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Implementation and Teacher Leadership of Collaborative Efforts During the Challenges Surrounding the COVID-19 Pandemic

George R. Mayfield III
University of Maine, george.mayfield@maine.edu

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IMPLEMENTATION AND TEACHER LEADERSHIP OF COLLABORATIVE

EFFORTS DURING THE CHALLENGES SURROUNDING

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

By

George R. Mayfield, III

B.S. Vanderbilt University, 1983

M.S. East Tennessee State University, 1995

M.A.T. East Tennessee State University, 1995

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Advisory Committee:

Catharine Biddle, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, Advisor

Maria Frankland, Lecturer of Educational Leadership

Ian Mette, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership

IMPLEMENTATION AND TEACHER LEADERSHIP OF COLLABORATIVE

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George R. Mayfield, III

Dissertation Advisor: Dr Catharine Biddle

An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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The purpose of this study was to investigate the implementation and teacher leadership of collaborative work in the era of hybrid and online learning necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic in a medium-sized suburban/rural high school in central Maine. In situations of intense challenge like this, collaborating with colleagues to produce new teaching and learning modalities can be a beneficial task. Structures like professional learning groups (PLG) provide a means to support and enhance opportunities for just such a task. The study elucidated the levels of implementation of our PLG efforts and sought to inform future use of PLG structures as an approach for collaboration between teachers facing tremendously challenging adaptive circumstances. Collaboration resulted in sharing expertise and enhancement of teachers' abilities to provide quality classroom instruction. The study makes a reflexive examination of the teacher leadership necessary to initiate, support, encourage, and sustain continued participation in the PLG structure at the school through an examination of the researcher's own leadership. As teachers struggled with novel problems around hybrid teaching and learning in the COVID era, the organization of this effort brought together various levels and types of teacher expertise in

interdisciplinary PLGs. It was found that the interdisciplinary composition resulted in the inclusion of often excluded teachers; promoted the development of new relationships; and allowed the focus of the groups to be less on subject oriented material and more on the improvement of teaching and learning under the confines of the pandemic. Thus, group composition and dynamics were key to PLG functioning. It was also evident that leadership decisions and style during the initiative were vital in helping groups overcome the adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 2009) that the circumstances precipitated. The study is presented as an autoethnographic narrative of the researcher's leadership decisions and style and the impacts those decisions had on the PLG effort.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work first to my wife, Kelli, and my daughters, Auralee and Lillie. They have lent unwavering support and love and an understanding beyond expectations when it has taken me away from family things and I love them for that.

I would also like to dedicate this work to my parents and grandparents. They taught me to be resourceful, humble, and to value and love education and people. My paternal grandparents were both respected educators with tenures of over 40 years at Vanderbilt University and in the Nashville, TN public schools. I credit my grandmother, Lillie, with inspiring me to be the best educator I could possibly be throughout my career.

I would also like to dedicate this work to the colleagues I have worked with over the many years I have served in public education in North Carolina and Maine. Each of the schools I have worked in has given me the opportunity to lead and to grow as a teacher and leader. Principals have challenged and supported me and asked for my professional opinions on important decisions. My amazing teacher colleagues have critiqued my work and sought counsel about their own practice in ways that have engendered a deep love for collaboration and cooperation. I have learned so much from them and could list so many of them here. In particular, I want to thank Bryan and Justin for being my sounding boards over the last year as this research has taken place. Our conversations have kept me going and grounded, and I appreciate them more than they can know.

Finally, to my students: I thank you for helping me to realize the dream of being an educator and a mentor for you. It is for you that I have endeavored to be the best that I can be at what I do.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to first acknowledge Dr. Richard Ackerman, without whose help and support this journey would likely have never taken place. His demeanor in the classroom is like none I have ever experienced and his capacity to engage students and to provide feedback that initiates reflection and appreciation for the nuance he can discern in the works produced is exemplary. His wisdom and knowledge shared through courses prior to my entrance to this program and at the beginning of the program around educational leadership and change were key in pushing me forward as I applied and began the program and are most highly appreciated.

I also want to acknowledge Dr. Catharine Biddle for introducing me to qualitative research and helping me to better understand how to engage in this kind of work. As a trained biologist, it was definitely not in my wheelhouse, and she has made it a part of who I am as a teacher and leader. It has enriched my ability to be descriptive and reflective in my thought processes and writing.

Dr. Ian Mette has been instrumental as well in growing my understanding of the processes of leadership and in better understanding how to conduct research and write about being a leader in education. His ever-present smile and pleasant nature make being in class a pleasure.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Maria Frankland as the third member of my committee and thank her for her feedback during my proposal and defense.

As the only classroom teacher left standing in my cohort, I cannot begin to describe how my cohort members' insights and wisdom about leading the schools where you work has impacted me as a teacher and as a teacher leader. I would be proud and grateful to work with any of you and you have my utmost respect and admiration.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

<u>The Basis of the Study</u>

In the spring of 2020, as I thought about how our school/system would cope with the changes imposed in the current crisis created by the COVID pandemic, I began to search for ways to increase collaborative efforts among teachers. I took on the task of setting up professional development workshops and recruited some of our own district teachers to facilitate virtual collaborative opportunities for teachers to learn from each other about topics district teachers had identified as needed. The primary focus, of necessity, was to give all participants access to tools and resources suited to meeting the challenges we had faced during our remote teaching and learning at the end of the 2020 school year. The motivation was that we would face challenges that schools had not dealt with in recent history, and likely, ever. Collaboratively, it was hoped, we could more effectively deal with the many challenges we were sure to confront during the 2020-2021 school year. Furthermore, it was clear to me that this cauldron of drastic change, externally imposed by COVID-19, would also create opportunity for improvement, albeit in an extremely difficult set of circumstances.

These conditions led to the idea of creating a strong, teacher-centered, teacher-led structure for collaboration at our high school for the following year. I organized our staff into small, interdisciplinary, Professional Learning Groups (PLG) in an effort to involve everyone on our staff in the process of rethinking educational strategies we would use in our classrooms as we faced the challenges imposed by the pandemic. I laid out the initial plan by carefully selecting group members and recruiting group facilitators. That role shifted to a more supportive one over the course of the year as we worked to enhance and facilitate growth for our teachers in dealing

with the extreme difficulties encountered related to COVID-19, particularly our school system's choice to go with a hybrid education model to minimize personal contacts by our students. One of the major aims of the study is to examine my own leadership of this PLG effort using an autoethnographic approach.

Collaborative efforts are, in theory, valuable to the success of schools, but, in practice, are difficult to establish and maintain (Luhan & Day, 2010). Judging from my 26 years of experience teaching in four high schools, coupled with evidence from conversations with other educators, high school teaching is primarily done in a very insular manner. This is confirmed by various studies in subjects ranging from music to science, in the US and abroad, that have found there are significant feelings of isolation among secondary teachers (e.g., Sindberg & Lipscomb, 2005; Stone-Johnson, 2016; and Padwa, et. al., 2019). In our district, collaborative work is done in grade level teams at the elementary/middle level, or in departmental work at the high school. Other collaboration at the high school is inconsistent at best and there has been little change to this during my tenure. Freshman teaming has been the strongest collaborative work undertaken consistently. This study examines our efforts to capitalize on the receptive, but challenging, climate created by COVID-19, and serves as a lens through which to understand the benefits and challenges associated with implementing collaborative efforts at our school. It is hoped that it will enable us to refine, improve, and justify use of these PLG structures for future years.

Problem of Practice Statement

At our school, collaboration has primarily been restricted to departmental and grade level teaming. A major goal for this study was to understand teacher leadership strategies employed in the support of small, interdisciplinary, collaborative PLGs. As this was an inaugural effort at this type of work for us, it was important to recognize both the successes and challenges unique to

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our school. Furthermore, because these PLGs were established under the difficult set of circumstances related to COVID-19, it bolsters support to further our efforts around school improvement achieved through collaborative means and led by teachers.

Unlike many schools, ours does not have department chairs or other formal teacher leadership positions. My leadership has evolved over the eleven years that I have been at our school. I have built trust and relationships through networking with other teachers, support staff, and administrators. This has given me the opportunity to influence change at our school, with this PLG effort being the most formal attempt I have made in that regard. I chose the facilitators who led this effort because I knew them as knowledgeable, trustworthy, individuals who were enthusiastic about teaching and sharing their skills with others. The study has the major goal, then, of understanding the ramifications of the teacher-led nature of our work.

Another important aspect of our effort is that successful implementation of change requires not only leadership, but also, time. The principal in our school agreed to honor and protect a time commitment for our PLGs and was (and remains) enthusiastic about the possibilities it brought, both in the hybrid learning necessitated by COVID-19 and for the future. This study should help better understand, then, how important it is that time be protected and honored for teachers to do collaborative work.

Purpose Statement

The primary goal of this study was to better understand the opportunities and challenges associated with the implementation of collaborative efforts at our school in the context of COVID-19 by focusing on the establishment of teacher-led, small, interdisciplinary PLGs for regular meetings over the 2020-2021 school year. It examined the impacts of this effort on teacher perceptions of autonomy, professional discretion, and, perhaps most importantly, feelings

of efficacy for teachers. I, and others (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Kraft, et. al., 2020), have observed that the pandemic has led to tremendous feelings of inadequacy and stress among many, if not all, educators. Particularly, this study focused on my leadership in fostering collegial support around organic, group-generated issues encountered by teachers as they faced many novel challenges in the unique climate of hybrid teaching brought on by COVID-19.

The potential benefits of our collaborative approach were to increase teacher feelings of autonomy and professional discretion, and to enhance teacher feelings of efficacy, all of these, of course with the potential to positively impact student learning. Barnes' (2014) dissertation on the subject of teacher "self-perceived…efficacy" as a result of participation in collaborative efforts found collaboration had a positive effect on teacher efficacy but noted she did not find any significant effect based on whether the collaborative time was used in a structured or informal setting. Gilbert and colleagues (2018), citing other studies, suggest "High levels of teacher efficacy, essential to the shared beliefs of teachers that they can carry out tasks successfully, significantly and positively influences students' learning" (p. 73). Ultimately, it was the hope that those benefits would bolster school morale in a time when educators were struggling with many difficult adaptive challenges related to COVID-19. They faced an unfamiliar situation where they were pushed to the edges of their pedagogical acumen and the PLG groups gave them the opportunity to share common difficulties and solutions related to encountered adaptive challenges.

One aim of the PLG effort was to give teachers more choice and control over their own professional development. Throughout my career I have found that professional time has rarely been as much in the control of teachers as this PLG effort afforded. Diaz-Maggioli (2004) confirms this:

Given that their voices are not generally heeded during professional development,

teachers rightly question their investment in programs that were built behind their backs

yet are aimed at changing the way they do things. (p. 2)

To combat this lack of investment, this PLG effort was truly teacher-directed, from its

conception to its initial implementation, and during its ongoing operationalization. Evidence of

the novelty of our effort was made clear when, as the groups were first formed, one teacher

facilitator reported that his group just could not wrap their heads around the idea that they were

in control of their own professional development destiny. And so, professional development

(PD) time protected from imposition of administrative mandates should enhance teacher's senses

of autonomy and self-efficacy, as it is a recognition of their professional status and expertise. It

was hoped that by allowing small groups to choose their focus, the energy behind professional

growth would not wane, as Reeves (2009) suggests that it can easily do when PD is offered in a

top down and generic way.

An added benefit for our school was that the administrators in our school were busy

finding solutions to logistical issues around educating young men and women while facing

impediments imposed by COVID-19 and dealing with important administrative decisions that

needed to be made. They welcomed sharing of responsibilities with regards to professional

development and growth by teacher leaders. That increased reliance on teacher leaders certainly

helped this effort to begin. Thus the study was well positioned to elucidate benefits of this style

of PLG implementation not only for teachers, but also for administrators under these unique

circumstances.

Considering that we had not had PLGs in the past, the challenges around implementation

of these groups in a complex and trying set of societal and school circumstances pervaded by

COVID-19 precautions were adaptive ones (Heifetz, et. al., 2009). These included challenges like how to best work with students in a hybrid in-person/online educational setting, ensuring personal safety and health, and facing struggles over values and beliefs in a strained political climate as well, with our country embroiled in debates over racial inequities, gender bias, and other volatile issues. Teachers are on the front lines in daily interaction with students which means they are well positioned to understand their challenges and seek effective solutions for the challenges students face.

Our groups gave teachers the opportunity to share and reflect on potential solutions to student challenges. As a result of our efforts, we built both human and social capital (Leana, 2011) and collectively were able to make more sound choices about how to best educate students during this era. In the midst of all the turmoil, we collectively sought new ways to provide the best education possible for our students and the lessons learned should serve us well in the future, irrespective of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The leadership of this work was important, and it was vital to have strong teacher leaders when doing this work. My leadership role was to take this situation and turn it into a holding environment (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz, et. al 2009, Drago-Severson & Blume-DeStefano, 2014) by setting up a structure that allowed educators to better manage and take on the concerns of the situation. Northouse (2019) writes that situational leadership "is composed of both a directive and supportive dimension, and that each has to be applied appropriately in a given situation" (p. 95). The situation caused me to consider the possibilities for how to deal with our adaptive challenges, and I proposed PLG implementation to our administration as a means to organize our staff to face these challenges. I provided organizational, directive, and supportive leadership for this PLG work. This study reflexively examined my leadership in an attempt to understand the

struggles, successes, and failures that I experienced as we sought to build collaborative PLG structures in our school to address our current and, perhaps, future challenges.

Research Questions

The main research questions the study addresses are as follows:

1. How have the intense forces of change in the time of COVID-19 affected our teacher's efforts at collaboration and, subsequently, feelings of efficacy?

2. How has our PLG organizational strategy affected the implementation of our school's initial, novel, PLG effort?

3. How have I exercised leadership in our PLG effort as both a colleague and teacher leader?

Overview of Methodology

This is a qualitative study written as a narrative case in an autoethnographic style. This necessitates a writing style that is inclusive of the participant-researcher's perspectives gained during the study as well as those of the other participants. Throughout the course of the events studied related to my leadership and the implementation of our PLG groups, I collected artifactual data including emails, meeting notes, and memos about conversations with participants and reflective thoughts about our ongoing work. These served to provide perspectives for comparison with thoughts and opinions gleaned from interviews conducted with other participants.

Participants in the study were educators in the school who were organized into PLGs by this researcher. Seven of eight teacher facilitators for the PLGs chose to be individually interviewed. Two focus group interviews totaling 17 teacher participants were also conducted. **Table 1** shows the statistics of the interviewee sample.

Table 1. Interviewee sample sizes and percentages.

Interviewee Type	N Size	Percentage of Group
PLG Facilitator	7	88% of facilitators
Focus Group 1	9	23.1% of staff
Focus Group 2	8	20.5% of staff
Total Participants	24	61.5% of staff

Interview transcripts and artifactual data were analyzed via coding using NVivo. The first rounds of coding were open and subsequent coding resulted in a more categorical grouping and consolidation of the numerous first round codes. Once coding was completed, the narrative of the effort was composed in a reflexive style, situating my own perceptions of the PLG effort and leadership of that effort within the context of the perceptions of the participants. This created a work that allows the reader to have a view of multiple perspectives on the use of PLGs in the pandemic influenced era of education at our school and the impacts that its teacher leadership and collaborative grouping had on that effort.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Content Literature

This literature review focuses on several areas that relate to the efforts we have begun at our school to implement PLG groups (Note: I will use the term PLG preferentially as that is what we have termed our groups. However, much of the literature addresses them as Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs. Some descriptions differentiate the two, but I have chosen to use the terms interchangeably and will refer to them as PLGs regardless of the terminology chosen by the authors of the papers referenced herein to avoid confusion.)

The review first examines some insights into adult learning theory that had bearing on the organizational strategy I utilized. An examination of the literature about teachers' feelings around choices related to their own professional development revealed a lack of a sense of autonomy and professional discretion. The literature review elucidates the generally positive impacts that PLG structures have on teachers' overall feelings of autonomy, efficacy, and professionalism. A significant proportion of that impact is the development of professional capital, a vital resource for a school, and that is also explored here. However, the literature also confirms that implementation and organization of collaborative groups is not without challenges. This is likely exacerbated now, in the climate created by COVID -19.

The value of teacher leadership, as opposed to the top-down institution of PLGs as an innovation, is highlighted next, because a primary focus of this study is to better understand my own efforts at leadership. Finally, the review focuses on the adaptive nature of the challenges that our school, and all schools, are confronting in the face of the pandemic and elucidates

reasons that collaborative efforts, though not a panacea for these challenges, are vital in the construction of new modes of teaching and learning in our schools.

<div align="center">**<u>Learning and Growth Through Collaboration</u>**</div>

In their work on adult learning theory, Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2019) utilize the concept of "four pillars" to highlight important characteristics of collaborative practices that are vital. The first of these is teaming. Used well, it can promote sharing of ideas and growth of team members' internal capacities. They express in a single paragraph the main goal of the PLG effort in our school:

> For instance, while working with others on a team, adults can share and learn from each other's ideas and more fully understand and question the beliefs and assumptions that guide their instructional . . . practices - and of course, their collaboration. Moreover, teaming can decrease isolation, enhance deeper and more authentic communication, include others in supervisory and leadership processes, improve the implementation of new initiatives, and enhance instructional improvement. (p. 341)

Then, they go on to discuss how each of the adult learner types might benefit.

Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2019) suggest that the formation of teams should include a variety of adult learner types. There needs to be support for all types of knowers. "Instrumental knowers" benefit from the support of the group and necessitate the establishment of norms and rules around the act of teaming. They need structure. "Socializing knowers" benefit from teaming because it gives them connections to other team members. They also are good at validating the work of the group. "Self-authoring knowers" are the members who like to share their own ideas and expertise which certainly has potential to benefit the team. Finally, "Self-

transforming knowers" enjoy the challenge of leading the team and maintaining the interconnections that help it to function well.

In addition to the pillar of teaming, Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2019) designate collegiality as one of the four pillars. They state that "engaging in collegial inquiry . . . can help educators listen to and learn from diverse perspectives" (p. 343). They go on to state that establishment of norms and confidentiality agreements are vital to the success of collaborative work.

In a longitudinal 10-year study of leaders who had received training in leading transformational learning, Drago-Severson and Blume-DeStefano (2013) report that using the principles of adult learning theory had continued beyond the leaders' training and had a high level of impact on their work with the adults in the educational organizations they led. They still relied on the concepts around adult learning theory described above to help maintain an appropriate holding environment (Drago-Severson & Blume-DeStefano, 2013) when working with those learning adults to promote transformational learning in their organizations.

In their 2015 paper, Cooper and colleagues validate an emphasis on collegial work. Their study, further, documents the importance of teacher leadership of collaborative work through their examination of the efforts of eleven teacher leaders in generating improved instruction delivered by their colleagues as a result of collegial PLGs. They cite the work of Drago-Severson (2007) as they describe the importance of teacher leadership in successful implementation efforts for PLGs, paraphrasing it this way: "Finally, specific school structures that promote and support effective teacher leadership include time for collaboration, shared leadership, and embedded professional development" (p. 87).

Isolation, Lack of Autonomy and Professional Discretion

One of the difficulties of collaboration for professional development is cultural in nature. In many high schools, professional development is not undertaken collaboratively, but rather, individually, or it is brought to the entire staff by school or district leadership. The former likely contributes to feelings of isolation and the latter, lack of professional discretion and autonomy (e.g., Sindberg & Lipscomb, 2005; Stone-Johnson, 2016; and Padwa, et. al., 2019). Dufour (2011) stresses the deeply ingrained culture of isolationism amongst teachers in most schools:

> The reason for the persistence of this professional isolation — not merely of teachers, but of educators in general — is relatively simple. The structure and culture of the organizations in which they work haven't supported, required, or even expected them to collaborate. Attempts to promote collaboration among educators inevitably collide with this tradition of isolation.

The classroom is a teacher's domain, and they often adhere strongly to the modes of instruction and learning that they already have in place. To collaborate means to open yourself and your classroom up to scrutiny by others which is likely an uncomfortable place to be.

