of the two interventions. The descriptive statistics by time of administration are presented in Table 6. Although there was a slight increase in the total SPSLCQ mean, this increase was not consistent across the five sub-scales. An inspection of the mean differences of sub-scales over the three administrations of the SPSLCQ showed that two sub-scale means remained relatively constant while others changed over time. Shared Leadership and Collective Learning remained stable, while Shared Values decreased, and Shared Personal Practice and Supportive Conditions increased.

Viewed from a criterion-referenced perspective with a mean on the SPSLCQ of 1 to 2 representing little to no evidence of a professional learning community, 2 to 3 representing some evidence, 3 to 4 representing evidence, and 4 to 5 being a professional learning community, Abramson would be considered as showing evidence of becoming a professional learning community. All means in March were in the range of about 3.5 to 4.0.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for SPSLCQ by Time of Administration

SPSLCQ sub-scale	December			February			March		
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Supportive and Shared Leadership	50	3.76	.83	69	3.90	.79	69	3.77	.88
Shared Values and Vision	50	4.15	.67	69	4.10	.74	69	4.02	.73
Collective Learning & Application	50	3.81	.69	69	3.80	.65	69	3.80	.68
Shared Personal Practice	50	2.90	1.11	69	3.25	.83	69	3.53	.84
Supportive Conditions	50	3.69	.67	69	3.83	.65	69	3.75	.68
SPSLCQ TOTAL	50	3.66	.61	69	3.78	.57	69	3.77	.63

Analysis of variance was used to determine if the total SPSLCQ mean differed over the three times of group administration. The *F* was not statistically significant (see Table 7).

Table 7

ANOVA Summary Table for Effect of Time on SPSLCQ Total Mean

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared
Group	.48	2	.24	.66	.52	.01
Error	67.04	185	.36			
Total	2704.22	188				

R Squared = .007 (Adjusted R Squared = -.004)

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA, see Table 8) with univariate post hoc tests revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in one sub-scale, shared personal practice. The Duncan post hoc test categorizes means into subsets. Means in different subsets are statistically different ($p < .05$). Table 9 shows that for Shared Personal Practice the mean score at the first administration of the SPSLCQ was statistically lower than the mean at either the second or third administration. Because means for the second and third administration are in the same subset, they did not differ statistically.

Table 8
MANOVA Summary Table for Effect of Time on SPSLCQ Sub-Scales

SPSLCQ Sub-scale	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Eta Squared
Supportive and Shared Leadership	.78	2	.39	.56	.57	.01
Shared Values and Vision	.46	2	.23	.45	.64	.01
Collective Learning & Application	.00	2	.00	.00	.99	.00
Shared Personal Practice	11.48	2	5.74	6.89	.00	.07
Supportive Conditions	.58	2	.29	.65	.52	.01

Note. Wilk's lambda=.879; F (10,362) =2.42, p=.008

Table 9
Duncan Post Hoc Test for Differences in Means on Shared Personal Practice by Test Administration

TIME	n	Subset 1	Subset 2
1.00	50	2.9000	
2.00	69		3.2464
3.00	69		3.5290
Sig.		1.000	.087

Note. Means for groups in different subsets statistically different (p<.05).

Conclusion

In this chapter a description of my efforts in implementing whole faculty study groups and peer observation over the course of the 2004-2005 school year at Marion Abramson Senior High School was documented. The action research meets all of the challenges of the three E's of data collection for action research. *Experiencing* or observing was accomplished through the use of walkthrough observations, school visits, and peer observations from the participants and researcher. *Enquiring* or asking participants for information was accomplished through the focus group interview, through the school professional staff as learning community questionnaire, and the whole faculty study group questionnaire. *Examining* or using and making records was accomplished through the use of audio tapes, field notes from the researchers, and journal notes (Creswell, 2002). Teachers were generally receptive to the collection of data and were involved

in the process of restructuring the school into a professional learning community. Chapter 5, the final chapter, provides a detailed discussion and interpretation of the findings.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS

Overview

The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship of whole faculty study groups and peer observation to the development of a professional learning community at Marion Abramson Senior High school using the action research design. The school is a typical urban senior high school. At the time of the study, Marion Abramson Senior High school had a student population of 1,559 students in grades 9-12, making it the largest public high school in the Orleans Parish School District. The school was physically divided into four communities. The communities were called Small Learning Communities (SLC), designed to divide the school into smaller sections or teams. Each SLC had approximately 400 students. These smaller teams were designed to function as schools within the school. Each SLC had a core group of teachers, a core curriculum, and an administrator designated to manage the community. The four SLC's were the Ninth Grade Academy, Tenth Grade Academy, Travel and Tourism Academy, and the Business Academy. Students followed a four-by-four schedule, which means they attended the same four classes each day from August to January. They attended a new set of classes from January to May. Students had the opportunity to acquire 32 credits during their four year high school tenure. Each teacher had a daily 90-minute planning period.

