

ABSTRACT

Mark Triplett, TALK SMART: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IMPLEMENTING ACADEMIC DISCOURSE IN AN URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, December 2019.

Purpose: This participatory action research study explores how the central office of an urban school district, and the leadership of a middle school, work collaboratively to support a school-based instructional initiative in order to change outcomes for students who have been traditionally underserved in public education. In particular, the study focuses on the necessity of coherence and alignment on the part of both central and school-based staff in service of increasing the quality and depth of student academic discourse in the classrooms of an urban public middle school. **Research Approach:** A case study was conducted from 2017 to 2018. Data were collected, coded and analyzed from observational notes of central and school site team meetings, classroom visits, school learning walks, and professional learning sessions. In addition, notes and personal memos were collected and analyzed from regular one-on-one meetings with central partners and school leadership. **Findings:** Analysis of the data provides insights into how we can continue to improve the coherence and alignment of central office teams and site leadership, including instructional coaching, in support of improved outcomes for students. Results from the study highlight how, despite the best intentions of team members, competing priorities and interests can easily derail a school's instructional focus. While the structures and systems established to align the work of teams clearly improved the way central office supported a school to stay on track, personal interests and alternative focus areas threatened to take the school down other paths. Fortunately, the development of strong, collaborative relationships between site and central partners built a culture of trust and reflection that enabled the school to get back on track when the focus was derailed. The study surfaced particular structures and

dispositions necessary for a central office partner to effectively align and engage with school-based leadership to best support instructional change. Implications for Research and Practice: These findings have implications for both central and site-based leaders as they collaboratively plan and implement instructional reform efforts for maximum impact.

TALK SMART: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IMPLEMENTING
ACADEMIC DISCOURSE IN AN URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

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ACADEMIC DISCOURSE IN AN URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

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DEDICATION

To my beloved life-partner Shara Mays, who encouraged me to take this crazy leap, and supported me every step of the way. To my two incredible girls, Delilah and Zora, who inspire me and fill me with endless joy. And to the wonderful Mimi and Papa, who have always been my biggest fans...

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CHAPTER 1: FOCUS OF PRACTICE

Introduction

As the principal of a small public middle school in an urban school district for six years, I experienced first-hand the challenge of being a part of a large, urban school system. Like many principals, I felt an important part of my role was to shield my school community from the dysfunction of the district, while constantly advocating for much needed resources. We were fortunate in that our school was able to operate with a relatively large amount of autonomy based on our reputation and performance. In fact, having emerged from the autonomous small school movement, the school community prided itself for doing things “our own way.” And, as a school with over 95% free and reduced lunch, and having the highest achievement of any Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) middle school at that time in math (and second highest in ELA), there was an argument to be made for operating as an island. That changed when I accepted a job in the Central Office assigned to supervise and support middle schools and principals. Just like a teachers will not be successful by remaining in their classroom silos, I quickly realized that our system would never successfully address the opportunity gap and achieve equitable outcomes for our young people if we operated each school as an island unto itself, rather than a part of an ecosystem.

In my current position as Middle School Network Superintendent, I see a key part of my job as aligning central services in support of schools and school leaders. I believe we can change systems to be more effective in service of our school communities, but we need to do things fundamentally different than we have done in the past. Part of that comes from a belief that the people closest to the classroom know best what is needed to positively change outcomes for students.

A core driver of the work at schools and central office is the use of teams and distributed leadership. Clearly no one person can do it all. Developing a highly effective team, in which leadership is distributed, has the potential to create coherence, alignment, and calibration across groups and departments of a school or in a school system. But building such teams is no easy task. Thus, while we as a system encourage schools to develop strong Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs), central office struggles with the same challenge of creating high-functioning teams with coherence and alignment in service of schools and students. Instead, what we often find is that central departments each operate with their own goals and purpose, but lack alignment with a larger vision and coherence. Likewise, school leaders often complain that central partners are seeking compliance with their own agendas and goals versus supporting schools to achieve the school's goals and vision, or address the school's needs.

In this chapter, I introduce the focus of practice of the participatory action research (PAR) project, including why I chose this particular focus and the evidence of its importance in championing equity in our public education system. I explore the assets and challenges present in the setting of this research, and present an overview of the frameworks that inform these assets and challenges. The research questions attached to this focus of practice are detailed here, as well as an overview of the design of the action research project. Lastly, I highlight what I consider at this juncture to be the projected significance and limitations of the project.

Focus of Practice

Description

All too often there is a support and alignment gap between the efforts of central office partners and the staff of a given school site. Central partners complain of being shut out of schools and of difficulty in gaining access to teachers and administrators. Conversely, school

staff express frustration at the lack of support from central office, and the top down, compliance driven nature of interactions that they feel do not align to the needs and priorities of the school community. Data in Oakland show the schools with the greatest need for support are the schools serving the largest number of low-income students of color. Sufficient data demonstrate how we are providing a greater amount of resources to the schools with greater needs (two examples being CA Local Control Funding Formula at a state level, and Z Factor/School Performance Framework Funding at a District level); however, it is the support, alignment and coordination of those resources where we clearly fall short. As a system, we are doing a poor job of coordinating and aligning services and support for our population with the greatest need. Consequently, the gap in alignment and collaboration is an equity gap. The focus of practice of this action research examines the relationship between central office partners and school site staff. Given our belief in the necessity of teams to effect change, we examine how to best utilize central office teams in order to maximize support of the leadership in a specific middle school in Oakland Unified School District with a large population of low-income students of color to implement a locally-generated pedagogical practice in their classrooms. Although there are many potential aspects of support and alignment to consider, we narrowed our focus to instruction, and specifically to implementing student academic discourse in the classroom. We believe that if we can effectively utilize a central team in service of support and collaboration with the school's leadership team, we can positively change outcomes for our students who have been traditionally underserved by our system. Of course, I am well aware of the challenges and hurdles that exist. The disconnect between central office and school site teams is one that has existed despite countless reform efforts and waves of talented, well-intentioned people. Our approach is not to come in already knowing the solution, but, rather, to use an action-research approach. The participatory action

research (PAR) approach is designed to engage all stakeholders in two cycles of inquiry, relying on the teams to co-construct and evolve a culture of collective accountability and support to address equitable outcomes for our young people. The focus of practice is to study the implementation process of academic discourse as an innovation or key lever to change instruction in order to impact student outcomes for English Language Learners and African American students.

Evidence

We, as an action research team, identified a number of key drivers from which we will collect evidence to inform our action research project and address the focus of practice. Those include: principal professional learning, instructional leadership team summits, network instructional leadership team weekly meetings, monthly learning walks, and other observations of school (classrooms) and central office work. While the detailed evidence is discussed in Chapter 3 as a part of understanding the context of the research, these key regular meetings and interactions provide diagnostic evidence for choosing the focus of practice as well as iterative evidence for tracking the cycle of inquiry.

Principal professional learning sessions. One of the primary learning spaces in which central partners and site leaders interact on a regular basis is in principal professional learning. This occurs two times a month for full days. In the past two years, principals complained (both on the feedback forms and in one on one exchanges with myself) about the perceived poor quality of the professional development they receive, particularly from the Teaching & Learning Department (as well as from Operational Departments). They expressed that professional learning has not felt relevant to the work at their site, and the priorities their school community has identified. There have been exceptions to this (for example, the ELA Department has

generally received positive ratings on the principal feedback forms). Because so many central offices compete for time “in front of principals”, the principal professional development is often chunked into as many five or six topics that are presented consecutively to principals in a lecture style during a day from 8:00AM to 4:00PM. Principals complained that central partners often come to principal professional learning, but sit in the back, work on their computers, and do not engage whatsoever with the principals themselves. The one-on-one feedback I received was that principals felt there was not a safe space for learning with each other when there was a line of unknown people in the back of the room typing away at their computers. Based on these data, we have been re-visioning how we engage principals and central partners in the design, facilitation, and participation of principal professional learning so that it becomes a space of collaboration and learning for all. This includes intentional relationship building, clear expectations for participation, input into agenda design, and co-facilitation. Evidence from these sessions include analysis of agendas, PowerPoint, debrief notes, and feedback forms from participants.