Diaz-Maggioli (2004) emphasizes that topics chosen for PD are often tangential, at best, to teacher needs for growth and of little benefit and/or interest to the educators in a school. The topics undertaken are just not broadly applicable enough to appeal to a wide audience, or they are too broad to be useful or fail to provide take-home additions to a teacher's repertoire. Diaz-Maggioli (2004) goes on to suggest that sometimes, teachers just see PD offerings as an invasion into the time they use for instruction or planning for instruction. Teachers need to feel that the PD they undertake is valuable and that there are pragmatic takeaways, as well as opportunities to continue to refine changes in their practice related to those takeaways, from PD. In a self-critical

statement, Reeves (2009) describes the failure of his own workshop delivered to a large group of teachers:

> I not only did a terrible job; I took a long time to do a terrible job . . . The supposed enthusiasm for a day of professional collaboration disintegrated into a sullen wait for the day's seminar to end. (p. 47-48)

He goes on to emphasize that the best of professional development is not delivered but occurs with repetitive practice and learning within the context in which it is to be utilized. The broad brush of most school wide PD is just not specific enough and, thus, not always applicable to an entire audience of educators. Lieberman (1995) also makes an interesting argument against the effectiveness of a one size fits all approach when he states:

> What everyone appears to want for students - a wide array of learning opportunities that engage students in experiencing, creating, and solving real problems, using their own experiences, and working with others - is for some reason denied to teachers when they are the learner. (p. 591)

Fullan (2007, p. 35) takes this condemnation of traditional PD a step further proclaiming that "Professional development as a term is a major obstacle to progress in teacher learning." And so it is, oftentimes, teachers just see PD offerings as an invasion into time they could use for instruction or planning for instruction.

PLGs as a Solution

Collaboration in PLGs is one structure that has been shown to have the potential for improvement of educational quality (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Bailey, 2016; Johnson, 2016; Farina, 2019; Fullan, 2006; Mattos & Dufour, 2013; Voelkel, et. al., 2016). A PLG is a group of educators whose primary purpose is to collaboratively develop priorities for growth and learning

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for its members that, amongst its several goals, builds teacher capacity and enhances instruction

and learning for students. Fullan (2006) describes a PLG this way:

> Professional learning communities are in fact about establishing lasting new collaborative
>
> cultures. Collaborative cultures are ones that focus on building the capacity for
>
> continuous improvement and are intended to be a new way of working and learning
>
> (p.10).

The importance of collaboration is further supported by the work of Hargreaves (2019),

who sums up his findings in a meta-analysis of collaborative efforts thusly: "It is important now,

therefore, not just that teachers collaborate, but that they collaborate well, and that school and

system leaders enable and empower them to do that" (p. 618).

Human, Social and Decisional Capital = Professional Capital

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012 and 2013) have written seminal works on a concept they

refer to as professional capital. Their premise is that similar to economic or business capital in

the business world, there is value in accumulation of professional capital in the education sector.

They describe three components of professional capital. Human capital is the talent pool within a

school. They defer to Leana's (2011) definition of human capital: "the qualities of the

individuals, their qualifications and competencies on paper" (p. 32). A second component in

professional capital is social capital. Leana (2010) establishes that human capital in isolation is

valuable, but not as valuable as when it is present in a school or system where social capital is

high. Leana (2011) strengthens her stance on the importance of social capital, stating that her

research suggests "when the relationships among teachers in a school are characterized by high

trust and frequent interaction—that is, when social capital is strong—student achievement scores improve" (p. 33).

The final component of professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013) is "decisional capital". They use this explanation: "Decisional capital . . . is about how you develop your capabilities over time, particularly your capacity to judge" (p. 37). They place emphasis on the importance of experience in the development of this kind of capital. New teachers, they explain, have an abundance of enthusiasm and excitement, but lack the experience in the classroom to hold high value with respect to decisional capital. Teachers in the twilight of their career hold considerable potential decisional capital, but their mentality is key in whether or not they share that capital with others through collaboration.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2013), thus, suggest that it is mid-career teachers who likely possess the greatest potential for the sharing of knowledge about teaching. In the end, it is those teachers who possess high capacity for teaching in certain disciplines (human capital), who are enthusiastic about working with others and sharing their understandings about effective teaching (social capital), and who likely possess strong pedagogical knowledge about making daily choices in the classroom (decisional capital), that have the most professional capital. A focus on making good use of that professional capital through collaborative efforts is, thus, a strong strategy for growth in schools.

COVID-19 has provided challenges and just such an opportunity for growth. Teachers have responded in many amazing ways. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) acknowledge this. They ask the question of whether COVID-19 "has arrived at a time when it can inadvertently become a catalyst for deepening professional capital" (p. 333). They further stress this point by highlighting that COVID-19 has had a duplicitous effect on the need for collaborative

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relationships, yielding an opportunity for teachers to work together to solve urgent and difficult challenges.

Challenges to Implementation of PLGs

The establishment of PLGs has been a growing trend in education to combat the isolation and lack of autonomy that educators often experience, especially in high school (Dufour, 2014). One of the primary difficulties in this, however, is in defining a professional learning community. Lomos, et. al. (2011) point out that "the definition and implicit operationalization of the concept of professional community has proven to be a difficult process" (p. 124). The operationalization of any one definition is confining, and thus, the definitions, perhaps more appropriately termed models, of PLGs are just that, models. There is no one correct way to provide opportunity for collaboration, but rather, a plethora of possibilities that can all be taken advantage of to improve education for all stakeholders in a given situation. Unfortunately, many attempts made at formation of PLG's have been top down and, as a result, largely unsuccessful (Klein, 2008; Luhan & Day, 2010; Fullan, 2006).

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) suggest that the establishment of collaborative cultures where there is no existing collaborative effort has two necessary conditions. The first is that much of the work is informal and dependent on relationships and trust. However, they caution that, without appropriate leading and prodding, it is likely to fail. The second suggestion is, thus, that deliberate arrangement of collaborative groups is more often than not a prerequisite to establishment of these cultures. They go on to caution, though, that too much pressure can have a detrimental effect on collaborative efforts. Thus, there is a fine line to walk when a system is implementing such "contrived collegiality" (p. 118).

Also ubiquitous in the research is the fact that time is rarely honored for PLGs in a consistent manner (e.g., Luhan & Day, 2010; Kilbane, 2009). Reeves (2009) states that "Schools that claim . . . to be professional learning communities but fail to provide time for collaboration are engaging in self-delusion" (p. 46). Furthermore, autonomy of those groups is not always honored. Comparing PLG structure and autonomy in two schools with similar student demographics where student achievement data suggested opposite trends, Casas (2019) found a significant difference in the autonomy afforded the PLGs. He reported similar adherence to the PLG cycle as described by Dufour, et.al. (2008) in both schools, but, in the school with higher levels of perceived autonomy in their PLG structure, student achievement was found to be trending upward, and in the school where teachers perceived less autonomy within the PLG structure, student achievement was heading downward.

Thus, it is in the implementation of PLGs where some of the greatest potential for failure may occur. Often, teachers see new programs as the next thing in a line of things they are asked to do for professional growth and development. Fullan (2006) describes the risks in seeing PLG implementation efforts as "innovation". One is the common sentiment among teachers that the effort is just a fleeting one and will go away when the next thing comes along. He goes on to say that this "innovation" view compromises the potential for appreciation of the opportunity PLGs provide for educators; appreciation which should grow from a deep understanding of what it means to have the opportunity to collaborate. But in a system that has not previously conducted or valued collaborative work, that is difficult.

Leading Change from Within

Reeves (2009) addresses some myths that he identifies as obstacles to leading school change. His "myth #4" is that "People Love to Collaborate" (p. 46). He concludes a comment

about provision of appropriate time (cited above) by saying that "schools that provide time for collaboration . . . but fail to provide practice and accountability for effective collaboration are equally delusional" (p. 46-47). In a later section of the text, while discussing how leaders set the direction for PD, he stresses the importance of internally driven work:

> With an emphasis on internal capacity, the leadership of professional development efforts comes from the faculty itself, and a large part of professional education takes place in the classroom while teachers are engaged in authentic teaching (p. 63).

This is a goal of the PLG effort; to generate new ideas and share new ideas internally, utilizing and refining them in practice to face challenges collaboratively.

Adaptive Challenges amid COVID-19.

According to Heifetz, et. al, (2009) change leadership must be adaptive to face the adaptive challenges such as those brought on by COVID-19. The pandemic has brought us challenges that are not well defined and have evasive solutions as well, displaying the very essence of adaptive challenges. There have been very real senses of loss amongst educators, students, and all stakeholders in our educational communities. Heifetz, et. al. (2009) describe adaptive leadership this way: "Adaptive leadership almost always puts you in the business of assessing, managing, distributing, and providing contexts for losses that move people through losses to a new place" (p. 22-23). This school, and all schools, are in the position of having lost familiarity, forcing moves to new places. Enhancement of collaborative efforts seems an effective way to deal with the adaptive challenges we face.

Collaboration - not a Panacea

In their recent paper on the impacts of COVID-19, Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) discuss how professional capital has become synonymous not only with autonomous practice, but also

has necessitated the ability for teachers to be flexible to adjust to the system in which they teach. They emphasize that this shift pushes teachers' professionalism to become more openly and broadly collaborative. The concept of collaboration is, thus, expanding in the age of COVID-19. In their estimation, Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) suggest that, in schools where collaborative structures were already deeply ingrained in the school culture, adaptability to these adaptive challenges will be higher than in schools, like our own, where it is not.

However, they go on to suggest that there are reasons that collaborative efforts may not be the magic bullet that solves the challenges to education in the pandemic. First, and perhaps most relevant to the current study, is the fact that collaboration done poorly is no help at all. This is reminiscent of Fullan's (2006) cautions around leading and organizing collaborative efforts through PLGs that fail because they are too superficially contrived or externally imposed. A second relevant point is that they recognize that much of what teachers actually do is individual and takes place in isolation. The collaborative work is intended to support teaching efforts, and should do so, but will not likely result in collaborative teaching.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study (**Figure 1**.) addresses four elements critical to PLG implementation. These are teacher leadership of the effort, the organizational structure of the PLGs, and various aspects of school culture and demographics that may have an impact on the effort. Complicating matters, and fourth on the list, is the all-encompassing impact of COVID-19 on any educational processes undertaken during the time frame of this study.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Factors Affecting the Implementation of Collaborative Efforts via PLGs
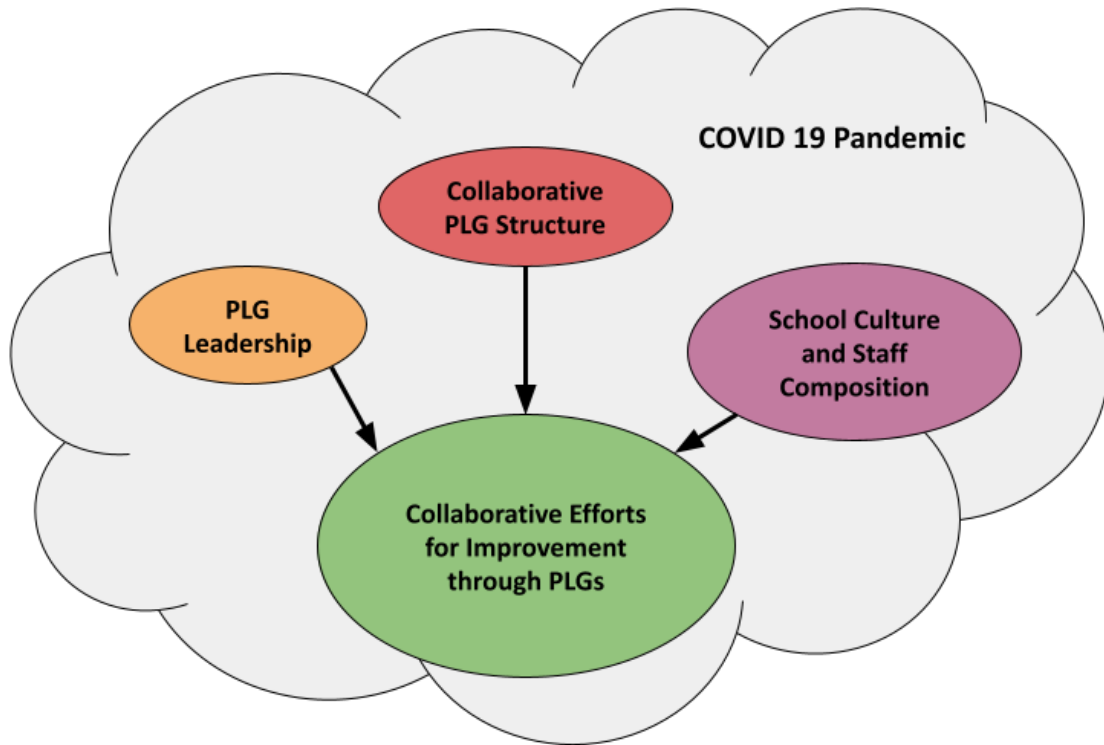
PLG Leadership

The first of the four areas in this conceptual framework is PLG leadership, including the leadership of the district and school, the teacher leaders chosen to facilitate the effort, and my own leadership in the design and implementation of our PLGs. As the focus of the conceptual framework is on these PLGs, it is important to understand how interactions between leadership and the PLG groups affected the overall effort. School leadership was supportive of this effort and committed to the time it required. At least initially, teachers chosen to serve as facilitators were similarly committed, though some exacerbating circumstances emerged due to changes in contractual obligations in deference to the general tension that has been created for educators in

the age of COVID-19. That shift impacted the level of commitment by at least some of the facilitators and teaching staff.

Leadership of PLGs should be distributed (Dufour, 2004). Members are to have equal input into the choices for the foci of their work together. Facilitation of our groups was appointed to a group I chose so that initiation of the effort could be organized around their displayed leadership, enthusiasm for collaborative work, and abilities and expertise in use of educational technology. The reasoning for the last criteria was that effective use of instructional technology is currently a major focus of time and effort for educators. The mission given was that they were to be facilitators, not directors, of the effort. Their groups were to establish norms for discourse and communication at the initial meeting and they were asked to do their best to maintain focus on professional growth and collaboration during group meetings. As the ongoing presence of the groups becomes more embedded in the culture of the school, it is hoped that future formation of PLGs, following the model of Dufour, et. al, (2006), will become more of an organic and fluid effort and that teacher choice of PLG group will become a part of the fabric of the school.

Collaborative PLG Structure

The second foundational aspect of this study is the structure and organization of the PLG effort at our school. There were several aspects of organization that were considered in the formation of these groups. For teachers, their experience level and the discipline they teach were important considerations and an attempt was made to diversify the groups as much as possible with respect to these factors. Groups were composed entirely of non-departmental colleagues and an attempt was made to distribute levels of experience, though this was secondary to separating departmental colleagues. The rationale for this was that departmental meetings were in place and that there were teachers who belonged to departments of one or two. These individuals were

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often left out of collaborative efforts or added to meetings of other departments which may or may not have served to improve their own practice. Analysis of these strategic choices was one goal of this research.

School Culture and Staff Composition

The third potential contributing factor affecting implementation of PLGs was related to school culture and the composition of our staff with respect to professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013). It was important to situate this study, qualifying it using the school's grade span and its racial, ethnic, socioeconomic diversity, and population size; and finally, staff composition, including gender ratios, years of experience, and discipline taught. These will help other schools who potentially could benefit from this effort to understand how their own schools might be similar or different from ours. It will also provide some information for individual teacher leaders who might undertake similar efforts elsewhere. The study was influenced by the extent of collaborative culture that is currently in place and elucidated that our teachers perceived changes in that cultural aspect of the school. Efforts were made to tease out the details of these perceived changes in the analysis of the focus group interviews and analysis of artifacts.

External Forces - COVID-19

The fourth, final, and perhaps, most influential set of contributors to the implementation efforts of our PLGs exists in the external circumstances tied to the COVID-19 pandemic. It impacted every aspect of our teaching, including our efforts at collaboration - implementation, leadership, time available, etc. The imposition of such measures as hybrid and online learning, and the rapidly increasing use of technology in education to support those measures, were at once, among the greatest challenges as well as a considerable motivator for our groups and their efforts. It presented a challenge, in that the current climate in education is novel, and was

motivational in that change and growth were not optional and teachers were eager to find solutions to the novel problems they faced!

Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) evaluate potential impacts of COVID-19, suggesting that schools where collaborative structures were already deeply ingrained in the school culture will have greater adaptability to these challenges. However, they less certainly state:

> systems like those of many states in the United States that are more bureaucratically hierarchical and less collaborative and that have been less willing to trust their teachers' professional judgment . . . will have likely produced opposite trends (p. 334).

As we did not have these collaborative structures in place, this study was timely, allowing a better understanding how trust placed in the professional judgement of teachers impacted our use of collaborative efforts.

Overall, the goal to understand the efforts at improving school collaboration, particularly PLG implementation, and how that has impacted teachers and the school overall, was primary in the study. Many measures of that impact relate to teacher feelings and impressions of the success or failure of the collaborative efforts. The typical measures of feelings of autonomy, professional discretion, collaboration, and choice regarding growth efforts have been central to the interpretation of the impacts of our effort (e.g., Casas, 2019; Coello, 2020, Smith, et.al., 2016).

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Context

The School Setting

This study focuses on the implementation and leadership of PLGs at a medium-sized high school/district in the central region of the state of Maine. The school is in a community which is classified somewhere between suburban and rural, with some students coming from outlying rural areas, and some from the immediate, more suburban area. Students are primarily white with a small population of minority students including Native Americans and a very small group of African American and Asian students. At the time of the study, it had a staff of approximately 40 educators, with, variably, 20 ed techs who support teaching staff, mostly in the area of special education. The teaching staff was slightly over half female and there was only one minority ed tech on the staff who was Native American.

For 2020-21, the student population was just under 500. Students had the option to choose to attend remotely but less than 10 percent initially chose to go fully remote for the year. The remainder attended in a hybrid model, the majority of whom attended in person on Monday-Tuesday and the rest on Thursday-Friday. The Wednesday schedule was remote for all students and as the term began and students had an abbreviated class schedule in the morning. Teacher office hours were available in the afternoon for additional support, parent-teacher conferences, and other contact needs. However, that schedule eventually changed to match the same daily schedule as the other days because of apparent confusion of students resulting in missed online classes on Wednesday. This hybrid learning model created challenging teaching and learning circumstances for teachers and students alike.

Previous Collaborative Efforts

Over the last ten years, the school has implemented or maintained some collaborative effort amongst teachers, mostly involving departmental or grade level work. Grade level teams have primarily focused on discussions of various issues surrounding individual students which team members share, with the freshman team using the model designed by the BARR Center (Building Assets, Reducing Risks, https://barrcenter.org/about-barr/barr-model/). Departments have focused a large proportion of working time on implementation of standards based curricular procedures in recent years. There have also been some district efforts at collaboration across grade spans within subject areas, but those efforts have exhibited little sustained enthusiasm and have not produced many tangible outcomes. Working out the logistics of bringing together educators from different grade levels has been the major impediment to these efforts as well as, at least for some, a perceived lack of purpose. Previous collaborative efforts, outside of freshman teaming at the high school, have been used to address technical challenges, not to enhance the efficacy of pedagogy and classroom instruction. Thus, a new model of collaboration through this PLG effort was much needed at this time due to the challenges imposed by the pandemic.

New Collaborative Efforts

The particulars of the case under study include the use of a unique approach to the implementation and operationalization of PLGs. I was the primary driving force behind the organization of this PLG effort, choosing that role despite the fact that I have no formal position of authority or leadership in the school. As we moved toward the fall semester, it became clear that we were going to face a tremendously difficult set of adaptive challenges (Heifetz, et. al., 2009) and I felt that we needed to have a means in place to support all teachers as they faced those challenges. After consultation with our district curriculum coordinator and two of our

principals, I worked to create a plan. In support of that plan, I secured two major commitments from our administrative team. First, the groups would have protected professional development (PD) time to work together. Second, the groups would be free to choose the areas in which they pursue professional growth and development and the ways in which they offered each other support.

The condition that had the greatest impact on this inaugural year of our collaborative efforts, was the challenge of coming to fruition under circumstances of stress novel to public education and to our society in general - the stress, of course, due to COVID-19. Originally the plan for these groups had been to work toward a system of peer collaboration, peer observation, and feedback, with the stated goal of improvement of our curricular offerings and the quality of instruction overall. However, the stress teachers felt, induced by the pandemic, necessitated, at the behest of several teachers who were among the leaders selected for the PLG effort, that we forego the observation and feedback component and focus on raising awareness of pedagogical approaches to hybrid learning as well as means of student and self-care and mutual support.

Ultimately stress, combined with contract variances granted around previously held terms relative to professional development time for teachers, resulted in various degrees of commitment by educators to the organized PLG effort . Observations made during the year, as well as data collected through the interviews conducted, however, suggest that the circumstances bolstered and encouraged informal means of collaboration outside of the structure of the PLG initiative. Thus, it is clear that teachers stepped up to help each other in many ways.