The school community was faced with a multitude of problems: inadequate funding, a high dropout rate, and coping with children from families torn apart by drugs, violence, and apathy. The increased pressure to improve test scores and maintain order and discipline in the school was not specific to Marion Abramson Senior High school. The results can therefore

readily be generalized to other schools with similar problems, similar challenges, and similar school organizations and structures.

As an experienced principal, but new to the high school environment, I was intent on looking specifically at the development of actions and structures that enabled the school staff to identify a shared vision, learn together, make informed decisions collectively, and collaborate with peers in critically examining the quality of student work. Establishing a professional learning community within a school does not occur quickly or spontaneously. It requires the dedicated and intentional efforts on the part of the administrator and the professional staff (Morrissey, 2004). I saw these intentional efforts as whole faculty study groups and peer observations.

I used the action research design to describe the relationships between whole faculty study groups and peer observations to the incremental development of a professional learning community. Action research has four basic themes: empowerment of participants, collaboration through participation, acquisition of knowledge, and social change. The steps in the action research cycle include the identification of the problem, collection and organization of data, interpretation of data, actions based on data, an evaluation of results, and reflection (Ferrance, 2000). To be true to the design, I must now review where we are in this process of creating a professional learning community and where we will go next in the action research cycle. I begin by discussing what I found at the end of the first cycle, then continue with where I believe we should go next.

Discussions of Results

Two interventions were introduced and implemented over one school year: whole faculty study groups and peer observations. Where we find ourselves as a result with regard to professional learning communities is discussed in conjunction with the five themes described by Hord (2004), as discussed earlier in the literature review.

Supportive and Shared Leadership

Overall participants reported through the questionnaire that there was not a significant change in the area of supportive and shared leadership. However, it should be noted that the mean scores for the three administrations of the questionnaire were consistent, which means the participants had the same perspective throughout the study regarding supportive and shared leadership. Comments from the focus group interview supported the belief that the faculty viewed the leadership as supportive and shared. Because this study examined the implementation of whole faculty study groups and peer observations, it is noteworthy to discuss critical incidents impacting the professional learning community.

One such incident occurred in December at a whole faculty study group session about the scheduling of the Family Advisory Period. This was an additional period created by the school district to foster an advisory session for senior high school students. This additional period was only 25 minutes but was separate and apart from the four periods teachers were scheduled to teach. Teachers discussed their displeasure with the schedule but refused to make a decision. They expected the administration to jump in and save the day with a plan for change; the administration didn't. They grappled with the issue for several whole faculty study group sessions before they came up with a solution that their colleagues could support. They were

forced to share leadership. Perhaps, teachers will only start to share leadership when transitioning from autocratic to shared leadership when all other options fail.

The whole faculty study group sessions created opportunities for teachers to voice their opinions and concerns. They saw the aforementioned process unfolding differently but they all saw discussions taking place in the whole faculty study group. Only two of the five participants in the focus group sessions felt comfortable with the idea of debating their concerns in the group. It may be that teachers do not yet feel the level of trust necessary to challenge their own assumptions and the assumptions of others, particularly when the principal who evaluates them is present. If Fullan (2001) is correct and it takes five to seven years to change a secondary school, and trust is the important initial ingredient, maybe I expected too much too soon.

The whole faculty study group sessions were markedly different from the traditional faculty meetings and it will take some time before trust is built to the point where teachers feel comfortable in sharing. The focus group sessions indicated that teachers viewed the change in the new administration that occurred the previous year as positive. Lack of change in the mean score for this sub-scale may be because the supportive and shared leadership component had formed prior to the initial data collection. More likely, however, is the possibility that teachers remain comfortable with leadership from above. In retrospect, I may have reinforced that comfort zone. While we made changes in the organization, instruction, and management of the school, these changes were difficult and moved the school slowly toward the direction I envisioned.