Instructional leadership teams (ILTs). One challenge that has existed is that, as a system, we had very little information or direct contact with site Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs). Because of this limited contact, we were relying solely on individual contact with principals or content specialist contact with teacher-leaders (who theoretically are part of the leadership team) to inform us on the development of a strong ILT and the ILTs engagement in a cycle of inquiry related to instruction. What we did learn from principals and teacher-leaders was that the majority of schools did not feel they had a high-functioning ILT. During school year 2017-18, we developed additional ways in which to engage and directly support the ILTs. Every other month, all middle school principals and their ILTs came together with content specialists from Teaching and Learning for an ILT Summit. These ILT Summits were scheduled so that

ILTs were supported to engage in a cycle of inquiry which included analyze, plan, implement, evaluate, and revise steps. Site teams identified their focus area based on the data from their school and then identify strategies or instructional practices to implement in order to impact student learning. In these ILT Summits, the emphasis was on providing the time and structure for teams to plan, reflect and collaborate in and across schools. The feedback from participants was positive. Additionally, I scheduled to visit each ILT at least two times during the school year. Evidence from these groups includes analysis of agendas, notes, and my own observation and feedback to leaders.

Central Network Team. For school year 2017-18, the Middle School Network formed a Central Network Team, consisting of the middle school content specialists from each department in Teaching and Learning. Additionally, there was a middle school representative from the Special Education Department and from the Educator Talent Department, which focused on teacher evaluation and new teacher support. The goal was for this team to build greater alignment and targeted support of schools. The disconnect between the Network Offices and Teaching and Learning (as well as the disconnect between content areas within Teaching and Learning) had been a struggle for many years; however, during the year prior to this study, there was significant progress in the middle school network team in terms of developing a cohesive, collaborative team (2016-17 Central Network Team notes and agendas). We focused on learning together, relationship building, collecting and analyzing data, and coordination of support. Anecdotally, three Teaching and Learning supervisors communicated with me about how their specialists were feeling positive about the effectiveness of the group in our planning for 2017-18. Likewise, at least three content specialists reported appreciation of the direction the group was going. I intended to meet monthly one on one with each of these team members (and their

supervisors) to do content specific planning and coordinate site support. Evidence from this group includes analysis of agendas, notes, and my own personal reflections.

Learning walks. For the year prior to this study, the Network cohort engaged in an ongoing training and professional learning focused on learning walks. The learning walk structure was intended to support and inform school leaders as an improvement strategy. Learning walks were intended to develop principals' instructional "chops," to calibrate with a team or cohort, and most importantly, to inform the instructional direction of a given school. The learning walks did so by collecting evidence of instructional patterns in a school (or across a network of schools). That evidence was used to inform the cycle of inquiry within which a professional learning community engaged in. The learning walk acted as a way to draw on assets, identify themes, progress monitor an instructional plan, and make adjustments. In Oakland Unified School District the cycle of inquiry stages we used were: Plan, Analyze, Implement, Evaluate, and Reflect (similar to the Plan, Do, Study, Act structure used in many professions (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). Principals were introduced to the learning walk structure the year prior, and we continued to build and grow that process thereafter. Once a month, in Principal Professional Learning, the principal cohort conducted a learning walk together at a different site using the lens of the Instructional Core in which the student, teacher, and content are interlocking components linked by high quality tasks (Elmore, 2002). The focus of the learning walks alternated between English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics. The expectation was that principals were then conducting learning walks with their site teams (ILT members, coaches, or assistant principals) to monitor progress towards their site goals. I also used learning walks with content specialists (members of the Central Network Team) to monitor progress across the Network. Initially we gained the most traction in ELA,

where we conducted a learning walk with the Teaching and Learning ELA Team of every middle school in the district in order to get a baseline on the implementation of a new curriculum (Expeditionary Learning). The process did not focus on fidelity to the prescribed curriculum per se, but rather, focused on the degree to which certain fundamental practices were occurring in each class. Those practices included the use of grade level text, the degree to which students were engaging in critical thinking about the text, and whether students developed claims or warrants and used evidence and reasoning to support those claims. Data, including debrief notes, were collected by the group. The details of this diagnostic evidence are further analyzed in Chapter 3.

Additional stakeholder engagements. Additional stakeholder engagements to inform the action research project included regular meetings with student and family groups. The Parent and Student Engagement Office hosted an All City Council Middle School group which attempted to bring together student leaders from all the middle schools in the district. As an initial engagement, I attended their first convening of the 2016-17 school year (they informed me I was the first Network Superintendent to ever do this). The focus of the first convening was introducing restorative justice practices. As I worked with the Parent and Student Engagement Office (we meet monthly to plan and coordinate), our goal was to develop an instructional focus for the group, where students could begin to think metacognitively about the way they were learning and have a stake in identifying assets and growth areas of the teaching and learning at their schools, as well as informing strategies to address those areas. My goal was to do the same with middle school family convenings. Evidence from these convenings included analysis of notes, agendas, debrief notes with co-facilitators, and personal reflections.

Critical friends. In addition to the groups listed above, I relied on a number of key individuals as critical friends in this research. Those included the Deputy Chief of Teaching and Learning who led the Teaching and Learning Department where the middle school content specialists resided; the Deputy Chief of Continuous Improvement whose department led efforts to use data to inform practice in a cycle of inquiry; and the Executive Director of Personalized Professional Learning whose role was to coordinate all professional learning for the district. In addition, I met weekly with my Network Superintendent colleagues (a group of 7) to collaboratively align, reflect, and plan. Lastly, the Middle School Network Partner was an invaluable thought-partner in this work.

As indicated in the above evidence, the current situation in Oakland Unified School District suggests multiple assets and challenges impacting the focus of practice for this project that are summarized in Figure 1. These included assets and challenges that existed at both the school site and central level, and within both a historical and human capacity context and are discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

Framework for the Focus of Practice

With any given focus of practice, various frameworks can be useful in order to holistically study the multiple angles and aspects of that focus of practice. Within this focus of practice, the frames at play in influencing why things had been the way they were, and the challenges that existed in seeking to make change. They are illustrated in Figure 2. At central office, the political frame surfaced when different departments had different priorities that manifested in political agendas that were then pushed without regard to the bigger picture for the whole district. Central offices were also influenced by school board decisions which can be motivated by particular political agendas. In our current reality, the economic frame played a