Implementation

Using the model I proposed, with suggestions from other staff, the implementation of PLGs began with nine small (3-5 individuals) interdisciplinary, groups of educators meeting on a

regular, protected schedule, every two to three weeks. The interdisciplinary nature made this effort unique, as there is little evidence in the literature that this is an oft-initiated format (Finch, J. A., 2017; Terry, et.al., 2018). In addition, as previously noted, discipline-focused efforts at our school have excluded some staff members from collaborative work and the goal was to correct that. Each group had a teacher facilitator who was chosen based on my knowledge of their skills with technology and perceptions of their leadership skills and previous enthusiasm shown for collaborative work. It proved challenging to maintain a schedule and to maintain a high level of enthusiasm throughout the year for all groups, but the effort is ongoing in the subsequent academic year. While our PLG effort was implemented in a somewhat top-down semi-structured way, the freedoms of focus choice for each group and long-term affordance of protected time granted by the administration contributed to palpable success and allowed it to blossom into more organically inspired groups of educators in the current school year.

Ultimately, the lessons gleaned from this study will hold implications for teacher leaders who seek to elevate their own school's efforts at collaboration in this, and perhaps other, instances of climate induced stress. It could also provide insight for future efforts at similar schools and for other teacher leaders as they continue to deal with the impacts particular to COVID-19 on educational practice.

Research Design

A Qualitative Approach

I used a qualitative, case study approach with three strands: a) a focus on PLG organization and implementation; b) an investigation into the impacts of teacher leadership of the effort; and c) an autoethnographic examination of my own leadership efforts. One goal was to inform my own future leadership and perhaps that of other teacher leaders facing similarly

difficult circumstances. Krathwohl (2009), suggests that qualitative studies are "particularly effective in communicating with practitioners" (p. 239). More specifically, he suggests the qualities of a case study (p. 30-31) are to "explore, describe, explain"; to use an "inductive-emergent, bottom-up" approach; to use words as the primary data source; and to be holistic in focus and composition. This approach allowed me to capitalize on my broad personal understanding as a participant researcher of the many challenges we have faced, and to modify and guide my research analysis utilizing the emergent strategy and holistic approach that Krathwohl (2009) suggests.

Yin (2003) suggests that a case study is appropriate if it fits one of several circumstances, one of which is that the case is unique. Further, this PLG effort represents what Yin terms a revelatory case. It was revelatory in that we were carrying this forward in the circumstances surrounding the pandemic which created, arguably necessitated, opportunities for collaborative work. Yin describes the revelatory case as one possible "when an investigator has an opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation" (p. 42). I was, of course, a participant-observer, which allows interpretation of the effort from the perspective of experience and allows access to individuals in the case that might otherwise be unavailable.

Analytic Autoethnography

This study was written in a style described by Anderson (2006) as analytic autoethnography, as distinguished from the more common "evocative autoethnography" (Ellis, et. al., 2011). He describes 5 key features of this research approach: "(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self

(4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (p

378). The analytic autoethnographic method, then, Anderson (2006) describes this way:

> The resulting analysis recursively draws upon our personal experiences and upon our
> broader social understandings to enrich our self-understandings . . . The kind of self-
> understanding . . . at the intersection of biography and society. Self-understanding that
> comes from understanding our personal lives, identities, and feelings as deeply connected
> to and in large part constituted by - and in turn helping to constitute - the sociocultural
> contexts in which we live. (p. 390)

He suggests several virtues of this approach. The first is that the researcher has the opportunity to
"meld research goals with a variety of interests, including making a living" (p. 389). The second
virtue of this approach relates to intimate knowledge from an insider perspective. He warns,
though, that the researcher must be careful to pursue other insiders' interpretations, attitudes and
feelings as well as their own" (p. 389), and I have done that.

Research Questions

The research questions the study addresses are as follows:

1. How did the intense forces of change in the time of COVID-19 affect our teacher's efforts at
   collaboration and, subsequently, feelings of efficacy?

2. How has our PLG organizational strategy affected the implementation and outcomes of our
   school's initial, novel, PLG effort?

3. How did I exercise leadership in our PLG effort as a colleague and teacher leader?

Method

Participant Selection

Two participants' focus groups were utilized. The original intention was for participants to be selected in a purposive manner for interviews. Krathwohl (2009) describes this as "common in qualitative research" (p 172). The purpose was to ensure inclusion of representatives of as many PLG groups as possible. Another goal was to seek data from teachers from each of the major academic departments, and representatives from the school who rarely have the opportunity to engage in collaborative work because of small department size. In addition, I made a strong effort to encourage special education teachers to participate in the focus groups. They often interact only under specific circumstances with the general education teaching staff and I wanted to understand how the added layer of interaction with general education staff had impacted their work. The focus group questions also sought information about how their presence had impacted our general education staff as well.

Ultimately the organizational goal for the focus groups was to seek the broadest representation of the staff possible without having the groups become too large. Krathwohl (2009) suggests a small size is most appropriate: ". . . [a] typically small (7- to 10-person), relatively homogeneous group representative of a target population" (p. 304). My goal was to have one focus group in this size range, but I ended up having two groups because of the response of teachers to the request to participate. Participants represented multiple PLGs which allowed me to learn about the perceptions of their PLG groups, but it also allowed interviewees to hear each other's commentary on how the various groups had undertaken their work. This was beneficial in that one's comments triggered others' recollection of important events and

understandings gained about their PLGs and stimulated conversation around topics relevant to the study.

Though I ended up not using purposive sampling, per se, the sample did end up representing our staff, broadly speaking. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that special education teachers were the largest subgroup who chose to participate in the interviews. Foreign language teachers were the only subgroup of teachers that were not represented. In addition to the focus group participants, my goal was to interview all facilitators of PLG groups individually. In the end, seven out of eight facilitators chose to be interviewed. **Table 2** shows the specific number of participants from each of the subject areas taught in our school and shows I had good representation from almost every department. The first category consists of all the teachers who are not departmentally affiliated or have departments of two or less.

Table 2. Interviewees by Department or Subject Area

Department or Subject Area	Number of Focus Group Participants	Number of Facilitators Individually Interviewed	Totals by Department or Group
Arts/PE/JROTC/Alt Ed/Health	4	1	5
English	2	2	4
Math	2	2	4
Science	3	1	4
Social Studies	1	0	1
Special Ed	5	1	6
Total	17	7	24

Figure 2. Chart showing breakdown of experience levels of all interviewees.

Years of Experience
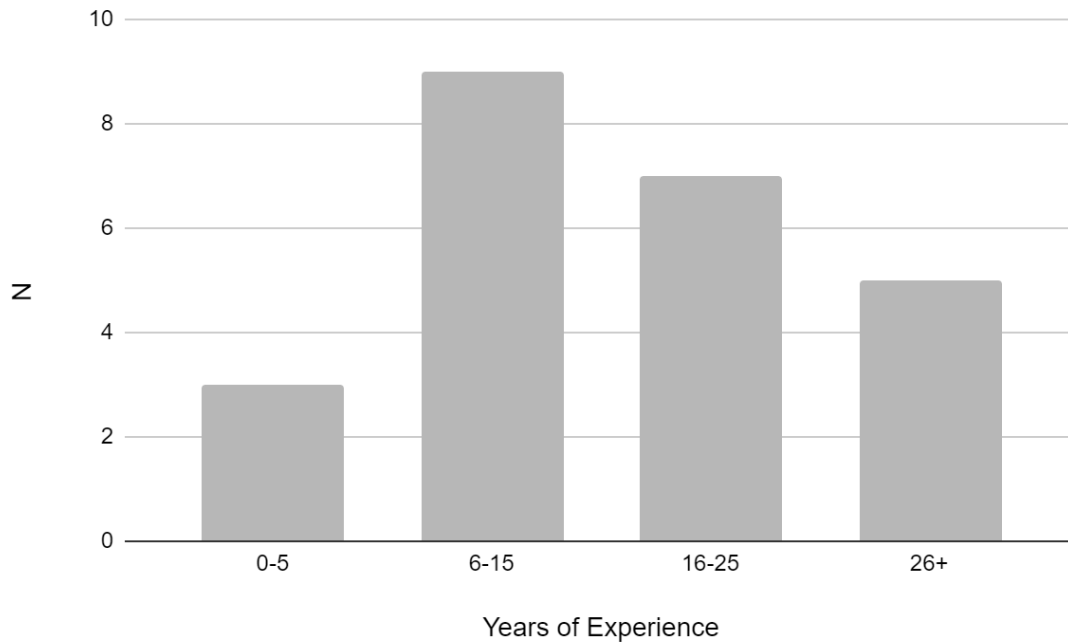
The interview sample also included teachers of all experience levels. The majority were in the 6-15 years' experience category which is reflective of our staff population in general. **Figure 2** shows the breakdown of experience levels of all interviewees.

Instruments/Protocols

Data collection for the three study strands stemmed from 3 main sources. The bulk of the corpus was collected through the use of two focus group interviews and individual facilitator interviews probing impressions and perceptions of our collaborative efforts and my leadership of our PLGs over the course of the year. The second piece was artifactual data collected over the course of the implementation effort both prior to and after formation of the groups. Finally, the data included relevant journal entries and memos I made throughout the process as I reflected on the work in progress.

Focus Group and Individual Interview Protocols

The focus group protocol examined the effects collaboration had on school morale, teacher efficacy, teacher autonomy, teacher professionalism, instructional pedagogy, etc. For the leaders', the protocol sought to elicit understanding of the ways that they responded to the challenges they faced in leading our groups. This had the potential to reveal both effective and productive (as opposed to ineffective and unproductive) strategies within the context of the PLG groups. Anecdotal information prior to the study suggested that most teachers in both the facilitator and participant roles had not previously participated in such small and interdisciplinary groups, so this was untrod territory.

The perspectives of the facilitators, because they entered the process at an earlier stage with a different role, helped to triangulate data. The questions directed at this group were more focused on the challenges and decision-making processes they used in deciding how to organize their individual group's efforts. The questions also sought to clarify how facilitators' choices affected the faithful participation of the other staff in the groups through the course of the year. Of course, both groups had questions/prompts directed toward understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on the functionality of their groups.

The protocol for the participant's focus group is found in Appendix A and the facilitators' interview protocol is in Appendix B. The focus group protocol follows the model of an example from the RAND Corporation (2009) for semi-structured interviews and consisted of several major questions for focus, along with sub-questions when needed to tease out details from the groups' initial responses. The facilitator questions are similar in content and focus, with slight modifications to accommodate the different role they had played in the PLG effort.

Artifactual Data

Over the year prior to our PLG implementation, there had been multiple meetings between myself and our school and district administrative team about how the formulation of our PLG groups might transpire. Artifactual data was collected throughout the year by myself and the teacher facilitators of our groups. It included notes and memos from the implementation phase as this PLG effort took shape. At least some significant proportion of those communications and meeting notes were kept in a Google Drive folder and in physical records. There were also many communication emails between myself, administration, facilitator teachers, and other teachers that I stored in a protected Outlook email folder. Finally, PLG groups were asked to maintain records of their interactions and store them in a shared Google Drive folder as these documents and notes had the potential to contribute data towards a better understanding of our efforts. In addition, email communications and incidental accounts of tangential activities that affected the PLGs along the way were used as data. All artifactual data were kept in a password protected Google Drive folder with the exception of the group notes which were/are working documents and remain accessible to PLG groups to access.

Analysis

Autoethnographic Data Collection and Analysis

The autoethnographic analysis of the data drew findings from the artifacts as well as from the focus group and individual interviews. It also drew from memos written to describe events, feelings, changes in situational climate, and any other information that helped to narratively depict my efforts at leadership of this PLG work. The five conditions for effective autoethnographic analysis outlined by Anderson (2006) and described above, were met in different, but related ways.

First, I am and have been a member of this school staff 10 years before I became a researcher of it, so I do have the benefit of being, integrally, a *member researcher*. This gives me an introspective view of the work done with respect to the staff and school culture.

Second, *the reflexive nature of autoethnographic writing* was achieved through development of a thick narrative description of events that transpired around our collaborative efforts and my role in them. Bolton (2010, p. 14) describes reflexivity here:

> Reflexivity involves coming as close as possible to an awareness of the way I am experienced and perceived by others. It is being able to stay with personal uncertainty, critically informed curiosity as to how others perceive things as well as how I do, and flexibility to consider changing deeply held ways of being.

There were certainly informal conversations about the strategies I used in this process. Those are recounted, to the best of my ability, though concrete and timely notes about these things were sparse. I kept some journal notes in the form of memos on a weekly basis for analysis as well. I also took memos on an irregular basis when events or circumstances arose that seemed important in helping understand the issues that arose around our PLG effort and my leadership of it. The journal entries focused on my own perceptions, feelings, and growth with respect to my leadership of, *and* struggles with, our collaborative efforts. They also grew from feedback I received from others involved in the effort along the way.

The third aspect of analytical autoethnography, *a narrative visibility of the researcher's self*, is satisfied through clear identification of my role, including a careful rendering of what Anderson (2006, p. 384) refers to as my "feelings and experiences" in the narrative. I "openly discuss the changes in [my] beliefs and relationships over the course of the fieldwork, thus

vividly revealing . . . issues relevant to membership and participation in fluid rather than static social worlds".

The fourth criteria, *dialogue with informants beyond myself,* was accomplished through analysis of the focus group and individual interviews and of memos and communications like emails with others in my school. This ties closely back to the reflexive nature of autoethnographic analysis.

Finally, the *commitment to analysis* proceeds from a closer look at the data from the interviews and artifactual data, and patterns revealed in the initial and subsequent coding choices that I made. I sought evidence of theoretical underpinnings for my strategies and choices made in concert with others who helped lead and push our collaborative efforts along.

Coding Strategies/Types

A combination of coding types was employed to analyze the focus group interviews, the artifactual data and the journal information. Coding began with an initial, open coding strategy, to "search for processes - participant actions that have antecedents, causes, consequences, and a sense of temporality" (Saldana, 2016, p. 118). This strategy served to capture the essence of the participants' thoughts first, then categorize statements and ideas from the memos and notes taken and from the interviews to seek commonality in the artifactual and interview data. Appendix C is an initial mind mapping matrix that shows how I initially sought to determine the best strategy for analysis of my coding data organized by combined research questions (as suggested in Maxwell, 2013).

Secondary coding created parent codes that were more categorical and reflected the major themes of the research questions around the PLG implementation effort. Some of those categories were organizational and sought to yield insight into the impacts of the chosen criteria

of small size, protection of time, and interdisciplinarity of the groups on our PLG effort. Another category held COVID related comments to search for thematic responses related to the pandemic and the difficulties inherent in the forced changes in teaching and learning strategies. There were also categories related to teacher autonomy, teacher self-efficacy, and teacher's perceptions about latitude in professional judgement. Finally, there was coding that informed the analysis of leadership of our groups, both the teacher facilitators and my own. The intersections and points of separation between these categorical codes gave me some idea of the relative importance and interconnectedness of various aspects of our efforts at collaboration. It is noted that not all initial codes actually fit into a specific parent category.

The artifactual data was then coded with the same scheme as the focus group interview data to complete analysis of the bulk of the data set. In the autoethnographic narrative, derived in part from the journaling and memos, I was careful to heed the previously noted warning from Anderson (2006) to "be careful to pursue other insiders' interpretations, attitudes and feelings as well as their [my] own" (p. 389). The story I tell in the analysis of our collaborative efforts is not just my own but is about my leadership as seen through the impressions and comments of others with whom I worked. In particular, I hold the belief that a leader must be a servant and be authentic (Northouse, 2019) to be worthy of followership, and I have sought evidence that I have utilized the attributes of leadership that characterize those two styles. The code book from NVivo is found in Appendix D.

Study Timeline

The study described herein took place during the 2020-2021 school year. This was the first-time students had been back in physical classrooms at our school since the start of the pandemic. Students attended in a hybrid learning format throughout the duration of the study.

The PLG plan was implemented over the first month of the school year. I led this effort

and, after initial work to implement the PLG structure with our staff, I continued to give support

to facilitators of groups as needed. During this entire time, I kept some memos and filed all

relevant email communications into a folder to refer to later in my artifactual data analysis. The

first of the interviews with the facilitators took place on March 1st, 2021, and the final one on

March 31st. The two focus groups were conducted on March 9th and March 17th. All of these

were conducted via Zoom either before or after the school day as the participants preferred.

Transcriptions were cleaned up from their original format from Zoom as time allowed in March

and April of 2021. Following transcription, analysis of the data began in April of 2021 and

continued through the summer months into August. Subsequent narrative composition around the

case study then began and was completed in December 2021.

Validity/Trustworthiness

The effort to establish the PLGs was underway for some time prior to the collection of

the data, which may have caused some uncertainty of response because of the effects of

participants already having been in the groups for a time. Events and feelings that occurred more

distal in time to the interviews may have been difficult for participants and myself to recall,

especially in light of the intense climate around COVID-19. Furthermore, distinguishing

complications resulting from the stress of COVID-19 induced conditions from those resulting

from the novelty of the PLG effort was sometimes difficult and constitutes one threat to study

validity.

Triangulation

The triangulating effects of analysis of artifactual data gathered during the

implementation process, combined with the focus group interviews and memos, however, should

help alleviate some of that threat. Minimization of threats to validity is accomplished through use of multiple types of data (Denzin, 1978; as cited in Krathwohl, 2009) and because sampling occurred across time, space, and persons, the study has the characteristics needed to minimize the threats. Krathwohl (2009) says "Triangulation is the process of using more than one source to confirm information: confirming data from different sources, confirming observations from different observers, and confirming information with different data-collection methods" (p 286). By interviewing in focus groups rather than individual PLGs, I sought the input of multiple persons and perspectives from multiple PLG groups and individuals with varying backgrounds, experience and areas of specialization. This elicited reinforcing/conflicting statements in the form of a member of one group confirming/denying the experiences of another group. I had no issues with openness in the focus groups, as I had anticipated might be the case, as the group members seemed comfortable with each other and with me. I used confidentiality statements as the focus groups and interviews began to further facilitate open and honest communication. The artifactual data also helps with triangulation in that it represents data collected across a broad span of time rather than a snapshot of summative data collected in a single moment at the end of the year.

The findings are presented in a thick description of the events surrounding collaborative efforts at our school. I describe strong emotions and feelings that have been expressed by my colleagues as they dealt with the monumental challenges of COVID to their perceived efficacy as teachers. I have also examined and elaborated on my own leadership and the difficulties and challenges of that leadership, again using thick descriptions and reflexive examination of particular interactions and emotions I had throughout the year.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is specificity of the case due to the nature of the setting in which it was conducted and my integral role as participant-researcher. However, because that is a critical element of autoethnography, it is important to reach the overall goals of the study. Perhaps a greater limitation is the self-imposed critique of my work with its implicit bias as the designer and leader of the PLG effort.

While there certainly are other schools in similar communities of similar size and demographic makeup, and certainly teacher leaders in those schools, it would be difficult to take this case as broadly generalizable. This is exacerbated by the circumstances surrounding COVID. As we return to 'normal' in the future, whatever that might look like, certainly it is hoped that these conditions will not persist.

And so, the revelatory case the PLG effort represents, implemented in these times, is perhaps not reproducible. It is highly likely that how we view public education has been permanently altered in ways we cannot even recognize or summarize as yet. For this reason, the limitations are perhaps even greater than in 'normal' times. The study findings cannot be interpreted as a recipe for success, but rather, a study of efforts made to promote collaborative culture in a world that, at least for a time, has stymied some portion of our efforts at collaboration. However, as when an artist arranges the shards of glass that compose a collage, perhaps at least a shadow of a new image of collaboration will begin to emerge that will hold merit amongst the many models of PLGs.

All that said, while the external generalizability of the results is certainly limited, the study of our school's collaborative efforts could be expected to at least demonstrate some internal generalizability. Leadership among teachers is certainly important to the success of a

school, and so the study of my leadership of our efforts could prove beneficial to others seeking to exercise or elevate their own level of leadership in our context or beyond.

Another limitation stems from the fact that some teachers chose to limit their participation in the effort due to temporary contract leniency regarding PD time negotiated by the local education association, which limited the sample of opinions and ideas from participants. Many of those who actually chose to participate regularly in the PLGs were also the ones who chose to be interviewed, though this was not the case for all the interviewees. However, the overall understanding of the school's climate of collaboration is now much clearer. The study provides illustrative examples of collaboration that exhibit some efficacy in dealing with the most unusual of circumstances surrounding the pandemic and the upheaval of our current system of education. These may also prove to be useful to other similar schools who are working to provide support and opportunity for collaborative efforts among their own staff in challenging times.