I instituted many changes in my first year as principal without the input of the staff. I acted as a lone ranger without much faculty input. I deemed this to be necessary at the time. While faculty indicated in the interview that they viewed these first-year changes as positive,

they also seemed to feel that I was the only person responsible for creating and initiating change. During the past 8 months, I was filled with the desire to lead teachers to take a more active leadership role in the organization and instructional culture of the school, but many faculty revealed a passive-aggressive attitude toward leadership. They provided very little support. While I was willing to have the faculty share in the decisions that are required to manage a large urban school, they were reluctant to jump in. I had inadvertently helped teachers remain accustomed to taking directions.

In retrospect, I feel that shared and supportive leadership may not be the aspect of professional learning communities that I should have expected so soon. Teachers, in my opinion, truly did not feel it was their responsibility or their obligation to do anything more than manage their classroom. Perhaps the faculty needed more time to ‘unlearn’ the habits of the past where leadership was the sole responsibility of the administration. It certainly did not help create shared leadership when one of my first actions was to restructure the organization without input. It could be that teachers felt overwhelmed with discipline and classroom management and didn’t have the energy to take on another perceived obligation. After analyzing the study data, I believe that the large number of teachers and the lack of teacher involvement in the leadership process of the school will make this crucial area even more difficult to address. While a leadership team existed in theory at the school, the team only brought issues to the table. They often felt that after bringing the issue to the table, it was then the responsibility of the administrative team to solve the problem through directive measures.

Shared Values and Vision

For the theme of shared values and vision, participants did not report a difference in the means over the three administrations of the questionnaire. Their scores were consistent but it

should be noted that this subscale had the highest mean of the five sub-scales, indicating that participants viewed this theme as somewhat evident in the school.

Participants were involved in a total of 30 whole faculty study group sessions from September 2004 through February 2005. They participated in teaming activities that required them to utilize instructional strategies. They reviewed and shared how grade level expectations affected them in their classrooms. All of the meetings addressed students' needs.

Even when sessions addressed teacher needs or concerns, the overarching theme was "How do we become better at meeting the needs of our students?" Teachers felt a common purpose and began to develop the same core values. The vision from every participant was different but all of the visions included student concerns. The visions were centered on improving the learning conditions for all students. Teachers now believe students are the focus of our work. The focus group interview articulated the view that the shared vision was more common in the small learning academies or teams that were created to foster teaming and a common purpose among teachers. This is exactly what the small learning academies were created to accomplish. Nevertheless, it is possible teachers in four groups may have felt compelled to express a vision that was about the students because that is my vision. However, I was buoyed by the fact that the anonymous SPSLCQ responses were uniformly positive around vision. Given that the literature stresses the need for shared vision before other components of the learning community can evolve, I take this as a positive indicator that we are moving in the direction desired.

Collective Learning and Application of Learning

The third theme of collective learning and application of learning did not yield a difference in the means over the three administrations of the questionnaire. It should be noted that the mean on each administration of the questionnaire was exactly the same, 3.8.

Participants spent eight sessions reading, studying, and discussing the book, “Becoming a Successful Urban Teacher” by Dave Brown. The book study gave participants a better perspective of the students and their community. It addressed the differences and similarities between urban students and non-urban students. The book study allowed participants to examine their cultural heritage and the heritage of the students they teach. It allowed the faculty to discuss their expectations for themselves, their colleagues, the community, and their students.

Participants were involved in reviewing the requirements for LEAP testing week and they made recommendations for changes so poor processes would not be repeated. Participants also studied a variety of academic content in the sessions. They reviewed with each other their own, and their colleagues’ perceptions of their classroom content and methods. In the peer observations craft knowledge was shared, observed, and discussed. Although means on this sub-scale did not improve, all means were close to 4 on a 5 point scale, indicating some evidence of collective learning.

Nevertheless, as a major obstacle to collective learning discussed in the literature is lack of trust. Several incidents make me question whether trust has been developed on this staff. First, only six teachers volunteered to participate in the focus group interview. Second, the number of teachers absent during the action research process suggests either a lack of commitment or a level of discomfort among teachers. Also, teachers never reached the position that they felt responsible for their colleagues. This was evident by the comments from the focus group

participants that they were closer to teachers in their own small learning academy or team. While this was positive in one sense, it further divided the faculty into factions. This division may have helped to create a climate of distrust between teams.