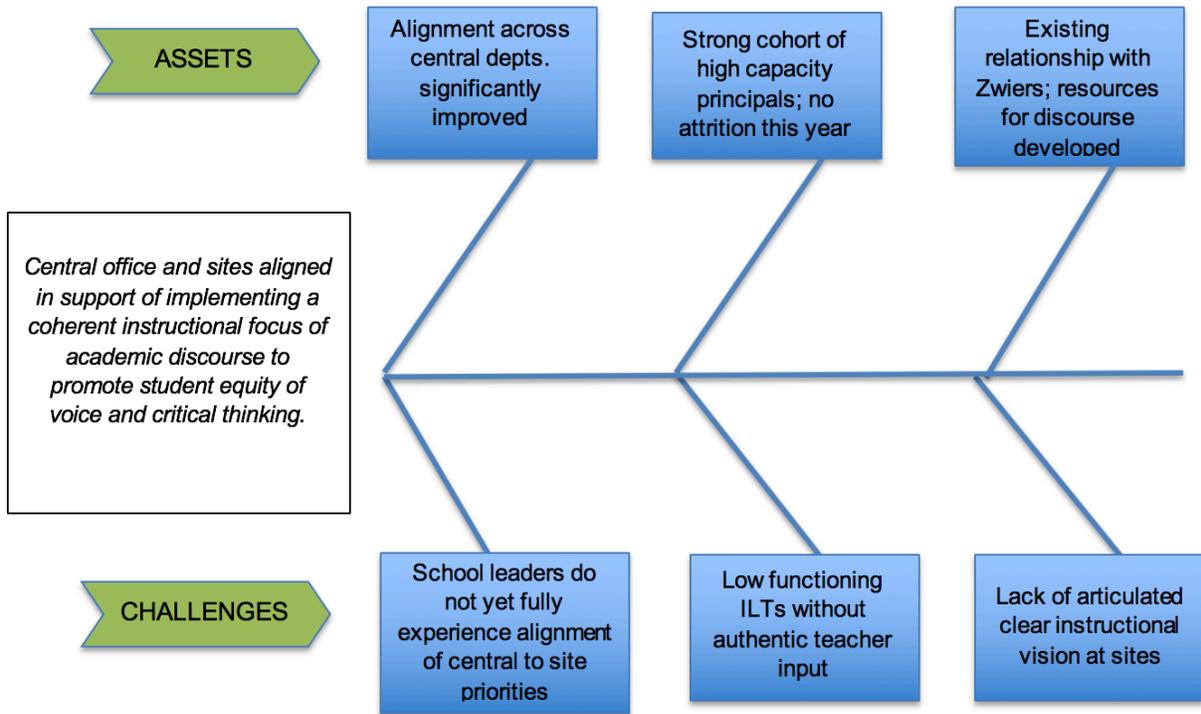


Figure 1. Fishbone diagram of assets and challenges.

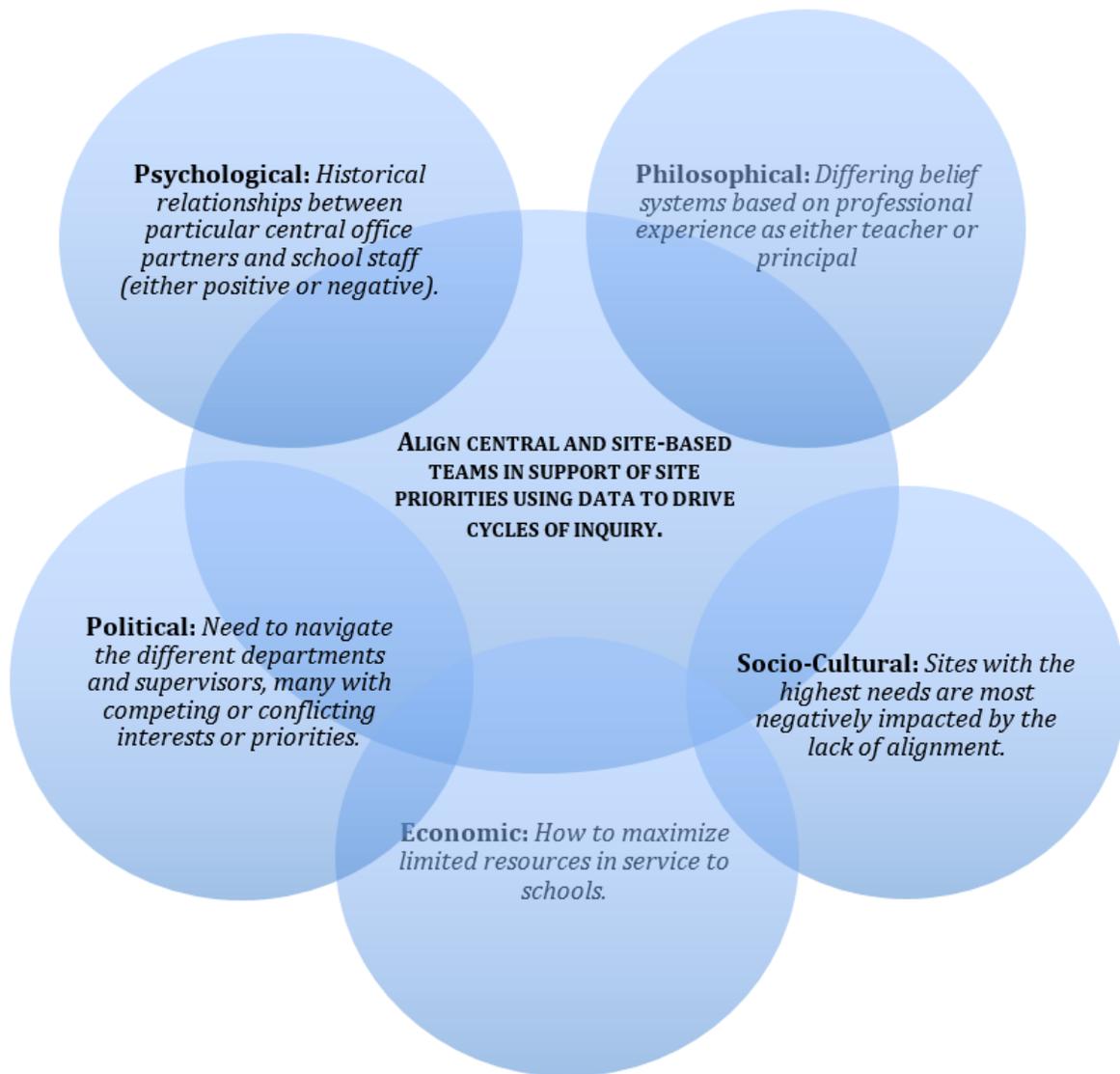


Figure 2. Frameworks of the focus of practice.

particularly influential role, as resources continue to be restricted to a greater degree. Fiscal uncertainty at the district level also influenced the political realm as different stakeholders negotiated for resources. The fiscal uncertainty also affected the psychological frame, as people were forced to function without knowing what would happen next with the budget, and in some cases, feared their own jobs could be eliminated. The philosophical frame played a significant role in the chasm that sometimes existed between different departments and the sites, as not everyone shared the same belief system about where the locus of control should be, and who should be in service of whom (e.g. schools in service of the district, or the district in service of schools and students).

Improvement Goal

The goal of the action research was to effectively organize central and site-based teams and leadership to collaboratively transform instruction by focusing on the high-leverage strategy of academic student discourse to increase student engagement and develop students' critical thinking skills. To do so would require the engagement of all stakeholders in the development of a system and structure by which central and site-based teams aligned and focused on this instructional priority to best impact teaching and learning at a given school. The driver diagram in Figure 3 articulates the aim of the research and the primary and secondary drivers that will impact the aim. One focus of the research was to address the lack of alignment and support that sites and central partners experienced with each other. Because of this disconnect, schools were not able to access and maximize the central resources specifically intended to support them. Sites with the capacity to "go it alone" were able to move forward while sites with the greatest need of support were disproportionately impacted. Specific departments were experienced more positively than others. In particular, the English Language Arts Department and the Office of