A final note on limitations and implications is that Yin (2003) strongly urges the use of at least two-case studies in research to combat the perception of a weak overall study. Despite that I only studied a single case, I would point to the tremendous expression of common problems encountered by educators from across the US and the world. This provides evidence that the case is not one in isolation and could, thus, provide some clarifying understanding of the importance of collaborative efforts in such times. (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Jena, et. al., 2020; Kraft, et.al, 2020; Upoalkpajor & Upoalkpajor, 2020)

Ethical Obligations/Concerns

Positionality

A primary ethical concern relates to the fact that some participants perceived this as an initiative that was handed down to us from administration. This perception of a top-down initiative is certainly indicative of the need for just such a structure as this for professional growth and collaboration to be developed. It lends credence to the purpose of giving teachers greater autonomy and professional discretion through these groups. However, because I conceived and initiated the effort, I tried to be careful to structure the interviews in such a way that the responses of staff shouldn't have become a set of statements about what they thought I wanted to hear. However, I have to acknowledge that some responses may have been tempered by my presence as the interviewer.

These cautions are, on the other hand, the exact reason that the choice of autoethnography for this study proved beneficial. It was precisely my positionality that gave me access to the information I needed to evaluate the data most clearly. My insight by virtue of my intimate involvement as a participant researcher was crucial to the interpretation of the data. My own perceptions were clearly triangulated, in the ultimate analysis, by the careful coding of the variety of sources in the data corpus.

Recognition of Bias

A potential ethical issue and source of bias stemmed from the fact that this is a self-evaluation of my own handiwork. I was the individual who established the format for our PLGs and directed their implementation. I did my best to remain aware of my own subjectivity as I examined the data. My initial National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and my recent renewal have taught me about how to be objective in analysis of my own work so that I can

understand where growth is needed. I believe this experience tempers this bias to some degree. The desire to find success in the effort, though, must be acknowledged.

As I have remained a leader in my school in shaping the strategies around continuation of the PLG effort these findings will help guide my future decision making. One way to accomplish this is peer review of analysis and findings from interview data, as suggested by Krathwohl (2009). Study participants of individual interviews had the opportunity to review the data and suggest amendments and alternative viewpoints that helped me to recognize my personal bias and had there been any corrections or additions, I would have incorporated them into the analysis. However, I did not receive any feedback that required them.

Privacy Issues

Privacy and confidentiality were also concerns. No identities of participants are disclosed herein. It is certainly possible, however, that some individual responses to interviews could be recognized by individuals with close ties to the school, namely other teachers, administrators, and perhaps even students and parents. I have worked under the condition of confidentiality to the greatest extent possible. Participants in interviews were given open and complete statements concerning the use of the interview data and the fact that I could not guarantee anonymity but that their identities would be protected to the greatest extent.

Do No Harm

Another potential ethical concern was related to the discovery of information that might be harmful to my school or individuals within its ranks. To avoid this, I maintained a focus on findings relative to my leadership and implementation of the PLG structure and other collaborative efforts and not on the school as a broader entity. As such, I did not ask for any input in interviews that might have implicated individuals in the assertions of interviewees, but

rather focused on strategies and approaches for growth utilized in the PLGs and resultant individual feelings about autonomy and professionalism. Names mentioned in interviews were stricken and no data that relied on the use of names was used. Any statements that reflected negatively on specific individuals was stricken from the data set.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS/RESULTS

Research Question 1

Sailing through the storm: Navigating collaborative work and assessing the course taken through the pandemic

The quantity and intensity of impacts related to COVID-19 on our professional learning group (PLG) efforts could not easily be overstated. Many teachers made statements similar to this one from one of the interviewees: "I think our times dictate what we talked about in our group...Because we were all struggling with the almighty elephant in the room - of COVID." Primary among the negative effects was a general heightening of anxiety amongst teachers, which began very high as we started the year. Another comment attested to the duress teachers were experiencing:

> you were looking at trying to initiate something brand new in a time when, man, not too
> many people were looking to do anything new. We were looking to survive. And so, I
> think you've got to frame everything with that.

This is a very vivid example of the challenge we were facing in implementation of a new collaborative effort at our school in the face of COVID.

In talking about the difficulty of maintaining a regular meeting schedule, one facilitator said, "I suspect that a good portion of that was just feeling bogged down by the daily minutia of what this year has brought." By alluding to the "daily minutia," this person was underscoring how time became precious in a Covid affected year and it presented a challenge to participation in the PLG groups. However, this comment by another of our facilitators attests to the fact that at least some teachers generally felt they were going to need to collaborate:

I know teachers are going to have to get together. I know there's, like, there's gonna have

to be an avenue...an outlet of some sort, because there's going to be a ton of problem

solving that's going to have to happen for everybody to kind of navigate this.

This was confirming for the collaborative efforts I believed were going to be so important and

this teacher became one I would go to when I needed help or advice about how to proceed

through the year when faced with challenges with uncertain solutions.

Because of the uncertainty, there were absolutely aspects of the PLG effort that were

fluid through the year. One of the goals when we conceptualized these groups in my talks with

administration and our curriculum coordinator, had been to think about how we would use them

to improve the practice of peer feedback at our school. Peer feedback has not really been a vital

part of our professional growth and development. Comments from many of the interviewees

suggest that teachers recognize the potential value. In one facilitator interview, he conveyed his

group's sentiment this way around peer observation and feedback: "so they were excited that one

of the things in this group would be observing and in, in talking about the teaching of other

teachers." When you have teachers observing teachers, as opposed to the more traditional model

of evaluations and feedback given by administrators, both the observer and observed benefit.

The stress surrounding COVID, however, quelled the aspiration to include peer feedback.

One teacher commented:

I do like the idea of peer observation...It's great to have on the radar for the near

future, I just wonder about putting it out there right now as people are super overwhelmed

with everything else on our plates and if these groups are going to work and be something

staff are invested in, we need to be careful about throwing too much at them too soon.

I had at least a couple of the other facilitators say to me in passing that they felt like it was too much to ask of teachers in the shadow of COVID.

There were, of course, other concerns: teachers were concerned about getting sick. They were concerned about not having students in the classroom and about how to effectively teach students when, simultaneously, some were in and some out of the classroom in the prescribed hybrid learning environment. Many conversations were had over the very real concern that our students would not have equal access to education in our hybrid learning situation due to inequities of access. There were just many unknowns that teachers were dealing with. Through the interviews and focus group coding, three main themes of group discussion emerged that could be tied directly to impacts of COVID: technology challenges, socioemotional themes focused on our students and ourselves, and challenges related to issues around student engagement. This chapter 4 section, then, is a summary of the impacts of COVID on our collaborative PLG efforts.

Initial Enthusiasm and Perceived Value of the PLG Effort

Initially the enthusiasm for our groups varied. Our meetings were a key boost in my own thinking about how to better educate my students in the hybrid learning environment. Others expressed similar enthusiasm. One facilitator related "So if your question is enthusiasm, man, I was all in. Whether it's COVID or not COVID, um, I don't know if my enthusiasm would be any different." An email from another facilitator also expressed the value they felt for this opportunity:

> Generally speaking, we enjoyed our meeting and are finding these meetings worthwhile because we get to connect with each other as people and as teachers. It seems that it is a good thing to stay in touch and have new ideas as we are adventuring in this new hybrid

learning format. Plus, being from different departments and teaching different subjects,

one of us might have an idea that another has not thought of but might be worth a try.

This was a sentiment shared by others as well. This teacher was enthusiastic about the

interdisciplinary nature of the groups and thought the PLG work was going to be worthwhile:

maybe it's an opportunity for a relationship to be started, whether it's alt ed and math,

math and English, or whatever, I think it opens that line of communication. That, too,

supports student learning down the road because it could turn into something else. It

could turn into a relationship that you never saw coming.

Another said it this way: "I would say that I was excited about it, even though…I was excited

about the opportunity to meet with people that I work along with on this hybrid learning

adventure". The evidence for enthusiasm was clear.

The idea of this PLG effort was clearly novel. One teacher commented that the idea of

having colleagues to meet with on a regular basis was new to him as that had never been the case

before in his former school. "I was very excited. In the past, again, it was all kind of 'me'. We

didn't have anything like that. It was the old everybody get together, we'll talk about

something...So, when being assigned to a group, I thought it was going to be a good thing."

Unfortunately, this teacher also relayed that his group just did not work out as well as had been

hoped. Another teacher's comment showed their perception of a positive outcome when they

said, "working with teachers to actually produce good education for students is something...that's

definitely, I think, bringing me forward". Our formal PLG effort helped build relationships that

enhanced teachers' propensity to collaborate with others about what they were trying to

accomplish with their students.

The Importance of Time

Despite initial enthusiasm, one clear implication from the data was that as the year went on, and largely as a response to the stress created by COVID, people became weary, so anything that imposed a commitment of time became less and less appealing. Data from meeting notes suggest that most groups met the first month or two fairly consistently. However, that consistency waned due to other demands on teacher time and the general sense of weariness. One teacher stated:

I think that extra load of having to teach in this kind of environment, it was just so exhausting, people thinking about having to be in a meeting, afterwards or before school, either way, it's just, I think it was more than they really wanted to have to deal with.

Another example from an email sent to me read "more than anything, the people in my group felt like time is more precious than ever, and so … I'm suspecting that my PLG members may not meet often."

There were only 4 groups out of 9 whose notes reflect that they continued to meet through the year. At least one group indicated they did not meet at all after the first meeting, and another did not submit any notes and may also not have met beyond the initial week. Part of this seemed to be that facilitators did not have the energy to wrangle people. If nobody wanted to meet, they were not inclined to chase them down and push them. One facilitator said "So that has been a challenge, like me, feeling like our wrangler. Like 'Hey guys, it's, you know it's a week for PLG, what do you have for availability'." There were some facilitators who were fairly persistent, but others did not press for participation. I would include myself in that second group at least for a brief period of time in the middle of the year right after Christmas, although I did restart our meetings in the early spring of the year.

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As a result of COVID-19, teachers were really busy just trying to keep their proverbial heads above water. About a week after our first PLG meetings, our union representatives went to the superintendent and asked for a reprieve on the mandate that we have in our contract that we complete 25 Tuesday afternoon meetings through the course of a year. Those meetings are intended to be Tuesday afternoons after school for 90 minutes as a part of our professional obligation to our district. Because he recognized the challenges we faced, the superintendent relinquished that mandate. One facilitator expressed this in an email immediately when the announcement was made that we did not have to account for our 25 meetings: "With the unions negotiation of not needing 25 meetings this year…I do not see a reason to just get another meeting in if the 25 are not required". It was a comment that revealed how busy teachers felt in general and the understandably cautious approach to commitment of time many were taking. As a result, teachers were much less inclined to commit to Tuesday afternoon PLGs. Without exception, all the facilitators made comments similar to this one when asked about the impact that announcement made on the enthusiasm for PLG participation. Another said this: "I think the real drawback was...when it came about that the meetings weren't mandatory...I think that was the tipping point." No one commented that they did not want to meet because they saw no value in it. It seemed more that teachers did not want something on their plate that did not have to be there.

Technology Challenges

One of the impacts voiced early on in our PLG groups was that teachers were worried about their capacity to teach online as COVID necessitated. When I set up professional development for district teachers at the end of the 2020 school year, I found out that many of our teachers had never had any real experience teaching in an online environment. The school had

utilized some online programs for credit recovery, but those programs were primarily self-guided and paced by the students and had never been used by teachers other than those who teach summer school and a couple of special education teachers who use it throughout the year.

Some pieces of the overall repertoire of requisite skills were in place, but certainly there were few of us who had the confidence to say they were ready for hybrid teaching. Many teachers, though certainly not all, were using and had become familiar with the G-Suite apps from Google, but many of them had not been consistent users of apps like Google Classroom. There was use of technologies like YouTube, Khan Academy, as well as some textbook specific resources by some teachers. So ultimately, the use of online learning technologies by the staff was highly variable, ranging from some who avoided technology to as great a degree as possible, and some who embraced it to the greatest extent possible.

The fact that we were to teach in a hybrid environment, then, posed an adaptive challenge regardless of previous experience because teachers were having to do both virtual and online learning at the same time, a situation few, perhaps none of us, had ever experienced in the past. As a result, much of the conversations in our groups early on focused on the challenges related to teaching in that hybrid learning environment. One teacher specifically mentioned "And now we're doing this virtual hybrid model and that throws a whole 'nother wrench, so…". The centrality of the focus, at least initially, on hybrid learning challenges was also in evidence here:

> The biggest thing I thought...a great thing was the fact that it [PLG group] was member
> lead and being able to say, 'okay we're just not going to talk about whatever we're told to
> talk about, let's talk about something that we all need to talk about', especially where we
> were at the beginning of the year, when everybody was trying to get into this whole
> hybrid type learning.

The strategies teachers employed were highly variable, but in the end some general patterns emerged. Some chose not to do any live online teaching and sent work for students at home via Google Classroom or physical packets of work. They basically only gave direct instruction to their in-person students. Others, myself included, taught almost completely synchronously. This meant it was important to spend PLG time addressing technical challenges.

The previous data suggest mostly negative impacts of COVID, but there were motivational impacts as well on teacher collaboration. At least partially as a response to novel challenges, teachers knew they had to do everything they could to enable them to provide the best possible opportunities for learning by their students under less-than-optimal conditions. One teacher put it this way in our interview: "I think this whole pandemic has forced me outside of my comfort zone. Like, I can't say I'm going to learn about that later. I had to learn it, like, now, because I gotta teach it in a week." Several of our teachers stated that the PLG groups provided the opportunity to share challenges, but also a way to show empathy for each other and share the burden of improving our ability to utilize technology to improve the opportunities for our remote learners. One teacher said "... there are some benefits, you know, to this situation because I've been thrown into 'how do I incorporate technology, how do I use these things?' So, so, then the trick is, what technology can I use with this content that's going to allow my students to become more engaged and, and that is going to increase discussion?"

Socioemotional Support

COVID forced our educators to seek and offer help to colleagues and our PLGs gave us the formal opportunity to do this. It also seemed to increase our willingness to be vulnerable and to allow others to see our weaknesses and to seek help from each other. One teacher put it this way:

...the most valuable thing was learning about what other teachers are struggling with

made me feel like I wasn't alone in the struggle...I think it is sometimes easy to think that

'Oh, this is hard because I'm, I'm not good at this.' Whereas, when I, you know, hear

from a teacher who's been doing it for 20 plus years and they're also having a hard time, I

think like 'Oh, okay well it's not just me.'

The implication was that this teacher felt that in a normal year we may not have been so willing

to say, 'I'm just struggling with this and I really do not know how to do it.'

Some teachers felt that, rather than in the groups, much of the collaboration they were

doing was in brief encounters and one on one discussions in the hallway or in another teacher's

room. One particular instance between two teachers was described in an interview: "Currently I

collaborate every day with [another teacher] ...we share a door to our room, so we easily

collaborate that way". Another teacher expressed a similar sentiment that pertained to their

physical location in the building promoting collaboration: "I've been able to rely on [the

teachers] where I work... I may bounce ideas off of them and work with them and kind of

brainstorm some ideas from time to time." Another commented "... the most productive

collaborative experiences have been kind of happenstance, and, I would say, with colleagues that

have classrooms that are nearby. That kind of allows for convenient, frequent conversations."

This type of impromptu collaboration that happened outside of our group meetings via email, or

on the phone with a quick call, or in a conversation in the hallway or in the teachers' room, over

lunch, was clearly important.

Another impact of COVID was that it forced us to look for a place of comfort where we

would not feel like everything about our teaching was unsettled. One comment suggested a

teacher's tendency to be too hard on herself and commented about how the collaboration that

happened helped her to be more aware of being too self-critical: "I have learned through conversations with all of my colleagues; even, you know, the five-minute things in the hallway, to be kinder to myself. And to be more patient with myself." At least initially, teachers seemed very unsettled about how to use the hybrid learning system and what we could accomplish. The mental task of providing a good education for all our students was difficult because we found ourselves so emotionally challenged by all that was going on and drained by the unfamiliarity of teaching both in person and online.

As a result, there was quite a bit of focus on socioemotional topics in our meeting groups. One teacher compared a "normal year" to what we were all experiencing:

> So, there was a lot of, you know, 'I just need to unload', or someone unloads and then somebody else is having a good day, so 'let me just put this in perspective for you'. And I think in a normal year we don't do that enough, because we just get, we're so focused on the academic rigor and the academic side of things, which is super important, I mean, don't get me wrong, it's super important…but I started noticing last spring, that I really, as a teacher, don't take care of myself enough, and neither do my colleagues. And that it's, you know…That needs to be a priority now. But also, when the pandemic is over, we really need to keep taking care of each other and reminding each other to do that.

It was clear from this comment that this teacher found this a valuable outcome from our PLG effort.

Addressing a Lack of Student Engagement

Not only did we talk about caring for ourselves, but about caring for our students. One of the biggest impacts of COVID that we often talked about in our groups and outside of them, was about which technologies were most effective at engaging students in their virtual work, an

important topic related to hybrid learning. One group's meeting notes highlighted this focus and are found in **Figure 3**. These notes illustrate the active pursuit of means to involve students who were not in class, as well as a focus on alternative means of assessment and how to give feedback and motivate students.

Figure 3. Meeting Notes from one PLG Group as an Example

We talked about ways to engage students in virtual learning. Here are some ideas we talked about:
Student choice:
o in projects or activities
o many ways to show same skill
o gives student a bit of ownership in the project
· Connect to current events or real-world problems
· Discussions to build community
o Maybe give a grade for this?
· Group work
· Synchronous meetings
· Audio and visual
o the power of using our own teacher voices in videos
o Looking for ways to give feedback to students with audio recordings
o Ways to add audio comments in Google Classroom?
Ted-Ed videos
Ed Puzzle
Google Meets
o Break out room possibilities
o Polling in Google Meets
o If here, type in chat

Another facilitator described how their group discussed the efficacy of different strategies to engage students:

It did come up about 'how do you engage the kids? How do you get them talking?'...

[another teacher] was using the Owl in her classroom...she talked a lot about the Owl and

how it picks up...whoever's talking so then it's helpful in providing the kids that are

online...they still get the conversation. Whereas like me I'm just...recording using my

computer, so if I'm having conversation with the kids in the class, the kids online aren't

necessarily getting that information unless I'm repeating what was said. So we talked a

little bit about some of those things, but, you know, the ones that had the cameras off,

and, and how do you bring them into the conversation as well.

Student engagement, then, was often the topic of conversation, especially after the initial push to

become more proficient at the use of virtual teaching tools and methods.

Notes from several of the other meetings reflect a variety of related concerns around this

issue. Teachers repeated the familiar laments that many students, when they were at home, kept

cameras and microphones turned off, so the teachers had no way to verify easily that students

were participating. Often, in fact, it was found out inadvertently that they weren't. Anecdotally,

teachers conveyed that sometimes they would tell everyone class was over and some individuals

would not sign out of meetings; they would not respond when asked questions; they would often

just not show up! One meeting note reflected frustration from a teacher whose class required

physical participation. She could not easily assess whether students were actually doing the

activities that were required of them. As a result, considerable discussion occurred about how to

engage students. That discussion will probably end up being beneficial to all of us in the end,

even as we move to what is hopefully a more normal educational circumstance.

Research Question 2

Setting the sails and course for waters unknown – organizing and implementing new PLG's in

uncharted territory.

The organizational strategy for our PLG effort began to take shape prior to the year in

which we implemented it. When COVID happened, those plans had to be reformulated to some

degree, however much of the plan that had been put in place seemed to be still applicable for our

effort. In this section of the chapter is a presentation of the thoughts of colleagues and my own observations about the various organizational aspects of our PLGs. These organizational aspects included small-size, interdisciplinary composition, and demographic factors used to identify both facilitators and members of the groups.

The concept of PLGs was essentially new and, to some, seemed extra work that they could not readily associate with improvement of practice. One facilitator reported that the novelty of this effort was in evidence in their first meeting. The quote was:

But I know for our group, the first one was...it was a little weird...as far as, with the expectations...they had a lot of questions around, ' well, is this just going to be another meeting'…It was just an education, you know, around what it was and what the purpose of it was and...at the first or second meeting, at one point, it was like 'so you're not like...this isn't a meeting where you're just going to tell us a bunch of stuff?' and [I responded] like 'no, no that's not what this is.'...I think just the novelty of that was good, but it was new.

Because of the novelty of the PLG effort, we modified its goals as we went along.