Supportive Conditions

Overall, participants reported through the questionnaire that there was not a significant improvement in the area of supportive conditions. This subscale had the second lowest overall mean. This can be interpreted as meaning the participants consistently felt a lack of support. Still, the mean approached 4 on a 5 point scale, indicating somewhat supportive practices.

Participants met on Tuesday and Thursday for a minimum of 45 minutes. Most meetings continued for 60 minutes. Participants were provided this time because of the 90 minute block schedule that allowed teachers to have an additional daily planning period. The time was compromised when teachers were required to cover the class of an absent teacher when there were not enough substitutes available to cover classes. The time was, however, protected from any other meetings or conferences.

Several factors undermined what should have been supportive. Teachers were not comfortable with the notion of relinquishing their previously sacred 90 minutes of uninterrupted planning time each day. The fact that they were required to give up two days for what was originally perceived as another meeting was not initially well received. Participants also became increasingly frustrated with the fact that they were covering the classes of absent teachers on non-whole faculty study group days. It was not uncommon for a teacher to have only one uninterrupted planning period during some weeks. Thus, time intended to be a supportive condition, was not viewed as very supportive.

The large size of the group also may not have been viewed as supportive. The whole faculty study groups consisted of 18-20 participants. According to Murphy (1992), focus groups should be formed with six or fewer participants. In larger gatherings, it is easy for some individuals to stay uninvolved and for cliques of two or three to be created.

Shared Personal Practice

The fifth and final theme of shared personal practice had significantly lower mean score at the first administration of the questionnaire at either the second or third administration. The mean score of the theme shared personal practice showed a significant increase. The second and third mean did not differ statistically.

Participants were required to support their colleagues by visiting each other's classrooms and monitoring instruction. I believe that relationships were built as a result of this effort. Participants also discussed what they expected from the school through gallery walks and walkthrough observations. Peer observations meet the requirements of reducing teacher isolation by forcing teachers to enter their colleagues' classrooms. Walkthrough observations became a collaborative norm in the school. Teachers were comfortable with visits by their colleagues. It was not a rarity to find teachers in other teachers' classrooms. The walk-through observation feedback provided teachers with positive and negative comments regarding their classrooms and their colleagues' classrooms. They were required to evaluate how their classes compared to the 26 classes identified in the walkthrough.

The peer observations were extended to other schools. Selected teachers volunteered to observe other schools and classrooms. Teachers compared the positive and negative attributes of their school to the other four schools visited. These observations were shared with the staff. Attempts were made to replicate the positive aspects observed and these observations reinforced

the notion that the school was functioning well. The formal peer observation provided time for teachers to talk. This reflection is exactly what teachers need in order to gain new insights about teaching and learning. While the formal peer observations did not occur until after the second administration of the questionnaire, other types of peer observations, (i.e., walk-through and peer conversation and school observations) took place prior to the second administration and could easily have impacted the results of the second administration of the questionnaire.

There is no one right approach to peer observation. The approach utilized at Marion Abramson was necessary because of time constraints. LEAP testing was scheduled for March and several whole faculty study group sessions were cancelled in November and December because of teacher absences. Participants performed their first and only formal peer observation in March prior to the LEAP testing. Several observations were scheduled in the month of April to continue the process of creating a professional learning community. Participants felt comfortable visiting the classroom because of the earlier walk-through observations. The comments of the peer observation participants were geared toward LEAP testing because of the seriousness of the testing. Participants' comments reflected that they were open and honest in their assessment of their colleagues' classroom environment. The comments were positive and the time spent reflecting, while required, was the only way to provide time for the entire faculty to discuss the observation. While the observations were not a voluntary activity, I think teachers were more receptive because the focus was on the LEAP test rather than on a specific aspect of their instruction.