Driver Diagram

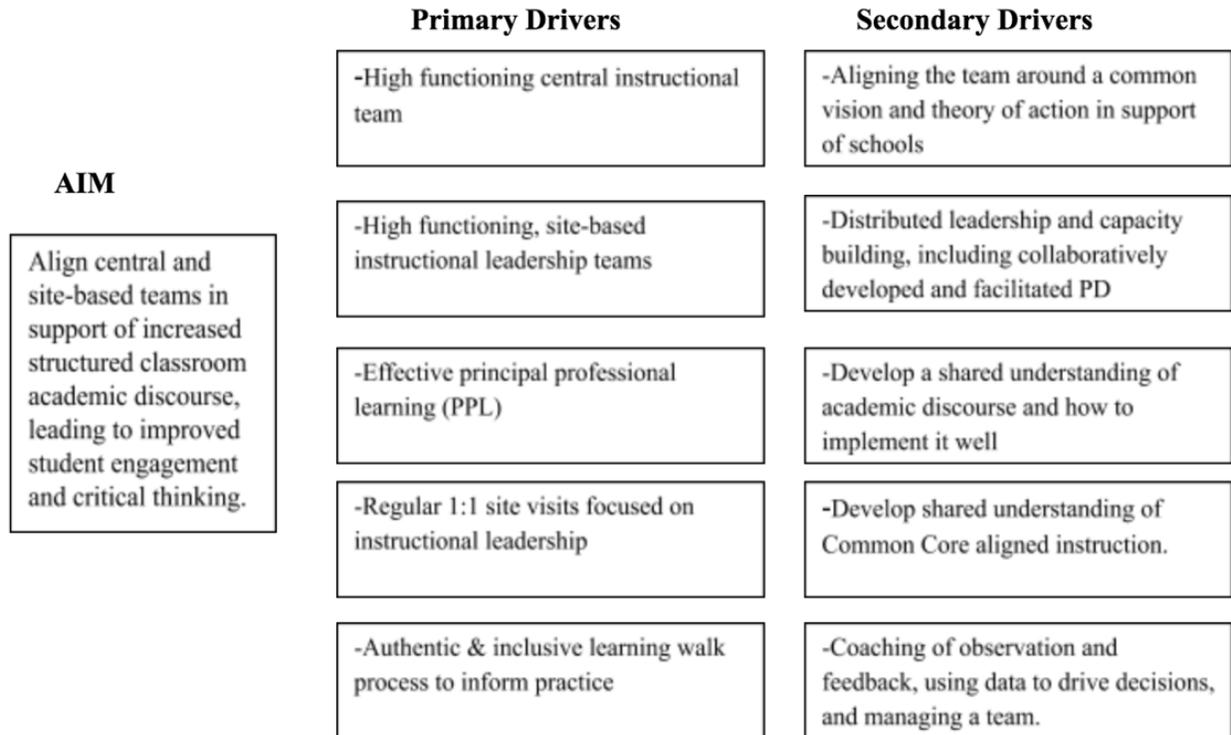


Figure 3. Driver diagram.

English Language Learner and Multilingual Achievement both stood out as offices that schools reported as offering a higher degree of support in the form of professional development, trainings, and engagement with sites. Given the insufficient amount of progress of our highest needs schools, and the district overall, the problem of disconnect and misalignment was not something that could be ignored. The way we had been operating was not working. We simply had to do better for our teachers and students.

Given that alignment was an issue that plagues most large urban school districts, getting it right had the potential to not just impact the children of Oakland. The strategies tested here had the potential to positively inform and impact other districts facing similar challenges. Likewise, getting this right was not something that one person could do alone. Because we were a complex ecosystem, with innumerable stakeholders and participants, we could address our challenges only if we were doing so publicly, and as a team. Fortunately, the work was directly aligned to the three core priorities of our district strategic plan:

1. Effective Talent Programs
2. Accountable School District
3. Community Schools

In particular, we articulated an “Accountable School District” as a “school district that supports its people and is grounded in values and effective systems. We ensured that we were one team dedicated to the development of quality schools in every Oakland neighborhood. We also wanted to provide exemplary service to all Oakland schools” (Oakland Unified School District, 2014, p. 6). By engaging in a cycle of inquiry focused on the challenges put forth in this action research, we made our learning and development public while embracing the belief that the solutions lay within our own experiences and learnings together.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the participatory action research project and study was to increase the quality of student academic discourse at one middle school in Oakland Unified School District by developing an effective system and structure for instructional collaboration and support between central office instructional partners, and the instructional leadership at the middle school. Specific to this support and collaboration would be the development of high functioning instructional leadership team at the site. Instructional leadership teams were generally defined as groups of aligned educators responsible for implementing school-wide initiatives for instruction, and for modeling cultural norms.

Research Identity

As a public school practitioner who occupied a leadership role in central office, I realized that I was sitting very much in the crossroads of this challenge. My hope was to utilize the opportunity offered by the action research project to address the challenges that I faced every day in my work as a middle school network superintendent. I was eager to, as Labaree (1997) puts it, “make good things happen for students” (p. 43). While a part of my researcher identity was to seek root causes to problems, my role was to find practical solutions to those problems rather than looking at them as “an object of analysis” (Labaree, 2003, p. 18). Two assets I brought as a researcher were: (1) throughout my career I had engaged in and supported others to engage in action-research; and (2) a core part of my role was supporting school leaders to engage in cycles of inquiry to improve student outcomes.

My research identity took the approach of engaging stakeholders in a dialogue about a problem of practice and recognizing that those closest to student learning (teachers and students) had the most insight into the problem, its root causes, and possible ways to address the problem.

I believed the expertise existed in the room, and that, when the stakeholders were empowered, they would co-construct ways to solve the problem. To add to this, I identified with the idea that research could provide a “theoretical mirror” (Labaree, 2008, p. 422) for practitioners to use to hold up to their particular problem of practice. This would provide new ideas and possibilities that could often elude us when we were too mired in the day to day struggles and crisis in our schools. I was also fascinated with the idea of how to improve the central office of a public school district (Honig, 2014). Likewise, I was interested in the research on the high leverage moves of a school leader fighting for equity (Rigby & Tredway, 2015). Finally, I appreciated the discussion of the importance of contextualized research and the awareness of “preconceived assumptions and one-sided perspectives” that an education researcher must adopt (Murakami-Ramvalho, Militello, & Piert, 2013, p. 256).

Research Question(s)

The overarching question that drove the research was: *To what extent does the structure of an urban school district and its leadership, both centrally and at sites, foster the implementation of academic discourse in support of Long Term English Language Learner and African American students critical thinking and engagement in learning?* The sub-questions embedded in the guiding question were:

1. What fosters and inhibits the classroom implementation of academic discourse structures with a principal, site coaches and teachers?
2. How does a locally generated focus of practice (academic discourse) navigate through an organization in order to have an impact on instruction and learning?
3. How do the leadership actions of a district administrator, in collaboration with a network instructional lead team, inhibit or support a site leader’s ability to build

- teacher capacity and implement the strategies of academic discourse in the classroom?
4. To what extent do we see a change in the degree and quality of academic discourse in the classroom?
 5. How has my own engagement in this research process shifted and informed my understanding of research and my practice as a leader?

Significance of the Focus of Practice

This focus of practice had direct significance to my work as Network Superintendent of Middle Schools in Oakland Unified School District. In the past ten years, a large degree of research focused on the importance of teams (Danielson, 2007; Dozier, 2007; Johnson & Donaldson, 2007; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007). This included research in the field of business as well as education. Much less research has focused on the effectiveness of central office in support of schools although that is a burgeoning field of interest (Corcoran et al., 2013; Honig & Hatch, 2004). The focus of practice had particular significance for research because the challenge of aligning and coordinating central and site-based teams was something that most large urban school districts faced, and few had solved. Likewise, my colleagues and I who observed regularly in schools saw a dearth of quality academic discourse in our middle school classrooms. We realized we would continue to perpetuate an opportunity gap in our school system if we did not empower traditionally underserved students to be the owners and drivers of their own learning. Academic discourse was a critical step in that process of empowerment. Furthermore, student success at achieving the Common Core state standards was heavily dependent on students' ability to think critically and to engage in problem solving using claims,

evidence, and reasoning. Academic discourse was a key lever to facilitate the development of that type of thinking and reasoning.

The participatory action research (PAR) project was limited by the scope and nature of any small study of a single school. While it was a small sample size and cannot be generalized without further study and research, nonetheless, the study of a middle school and the interaction and collaboration with central partners could directly inform the development of effective structures and strategies to use with the other schools I supervised and supported.

Participatory Action Research Design Overview (Methodology)

The participatory action research study was designed to engage in two cycles of inquiry with key central instructional partners and school leadership to support the implementation of quality academic discourse. The cycles followed a process of plan, implement, analyze and reflect. The first cycle involved all stakeholders in developing a shared understanding of academic discourse. Next, the team conducted baseline observations and data collection to determine the current level and nature of academic discourse at the school of the study. The team then developed a plan for how to progressively implement academic discourse in the classroom and what ongoing supports would be needed to do so. The team collected data on implementation using surveys, observations, and interviews. The next stage of the cycle would largely depend on what emerged in the first cycle; however, the process of plan, implement, analyze and reflect would continue in the following cycle. The full design of the study will be discussed further in the methodology chapter (Chapter 4).