Perceptions about Group Size

The first aspect of the organizational strategy was determination of the size of the groups. I chose to organize all staff into groups of 4-5 teachers. Most comments were positive about the small group size. People felt that there were definitely advantages to having only four or five people in a group. The primary advantage was that everybody felt more comfortable to participate in the conversation than they would in professional development (PD) activities undertaken in larger groups. One facilitator put it this way when asked if he thought the group size was appropriate:

Absolutely, because what, anything bigger and you start to get to too many people. Then, the quiet ones that don't normally talk are gonna start to shelter back a little bit because they don't like to talk. They're just not comfortable speaking in big groups of people. Anything smaller though..., I think, five is a good number, maybe six, maybe, but five's a good number, because if one or two can't make it, you can still have a meeting with three and still get together. If you're at three or if you're at four, let's say, even two can make it work... I really do yeah.

This statement confirms staff do not always find large group PD opportunities in a school useful as a few voices usually dominate the conversation.

One other advantage noted relative to small group size related to the flexibility it affords. It seemed to instill confidence in all group members in that no topic was off limits, and if it turned out to be unimportant to the group, it was still acceptable that it was brought up.

I think in the smaller groups, too, when we have an issue, we don't feel like we're necessarily wasting everybody's time. If we throw that concern out, we can just say 'Is anybody else [having this issue]', and if nobody else is, we can go 'Okay. That's fine. It's just me. I'll figure it out.' But most of the time, the groups are like 'No, no, what's going on what's the problem? We can probably solve this amongst us.' so I feel like we're more willing to enter those [conversations]

Many teachers never get the chance to do much besides listen in whole staff meetings, especially in the hour to hour-and-a-half time frame we have traditionally utilized in our district. So this teacher obviously appreciated the opportunity that small group size afforded for all to have a voice.

Some group meetings fell victim to potential risks that accompanied small group size that I did not anticipate. Despite the comment noted above, there was concern that with groups of four, for example, if a couple of people couldn't be there for the meetings, then the meetings could not be productive. For some groups that meant the group would just choose not to meet when, say, two group members could not participate. In other cases, though, the group just chose to continue, even if it meant that on occasion, they had one-on-one conversations with two people. This happened in my own group on at least a couple of occasions. In contrast to the concerns, some statements made in the data suggest that there was a notable ease with which a two-person meeting proceeded. One facilitator commented: "When it was just me and [another teacher] …I felt like we were able to just get to business, you know...it was kind of like, it was more fruitful…" From my own knowledge of this particular case, the reason for this success was that one teacher was having some technological difficulties and the other, the facilitator, was able to provide the needed support. This did not really meet the initial expectations for the groups but did serve the goal of support for colleagues.

In some of the interviews it was suggested that an increase to six group members might be a good number. The comments made along these lines were that it would more likely ensure a meeting would not get as small as two teachers if one or more members could not be present. In the end, though, most teachers interviewed felt that five was a good number.

Perceptions about Interdisciplinary Groupings

The second organizational strategy was to include people from different departments and avoid having folks that are from the same department in the group. This was seemingly well received as I didn't get any negative comments with respect to this. One of the positive things said about it was that having interdisciplinary groups allowed people that normally do not

interact much in the normal course of events, to form new and better relationships. One facilitator put it this way: "I had no working relationship [with this teacher] until our first meeting. So that, that did open up a relationship with a teacher that I never ever probably would have had." Another said

> I would echo that sentiment, I think that's been one of the most powerful things for me, is that I have gotten to know people that I didn't know very well and would never have gotten to know very well.

This sentiment was confirmed by others as well. The interdisciplinarity of our PLG groups brought us in contact with people in our building that we rarely spend time with. While everyone knew each other, outside of our departments, many did not know each other well. Rarely have they had the opportunity to choose to collaborate professionally, so the organizational strategy of our PLGs facilitated that. A teacher in one focus group commented "I think that moving forward, we, as a group, are going to be better at utilizing the strengths of our colleagues." This suggests that at least he feels our efforts will have an impact that will endure.

In a year when virtually everyone was struggling with the difficulties of teaching in the pandemic, another teacher commented "What the interdisciplinary in COVID, though, helps you realize, math is struggling with it, just like science is struggling with it…" It is clear from this statement that the teacher appreciated this tangible benefit of interdisciplinarity, recognition of the shared struggles we were all experiencing. Another teacher struck a similar tone:

> ...the most valuable thing was learning about what other teachers are struggling with made me feel like I wasn't alone in the struggle, like, because I don't really talk to other teachers very much outside of the group that I do talk to, and so, you know, it was interesting to talk to, you know, a special ED teacher who has similar challenges, and

worse challenges in some ways, made me, like, say, 'okay I'm not the only one that's

experiencing this challenge', or 'I'm not the only one that is having a hard time…'

It is clear that understanding we were not alone in our struggles had value that could not be

understated. The groups helped teachers more clearly recognize, in a time when many had

entered the year with considerable apprehension about their ability to deal with the many

challenges we would face, that others were in the same place and had the same or at least similar

struggles.

Another primary goal of this strategy was to give teachers whose departments are really

tiny the chance to collaborate and hold discourse about teaching with a larger group of teachers

than had been the norm for them. Bautista, et.al. (2020), found that collaboration with colleagues

from other disciplines can alleviate feelings of isolation among teachers of arts and music. Our

art department consists of two teachers, our language staff consists of two teachers, PE is one

teacher (although she and our health teacher collaborate), and our health teacher is also just by

herself. I made a point to be sure that they were included in groups. The feedback from them

showed congruence with the aforementioned study in that they appreciated the opportunity to

have a small group to interact with that was not just their teaching neighbor in the building,

relieving the sense of isolation that these teachers experience.

One teacher, who is relatively new to the building and was chosen as a facilitator because

of her technological expertise, and facilitated one of our most successful groups, pointed out the

advantage in terms of relationships in this way:

I do like the model of having us be in different content areas. And even teaching like

different level kids, I think that's really positive, because I think teaching can already feel

like you're isolated on an island completely alone and then, beyond that, sometimes you

feel like you've got a good network, but maybe it's just your department, maybe it's just

the people you happen to have next door to you so it's really difficult to sort of branch out

and really connect with people who are physically or content wise distant from you, so I

think that's been a really positive thing.

It was clear that the benefit was not just pedagogical but relational as well. That teacher also

pointed out that the fact that she was relatively new to the building had been an impediment to

her getting to know folks well. She said "I think they're [the staff] quite friendly, but...some

people have been here a very long time, and that can be very intimidating and alienating to new

teachers. So, I think that's been really positive." Another fairly new teacher to the building who

was a facilitator felt similarly.

Another benefit to the interdisciplinarity was that teachers felt that it gave them the

opportunity to talk about good teaching in general rather than discussing their particular subject

area. One teacher said it very well:

...if we're going to talk about teaching or instruction, sometimes it's easier to do when you

are interdisciplinary because you don't argue over content. You know when you're within

your own department, sometimes we get so focused on the content pieces where if we

were to remove those and just talk about the instructional piece...you can't be as specific,

but then you can actually talk about teaching and you don't have to talk about math, and

you don't have to talk about history, you can just talk about teaching, because you have

to, in order to communicate, you know, with those that are in the room. So, I think it's a

benefit.

That sentiment was echoed by another teacher as well who said:

I think that is the value of the interdisciplinary nature, right? We don't tend to get into this, this wormhole of science or what not...And I think about the few conversations that our group had which involved everybody...It was about how to get students to participate when they're virtual. Like when you're having a class session, what are some strategies? And we as a group, talked about all the different things that we do, and there was an individual that I guess hadn't thought about those strategies and... made some effort to implement those.

So, the conversations that grew from having educators from multiple disciplines in a group ranged from talking about good teaching to discussions about how we could better engage students in a virtual environment. The perceived benefit was that when we remove the isolation or departmentalization, we open ourselves up to strategies we had perhaps never considered in the narrow focus of our own disciplines.

Another teacher expressed that she felt enthusiasm for the interdisciplinarity of her group because it gave her the opportunity to hear about ways of teaching that were very different from those commonly used in her own discipline. She put it like this:

I loved that it was interdisciplinary because I get to spend time with people in my department, you know, on a more frequent basis, first of all, in a regular year. But what this made me realize, working with teachers in different disciplines, is that's something that I would not have thought of, something completely like, out of the box. In a completely different discipline, it made me [see] something that I could do in my classroom. It was about what makes good teaching. How do we reach kids? What works? It wasn't based on the content of the class; it was based on ways to, you know, different activities that we can do, regardless of the discipline. It was really, it was really fantastic!

Another teacher put the same message quite succinctly: "it was nice to branch out and get some other fresh sets of eyes on things, you know, and talk through problems."

So, to summarize the impacts of interdisciplinary groups, they allowed teachers who normally might have been excluded from routine opportunities, like department meetings, to spend time collaborating with colleagues. It freed teachers from the constraints of their discipline and allowed them to look at models of teaching they might not otherwise have ever considered. It helped to establish new relationships throughout the building that otherwise would likely have never materialized. Finally, it enabled teachers to become comfortable with the idea that they were facing struggles that were not unique to themselves. In short, it countermanded some of the isolation that high school teachers often feel in their work.

Strategic Choice of Facilitators

The third organizational strategy used was about how the facilitators of the groups were chosen. Each of them had varying levels of experience. We had one facilitator with 20 plus years and we had another who was a fourth-year teacher. The primary guiding force behind the selection was to choose people who were technologically literate and who used technology regularly prior to the advent of school wide hybrid education.

One of the younger teachers, who was very good with technology, expressed that he was a bit apprehensive about being labeled a "leader" since his group was made up of folks whose combined experience topped 50 years. He said, "I felt a little stress just, in that, the pressure was going to be there to be the leader in the sense that I don't generally feel like a school leader." In this case, his group did struggle some, in that they had a hard time as a whole group maintaining a focus on teaching and learning at times. However, because of his expertise, he became a go to

person for a couple of group members over the year, and still is today, when they require help with technology use.

The fourth-year teacher mentioned above had the most successful group of all, in that they met most consistently and throughout the whole year. She also has shown that she is a leader among our teachers despite expressing some trepidation over her relative lack of experience. She commented that she told her group "I kind of stress that too, like, I don't have the same expertise as you guys [the others in her group], but I do have this one area [technology] that I'm more comfortable with and I'm happy to share that, but I'm gonna, you know, hopefully, learn more from you as well." She explained to me this was an attempt to divert some of the attention from herself as *the leader* of her group. In the end, regardless of the years of experience, most interviewees in the focus groups (which did not include facilitators) commented on how grateful they were to have someone (at least one, but sometimes more than one) in the group that was technologically literate in the face of the challenges that we had around hybrid education last year.

One pitfall was that some of our facilitators reported that, because of the composition of their group, they were not benefiting from being in the group because they ended up being the expert that poured out knowledge upon the people in the group. One facilitator said "...because we're focusing a little bit more on technology, my one, maybe, you know, frustration, is I do feel like sometimes I contribute more than I get. That's just the nature of like, my comfort level with technology." This was not true for most groups. Some of the groups had a better balance with respect to technological literacy. Ultimately for most groups, even members who were not overly technologically literate picked up on a particular tool for use in online teaching, and really took it and ran with it and brought that back to their groups.

Experience Levels

Another organizational strategy used when choosing group members was to consider experience levels. Those experience levels were important in that I didn't want to have an entire group of new teachers in one group and an entire group of older teachers in another. One of the goals to which I aspired after conversations with our curriculum director, was to promote this idea of cross pollination and not only across subject areas, but also across experience levels. It turned out that in many of the groups for this past year, the great benefit of that was that the younger teachers, being digital natives, were really able to help some of the older teachers who were not so in developing online tools and procedures to use for their students. One teacher, who was in her first year at our school, was just a tech guru and everyone was amazed at her work. I was her mentor teacher, and though I consider myself fairly proficient, I paled in comparison to this digital native. One downside to this for her was that attendance in her PLG was usually her helping others and she felt little benefit from being a part of the group in general other than she was happy she could help others with their challenges.

Gender Balance

It also seemed important to try to include folks of varying genders within a group so that a group wasn't all males, or all females. I had one group that reorganized after a couple of weeks and somehow, I missed that it ended up being a female facilitator and all male teachers. I wouldn't have thought that would be a problem but in the end, she was the one person who mentioned that gender issues were something that I should consider (though this occurred in casual conversation rather than in the formal interview she participated in). She didn't say that it was bad, just that she would have liked to have had another female in her group. Of the male teachers in her group, two of them were very experienced and one of them was not so much. Our

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staff had roughly 50/50 male to female ratio. There are a few more females than males, but not much more, so, other than in this group, the organization of the groups reflected this.

Inclusion of Special Education Teachers

Another organizational aspect that people seemed to really appreciate, and made comments about, was that I tried to put a special ed person in each group. That was accomplished in six of the nine groups. One of the difficulties in high school teaching is wrestling with how to ensure that we meet the directives contained in IEPs and 504 plans and such of our students with special needs. The special ed teachers do not always get to come out with the students into our rooms to see what they're doing or what we are trying to do with them. Often the extent of the communication is an email interchange between groups of people, trying to figure out how to best support a student. The oft-cited advantage of these groups was that the special ed teachers were able to actually sit in the room and listen to the classroom teachers' rationales about why they do some of the things that they do. One special ed teacher in the focus groups said

> I think, especially from my standpoint, with special ed, where I feel like so often we're
> kind of on the outside looking in and trying to make sure that we're doing right by our
> kids but also keeping, keeping things, you know, as close to the typical high school
> experience and keeping along the lines of what you guys [gen ed teachers]are doing in
> your classrooms and the efforts that are being made there. So, personally, I like it, I like
> the opportunity of being able to work with general ED teachers on a little bit of a smaller
> scale.

The end result was that special ed teachers benefited by learning about the rationale for some classroom strategies. This gave them the opportunity to input to the gen ed teachers ways that

might be helpful to their special ed population. The special ed person that was in my group has a mostly self-contained classroom and group of students. For her, there was not quite the same benefit, but she did end up using some of the tools that she learned about in our group in her special ed room and found great benefit in that as well.

General education teachers (as the SPED folks refer to the rest of the teaching staff) also found benefit. One facilitator commented

...there are things that work for special ed students that also can work for other students, you know, and we kind of had...those discussions about just making sure that directions and things, everything is as clear as possible. And in thinking about the things that special ed teachers kind of talked about, how things that can derail her students and prevent...them from having success...made me realize like, wow, I think, yeah, those are those are similar issues that my students have, you know. And I would say, partly, it's because she had very little experience with gen ed students. She kind of thought that it was a problem that only her students had because of their educational needs and it's kind of like, 'look, my AP students have the same challenges', so it's, it's not that only your students have those, actually. We kind of all do.

This was a very different set of circumstances from our normal interactions with our special ed teachers through IEP meetings and paperwork about accommodations. It was clearly viewed as a chance for both groups to share what happens in their realms of influence and to better understand what good teaching practices are, regardless of which student population is involved.

Finally, I made an effort to include the ed techs and support staff including the guidance staff, our media specialist, those kinds of folks that are not classroom teachers. I only had one ed tech join the groups. The guidance staff and our gifted and talented teacher also chose not to

participate in the groups but to form their own group, though I do not have any data about their efforts.

<div align="center">**Research Question 3**</div>

Piloting the ship – keeping the PLGs on task, and adjusting tack as their leader through success and challenge.

Much of this section of the chapter consists of a timeline extrapolated from notes and email communications that reflected my thoughts around the justification for the decisions I made. It describes how I went about planning and organizing the PLG groups as well as the feelings that I had relative to leading the effort. There is some reference to the literature here as well, but primarily this is a recounting of the events impacted by the leadership decisions I made and the consideration of the leadership principles that were important. The data consists mostly of comments made during the interviews about the leadership that I exhibited through the year.

Formulating a Plan

As I began my work to think about our PLGs, one of the things that I remember is that I was somewhat apprehensive about trying to lead an effort with colleagues when I didn't have any position of formal authority. Our school does not have department chairs, though I have been a voluntary part of our school leadership team for several years since its inception in 2012 and at my former school for about ten years as well, so I am comfortable in general with leading colleagues. Additionally, I had gained some confidence in my leadership abilities due to the success of the work I had done in the previous spring. I facilitated online discussions related to technological and other issues our district teachers identified as we struggled with teaching remotely when COVID began. The spring workshops had been well-received district wide, and I had good participation and feedback. One facilitator was not aware that I had set up the logistics

of those workshops and commented: "as far as the stuff this spring, I was like, I had no idea, I knew that you were involved, but I had no idea that you were the one that pulled it all together."

One of the things I knew about the coming school year from having talked with the administrators in my EdD cohort was that they anticipated their workload was going to be heavily focused on dealing with issues related to communication with families and logistics relative to the pandemic and hybrid education. I began to contemplate how our staff might be able to help each other to deal with the complexities of the pandemic and recognized the opportunity to benefit my school and our administrative team by relieving some of their responsibility with staff. Teachers could work together to provide each other with support and feedback that would enhance their skills in the hybrid educational model which none were experienced with.

Another factor affecting my confidence was I had also completed all the coursework for my doctoral program in Educational Leadership and felt I had gained/developed some expertise that would help me to be successful as the leader and organizer of this effort. I had carried on some conversations with the other members of my doctoral cohort about how PLGs had impacted their schools. In the light of those conversations and the reading I had done, I felt sure that PLGs could be an appropriate means for us to take advantage of our existing human capital to further develop the skills for those who needed help with hybrid teaching and learning. We would face tremendous challenges and we had a considerable portion of the expertise needed among our staff.

Key for my success in this work would be my ability to balance the role of teacher with being the leader of our PLG work. The final planning was completed over a couple of weeks. I had been in conversation with our administrators and our curriculum coordinator in previous

months about starting a PLG effort. We had thought to focus on how to improve classroom

instruction, perhaps using a more formalized system of peer feedback, and had discussed how to

work on consistency across curricular levels of courses. But we hadn't really talked about the

possibility of implementing a PLG structure for the purpose of supporting teachers in our

COVID imposed model of hybrid education.

My thought was that we could capitalize on the strengths of all our staff to support and

assist each other in learning how to do this. The concepts of human, social, and decisional capital

have received quite a bit of attention in educational literature for the last 30 years or so

(Coleman, 1988; Leana, 2011; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2013). With a substantial amount of

human capital in our teaching staff, I knew our staff well enough to recognize who held strong

potential to lead this effort. I had watched those who became our facilitators lead in many other

ways. Some were a part of the school's leadership team that I had served on. Others had

demonstrated their skills in the leadership of workshops for the district at the conclusion of the

2020 year that focused on the challenges the pandemic had brought at the end of that school year

and ways to utilize technology to overcome those challenges. Others had led staff meetings and

in house professional development for our school. My task, then, was to organize groups to take

advantage of that potential. I crafted a proposal for the organization and operationalization of the

groups. As I thought about all the theories of leadership relative to schools and collaboration, and

adult learning theory, I began to organize small, interdisciplinary collaborative PLG groups for

our school. Though I knew that the ideal for PLGs is to have them arise organically, I also

recognized the importance of some scaffolding as a new effort is undertaken in a school.

Several iterations of the groupings commenced, taking into consideration age,

experience, gender, subject area taught, known personal relationships, levels of technological

expertise, and my own personal knowledge of my colleagues. Most of this information I knew from having spent 10 years at my school. However, I did communicate with others at times to try to discern whether the groups I had organized had any known potential disruptive issues related to these criteria. I asked my principal in an email about any personal issues: "Are there any pairings of teachers I should avoid? Personal issues, etc. I don't need or want particulars, but don't want to put anyone knowingly into a potentially dysfunctional situation." This was a painstaking task, as I thought about the best possible composition for each group as I felt this was so important if our groups were to be successful. Over the course of several days, I began to feel confident that I was getting groups that had a solid composition.

In the end, there were a couple groups that probably were not optimal, but overall they worked out well. My principal's enthusiastic response to my plan added to the confidence I felt in my ability to organize and lead this effort. My work was validated as I ran the plans by him and received an enthusiastic response. "Looks great to me. No changes necessary on my end. Thanks, Rad – this could be a great way for staff to improve online teaching and put Tuesday meetings to better use. I appreciate your efforts!"

Once the groups were organized on paper, I began to think about how I would share the plan with others to help us move forward in our work. My first step was, again, to share the rollout plan with my principal and assistant principal and our curriculum coordinator and to ask their blessings, so to speak, on proposing this plan to staff. I felt I had to go about it this way because I had no authority to decide what our staff does with their professional learning time and did not want colleagues to perceive that they were being told what to do by me. As this was the first time I had organized such an effort at my school, I was still a bit uncertain at times about the

line I had to walk between my relationships with my colleagues as peers, and the leadership role I was assuming among them.