Professional learning communities develop fertile ground on which to build shared personal practice in schools. In other professions, shared personal practice has dramatically affected the profession. In 1993, heart surgeons in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont began

to observe one another regularly in the operating room and to share insights and approaches with one another on a regularly basis. In two-years the death rate was lowered among their patients by 25% (Cushman, 1996). Does this have implications for educators? The emphasis on shared personal practice is at the heart of creating a learning community. It is significant to note that the mean score indicates that shared personal practice was the only theme to emerge as improving. Participants began to feel more comfortable with the idea of sharing their beliefs and views with colleagues. The two intentions explicitly targeted shared personal practice so I was pleased to see real improvement in this aspect of school culture. If this interaction is sustained, trust should begin to develop and feelings of isolation should be reduced.

Next Steps

I originally believed that a professional learning community would quickly develop after the implementation of whole faculty study groups and peer observations, but I learned that the type of changes discussed in the professional learning community literature could not develop in only one year. In fact, the research that indicates that deep structure changes take hold only over time, is correct. Schools change slowly and deliberately. So, based on the evidence to date, where do we go now? Because action research is a cyclical process, we begin at the beginning. We take stock of where we are and develop strategies to get where we hope to be. The evidence suggests that we have two strengths. First, we seem to have a common vision around student well-being. Second, we have made strides in exposing our practice by opening our doors and beginning to talk.

While I alone cannot make next steps, I feel that some issues are evident. The issue of time must be addressed. Teachers must be provided sufficient time to discuss the concerns of students and the staff. Time was provided in this action research but the time was perceived as

time taken away from teachers' planning periods and the 45- to 60-minute time period once a week was not sufficient to create the appropriate climate for teachers to communicate and share decisions.

One possible solution is to hold future whole faculty study groups at the end of the school day but within the normal school hours. Time could be provided at the end of the school day once a month every month to allow for these sessions. This time can be created by banking time. That means that ten minutes of teaching time would be added to the school day and that time could be used monthly for teachers to meet after students have been dismissed from school.

Another change I would like to see is for teachers to meet in smaller groups. The sheer size of the groups created an environment that did not support open communication, collegiality or collaboration. Too many views and opinions were discussed and it was easy for teachers to hide in the large groups. Smaller groups would provide teachers an opportunity to build trust, to work through the normal group dynamics to a point of openness. The smaller groups could also create a sense of family that is needed in this large school environment. The groups could be divided by teams. Teachers who work with the same students would meet monthly to address the needs of the students they teach. The team size would be about four to six teachers but would never reach the 18-20 teachers we worked with this year.

Finally, I believe we need to work on reflection. Teachers will be provided a notebook or writing journal to begin the reflection process. They will be provided the opportunity to write their thoughts after every whole faculty study group session and will be encouraged to write daily about their experiences. They will then have the opportunity to share their ideas with their group or the larger group if they choose. This reflection is a powerful piece of the action research process. When teachers reflect they take the time to think about their craft. So much of what

occurs in a typical school day is about reacting that teachers never stop to reflect on a class, a day, a week, a quarter, a semester, or a year. They move from one problem to another. I believe reflection is a powerful that could significantly change the culture of the school. Because I have mandated so many of the changes to date, I see reflective writing as an opportunity for teachers to safely express *their* opinions. It is my fervent hope that, little by little, they will believe that I want their guidance and their leadership.

Personal Change

This study was both frustrating and challenging. It was difficult to implement whole faculty study groups and peer observations after being at Abramson for only a year. School improvement is a very difficult and tedious process. Schools are unyielding environments. They have a life of their own. They can't change without the intentional efforts of the entire staff. The staff must share in the decision-making process and procedures that change schools. Teachers, while professing interest in change, don't always want to do the hard work necessary for change to occur. Trusting that their efforts will bring about positive results is especially difficult in a climate of academic failure.

Do principals need to be supermen? Can principals be supermen? The answer to these questions is NO! Principals need to have and give direction and this direction can't be a new program or initiative. I started this project to change the school, but I also changed as a result of the study. I became a learner. I have always felt I could do anything by myself, but that opinion has changed. There is true strength in numbers. People must be guided and supported, but they must be released to help lead school change. For me, letting go, choosing gentle nudges over firm mandates, and accepting that change takes years rather than weeks may be the most difficult barrier of all. Teachers are happy to leave my traditional role as principal alone, and I may in fact

be most comfortable with that role. But I also know that students benefit when faculties behave as professional learning communities. For the sake of our students, I must learn to find my role as a member of that community.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations describe the population to which generalizations may be safely made (Creswell, 2002). This study was intended to examine a typical urban senior high school. The school was not randomly selected; instead, it was purposively chosen for action research because the researcher wanted to model the notion of a learning community while improving the school culture. Action research allows practitioners to address those concerns that are closest to them, ones over which they can exhibit some influences and make changes (Ferrance, 2000). As the practitioner and researcher using action research, it was necessary to study the school to which I was assigned as principal. This means that a natural researcher bias can occur in the study. Methods for addressing this bias were discussed in Chapter 3.