Chapter Summary

The implications of this research were important to both the content and the process of the research. Urban school districts across the country have struggled to effectively support the

most vulnerable schools. This has led to dramatic reform efforts, which have included closing schools, wholesale firing of staff and leader, turning district schools into charter schools, and many more transformation practices. However, many of these efforts were from the inside out. This was an inside-out reform involving the people closest to the work (Grubb & Tredway, 2010). Throughout many of those relatively unsuccessful reform efforts, our district experienced ongoing turnover and change in the central office leadership. The lack of stability inevitably impacted our ability to see reform efforts through to the end. What had not been focused on to the same degree was the role of central staff in the reform, and the impact of how central staff could show up to support and engage with schools. In an effort to improve schools, we were often blind to the fact that we need to improve central office in order to improve schools. This research put central office at the core of the work engaging central and school staff together in a reflective process in which we were collectively understanding what to do and how to do it so that we could improve how we served students. I posited that, if we could get this right, we could truly transform outcomes for our students.

In the subsequent chapter, I present a thorough review of the literature as it pertains to organizational coherence, academic discourse, and the role of the principal supervisor. Chapter 3 shares the context of the city of Oakland, the Oakland Unified School District, and the recent history, setting, and people pertaining to the focus of the study. Chapter 4 examines the design and methodology of the participatory action research case study. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the two cycles of inquiry of the study, and the evidence collected in each cycle. Finally, Chapter 7 serves as a review of the key findings and implications of the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Around 500 BC, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote, “Nothing endures but change.” This adage rings true in modern public education, and is certainly the experience in urban schools and school districts such as Oakland Unified (OUSD). Yet, building a coherent system in the midst of change requires the stability of its members. Across the nation, attrition rates for urban superintendents, principals, and teachers remain high (Resnick & Glennan, 2002). In the twelve years that I have been in OUSD, there have been five superintendents. With each superintendent has come staffing changes, structural changes, and changes in priorities and vision. While “enduring change” possibly creates a supportive environment for innovation, it comes at the cost of a lack of coherence and alignment. At the time of this study, OUSD principals overwhelmingly reported that their number one frustration was how central office engages with schools. Turnover was high for teachers in Oakland Unified, and the highest level of attrition for teachers was in middle school, in which 54% of 7th grade teachers were identified as novice (two years or less of experience), followed by 49% in 9th grade, and 41% in both 6th and 8th. The district average was 35% for teachers identified as novice (Source: OUSD 2014-2015 Course Schedule Data from AERIES, Teacher Experience Data, ERS Analysis).

Urban school districts face particular challenges and struggles, which, given the large populations of low-income students, immigrant students, and students of color, is a significant issue of equity for our nation’s education system. Recent national gains in academic achievement have not played out equitably for students who are identified as language learners, low-income, and/or a racial minority in the U.S. population demographics, particularly in urban school districts. Even when accounting for these populations, achievement as measured by yearly

achievement data remains low in urban school districts. Despite the greater needs of students in these categories, per pupil spending in urban school districts tends to be close to the national average, rather than exceeding it. Even with these significant hurdles and challenges, there are examples of success (both nationally and locally in Oakland) that can help us to reform an urban district, and the schools within it, in order to support all students to reach their full potential. As Resnick and Glennan (2002) state,

Evidence ranging from school case studies to large-scale quantitative studies now strongly suggests that, given high-quality learning opportunities, poor and minority students can succeed academically according to measures from achievement test scores to college entrance and completion. The issue today is not whether it is possible for urban students to learn well, but rather how good teaching and, therefore, learning can become the norm rather than the exception in urban education settings. The problem, in other words, is taking powerful teaching and learning to scale in urban school districts. (p. 2)

If we were to dramatically change outcomes for students who have been traditionally underserved, we had to focus on supporting the development of quality instruction in the classroom that strengthened our students' ability to think critically and engage in rigorous, grade level tasks. This could not be accomplished if we continued to use the traditional, teacher-centered pedagogy that had been the norm in our public education system since its inception almost two centuries ago (Goldstein, 2014). However, changing this trajectory was not the solitary burden of our classroom teachers; absent useful support from central and school leadership, we knew we would continue to see the same high levels of teacher attrition, and low levels of academic achievement, particularly in middle school. The challenge of changing student outcomes had to be a collaborative, collective focus for our entire district. Instruction

would improve only if we prioritized it as a system. Significant research confirmed the important role of organizational coherence, both at the district and school level, in improving teaching and learning in the classroom (Coburn, Touré, & Yamashita, 2009; Elmore, Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2014; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Sebastian, Huang, & Allensworth, 2017; Weiss, 1995). Successful implementation of a district or school-based improvement strategy would require the coordination of elements throughout an organization and recognition of their necessary interdependencies in support of the work in the classroom. This included an awareness of how elements within a system can either support or hinder the implementation of an improvement strategy.

The participatory action research project I undertook aimed to engage in participatory action research with a principal, site coaches, and central partners who support the school. Our aim was to understand how effective the structures of an urban school district and its leadership, both centrally and at sites, were in fostering and supporting the implementation of an instructional practice in the classroom. In this chapter, I review the existing research and literature in three main areas: organizational coherence in support of instruction, academic discourse as a high-leverage instructional strategy, and the role of the principal supervisor in supporting teaching and learning. The overarching goal of the project was: To foster the level of deep critical thinking in our middle school students so that they are prepared for the rigors of high school, college, and career. To accomplish this goal with students, I focused on my locus of control, which was working with principals and site level instructional coaches who in turn supported a shift from a teacher-centered instructional model to one that was student-centered. Our theory of action rested on using structured academic discourse as a key strategy in the classroom to push students' thinking. I believed this shift could only happen if there was

alignment and coherence across a system (district, school, and classroom) focused on instruction. This required central office and school site leaders who prioritized instruction, and used the evidence from instruction to inform individual coaching and professional learning (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013). I asserted that the development and implementation of an instructional focus could not be top-down, nor compliance-driven, but rather, needed to be co-constructed and iterative. This would require engaging key stakeholders in an ongoing, generative process using inquiry to guide a theory of action. My role as principal supervisor would be critical to building coherence and alignment across and between central office and schools; as I acted as both a bridge and a buffer between central office and school sites, I supported a sustained focus on instruction in order to increase student engagement and critical thinking.

In this chapter, I examine the research and theory regarding organizational coherence at all levels of a school system. I analyze the research regarding the importance of academic discourse, or student talk, in fostering critical thinking. Finally, I review the research on the role of the principal supervisor in modeling and supporting instruction in the classroom.

Organizational Coherence

The participatory action research project aimed to investigate the influence of particular central office structures and systems that either impeded or supported the instructional initiatives at a specific middle school. In doing so, I hoped to identify certain systems and components of central office support that could be replicated to support other schools and bring greater coherence to our whole system. What I noticed in the literature was that, in order to positively impact teaching and learning in the classroom, organizational coherence would require a focus on the instructional core at all levels of the organization (Coburn et al., 2009; Elmore et al., 2014; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Sebastian et al., 2017; Weiss, 1995). Decision-making needed to be

collaborative and engage all stakeholders in the use of multiple types of data to drive instructional decisions within a cycle of inquiry. There needed to be a fundamental shared belief that all students can learn and that achieving equitable outcomes for students would require recognition that support should be differentiated according to need. This section of the literature review is divided into three subsections, each discussing aspects of organizational coherence. First, I discuss issues of coherence between central office and schools, and the impact on student learning. Second, I discuss how schools internally faced a similar challenge of organizational coherence, which negatively impacted the student learning experience. Lastly, I propose ways in which we can build stronger coherence at the central office, between central office and sites, and internally at sites.