Once I received the administrative go-ahead, I emailed those individuals in each group that I felt had technological expertise and had been willing to help out with our workshops the previous spring to ask for their willingness to facilitate our groups. I knew which of our staff were usually willing and able to lead conversations, particularly those focused on technology. I needed a total of nine facilitators, one of which would be me. And so, the initial email I sent out to facilitator prospects was simply an explanation of what we were going to try to do, and why I thought it was important. I needed to sell the idea to them because during my tenure, we hadn't had any overly similar effort ongoing in the past, especially one that was interdisciplinary. Another reason I had to sell this was that I knew there would be some equivocation about having more demands on teacher time. Everybody was feeling the pressure of the situation, and it was important that they understand how this stood to benefit our staff and our students and that it was not just going to be something useless teachers had to add to their already full plate.

One thing I wrote about in some memos I took at the time was that I wondered if my colleagues would grant me the authority I needed to move them into the PLG structure effectively. During the planning phase, I felt obligated to seek permission to organize the groups and to establish some structure for them. I wanted approval of the plan before I would roll it out to my colleagues. However, once that had been attained, and the go ahead given, I was, from the administrative end, granted the authority to move ahead as I felt appropriate. I wrote this note to myself:

> ...with no position of formal authority, my ability to recruit others; to have my strategy accepted and utilized by colleagues; to be listened to about how to operate; it was

required that my colleagues grant me that authority of their own will. I had to be seen as

an authentic leader in that they needed to have a perception of me as someone who truly

has the best interests of our school, our teachers, and our students in mind.

I knew I had to rely on authority earned via previous investment of work on behalf of students

and earned respect of my colleagues to instill the confidence to trust what I was trying to do was

in the best interests of us all.

Choosing Facilitators

Seven of the facilitators (myself included) were all fairly veteran teachers of varying

experience levels and backgrounds. Mostly they were mid-career with the exception of myself

and one other that were late career teachers. Among the facilitators chosen, though, were two

very young teachers and I suspected that their self-confidence as leaders in the school might not

be as high as someone who had been there longer. Both of them accepted, but then confirmed my

suspicion that they felt some trepidation about leading in the interviews. I sought to reassure

them and reminded them about the success they had experienced in leading our spring

workshops. One clearly understood the value they held because of their technological expertise:

it made some sense to me, because I think about last year when we went remote, how I

felt like I was answering emails every day from colleagues that had questions about what

I was doing and how it's going. And so, I guess I knew that there was this need for

collaboration. And so, I recognized that this could be an opportunity, where I would, I

could, have the opportunity to help people if that's what they wanted or needed. And it

would also be within the encompassing, you know, professional requirements of my

employment. So it's kind of two birds, one stone. Instead of being in addition to...

I recognized both of these young teachers had been part of collaborative efforts through an educational program at a local university in their master's programs and that they understood the power of collaboration. They were chosen, not only because of their technological expertise, but also by virtue of the fact that I had witnessed their willingness to discuss and learn about issues in education in the few years they had been at our school.

Of course, I considered all of the facilitators to be leaders in our school, in this climate particularly, as I knew they were adept at the use of technology in their teaching. I also knew that all of them were respected by their peers as capable teachers regardless of the mode. Their faith and willingness to grant me some authority was manifest in their acceptance of the facilitation positions. Their choice to grant me an audience at an organizational meeting was gratifying and I was humbled, and challenged, to be given this deference by my colleagues.

Rollout to Staff

With facilitators secured, the roll out strategy to staff became the next major decision that had to be made. Again, the issue that dictated how that should happen was that I didn't have any formal authority in our school. I questioned whether it was better to have the principal roll it out or for me to roll it out to staff? I asked the opinions of some other colleagues before ultimately deciding that the principal should roll it out. I felt that if the effort had his blessing, then it had a much greater chance of at least getting off to a good start. I asked in my interviews whether teachers felt this was the right decision and I got various responses. One facilitator felt that if I had introduced the effort, it might not carry weight enough to engender participation:

> I just wonder if it was rolled out like that, and it wasn't coming from [our principal], if it would look like 'alright, so this is the teacher doing it, Rad's doing it, okay cool, so now do I have to do this or is it just hey if I feel like doing it'.

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Another teacher seemed to feel the same way but was more focused on how it might affect my relationships:

> I personally feel like those kinds of decisions come much more clear and more direct when they come from administrators. And just because, you know, if somebody has an issue with it, or something like that...a colleague in that position, it becomes really kind of a touchy...

A third teacher was more equivocal: "The people who were not more invested because it came from Scott, may have been more invested had it come from you, but then vice versa...". Finally, one felt that it really probably did not make much difference:

> So, for me, it always felt like it was coming from you; I don't know if it would make a difference to others who it came from. I don't know, I can only speak from my group and my personal perspective, I think it's been fine.

Ultimately, there seemed to be no consensus on the issue of whether the rollout should have come from me or from my principal.

Eventually about the second week of school, an email which we had drafted together went out from the principal describing what the effort was for and what we anticipated it's benefits would be. It laid out the groupings of staff and set a first meeting date. I secured the promise of protected time from our principal and laid out a calendar to send out to everyone of meeting week dates for the entire year. One of the major tenets of successful PLGs identified is having that protected time (Hargreaves, 2019, among others) and so I knew this was important.

The Timeline View

The first couple of meetings went well for most groups. But early on, I started getting hints that it was going to be very difficult to sustain this initiative. When an email went out from

our teachers' union that relieved us of the usual mandate for professional development meetings, I felt an immediate threat to the success of our effort. I knew that at least part of the motivation for teachers to attend the meetings was that they had to have 25 Tuesday professional development activities. I had made a strong argument that control over the professional development they undertook and the community building our groups would be enough to motivate them to sustain our PLGs. However, I found at least some teachers expressed that if it was not required, they were not likely to participate with any regularity. Most of those acknowledged that they saw the value and appreciated the opportunity, in a 'normal' year it would be an opportunity, but that time was precious in a challenging school year.

I continued to meet with my own group and made my best effort to try to make it beneficial for them. Some other facilitators did as well. I felt like they were going to need the support through the year and could offer me support as well. I also theorized that I could hold up successes in the following year when we reorganized to increase buy-in by reluctant staff. Fortunately, my group and at least three others, wanted to keep meeting. There were other groups that decided not to meet at all, while some only met intermittently. This was a bit disheartening for me, but I really had no recourse. And so, I refocused my efforts more on supporting those groups that were still meeting.

I would note that during the time when the meetings started to dwindle a bit that I had one facilitator that I went to on several occasions to discuss my concerns with. This facilitator was someone who was very enthusiastic about the groups. In fact, he had proposed a similar effort earlier in the year to our principal right after I made my proposal. He reminded me about this in the interview:

Some sort of group teacher collaboration, teacher support network, whatever we want to

call it, it was on my radar before the school year, before the school year started, because I

knew it was, the year was going to be rough. It's gonna be hard to, and we need to be

able to, we needed a way to support each other.

As a result, he and I had been fairly conversant about the whole effort and how important it was

and why we thought it was a great idea. We also had a good working relationship prior to this

year and I knew he would be forthright and open with me about the challenges we faced. I told

him how I was worried that the effort was going to just end.

I was worried about it for several reasons. Primarily, I knew it was the right thing for us

to do as a staff to improve the use of the professional development time that we had to improve

the educational experiences our students would have in a very difficult year. At one point,

though, I must have overstated that my research was in jeopardy. He said, "sometimes it might

have come up, sometimes it came across as like, man, this is my project and, man, I gotta get this

in". I assured him that my goal was to build a professional learning community at our school

through these groups. I would have to acknowledge, though, that certainly some anxiety and

stress I felt through the late fall of the year was due to concern over the difficulty I was having

maintaining the enthusiasm for our staff about our PLGs and its relationship to my doctoral

work. I did my best to separate the two, and my colleague acknowledged that he witnessed a

shift in my leadership style.

I think your approach throughout this from when we started to where we are now has

changed for the better and [you have] adapted to it. I think initially it might have been a

little too rigid for what we, what we were getting into as far as, like, too much, too soon

...but...that tone sort of shifted...I think you just realized, holy smokes man, this is a lot

and everybody's dealing with a lot and so we're talking about leadership. To be able to read those tea leaves and say, I don't know if you intentionally did it, unintentionally did it, I don't know, but I felt like the tone shifted.

The implication in the conversation was that he appreciated that I had the capacity to recognize when and when not to push people forward.

In the early part of 2021 when we returned from Christmas break, I was tired and had been struggling with how to get people to be more consistent without being overbearing. I genuinely wanted this effort to pay off for our teachers and students and knew that it held transformative power for our school. I had continued to send out notes of encouragement and suggestions for work that could be done by the groups and to answer questions from group leaders when they needed support. I spent time walking around the building and dropping in on people from time to time just to ask how things were going in person, so it wasn't all just emails and virtual interaction.

However, there was a short period of time as we began the second term where I didn't even meet with my group. That was a shortcoming on my own part and sprang from the fact that I was so worried about other things with changing students for the upcoming term and with concerns in my personal life as well. There is no doubt that separation of our personal lives from our interactions with colleagues is a difficult, but important, separation to maintain.

As we moved into winter, I recognized the change of classes as an opportunity to reinvigorate our work. I pointed out to everyone that, because we were changing classes at the end of January, this was a great opportunity for everyone to get together with their groups again and to discuss how things had gone in the fall. I felt that they could use that as a jumping off point to improve what was going on in their classrooms for the spring. At least several of the

groups reconvened after a hiatus and got back together and talked about these things even though the effort sort of dwindled off again through the spring. My group continued to meet, but we didn't really have any new revelations about our teaching and what we were doing. However, I continued with emails and visits to do my best to offer support to any groups who still wanted it.

In the late spring, the conversations shifted towards how we might carry this effort forward for the next year. I was not deterred by the fact that the effort had not gone as well as I had hoped the first year. I still believed strongly that this effort was worth our time and energy investment. And so I set about thinking about questions that I could ask of people that would help to create plans that we might use for the 21-22 school year. My close colleague that I had talked so much with about the whole effort, encouraged me to continue to pursue it. The focus groups and interviews that I did were also generally positive in their commentary, as I was conducting my research. I received very little negative commentary on the work we had done or on my effort as the leader of it. And so I was very encouraged about how people felt about the groups. These facts became the primary motivation for pushing the continuation of them in the upcoming year.

Others' Comments about my Leadership Style

There were some comments made about my leadership in the interviews that I want to share here as they may not fit in previous sections but shed some light on my leadership style and actions. One theme was about my flexibility and this teacher appreciated that:

> So, being able to look at the big picture and see what we were going to need to be able to make it work, and then allowing people to have input on that. Allowing other people to be able to make some of those decisions without feeling like you had to be micromanaging everything, I think, is a sign of a good leader...you know what's going to

work and you give ideas and then you let people fly with it and I liked it very much so, and very much appreciate it.

The same teacher went on to say:

You've been extremely encouraging to all of us, you have had some great insights and you know, non-apologetic. It's like, this is what I would like to see done. But you're leaving a lot of, and this is what I like about it, what I think is a good leader is, 'this is how I would like to see it done, but I'm going to let you use your ideas. But I am going to make sure that I am still following my rules in what I'm asking you to do. I'm not asking you to do this solo. I'm doing it too'. Okay, so you do a lot of leading by example and that I appreciate a ton...I think that leadership by example and not being afraid to have people ask questions or to question what you're asking of them...you don't have a problem with that, you're non-judgmental. And I appreciate that openness to be able to just let us do what we need to do and, but you're okay with that. You've got the big enough shoulders to kind of handle it when I go...this ain't happening.

I have always tried to engage those that I lead in ways that encourage, rather than inhibit, them to take a direction that is productive for them, as long as the chosen path seems to be accomplishing the task. I have also always tried, as this facilitator alluded, to lead by example. I am not going to ask something of those I lead that I would not engage in myself. Leading by example demonstrates a leader's confidence in the direction followers are being asked to take and the evidence indicates clearly that I have done this.

These tendencies in my leadership were also in evidence as another facilitator remarked about my communication skills, my non-judgmental nature, and my approachability:

I think our communication has always been very effective, I respect you a great deal, and

so it was, it's, it's been tough for me that I feel like I didn't necessarily follow through,

because my group didn't. But I also never felt like I couldn't tell you that. I never felt like

it was going to be judgment, you know, I was going to be judged or looked down on or

not appreciated. And I think that's one of the hallmarks of good leadership is really being

approachable and I would say that you absolutely are.

A final related comment from a different teacher addressed my ability to judge the "heat" of the

situation: "I think you've done a good job of balancing, like, how much...we can really handle."

All of these comments seem to suggest, first of all, recognition by my peers of my role as the

leader of this effort. Secondly, they portray some underlying characteristics of my leadership

style with my colleagues which I will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

MY LEADERSHIP

With the understanding that one of the primary objectives of this work was to come to a stronger understanding of how my leadership style and decisions around the organization of our staff into collaborative groups impacted those groups, this chapter will elucidate that leadership. My conceptual framework highlights the importance of the leadership choices I made, and the support I gave, in the context of the school culture, concerning PLG leadership and organizational strategies we employed while facing the many challenges associated with the pandemic. I seek, here, to elucidate how my work as a teacher leader, in particular, of this collaborative effort as portrayed in the data corpus. I have made specific references to the ways in which the pandemic influenced the work and my leadership, shaping, in fact, almost most every aspect of it.

Fairman and Mackenzie (2012 and 2015) wrote a descriptive work on the ways that teacher leaders understand their leadership and how they influence others with whom they interact. They found that "teachers, rather than administrators, initiated teacher leadership activity, and that it were primarily veteran teachers who led improvement efforts." This study highlights my own teacher leadership, which, incidentally, fits both of these criteria. In addition, I have exhibited most, if not all of the nine "spheres" of teacher leadership actions (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015, p. 64) in one way or another and they are in evidence in the leadership that I describe in this chapter. I have experimented with innovation to improve student learning. I have shared my own pedagogical views and approaches to learning with other educators. I have sought to implement change for the better. I have worked to better understand myself as a teacher and a leader demonstrating personal improvement. I have sought to share my ideas about

teaching and learning with others to improve student learning. The PLG design I implemented with the help of my colleagues has brought a new way for our teachers to work together toward this goal. This chapter highlights these things. It describes my struggles and challenges as well as my successes. Also, my style of leadership and understanding of how to lead as a colleague is discussed and critiqued.

Organizing and Motivating Others as a Teacher Leader

Northouse (2019, p. 117) presents a view of path-goal theory that reflects my leadership in some respects. Path-goal theory stresses that a leader looks at what motivates the people that are considered followers, as opposed to taking an approach that focuses on accomplishing tasks. In our PLG effort, one of the primary goals was to allow groups to choose their direction. I viewed my leadership role as two-fold: organizer and motivator. As far as the organization goes, the data showed that my colleagues appreciated the small size, interdisciplinarity, flexibility and protection of meeting times, and freedom of choice of focus topics. My organizational choices for the groups provided some needed structure to facilitate at least the early meetings in the year. There were no comments suggesting incompatibilities in groups and, in fact, the majority of comments I received on the groups suggested that teachers felt comfortable and enthusiastic about their group fellows.

Motivation was a bit more challenging in such stressful times. I focused my efforts on maintaining supportive contact and providing reminders and potentially useful information to facilitators. I made casual visits to their rooms to let them know I was available for support if needed. The release from our normal professional development obligations early in the year, however, meant that I needed to work all the harder to keep groups meeting, and, while I endeavored to do this, my own time and energy for this was limited. The groups that did

continue to meet seemed to have the intrinsic motivation, augmented by my gentle urging, to continue and learn from each other how to face the challenges of the year. I did not want to push them, thereby causing undue added stress.

<h2 style="text-align:center"><u>Findings Related to Adult Learning Theory</u></h2>

A challenge in implementation of this PLG model was that not everybody was in the same place on many of the pressing issues. In thinking about, for instance, the developmental level and orientation of members of groups in terms of technological competency, there was a wide range. The modes adult learners exhibit as described by Drago-Severson & Blume-DeStefano (2013) were important considerations as I organized the groups. They identify four types of knowers. First there are instrumental knowers. These are individuals who are capable but prefer to be given concrete direction and guidance. Second are socializing knowers. They thrive on the relationships that are a part of the learning experience. Third are self-authoring knowers. These are capable and competent knowers who want to share their expertise. Finally, there are self-transforming knowers. These individuals thrive when the outcomes of the group are positive and fulfilling and the work has a recognizable impact on all members.

Due to the novelty of the situation, I believed that many teachers were in the instrumental stage with respect to hybrid teaching. They would need direct, hands-on help with the use of applicable technologies and would seek someone to show them how to accomplish tasks. The facilitators and some others were, by my estimation, self-authoring and were capable of demonstrating needed skills for the benefit of others. These two types were most easily recognized based on my existing knowledge of the teaching staff. My own role began, at least, as one who sought to be a transformational leader for our staff. And so most groups had individuals that fit into at least two of the four adult learning styles.

Challenges to Motivation

The school year began in a hybrid model, and the anxiety surrounding this unfamiliar climate focused teachers' efforts on learning the strategies which others were using successfully. As a result of this set of adaptive challenges, at least initially, our PLG effort was well received. Some teachers were anxious to share what they knew and some to seek input on how best to accomplish tasks and goals they had for their students in a hybrid learning environment. It was clear the reward for our efforts was that teachers felt they could become better and more proficient at online teaching and learning for the benefit of their students. As long as that was the case, the groups had fairly strong motivation to continue.

However, the motivation level of some colleagues to participate in our PLGs shifted tremendously over the course of the year. I maintained a consistent push to meet through regular communication, offering help and support to our facilitators where it might be needed. The major initial motivation was not really from me as the leader of the PLGs but was due to the extrinsic forces at play related to hybrid teaching challenges. We needed support from each other mentally in order to forge ahead and cooperate to learn strategies to meet the needs of students in this novel concept: simultaneous use of online and in person teaching methods, aka, hybrid learning. It became a uniting force for our groups. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) recognized a similar pattern in their study:

> The social capital aspect of professional capital has been both a precondition of how well teachers have been able to respond to COVID-19 and an outcome of collaborative relationships that have sometimes been strengthened further by the availability and necessity of digital platforms when almost everyone has had to work from home.

Their paper referred more to the forced online learning that characterized the spring of 2020, a circumstance which engendered an expressed lack of confidence among many educators of all ages and experience levels about their teaching abilities under the stressful circumstances. But, overall, the incentive to work together in a hybrid environment was still to provide mutual support, perhaps made more intense by the fact that teachers were trying to teach in two modes simultaneously.

However, once teachers settled into a routine that seemed to be working for them, motivation seemed to wane. In retrospect, it would have been good for me to have a formal follow-up with facilitators to identify further goals to give the groups the incentive to continue forward. One of the reasons that I didn't follow through perhaps as well as I could have was that I was just tired myself. It was difficult to find my own motivation to carry the effort forward. I did, though, continue to nudge the groups forward through fairly consistent communication with facilitators. Some facilitators expressed to me, though, that teachers were, understandably, resistant to devote time to our organized effort. Part of this diminished enthusiasm as the year went on was likely due to the fact that they had not had any previous exposure to the power of collaborative work (with a few exceptions like our freshman teams). Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) pointed out that the data they gathered suggested that, in schools where collaborative work through PLGs was already in place, the impact of COVID was to further enhance the drive to collaborate. Where it was not the norm to meet in groups, however, they suggested schools would struggle with dealing with the pandemic in a productive way that involved all teachers. Some individuals who possessed the tech savvy to do so, would likely thrive, but those who did not, probably were going to have a hard time delivering a quality educational experience for their students.

One area that I found inconclusive evidence about was whether the decline in motivation of our groups later in the year stemmed from my inability to recognize motivational things that could have a positive impact on our PLG effort or if it was just that the stress over our situation simply made the idea of meeting regularly untenable, irrespective of my efforts. The data seemed to suggest it was likely the latter. Interviewees were positive in their comments about my leadership and suggested teachers just weren't motivated to participate in the PLGs all the time. If it was, in part, the former, a shortcoming of my leadership may have been that I was initially so focused on the concept and structure of the PLGs in the planning process, that I didn't put enough effort into planning how to support and motivate my colleagues down the line.