One limitation of the study was the timing of the implementation of the two interventions. Whole faculty study group sessions were implemented in September but the first questionnaire was not administered until December. Obtaining approval to administer the survey became a serious challenge and resulted in the questionnaire being given three months later than anticipated.

The formal peer observation was implemented once because of the extended length of the approval process for the study. While this was a limitation, teachers did have other various opportunities to view their colleagues' classrooms. They performed several walkthrough observations and visited other schools.

A third limitation was the large number of absent teachers during November and December which caused several sessions to be cancelled. Other sessions included a smaller number of participants because of the number of absent teachers. These two factors delayed the peer observation process and resulted in only one peer observation for each participant prior to the conclusion of the study. Participants will continue to perform peer observations after the conclusion of the study.

Implications for Further Research

If this action research study were to be replicated, several additional pieces could be considered to enhance outcomes. As previously mentioned, the questionnaire would be given as a pre-test in September, prior to the introduction of the independent variable. The number of walk-throughs, considered to be an excellent tool for informal peer observations, would be increased. Whole faculty study groups would also continue, but with a smaller size per group. I believe that this is crucial to their success. The sheer number of meetings of the whole faculty study groups allowed for many opportunities for peers to share best practice, engage in deeper study of the data, and set the stage for more collegial conversation. Groups of 4-6, as opposed to 18-20 would help facilitate this process.

The peer observations could be planned to occur in both November and February, more if time permits. To a great degree, teachers would be prepared for this collegial sharing once the stage had been set to share during whole faculty study group for the previous 2-3 months. This best practice would increase the number of peer observations in order to gather more data to be studied at the close of the research.

The recommendations that I would give to a future researcher would be the following:

- Regularly reinforce Hord's (2004) components of a professional learning community to the faculty to remain focused on the goal.
- Have these components printed and hung in conspicuous places such as the faculty lounges and the school's entrance.
- Have teachers, or at least teacher leaders, visit other schools when peer observation and/or whole faculty study groups have been successfully implemented.
- Regularly place hand-outs and current literature in faculty mailboxes on professional learning communities to keep the focus everywhere.
- Find quotes on shared practice, etc., and have them laminated and hung in the teachers' workroom or copying area; use them as discussion tools in staff meetings to facilitate reflection.

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APPENDIX A

Human Subjects Approval Form

**University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans**

Campus Correspondence

Kelvin Adams
Dr. Peggy Kirby

2/25/2005

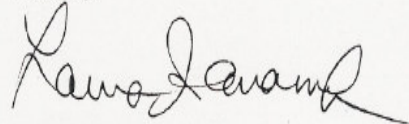
RE: The impact of whole family study groups and peer observations in the
professional learning community

Your project is eligible for expedited review and the research and procedures are now
compliant with the University of New Orleans and federal guidelines.

Please remember that approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any
changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB
prior to implementation.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you
are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best of luck with your project!
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laura Scaramella", written in a cursive style.

Laura Scaramella, Ph.D.
Chair, University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

*University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans*

Form Number: 07JAN05

(please refer to this number in all future correspondence concerning this protocol)

Principal Investigator: Peggy Kirby
Kelvin Adams

Title: Faculty Advisor
Graduate Student

Department: Education Administration

College: Education

Project Title: The Impact of Whole Family Study Groups and Peer Observations in the Professional Learning Community

Dates of Proposed Project Period From 01/01/05 to 04/01/05

Approval Status:

☐ Full Board Review

☐ Approved Date: 2-25-05

☒ Expedite

☐ Deferred Date:

☐ Exempt

☐ Disapproved Date:

☐ Project requires review more than annually. Review every _____ months.