Issues of Coherence between Central Office and Schools

Coherence means that an entire organization is successfully structured and managed so there is a unity of purpose and a consistent and logical plan in place to achieve the stated goals. If a school organization is coherent, it means the entire staff knows the goals, and acts in a unified way to achieve those goals. If central office staff is to be of greatest service to schools, there must be a coherent thread of how the central office is in service of the schools, and a reciprocal relationship between the central office and the schools. In this section, I review research studies that have examined the role of central office in effective support of schools, including the results of how decision-making happens (Coburn et al., 2009; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Weiss, 1995). I review the design principles developed by Resnick and Glennan (2002) to address the issues that misdirect central office from focusing on instructional support for schools. Elmore et al. (2014) discussed the stages of cohesive structures in a school organization providing an important guide to how each school can achieve results at the school level. What emerges from these studies is

that in order for change to be effective, there needs to be a collective focus on instruction at all levels of the organization. Furthermore, the process of positively impacting instruction needs to engage all stakeholders collaboratively using data to drive decision-making in a cycle of inquiry.

The Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University (n.d.) adapted a coherence model (see Figure 4) from Tushman and O'Reilly (2002), to explain the interconnected nature of an education system (district or school), where structure, systems, culture, stakeholders, and resources must be aligned in support of a clear strategy to support instruction. The model displays graphically the importance of an overarching theory of change; without a coherent theory of change, it is difficult to impact the instructional core (Elmore, 1996).

Balancing External and Internal Demands

A key part of leadership at both the central and school level is to support a process of sense-making and interpretation of external and internal demands placed on sites in order to ensure these demands are truly in service of students. Honig and Hatch (2004) characterize this phenomenon as a “policy-practice gap” between schools and central office; external agents who participate in reform efforts may bring a third level of incoherence. They argue that in order to truly address this gap or incongruity, there needs to be a “reconceptualization of coherence, not as an objective alignment of external requirements, but as a dynamic process” (Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 16). Honig and Hatch lift up the negative impact of excessive and unmanageable external demands placed on school sites by central office, outside organizations, unions, school boards, and state/federal governments. While they recognize that incoherence can have a profoundly negative impact on school success and student achievement, the authors articulate the potential opportunities for growth that external demands provide to schools, particularly when

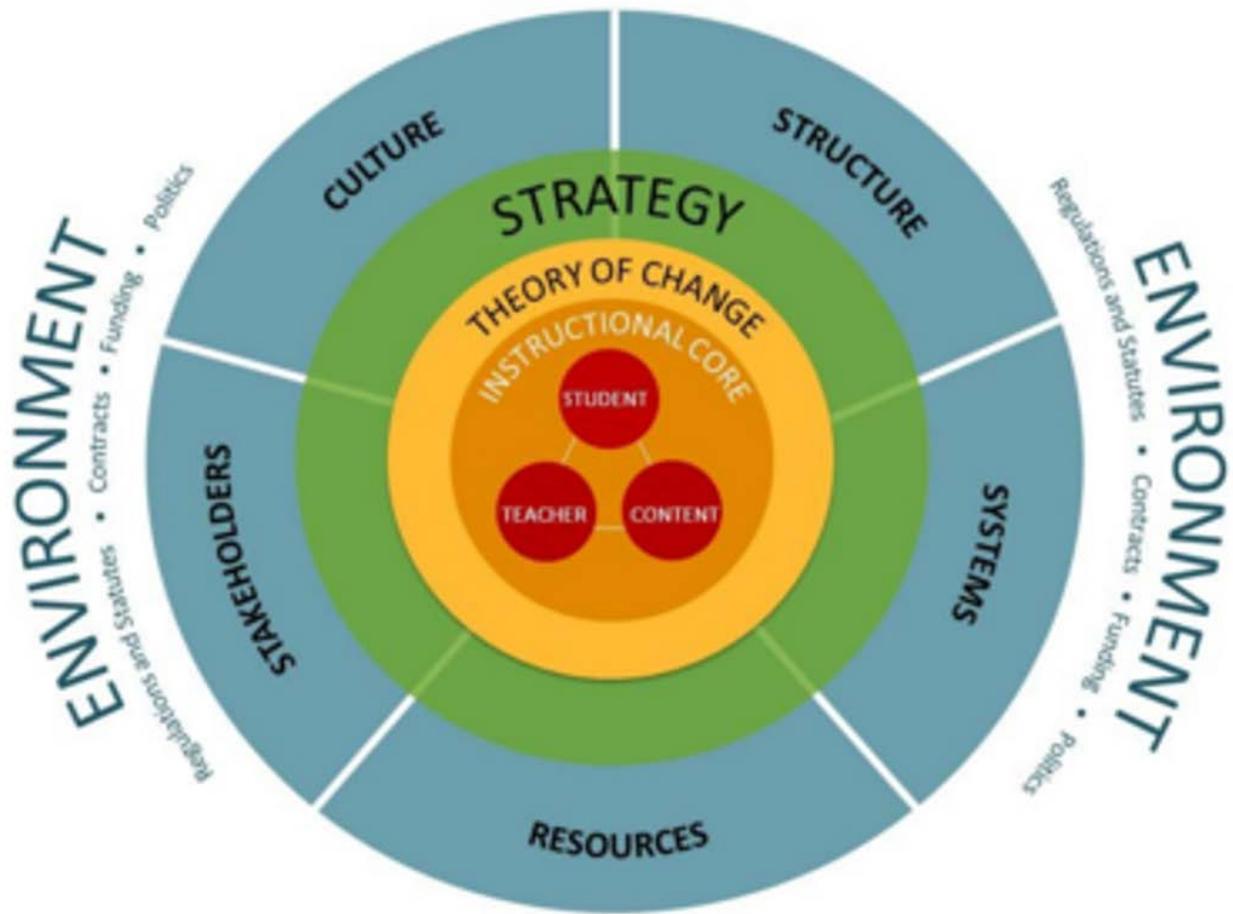


Figure 4. Educational coherence model.

they come with additional resources. However, without managing the dynamic nature of how this works in real time in schools and districts, the schools are not in a position to see the importance of leveraging coherence at the district level to support efforts internally. Instead, schools tend to see those as intrusions at worst, and unhelpful at best.

The Honig and Hatch (2004) research highlights how neither “outside-in,” nor “inside-out,” approaches to improving coherence has proved successful; instead, if Elmore (1996) and they are right, we need a both-and approach. The authors reflect on the role of the central office administrators closest to schools and the unproductive role they can play which often reinforces hierarchical power relationships with schools (Datnow, Borman, Stringfield, Overman, & Castellano, 2003). Indeed, central office may develop other policies that conflict with the whole school reform goals (Spillane & Coldren, 2011) and, in the end, promote district, not school, goals and strategies (Honig & Hatch, 2004). They point out how competing demands from a variety of stakeholders can influence decisions by central office administrators in ways which the school may view as counterproductive. However, they argue that, “...coherence might provide a more productive organizing construct for policy if research and practitioners viewed it as a process by which schools use multiple external demands to strengthen students’ opportunities to learn” (Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 16). As the Tushman and O’Reilly (2002) model in Figure 4 suggests, district level efforts and policy can be used effectively to frame and magnify school level results.

The authors offer a framework for the dual role that the district supervisor plays in bridging and buffering that occurs between schools and central office. Honig and Hatch (2004) present a new definition of an ongoing coherence process they call “crafting coherence.” They state “[c]oherence depends on how implementers make sense of policy demands and on the

extent to which external demands fit a particular school's culture, political interests, aspirations, conception of professionalism, and ongoing operations" (Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 17). Lastly, they introduce the role of school leadership as simplifiers of external demands as part of the process to ensure these demands match school goals and strategies. They define "coherence as a process of negotiation whereby school leader and central office administrators continually craft the fit between external policy demands and schools' own goals and strategies and use external demands strategically to inform the work and enable implementation of those goals and strategies" (Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 19). In order for this "crafting of coherence" to occur, there needs to be a recognition from leadership that this is an inclusive, ongoing process of meaning making as a part of engaging with stakeholders both centrally and at sites. While this recommendation is clear, the process of accomplishing this, like the dynamic process itself, depends on the relationship of central office with each school and principal; the balance between ensuring that the policy is clear, but it needs to be contextualized without losing the essence. Understanding the principal supervisor's role in modeling the transfer by bridging and buffering central office mandates or outcomes so that they help schools leverage central office support to support school results is part of the subject of this action research project. While we know what to do in general, how to accomplish coherence specifically is still somewhat elusive.