Certainly, it was possible that I did not provide adequate initial logistic support in the form of protocols and procedures to establish a framework for groups to use to focus on tasks related to teaching and learning and the myriad adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 2009 and 1994) related to hybrid education. This past summer I attended a professional development event on successful implementation of PLGs in schools. I learned about simple things that I could likely have done to help bolster and invigorate our efforts. I need to continue to seek out resources and be more thorough in my planning of efforts on behalf of my colleagues. Forming a motivational strategy and providing more guidance about how to accomplish the work would have been helpful, perhaps, in seeking to sustain and invigorate our PLG effort.

My Leadership Style

Northhouse (2019, p. 119-120) lists four types of leadership support behaviors: directive, supportive, participative, and achievement oriented. These are useful in characterizing my style of leadership. Certainly, I was participative, as I functioned as a facilitator for one of our groups. I did not have the positional authority to be directive in my approach to my colleagues. As a

result, I chose to remain on the low side in terms of directive behavior and higher on the supportive side. I needed to manage the holding environment (Heifetz, 1994; Drago-Severson & Blume-Destefano, 2013) to promote discourse and mutual support amongst my colleagues, but at the same time, not burden them with unnecessary and unrealistic lists of objectives so I was not overly achievement-oriented in my approach. I believed in the abilities of my colleagues as teachers and that our PLGs would work because they would share with each other openly and make decisions that were best for their groups. It was not my place to tell them how to use their professional time. So, the only thing directive in nature about the initial plan for implementation was that I had set the groups up to work for inclusivity of all staff with the intention of maximizing our learning for the greatest benefit of all teachers around the overarching adaptive challenges of hybrid education.

As far as offering support, the emails that I sent out to facilitators and to staff in general, through the year certainly expressed my willingness to lend support along the way. Several facilitators commented on that willingness and expressed appreciation for the fact that I was not overly forceful. I needed to let them know I was there to help and, in so doing, encourage them to remain focused to some degree on our efforts. I also made rounds every now and again to check in with facilitators in person, though I still avoided using a directive tone in my approach. These visits were just check-ins and, according to some of the facilitators, they appreciated that I did not visit with an agenda, but rather, with only offers of support for their groups,

Ultimately, the only truly directive style leadership decisions I made were about who would be in each group. An examination of the developmental characteristics of followers in the situational model of leadership (Northouse, 2019, p 97), would lead me to conclude my facilitator colleagues mostly exhibited a generally high, albeit somewhat variable, competence

with respect to different aspects of hybrid education. Each of them had some area of expertise that would prove useful to the colleagues in their groups. As a result, once the groups were assembled, the directive nature of my leadership shifted to a more supportive role.

Part of the challenge for my leadership resulted from utilizing this style of high supportive and low directive leadership behaviors. I didn't get much feedback from the facilitators about their groups in general unless I pointedly asked for it. I did that on occasion, but it was not a regular occurrence. Also, I was not a part of their groups, and, as a result, didn't have the opportunity to see how the things they were doing in their groups were working for them. Most of what I knew about their work was learned through limited email communication and documentation of their meetings. As a result, I did not always feel like I knew the needs they had which made it difficult to give support in a meaningful way. This points to an area of need in this type of effort for holding coordinating meetings with facilitators to address issues they face collectively. I did not push for this and probably should have.

My choice, instead, was to adhere to one of the tenets of the situational approach to leadership identified by Northouse (2019). I needed to be flexible in my leadership behaviors with the different facilitators who were leading our groups. For any topic they chose to address, there was going to be some variability in the competence of the members of the groups. For instance, if the task was to learn more about technology, then those that were better at the use of instructional technology, were going to be more competent, and require less direction. For some facilitators, I knew they were perfectly capable of handling these explorations of our work. At other times, they reached out to ask about how they might handle their groups and I was able to step in and offer advice or assistance.

My Leadership Traits

It is important to clearly identify the goal for work with colleagues and engage them in the realization of that common goal or vision. One goal was to create a structure that would help build networking and social capital in support of development of human and decisional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013 and 2020). We needed to grow our capacity to reach students in new ways and to be able to better and more quickly recognize when students were not being given adequate opportunities in scope or frequency to meet their educational needs in the climate of the pandemic. Furthermore, we needed to grow our capacity to support and encourage one another. Northouse (2019, p. 9) states that leadership is a "process that occurs when any individual is engaged in influencing other group members in their efforts to reach a common goal." This is exactly what I was trying to do; to influence my colleagues to work toward a working model of collaboration.

Northouse (2019) goes on to list five major leadership traits: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability. He claims the difference in intelligence between a leader and followers should be no more than one standard deviation. I could not put a number on this, but I feel like I am an intelligent person with the capacity to yield insight for people on things. I certainly hold some level of decisional capital (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) owing to my long tenure and reflective style of self-evaluation as an educator.

My self-confidence as the leader of this effort was not always high. I would sometimes feel I was heading in a good direction, while other times I was tentative. In those moments of doubt, I would turn to another couple of teachers as confidants during my leadership. In *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Heifetz (1994, p. 268-269) talks about the importance of a leader's partners:

Partners come in two general types, the confidant, and the ally. The confidant is the person to whom one can cry out and complain. A confidant can provide a holding environment for someone who is busy holding everybody else. People attempting to lead need partners who can put them back together again at the end of the day. These partners, often friends, spouses, lovers, or even colleagues, provide perspective that helps one climb back up to the balcony to understand what has happened…

My confidants were two teachers whom I trust and respect and knew would hold my confidence. There were definitely times that I felt the need to have someone else put things in perspective for me and the informal conversations they allowed time for were key for me in maintaining a good perspective when things did not seem to be going well.

Heifetz (1994) goes on to describe an ally as someone who is in a position of authority who can help facilitate the work of the leader by using that authority. He describes alliances as "from junior authority looking up and from senior authority looking down" (p. 269). My main ally was my principal. He was excellent at discussing logistics with me when I was trying to decide a course of action to pursue. He did not dictate the end result of those conversations but helped me gain perspective with the virtue of his knowledge of the entire staff. He was also an ally in that he helped roll out the initiative and communicate with staff about it from time to time using his positional authority as a means to draw deeper attention to our work.

Determination is also a quality I aspire to and make every effort to stick with the plan once I decide something needs to be done. Certainly, I consider myself to have integrity and other people seem to trust me. This was in evidence in that my colleagues and administrators trusted me enough to allow this effort to go forward and participate in it.

What I Learned about My Leadership

In the end, I have learned some things about myself as a leader. I aspire to work collaboratively with my colleagues as my own understanding of the issues and challenges we address are greatly impacted by the views of others. It seems clear to me that directive leadership could not inspire educators to accomplish what a motivated group of education professionals can accomplish collectively when they *choose* to collaborate, given the opportunity. My chosen leadership role was to create that opportunity. I cannot imagine that forced collaboration as interest waned would have led to any increase in benefits for ourselves or our students. In fact, the literature suggests that contrived or forced collegiality through PLGs is likely to fail.

In a reflection on 30 years of research on collaborative work in schools, Hargreaves (2019) writes:

> Contrived collegiality, meanwhile, was formal, predetermined, and fixed in time and space in pre-set meetings through the exercise of administrative power. In the preparation time study, for example, some of the principals in the cluster of collaborative schools tried to force collaboration upon their teachers—instructing them where and when to collaborate and what to collaborate about. In one school, teachers who were already meeting to collaborate together were then instructed to keep minutes of their meetings. The result was that they collaborated less.

I do recognize that authoritative roles are important in some circumstances and might even have forced continuation of all our PLG groups through the tough times this past year. However, the result of authoritative mandates about meeting in the climate we were operating under might well have been detrimental to the future of our PLG effort. My role as supporter and encourager yielded discouraging results for me at times, but was, perhaps, the best possible scenario in terms

of trying to re-culture our school to aspire to greater collaboration as the norm. It was also the correct leadership approach in that it seemed not to intensify the anxiety that teachers were feeling in the wake of the pandemic.

I also learned that my credibility with my colleagues is strong. They know me and, through their cooperation with this effort, have shown they believe that I hold the best of intentions for both them and their students' benefit. In 2010, I became a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certified teacher in life science. Mackenzie and Harris (2008, p. 100) report that NBPTS teachers are "frequently asked for advice on matters of curriculum and instruction by teachers and administrators in their schools and that they believe they exert a positive influence on their colleagues". I have lived this statement in my years at my school. I have taken on voluntary roles of leadership like being a part of the school leadership team, served on the National Honor Society committee, served as a senior project mentor and evaluator. I have also been generally available to colleagues when they had issues with technology. I have been a mentor teacher to both student teachers and to teachers that are new to our school. All these things have in some way contributed to my colleagues', both peers and supervisors, perceptions of me as trustworthy.

Heifetz (2009, p.38) says this about the exercise of leadership in the face of adaptive challenges:

> You are trying to move people who have not been convinced by logic and facts. They prefer the status quo to the risks of doing things differently. They are stuck in their hearts and stomachs, not in their heads. To move them, you need to reach them there. If you are not engaged with your own heart, you will find it virtually impossible to connect with theirs.

Without trust established through relationships, a colleague as leader could not accomplish what

I have. In this case there was no pre-existing logic and facts. It was novel territory. I knew that

the teachers in my school were going to move from the familiar to the unknown and that we all

needed a structure of support to make this work. The PLGs were something I strongly believed

could help teachers accomplish the "larger purpose that [I] found compelling", as Heifetz (2009)

puts it. My goal was to create a structure that would help build networking and social capital in

support of development of human and decisional capital as discussed in Hargreaves and Fullan

(2013 and 2020). The data described in chapter 4 clearly suggests that teachers found the lessons

gleaned during their PLG group meetings to be beneficial in their pursuit of improvement of

online teaching and learning and that there were many new relationships forged as well,

enhancing social capital in our school.

<div align="center">**<u>Facing Adaptive Challenges</u>**</div>

In *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Heifetz (1994) talks about adaptive challenges and

the possibilities for trying to solve novel challenges. Some challenges are strictly just technical

and not adaptive because solutions are already known. It is when challenges become unknowns,

as in our rapid shift to hybrid education, that they become difficult to solve in the end. If you try

to apply old solutions to new problems, generally, they are insufficient. And so, part of what I

was trying to get our groups to work on was to move beyond their trepidation to work on

becoming effective and better educators even though we may not even have known what types of

issues we faced. Heifetz (1994) ends this way on page 276:

> Leadership requires a learning strategy, a leader has to engage people in facing the
>
> challenge, adjusting their values, changing perspectives, and developing new habits of
>
> behavior. To an authoritative person who prides himself on his ability to tackle hard

problems this may come as a rude awakening. But it should also ease the burden of

having to know the answers and bear the uncertainty. To the person who waits to receive

either the vision to lead or the coach's call, this may also seem a mixture of good and bad

news. The adaptive demands of our societies require leadership that takes responsibility

without waiting for revelation or requests. One may lead, perhaps, with no more than a

question in hand.

My question in hand, really, was how I could lead an effort to help our teachers deal with the

challenges of this year, and my leadership of our PLGs was my best response to that question.

I was fairly thorough in the organizational planning of our PLGs, but COVID had other ideas.

There was one clear lesson learned here: in the face of extremely extenuating circumstances like

those surrounding the pandemic, the best laid plans... well, they just may not always work out

like one would hope. I do hope our school will continue to develop our collaborative strategies

via our PLGs. The work has already started at this writing.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

The Study and Findings

The primary objective of this study was to generate an autoethnographic analysis of my

leadership of a novel collaborative effort to establish professional learning groups (PLG) at our

school. I sought to delve into the planning, implementation, structure, and ongoing support I

provided as the teacher leader of the effort. The study reflexively examined my thought

processes and means of dealing with setbacks and successes throughout the 2021-22 school year

under the tremendous influence of the pandemic. I found that my leadership was perceived as

authentic, adaptive, and trustworthy and that the organizational choices I made promoted growth

in both the social and human capital arenas. In addition, the study demonstrates the power of

collaborative practice by educators in addressing adaptive challenges in difficult circumstances

similar to those surrounding the COVID pandemic.

Implications for Practice - Teachers and Aspiring Teacher Leaders

One of the key takeaways from this study is that teacher leadership in a system where

teacher leadership roles are chosen, rather than assigned, is a balancing act of sorts. As a

colleague, your role is to work with your fellow teachers and support them as an equal. As a

leader, your role is to guide and direct the progress of efforts in such a way as to promote growth

and improvement of what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) refer to as professional capital, the

components of which are human capital - the development of expertise and ability; social capital

- the development of relationships; and decisional capital - the growth of the mindset of teachers

that allows them to make productive and effective decisions, and adjust those decisions as

necessary, in their professional interactions with students, colleagues, parents and other

stakeholders. This last one is a function of experience to some degree and so is not something that comes about easily. Collaborative groups provide opportunity to showcase this decisional capital when they are composed of teachers of varying experience levels. The other two, human and social capital, with careful evaluation of circumstances, planning of activities, and follow through to assess outcomes, can lead to growth for teacher leaders and their colleagues and can enhance school culture. The data from this study and my own personal growth as a leader suggest this was the case here.

As my initial planning came to a close and implementation approached, initial trepidation was replaced with confident enthusiasm as I received not only the go ahead from my administrator to organize these groups, but his unconditional and enthusiastic support. This receipt of authorization was a necessary step for me, and I believe the study suggests it would be for any teacher leader, especially when no formal leadership position is held. I presented a clear plan and made sure to keep my principal informed of the decisions I made through the planning process, being careful to support those plans with sound reasoning. The study suggests this was a key part of the process, assuring that support would be given as the effort was implemented, and providing validation for the planning and work undertaken. Any teacher leader in a similar position should recognize that without clearly stated support from administration, the challenges to successful leadership of initiatives might experience rapid failure. It is also psychologically valuable to a teacher leader to know that the support for your work is there.

As I considered the organization of our groups, it was especially helpful for me that I knew most of my colleagues well. For those I felt I did not know as well, I reached out to others and to the particular individuals to ask about their levels of skill with online teaching and learning. I made the decision that our groups should be led by individuals who had technological

expertise and that the focus of our groups would be on supporting each other in improvement of the relatively difficult experiences most teachers had in the spring of 2020 when the pandemic hit, and everyone went remote. This study supports that teacher leaders (or, for that matter, any leaders) who seek to implement professional learning groups, would be wise to make sure they know the members of their collegial staff and should generate initial groupings with a specific goal or focus in mind.

The study also suggests that facilitators whose skills are greatest in the chosen areas of focus should be recruited to lead the effort once that focus is clearly outlined and individuals with appropriately high levels of skills and clear respect from and of their colleagues can be identified. Caution should be exercised, though. The intense focus on technology in this situation led at least one facilitator to suggest they did not benefit from their work as much as their group members. They were in the role of teacher of technology. I am not sure how we could have avoided this as anyone who had technological expertise during the year was called upon regularly both within and outside of the PLG structure. In the future, it would be good practice to teach facilitators how to manage the groups such that they and their group members find some benefit.

The study, further, lends credence to the choices I made in choosing group members. I was careful to select group members for this effort in such a way as to ensure inclusion of sometimes unintentionally marginalized groups of teachers. In a small to medium sized school, that would include teachers in areas like foreign languages, arts and music, physical education staff, and other special programs like JROTC instructors and vocational/alternative education staff. These individuals are rarely part of departments that have more than one or two individuals in them. It was clear from the interviews that these people were very appreciative of the

inclusion in our groups with teachers who are part of departments composed of core area studies and that it was good for them to be a part of a larger group within our school.

Several teachers commented that the interdisciplinarity shifted the focus of group discussions away from subject specific conversations and towards a more productive discussion around the qualities of good teaching practices. And so, the interdisciplinary nature of our groups holds promise for those who seek to develop a similar effort. Of course, in the end, the appropriate composition of PLG groups would be dependent on the goals for those groups, but in a case where the novelty of the situation and the community level of the challenges was as clear as were those in this case facing the pandemic, the study suggests that the interdisciplinary approach and appointment of tech savvy facilitators was well received and effective.

Another key insight of this study for teacher leaders seeking to implement this type of work is to include support and special education teachers in the groups. The primary contact between most classroom teachers and special education teachers is the IEP or 504 meeting or the obligatory paperwork sent out at the beginning of a school year so that teachers can acknowledge their understanding that a student has expectations for accommodations in the regular classroom. This creates a somewhat superficial relationship between these groups of colleagues at best. Several special education teachers commented on how valuable it was to actually have a conversation with other teachers that was not just about specific students and their needs, but, rather, included them in a conversation about the challenges of daily work with all students. In fact, a stated revelation for some in this effort was the similarity of the challenges faced by both special education and regular education teachers.

<u>Implications for School Leaders</u>

The effort described in this study was primarily teacher conceived and led. However, this does not in any way reflect a lack of involvement and support on the part of the administrative team both within the school and at the district level. I met several times with administration to discuss potential aims for our PLG groups and feedback taken and received in these communications was vital in the initiation of our efforts at collaboration. Initially the plans were focused on development of clear distinction of what constitutes various levels of courses. It seemed potentially to be a worthy goal. However, this focus proved too confining and narrow in consideration of the climate around the pandemic. Consultation and discussion helped move the goal towards a broader effort at improvement of all teaching and learning taking place in our classrooms. Of course, COVID had yet other plans for us. Taken together, these things shaped a vision for the collaborative effort. Administrative support was unwavering and positive and was vital to the confidence that I, as a teacher leader, had in taking this effort forward and should be such in any school seeking to foster teacher leadership. This study confirms that school leaders stand to reap benefits when they support and encourage teacher leadership within the ranks of their staff.

District level support also proved to be important to the success of the effort. The curriculum coordinator was instrumental in clarifying the aims for our initial effort as well. He was in agreement with me and clear in his conviction that "cross-pollination", accomplished through interdisciplinary groupings, was, in his view, at least one way to enhance the effectiveness of our groups. For me, as the organizer of the effort, this validated my determination that the groups should be interdisciplinary, the positive benefits of which have

already been laid out. These facts clearly highlight the importance of involvement by administrators at all levels in a district in support of efforts by teacher leaders.

The reflexive style of writing and self-analysis I used is deeply impactful of my practice as a teacher and as a teacher leader. It allows me to adjust my practice as I examine my own perceptions of how my work is proceeding because the lens of others' views of my work serves as a check for those self-perceptions. This research suggests that collaborative work can help teachers see outside of their own views of their work and help them build more broadly appealing and effective classrooms for their students and, perhaps, for themselves as well. Leaders should support training so that teachers can collaborate in ways that promote reflection and reflexivity.

Implications for Policy

One area of policy this study has bearing on is related to time for professional collaboration. The benefits outlined in the finding section clearly support formal designation of time for collaborative work to take place between teachers, especially when facing extreme challenges like those presented by the pandemic. The data suggested that mutual support among teachers in such challenging times was viewed, perhaps, as the greatest benefit of the PLGs. Teachers were able to express empathy towards one another and to share their common and unique challenges in the novel classroom climate of hybrid education. They were also able to share their own solutions to these challenges and focus on ways to refine and enhance instruction for students.

Another policy implication from this study is the value that comes from supporting development of teacher leadership. Our district supports teacher educational and professional development opportunities. My work in this doctoral program helped me to gain leadership skills

and the confidence to take on leadership roles, this one included, that I have assumed. Without that support it is likely this effort would have never taken place. Allowing educational pursuits by their teaching staff is clearly an effective way for any district to grow human leadership capital among the teaching staff and this study shows the value in that through the successful aspects of teacher leadership of the PLG effort.

When I think about the year we faced while our PLG effort was underway, I realize that teachers had considerable time available to us for collaborative work that is not normally afforded. It seems that this collaborative time was productive in that it allowed us to solve some challenges that were novel to us in education. It makes me think that one area of policy that should be closely examined going forward is formal continuation of this provision of time for collaborative work. The power of teachers working together to solve challenges is evident in our work and so it seems logical that having that time dedicated to this work would be beneficial in any given school year.

I am aware that some districts already provide this time and that there are mixed responses from teachers. I have heard it expressed by teachers who believe taking time away from teacher student interaction is not productive policy. However, I have witnessed through this research that if groups are focused and well led, successful outcomes are clear. If policies assured that time, it would be vital for districts to provide training and support for teacher leaders who facilitate this collaborative work so that the time remains productive over the long haul.

In addition to local and district level support for collaborative time, state level policies that promote teacher leadership of collaborative efforts are vital to the success of teacher leaders. At the high school level, teacher leadership, especially if informal, is a challenging proposition as high school teachers tend to work in isolation. This study suggests that policy that promotes

collaborative work at this level can have positive impacts on school culture with respect to human and social capital. Furthermore, state level support and encouragement of teacher led professional development can help foster a sense of autonomy and professionalism in high school teachers.