**approval is for 1 year from approval date only and may be renewed yearly.*

1st continuation Signature of IRB Chair

Date:

2nd continuation Signature of IRB Chair

Date:


3rd continuation Signature of IRB Chair

Date:

4th continuation Signature of IRB Chair

Date:

Committee Signatures:



Laura Scaramella, Ph.D. (Chair)

Pamela Jenkins, Ph.D.

Anthony Kontos, Ph.D. (Associate chair)

Richard B. Speaker, Ph.D.

Gary Talarchek, Ph.D.

Kari Walsh

Kathleen Whalen, LSW

L. Allen Witt Ph.D.

APPENDIX B

Copyright Permission Letter

TO: Kelvin Adams (Licensee)

FROM: Joyce S. Pollard, Ed.D.
Director, Office of Institutional Communications

SUBJECT: Permission to reprint and distribute SEDL materials

DATE: December 16, 2004

Thank you for your interest in using the printed questionnaire *School Professional Staff as Learning Community (SPSLCQ)* (the "work"), by Dr. Shirley Hord of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL).

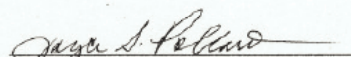
SEDL is pleased to grant permission for use of the material cited above for the purpose of: evaluating a faculty of 60 teachers at Marion Abramson Senior High School to assess the teachers' perspective of the school as a professional learning community. The following are the terms, conditions, and limitations governing this limited permission to reproduce the work:

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6. This license and permission to reproduce the work is limited to the terms hereof and is personal to the person and entity to whom it has been granted; and it may not be assigned, given or transferred to any other person or entity.

Please sign below, indicating that you understand and agree to comply with the above terms, conditions and limitations, and send the original back to us. If you wish, you may keep a duplicate of this agreement, but the copy with your original signature needs to be returned to us. Thank you again for your interest in SEDL's materials. If you have questions, please contact me at (800) 476-6861.

Sincerely,


For Southwest Educational Laboratory

Agreed and Accepted:

Signature:  Printed Name: Kelvin R. Adams

Date signed: December 16, 2004

APPENDIX C

Consent Form



CAMPUS CORRESPONDENCE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP,
COUNSELING AND FOUNDATIONS

Consent Form

1. Title of Research Project:

The impact of whole faculty study groups and peer observations on the professional learning community.

2. Project Director:

Kelvin Adams
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Educational Leadership
Education Building, Room 348
University of New Orleans
New Orleans, LA. 70148
(504) 280-6661

I am under the supervision of Dr. Peggy Kirby, Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling and Foundations, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA. 70148

3. Purpose of the Research:

This study seeks to evaluate a senior high school staff as they undergo the process of creating a professional learning community through the development of whole faculty study group and peer observation.

4. Procedures for the Research:

All teachers will be asked to complete the SPSSCO questionnaire twice during the school year. Whole faculty study groups were implemented in the fall of 2004. The senior high school teachers were required to meet for 45 minutes during their planning and preparation period every Tuesday and Thursday. The meetings are mandated by the school district. Teachers who had a common planning period were in the same faculty study group. The principal who is the researcher will lead the professional development sessions. The focus of the sessions was data analysis, book study, peer observations, small learning community, academic walk throughs, and any other subject introduced by the faculty that focused on the improvement of student achievement. Teachers will begin the process of peer observation in January after the introduction and discussion of the process in the whole faculty study group sessions. Teachers will review the research on peer observations and discuss how they can benefit from performing observations in their colleagues classes during their planning period. Teachers will develop a form to utilize in this process. The form will be customized to what they believe is important. They will be required to perform two peer observations from January – March 2005. Teacher self- selected fifty percent of the teachers they would observe and the researcher selected the other fifty percent. The researcher will use random selection to determine his assignment of the remaining fifty percent of the staff. Teachers determined what would be observed in the peer observations based on the teachers' observation of schools visited by selected teachers in December. A focus group interview was conducted with teachers eight teacher in March 2005 to determine their perspective of the school culture.

Audiotapes will be transcribed by a reputable, well established transcription service that promises to offer, confidential, professional services. In any published material, pseudonyms will be used when referring to participants. The signed consent forms, field notes, audiotapes, interview transcripts, and any other documents related to this study will be maintained by the Project Director in a secure and confidential manner. At no time will results of the study be identified with individuals interviewed.