Decision-Making Variables

When considering the importance of central office coherence in support of schools, it is necessary to interrogate how decisions are made, and the variation that go into those decisions, that ultimately impact student outcomes. Coburn et al. (2009) highlight the different ways in which instructional decisions are made in school districts, and the influences or motivations that impact how those decisions are made. Based on their longitudinal case study in one mid-size

urban district dealing with 23 key decisions related to instruction, they posit that decision-making in school districts is influenced by interpretation, argumentation, and persuasion, which inevitably adds political and social frames to the decisions that impact schools. The authors name how differences in the interpretations of key decision-makers are influenced by “the organizational structure of the district, content knowledge of key district leaders, resource constraints, and leadership turnover” (Coburn et al., 2009, p. 24). The way a problem is framed is, therefore, critical to a key finding of their research, and they cite the importance of using evidence and data to construct solutions, rather than as a rationale for why a particular pre-determined solution is better than another one. They documented that less than a third of the districts use evidence and data to determine next steps. This often creates decisions that are politically motivated rather than based on what is going to be best for schools and students.

Importance of Collective Sense-Making

Likewise, the authors emphasize the role of sense-making in decisions, and how sense-making is influenced by one’s position, role and working knowledge in an organization -- fundamentally a social function. The study notes that in the 23 decisions they analyzed, only twelve used evidence to make decisions. In the other examples, decision-makers resorted to one of the following three strategies:

1. Narrow the range of participants.
2. Structural elaboration. That is, they built the differences into the structure of the program or policy, often creating greater complexity.
3. Exercise authority (Coburn et al., 2009, p. 41).

What is significant for this study is understanding what evidence or data is useful in managing the iterative steps of school reform that are typically the regular diet of schools.

Relying on external quantitative accountability data offers a broad consideration, but formative assessments of student progress, data of evidence about classroom inputs (teacher actions), and outputs (student learning as identified through fine grain evidence on equitable participation), levels of questions and depth of student responses are all sources of evidence that might be key leverage points that help to enact the espoused theories or policies from the district (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

How Resources Affect Decisions

Coburn et al. (2009) discuss the “impact of a constricting budget” on decision-making (p. 33). The study identifies how reduced resources cause decisions to be further “drawn out or left unresolved- also resulting in less conceptual use of evidence and more symbolic use of evidence” (Coburn et al., 2009, p. 38). Both political and social frames are in play as departments try to protect their own priorities and people, even if it is not in the best interest of the larger district vision or direction. The study concludes with recommendations that are general and certainly necessary, but, like many studies on this topic, what is missing is attention to the ways that sense-making and use of evidence actually move any needle on student learning in the classroom.

1. The need for adequate resources to support the level and complexity of decision-making in a given district at a particular historical moment.
2. The need to develop greater opportunities for individuals in different divisions within school districts to interact in substantive ways with research and data.
3. The importance of content knowledge in instructional decision-making (Coburn et al., 2009, p. 41).

Unfortunately, our current budget crisis in Oakland Unified makes the application of “adequate resources” a challenge; yet, the latter two recommendations from Coburn et al. (2009) are crucial to developing coherence across our system in support of our middle schools. These two recommendations are more actionable and of particular importance in relation to two of the sub-questions in my action research;

- How does a locally-generated focus of practice (academic discourse) navigate through an organization in order to have an impact on instruction and learning?
- How do the leadership actions of a district administrator, in collaboration with a network instructional lead team, inhibit or support site leaders’ ability to build teacher capacity and implement the strategies of academic discourse in the classroom?

The Key Role of the Instructional Lead Team

In their research of three urban school districts, Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, and Newton (2010) name the critical role of central office reform in order to transform schools and its central purpose in teaching and learning for school improvement. At the time of the study, the three districts -- Atlanta Public Schools, New York City’s Empowerment School Organization, and Oakland Unified School District -- were in the midst of implementing central office reform and were showing gains in student achievement. Over the course of a year and a half, the study included 260 observational hours, 282 interviews, and the review of over 252 district documents. Based on analysis of qualitative evidence from multiple sources, the researchers derived patterns that were triangulated across the different data sets. Based on their findings, the study calls on central office staff to remake their work, and their relationships with schools, in order to prioritize a focus on teaching and learning improvements. The authors emphasize that central office, however, must make a fundamental paradigm shift in the way staff view their work and

their relationship to schools. Honig et al. (2010) discuss five key dimensions needed for central office transformation in the service of better supporting schools. These include:

- Dimension 1: Learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals' instructional leadership practice.
- Dimension 2: Assistance to the central office–principal partnerships.
- Dimension 3: Reorganizing and re-culturing of each central office unit, to support the central office–principal partnerships and teaching and learning improvement.
- Dimension 4: Stewardship of the overall central office transformation process.
- Dimension 5: Use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools. (Honig et al., 2010, p. 17)

These offer broad direction in the form of normative values and overarching roles; as previously discussed, enacting espoused values is more than a notion, which we know from the organizational literature of the past 40 years. However, with a focused examination of a school in which the district supervisor, instructional lead team members, principal and instructional coaches at the site are collaborating to ensure stronger coherence, this project aims to fill the gap in the literature about how this actually works by identifying and addressing the iterative assets and challenges and using evidence from multiple sources to move the work forward. We will look more deeply at how these dimensions can be actualized in the section of this chapter discussing the role of the principal supervisor in supporting instruction in the classroom. However, one part of the study design is supporting an instructional lead team, and comports with the role central office can play.

The instructional lead team in the school, which consists of the principal, coaches, and teacher-leaders, was a part of the participatory action research project and was critical to lending content knowledge expertise to instructional decisions. The instructional lead team played a pivotal role in building the partnership between central office and schools. The team kept the focus of central support to schools on instructional priorities because they were in more systematic relationships with site leaders and teachers. Because they participated in sense-making and developed a coherent theory of action, the team had the opportunity to shift the orientation of central office partners to prioritize site instructional goals. Likewise, the team helped to bring together individuals from the different divisions in the district to analyze classroom and student level data and research. While they still had to translate other central office mandates or other external demands that did not appear to be directly related to changing student outcomes, they, like the district supervisor and the principal, had to bridge and buffer so that those demands were understood as a part of a larger effort. And they acted as the eyes and ears at the site level to collect and analyze other evidence to support the district supervisor in tailoring support to sites and principals and maintaining coherence between the district and school and at the school level.

Organizational Coherence at the School Level

In a discussion of coherence, I examine the interplay of schools and districts as they grapple with how to move the needle on student learning at the classroom level. Several studies examine the importance of organizational coherence from both points of view: outside-in and inside-out. Without a coherent theory of action from the district to the school and within the school, as discussed in the last section, change is fragmented. Elmore et al. (2014) attention to cohesion over two decades of research provides a way to look at both school level and district

level work in cohesion. I then discuss Weiss's 1995 study of institutional theory and how the invisible hand of institutional norms can affect decision-making and change at the site level. Lastly, I examine the work of Sebastian et al. (2017) and the important role of teachers in the decision-making process.