It also might prove beneficial for our schools to encourage policies that take advantage of and develop teachers' professional capital. One example of this currently in existence is financial and professional support for National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification. Programs like these only stand to enhance teachers' capacity for leadership, and, by association, improve learning for our students.

Another potential area for state level impact would be in taking advantage of experience of late career teacher expertise. As I have progressed through my career, I have changed how I approach growth. In my early career, major areas of growth are often focused on content and classroom management. During my mid-career, I sought roles that would allow me to lead and be recognized as a teacher leader by my colleagues. In my late career, my focus has begun to shift away from improvement of my own teaching and towards developing ways that I can benefit younger, less experienced teachers. State level policies that encourage collaborative work between late career teachers and early career teachers stand to have a positive impact on things like retention of teachers beyond early career status and improvement of classroom practice for the benefit of our students.

Implications for Research

COVID-19 has had many impacts on our schools and education. Despite best efforts, teachers almost certainly have not been able to meet the educational needs of all their students. I have noticed that many districts are hiring educators to serve in the capacity of educational

recovery "officers". The descriptions of these positions are for a leader who will help coordinate between teachers and students and families to plan interventional activities to help students recover learning losses sustained during the pandemic. In my mind, teachers have the tools to deal with helping make this reality. While districts may be able to hire amazing individuals with the capacity to guide these efforts, cooperation with these efforts, and implementation of plans, might well be served through collaborative teacher groups as opposed to measures undertaken by individuals. Research into how to rally collaborative efforts around recovery might hold power for now and in future challenging educational eras.

Another area of extension of this research might focus on the value that inclusion of special education teachers in interdisciplinary PLG groups might hold for schools. Special education and general education teachers alike commented on the benefits of the opportunity for them to get a glimpse inside each other's teaching practices that were beyond the normal interactions of these two groups of educators. They found the similarity of the challenges they faced irrespective of the setting was intriguing. This is certainly one of the findings from this study that seems worth pursuing in further study.

Another area of research that bears investigating focuses on the differences in the qualities of leadership of teachers of differing ages, experiences, and disciplines. As I spoke with the facilitators of these groups, I found that they were not all exercising leadership in the same ways. As I stated in my findings chapter, one of the most successful PLGs this year was led by a fairly novice educator. Her group was composed of educators who, excepting one, all had considerably longer tenure as an educator in general and in the school. In my literature review, I found comments about how group composition was certainly influenced by the purposes established for the PLGs. However, I found little about choosing effective facilitators.

A final area in which I found some research, but certainly not an abundance, was around the advantages of interdisciplinary groupings. Through early grades, teachers are mostly interdisciplinary and so PLG groups at those ages seem to be mostly grade level teams. However, at the high school level, our primary groupings for collaborative work have been departmental in composition for the most part. There were so many positive comments from our staff who participated in this study about the interdisciplinarity of our groups that it seems an important topic for further investigation.

<u>Final Thoughts</u>

The purpose of this study was to examine the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on a medium-sized Maine high school's implementation of a novel collaborative professional learning groups. The effort to establish PLGs was conceived prior to the impacts of the pandemic, so it would have to be said that the first impact of the pandemic was to shift the focus of the groups from course improvement through peer support and feedback to the intense pursuit of human capital improvement with respect to teaching in a hybrid learning environment. The pandemic presented a clear set of adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 2009) as the situation turned what many teachers had known about pedagogy in their disciplines on its head. The feeling of loss and unfamiliarity was virtually universal, and teachers needed a good support network to help them cooperatively deal with these challenges to their modes of teaching and learning. The PLG effort was at least one component of collaborative work which enhanced our success in taking on these challenges.

The other main goal of the study was to examine, through an autoethnographic narrative, my efforts at leadership of this novel PLG implementation under such trying circumstances. With no formal designation of teacher leaders (e.g., department chairs), any leadership

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undertaken on the part of teachers is done either under specific circumstances (appointment to or volunteering for a committee, for example) or at the sole initiative of the teacher; this case was the latter. As an experienced educator, I recognized that we were going to face challenges unlike any we had faced in education in recent history and proposed that an organized front created to forestall negative impacts on our staff and students would be key to navigating these challenges. I also recognized that our administrators would be busy dealing with many issues and would need teachers to step up and deal with their own day to day classroom issues and challenges in an effective and productive manner. Finally, I realized that the pandemic created not only difficulty, but also the opportunity to examine the creativity, resilience, and fortitude of educators as they demonstrated their professional capital in the face of adaptive challenges.

I have not always considered myself a strong planner when it comes to the daily tasks I perform as an educator, but I recognized that a well-conceived plan would be vital for the task of organizing educators to confront the impending challenges. The work I have done in educational leadership studies has shown me that I need to be careful in my planning process and cognizant of the needs of my colleagues. I had the best interest of our students and our staff at heart when I planned and considered potential outcomes. The organizational and logistical decisions I made along the way were considered with a view to those outcomes that would be most supportive of all involved. Throughout the process I recognized when I needed to look to others for advice and counsel. Though not all my leadership decisions had the outcomes I hoped for, all were made using sound principles of leadership learned through 30 years as an educator and through these last four years as a student of educational leadership.

Ackerman and Mackenzie, in the preface to *Uncovering Teacher Leadership: Essays and Voices from the Field* (2010) state that "teacher's inner resources and capabilities must be

harnessed as well. They need to take risks, make mistakes and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses both as teachers and as leaders." I have done that in this work. The examination of myself as a leader has brought me to the understanding of skills that I possess and skills I need to foster to be an effective educational leader. Having gone through two rounds of reflective examination of myself as a teacher through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards initial certification process and renewal, I am familiar with the concept of self-examination and reflection about my practice. The autoethnographic portion of this study was very similar to those processes in that I critically examined my work as a teacher leader through the lens of the impacts that my work had on my colleagues and my school. The insights I have gained should serve me well as I close out my career over the next several years and so this has been a most valuable experience.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Protocol - Teachers

First, I want to tell you how much I appreciate your participation in this focus group about collaborative efforts undertaken in our school this year. You have been selected to participate in this group based on your roles in our professional learning community group effort, your membership in departmental groups or lack thereof, and your experience levels as teachers. I have sought to assemble a group that I feel sufficiently represents our entire staff with respect to our PLGs. I am going to ask you some questions as a group to get conversations started and then I will be listening to your conversations around this very important topic. The entire conversation/meeting will be recorded and transcribed by Zoom and on a voice recording as a backup so that I may listen to the conversation and reflect on the nuance and dialogue rather than deal with trying to record detailed notes. Those will be taken later in the transcription process. Do any of you have any objections to recording our conversation?

Before we begin, I would like to tell you a bit about what my goals in this study will be. Long before the presence of the pandemic, I have contemplated how we could expand our impacts on teaching and learning together at our school. We have faced most unusual circumstances as educators this year. In response, I have witnessed not only our formal PLG efforts to help with each other's challenges, but also many other acts of peer collaboration and support on your part. I would ask that you consider all those experiences as you answer and discuss the questions I raise. I hope to gain insight into how our collaborative efforts over the course of the last school year have helped you in your teaching and have contributed to our success as a school. I also hope to learn about what attempts at collaboration have proven most difficult or have outright failed. Finally, I want to explore the impressions you have of the

leadership of this initiative. In the end, I will attempt to provide a piece of work that will prove useful to us and to other similar schools in the promotion of collegial collaboration.

As I know confidentiality is vital, I will not identify any of you in the final reports, though I would point out that we are a small staff and so it may be possible that others who read my work around this that are close to us may be able to discern identities. All quotes used will be anonymous. However, your experience levels, grade levels taught, and subject areas may be important in the analysis of the conversations and may be reported or used in categorization of the findings.

I expect this focus group to last 60-90 minutes and will do my best to adhere to that as I want to respect your time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. I would like to go around and give each of you the chance to tell us a bit about your previous experience with collaborative learning over the course of your teaching career. This will help us all to understand the perspective you bring to the group.

2. Now I would like you to use the paper I have given you for notes to write down some of the primary ways you can recall doing collaborative work this year. Indicate whether that collaboration was in your PLGs or another group. Finally, if you recall the specific nature of any collaboration, please include a short note about that as well.

3. Could you please describe the level of enthusiasm you felt for participation in our professional learning groups this year and if/how that changed over the course of the year?
   a. How did you feel when the concept was first rolled out?
   b. Why did you feel that the effort was worthwhile, or not?
   c. How did circumstances surrounding COVID impact your enthusiasm either initially or over the course of the year?

4. This effort was teacher designed and led. Could you please describe efforts at, or effectiveness of, the leadership of our PLGs by myself or others as you recall them?

5. Our PLGs were purposefully interdisciplinary from the very start and attempted to incorporate teachers of varying experience and expertise in each group. Could you please elaborate on what you perceive were specific benefits or disadvantages of that approach?

    a. Was this a new thing for you to be included in a small collaborative group focused on sharing and learning about teaching with each other?

    b. Could you provide specific examples of takeaways that you may have appreciated that were specifically related to the presence of educators from other disciplines or experience levels?

6. If you could describe the most important pedagogical takeaways from your professional learning group this year, what would they be?

    a. How has that [a particular takeaway] impacted your teaching or student learning?

    b. Why was it so important to you as a teacher?

7. Could you please identify or describe ways that we could improve this effort for the future?

    a. Could you please identify and/or describe specific things that you believe that we could accomplish through these groups going forward? In particular I am interested in implementation of a peer feedback system and wonder how that might fit into the current PLG model.

8. Should we continue this effort going forward to next year? Why or why not?

    Thank you for participating in this focus group. I will complete the transcription and summarize my findings for our work here today. I would like for at least some of you to read that

summary and give me feedback. If you would be willing to do that, please indicate that on the

paper you have before I take it up from you.

Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Protocol - Facilitators

First, I want to tell you how much I appreciate your participation in this focus group. You have been selected to participate in this group based on your roles in our professional learning community group effort as a facilitator this year. I am going to ask you some questions as a group to get conversations started and then I will be listening to your conversations around this very important topic. The entire conversation/meeting will be recorded and transcribed by Zoom and on a voice recording as a backup so that I may listen to the conversation and reflect on and respond to the nuance and dialogue rather than deal with trying to record detailed notes during our time today. Those will be taken later in the transcription process. Do any of you have any objections to recording our conversation?

Before we begin, I would like to tell you a bit about what my goals in this study will be. Long before the presence of the pandemic, I have contemplated how we could expand our impacts on teaching and learning together at our school. This year, we have faced most unusual circumstances as educators and as teacher leaders. I have witnessed not only our formal PLG efforts to help with each other's challenges, but also many other acts of peer collaboration and support on your parts. I would ask that you consider all those experiences as you answer and discuss the questions I raise. I hope to gain insight into how our collaborative efforts over the course of the last school year have helped you in your teaching and have contributed to our success as a school. I also hope to learn about what attempts at collaboration have proven most difficult or have outright failed. I also want to explore the impressions you have of the impacts and effectiveness of the leadership we, you all and I, have exercised in this inaugural effort at PLGs. In the end, I will attempt to provide a piece of work that will prove useful to us and to other similar schools in the promotion of collegial collaboration.

As I know confidentiality is vital, I will not identify any of you in the final reports, though I would point out that we are a small staff and so it may be possible that others who read my work around this that are close to us may be able to discern identities. All quotes used will be anonymous. However, your experience levels, grade levels taught, and subject areas may be important in the analysis of the conversations and may be reported or used in categorization of the findings.I expect this focus group to last 60-90 minutes and will do my best to adhere to that as I want to respect your time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. I would like to go around and give each of you the chance to tell us a bit about your previous experience with collaborative learning over the course of your teaching career. This will help us all to understand the perspective you bring to the group.

2. Now I would like you to use the paper I have given you for notes to write down some of the primary ways you can recall doing collaborative work this year. Indicate whether that collaboration was in your PLGs or another group. If you recall the specific nature of any collaboration, please include a short note about that as well.

3. Could you please describe the level of enthusiasm you felt for facilitation of our professional learning groups this year and if/how that changed over the course of the year?

   a. How did you feel when the concept was first rolled out?

   b. Why did you feel that the effort was worthwhile, or not?

   c. How did circumstances surrounding COVID impact your enthusiasm either initially or over the course of the year?

4. Our PLGs were purposefully interdisciplinary from the very start and attempted to incorporate teachers of varying experience and expertise in each group. Could you please elaborate on what you perceive were specific benefits or disadvantages of that approach?

a. Was this a new thing for you to be included in a small collaborative group focused on sharing and learning about teaching with each other?

b. Could you provide specific examples of takeaways that you may have appreciated that were specifically related to the presence of educators from other disciplines or experience levels?

5. If you could describe the most important pedagogical takeaways from your professional learning group this year, what would they be?

a. How has that [a particular takeaway] impacted your, or others', teaching or student learning?

b. Why was it so important to you as a teacher?

6. I would like to know how you view my leadership of the PLG effort as you understand it.

7. Could you please describe your own experiences in the leadership of our PLG effort as you recall them?

8. Could you please identify or describe ways that we could improve this effort for the future?

a. Are there specific things that you believe that we could accomplish through these groups? In particular I am interested in implementation of a peer feedback system and wonder how that might fit into the current PLG model.

9. Should we continue this effort going forward to next year? Why or why not?

Thank you for participating in this focus group. It has been my pleasure. I will complete the transcription and summarize my findings for our work here today. I would like for at least some of you to eventually read that summary and give me feedback. If you would be willing to do that, please indicate that on the paper you have before I take it up from you.

Appendix C: Coding Strategy Development Matrix

Organized by Expanded Research Question

Research Questions (expanded versions)	What data do I need?	Analysis strategy

How have the combined factors of our PLG organizational strategy, including small size and interdisciplinarity, leadership of the effort, and the intense forces of change in the time of COVID, affected the outcomes of our initial PLG effort?	Memos/Field Notes
	
	Artifactual Documents
	  - planning
	  - communications
	
	Focus Group Interviews
		Some categorical codes:
		  -size related comments categorized as positive or negative
		  -interdisciplinarity related comments categorized as positive or negative
		  -COVID related comments
		  -General comment codes about the process of dealing with COVID collaboratively
		  - Leadership related comment codes
		Some connection-revealing open coding to emerge that may further clarify the outcomes of this effort.

How have teacher's feelings of efficacy, autonomy, and professionalism changed as a result of collaborative efforts, including the PLGs, at our school?	Memos/Field Notes
	
	Artifactual Documents
	  - communications
	
	Focus Group Interviews
		Categorization of the codes by subgroups may be revealing. for instance:
		  - Major department vs non-departmental/small dept teachers
		  - Subject area categorization
		  - Experience level categorization
		
		Codes will be emergent (open) within the categories. Some codes may prove useful in analysis of broader understanding rather than focused on subcategories. It is important to glean information holistically so I need to be careful not to subdivide the information too much. I also won't likely have a large enough sample size by category to make much inference about differences between groups.

Notes: This is an example of the way I organized my thoughts about the types of data and coding strategies I expected to use. Included were reminders of elements of nuance to be attentive to as I perform the coding of documents. The actual codes are in the subsequent **Appendix D**.

Appendix D: NVivo Codebook

PLG Leadership and Strategies

Nodes

Name	Description
2020-21 PLG Effort	Comments about the effort this year
Challenges and Struggles	Parent Node
Commonality of struggles	There was a general perception that others, regardless of discipline, experience, etc. , were struggling with common things.
COVID Impacts	This category held many pieces of data that related directly to the impacts of COVID on our effort
Leader Struggles	These were struggles faced by the facilitators of the groups
Outside influences	Mention of things that are not school based and their impacts on participants
Will it last	Comments that reflect the assumption that this effort, like others, would be short lived.
Concrete Outcomes	Parent Node
Impact school climate	Comments about how the groups have the potential to improve school climate.
Mutual Support	The importance of this
Relationship Building	Comments that reflected the value of our PLGs in building new relationships

Socioemotional Outcomes	Benefits to teachers that reflect positive influence on their socioemotional status.
Special Ed Benefits	Things mentioned about the fact that the SPED folks were scattered across groups enabling them to be familiar with gen ed teachers about what was going on
Student outcomes	Comments in group notes with perceptions about how students are doing and things they are learning to do to deal with the pandemic and hybrid learning.
Enthusiasm	Parent Node
General +	Comments of enthusiasm without specific details
Specific - reasons	Reasons they did not like the PLGs
Specific + reasons	Reasons that people really liked the PLGs
Uncertainty about PLG	Comments that reflected teachers trepidation
Focus Flexibility	Comments of appreciation about the self-determination and flexibility of the groups
Group dynamics	Challenges that had implications for the smooth functioning of the groups this year.
Group Focus	Comments about the focus of groups or lack thereof.
Group Goals	Some leaders mentioned that their groups had general goals
Group size	Comments relative to size of groups
Interdisciplinarity	Comments about the interdisciplinarity of this year's groups

Meeting Frequency	Comments related to how often groups met this year
Positive Impacts of COVID	Some mentioned the positive things that they felt COVID imposed on us as teachers
Topics of Group Discussion	Parent Node – subcodes all are related to the three main topics discussed by most groups
Social Emotional Support	Topics of Group Discussion child node
Student Engagement	Topics of Group Discussion child node
Technology	Topics of Group Discussion child node
25 Meetings Comments	Comments about the impact of the rescinding of our PD Meeting Mandate
Collaboration Other	Parent Node - Any references to collaborative work outside the PLG effort
Bouncing ideas off	Just that
Departmental	This code is for things referenced that relate to departmental collaborative work.
Mentorship	Comments about mentor mentee relationships
Outside Collaboration	Members comments about previous collaborative efforts
Peer to Peer	References to individual collaborative work one on one with others
Demographics	Parent Node related to participants and their experience, gender, etc.

Experience Level	Notes about participants previous levels of experience in leadership or with collaboration as a teacher
Experience Type	Sub-Parent Node
Administration	Anyone with Principal or AP experience
Other Ed leadership	Roles other describe about themselves. These could be useful in evaluating my decisions about leaders for our groups.
Outside Education	Comments about work in other disciplines
Group Norms	Comments that refer to the norms groups used
Isolation	Comments that discuss the isolation of teachers in high school teaching
Local Knowledge	
Challenging Logistics	Comment about the difficulties finding opportunities to meet that fit folks' schedules.
My Leadership	Parent Node for categories that address perceptions of my leadership
Admin Comms	Communications with administrators about this effort.
Facilitator support	My notes to facilitators to encourage or support them in their roles.
Leadership decisions	Comments or statements about my leadership made by others
Leadership Style	Comments that suggest a certain characteristic of my teacher leadership
My Flexibility	Comments that suggest a certain characteristic of my teacher leadership

My own thoughts	Segments from interviews that perhaps should become part of my memos list. Ask about this,
Recruitment of Facilitators	Notes from my emails and other communications about recruitment of facilitators
Remarks about my work	Comments that suggest a certain characteristic of my teacher leadership
Peer Feedback	Any related comments
Planning for the future	Statements about whether the effort was worth continuing and if so, how?
Previous PLG Experience Comments	Parent node for all aspects of previous participation in groups - size, interdisciplinarity, experience mix, etc.
Interdisciplinarity	Comments about the interdisciplinary nature of the groups
Prior PLC	Any reference to prior experiences in professional learning communities
School Climate	Just this
Similar ideas	Ideas brought up by others that they too thought we should do something to collaborate or share ideas this year.
Small Group Advantages	Organizational comments about the group sizes
Time	Some comments about limitations of time on the effort

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

George Radford (Rad) Mayfield, III was born in Columbia, TN on May 17, 1961. He grew up in Columbia and attended Columbia Military Academy. He graduated in 1979 and went on to complete a bachelor's degree in Biological Sciences from Vanderbilt University. After working for several years in the ski industry, as a raft guide, carpenter, and restaurant manager in western NC and in Nashville, TN, he began graduate studies at East Tennessee State University in Biological Sciences. While completing this degree he decided to pursue a Master of Arts in Teaching with a concentration in Secondary Science Education as well because he found that he loved teaching. The degrees of MS in Biological Sciences and MAT in Secondary Science Education were awarded in 1995. Following graduation, he worked as a teacher in Yancey County, NC at Mountain Heritage High School (2 years) and in Rutherford County at East Rutherford High School (12 years) in western NC. Following a move to Maine, he began his current position of 13 years at Old Town High School as a chemistry and biology teacher. He is married to Kelli and has two daughters, Lillie and Auralee. He is a candidate for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Maine in May 2022.