9. Signature and Consent to Participate:

Federal and University of New Orleans guidelines require that we obtain signed consent for conduct of social science research and for participation in research projects which involve human subjects. After this study's purpose, procedures, potential risks/discomforts, and benefits have been explained to you, please indicate your consent by reading and signing the statement below.

I have been fully informed of the above-described procedures with its possible benefits and risks, and I have given permission of participation in this study as well as consent to audio-record interviews.

Signature of Participant

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Project Director

Kelvin Adams

Name of Project Director

Date

APPENDIX D

Confirmation Letter



CAMPUS CORRESPONDENCE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP,
COUNSELING AND FOUNDATIONS

Confirmation Letter

Once the data is collected for this study, I will analyze all notes, audiotapes and transcripts of interviews to develop a report or narrative of the findings that emerged. For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms will be utilized to protect your identity outside the focus group. All interview documents and recordings will be utilized only for this study and will be accessible only to me and my dissertation advisor, Dr. Peggy Kirby. She can be reached at (504) 280-6661. Also the data collected for this study will be kept in a secure and confidential manner (locked file cabinet in a personal office). You are entitled to a full report of the findings once the study is completed. Thank you for volunteering for the focus group. I want to remind you that the content of the conversation is confidential and that your identity cannot be protected. Any information provided will not negatively impact or harm your current or future job position. As you know I am a PhD student at the University of New Orleans (UNO). I am going to ask you several questions that will focus on how you feel or perceive how others feel about the culture and climate of your school. Again, I am requesting that all conversations that occur during this group discussion remain private. The topic for discussion in this focus group is the school culture and climate of Marion Abramson Senior high school.

Your time and assistance in conducting this interview study are most appreciated. I look forward to sitting down and interviewing you and hearing about your opinion of the school culture. Thank you for volunteering to be a participant in this study. If you have any questions about the study or your role as a participant before we meet for the interview, please contact me. If you have any further questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact Dr. Anthony Kontos at the University of New Orleans at (504) 280-7481.

Sincerely,

Kelvin Adams
Ph.D. Candidate

APPENDIX E

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. How are problems identified and addressed in the school? Is debate encouraged?
2. What is your vision for the school and how has it changed?
3. Describe the relationships within the school and whether they have changed.
4. What types of classroom observations occurred during the school year and did that differ from past years?
5. Who participated in faculty study groups and how often? What specifically did the groups do?
6. What is the culture of the school like now and how has it changed over the course of the school year?

APPENDIX F

Whole Faculty Study Group Questions

1. What was the topic of discussion?
2. What was actually discussed?
3. What sources of information were used?
4. What decisions were made?

APPENDIX G

Observation Checklist

OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Room#	Yes/NO	Teacher:
1. Do Now on board		
2. Objectives on board		
3. Lesson steps on board		
4. Frontal teaching (direct instruction)		
5. Teacher used reteaching		
6. Students used chalkboard to demonstrate knowledge		
7. Students demonstrated knowledge through discussing with teacher/others		
8. Teacher asked critical thinking questions		
9. Teacher checked for understanding		
10. Teacher modeled expectations for students		
11. Room has a display of visuals, charts		
12. Room has a display of current student work		
13. Teaching from bell to bell		
14. Teacher monitors students' work/behavior		
15. Current lesson plans available, followed		
16. Form 44s available with grades/attendance		
17. Academic review held		

OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Room#	Yes/NO	Teacher:
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16. Form 44s available with grades/attendance		
17. Academic review held		

VITA

Kelvin Rory Adams was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on August 26, 1956 to Erving Adams, Sr. and Velma Jelks Adams. The second of six children, Mr. Adams was the first child to attend and complete college. He married Debra Marie Perkins in 1979 and had one son and one daughter: Jeremiah and Jessica, both of whom reside in New Orleans.

Mr. Adams received his undergraduate degree in Elementary and Special Education from Northeast Louisiana University in Monroe, Louisiana in 1978; his master's degree in Principalship from the Xavier University of New Orleans in 1991; and his Ph.D. in Educational Leadership in 2005 from the University of New Orleans.

His twenty-six year career in education included teaching in public schools at the middle school and college level. Mr. Adams was a teacher of Reading, English and Science for ten years (10), a Science Master teacher for one year (1), a principal for nine (9) years, and an Executive Director of Middle Schools for three (3) years. He is presently a principal at Marion Abramson Senior High School.