Internal Cohesion: District-Level and School-Level

Elmore et al. (2014) define internal coherence as “a school’s capacity to engage in deliberate improvements in instructional practice and student learning across classrooms over time, as evidenced by educator practices and organizational processes that connect and align work across the organization” (p. 3). Abelmann and Elmore’s (1999) work on coherence and accountability provided the backdrop for more expansive work on supporting school and district cohesion. They examined the interaction of individual responsibility and collective responsibility to accountability, levels of professionalism, and types of leadership in twenty schools, spending two weeks in each school. As a result, they identified three levels of cohesion: atomized, emergent, and internally coherent schools. Grubb and Tredway (2010) posit that there is another type of school that is less coherent than the atomized, and the term they use for such schools is “pre-atomized”. In this type of school, the “teacher accountability and professionalism are underdeveloped, the school is disorganized, there is no leadership, and the response to external demands is chaotic and superficial” (Grubb & Tredway, 2010, p. 157).

Elmore’s earlier work resulted in the “Internal Coherence Assessment Protocol (ICAP)” in order to articulate to leaders the practices they can use to improve the instructional core, which he defines as “the relationship between the teacher and the student in the presence of content” (Elmore et al., 2014, p. 5). He discusses the importance and power of strengthening efficacy

beliefs for instructional improvement, especially through instructional leadership and teacher collaboration, which he says are two of the strongest predictors. The domains of the ICAP are:

1. Leadership for Instructional Improvement in which these are key characteristics:
leadership for learning, psychological safety, and professional development
2. Whole-School Processes for Instructional Improvement that includes collaboration on an improvement strategy and teacher involvement in instructional decisions
3. Teams as Levers for Instructional Improvement who have a shared understanding of effective practice, support for team, & team processes
4. Individual and Collective Efficacy Beliefs that support both individual teacher and collective efficacy

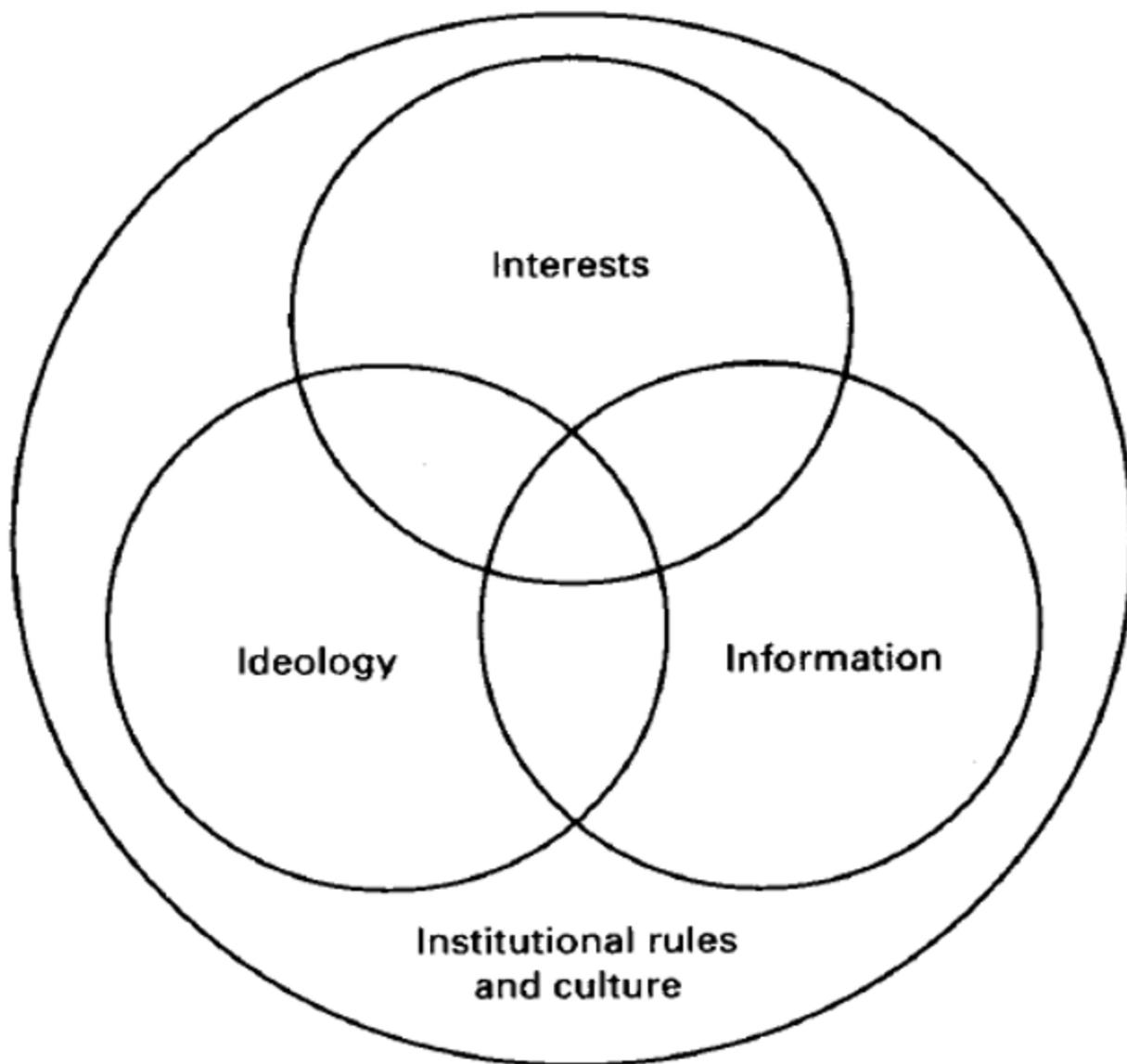
Elmore et al. (2014) state: “There is an emerging consensus across various research literatures on the organizational conditions that must be present in schools to promote both excellence and equity in student learning. These conditions include leadership that is distributed and focused on instruction; coherence in the instructional program; ongoing, embedded professional development; professional learning communities anchored in data on instruction and student learning; and teachers’ confidence in and responsibility for their efforts to obtain desired student outcomes” (Elmore et al., 2014, p. 3). He highlights the fact that support is needed if schools are going to implement these systems. This is where the role of the principal supervisor is essential. “Despite the fact that many school systems devote extensive resources to creating structures of collaboration - such as shared teacher time, vertical and horizontal teaming, and leadership teams- practitioners frequently lack the skills and processes to capitalize on their time within these structures for powerful ends” (Elmore et al., 2014, p. 22). Thus, the role of the district and the district supervisor can support or negate the value of outside-in support.

School level coherence affects decision-making. Schools have the same imperative as districts to develop structures in which all stakeholders are engaged in shared decision-making. This strengthens staff buy-in and is an important step in creating organizational coherence at a school. In her study of decision-making in districts and schools, Weiss (1995) looks at the historical development of the shift from district to the school when she states, “Many decisions that had formerly been the province of the district office, such as curriculum and graduation requirements, were appropriated by state legislatures. Later in the 1980s the shift was from the district office to the school. School-based management became the rallying cry, and numbers of districts moved the responsibility for decisions about scheduling, curriculum, hiring and even budgeting to the school level” (Weiss, 1995, p. 571).

Weiss assesses the impact of shared decision-making (SDM) structures on student outcomes. The five-year longitudinal study examined high schools in four urban, one suburban and one rural district. Half of the schools instituted a shared decision-making structure, and half used a traditional leadership structure. They conducted 193 interviews with stakeholders, and coded the interviews to identify patterns in the way conflicts were handled, decision-making processes were enacted, and what the nature of decisions were. Examining shared decision-making (SDM) at the site level (high school in particular) could arguably be equally applied to the central office-school site dynamic. The theory of action initially posited by Weiss was that those closest to the students (in this case the teachers) make different, and better-informed, decisions, and those decisions are more in the interest of positive student outcomes; however, that hypothesis does not actually hold water in the evidence as the institutional influences loom large and to some extent control other decisions.

At first glance, the study's focus on the factors that influence decision-making seem to contradict this belief in shared decision-making. As seen in Figure 5, she first discusses the initial three "I's" of the study's title: interests, ideology, and information.

The author posits that individuals make decisions based on their own belief systems (ideology), the information in front of them (information), and self-interests. Originally, Weiss thought that decisions were a result of the interplay among these three "I's." Similar to Coburn's research, Weiss (1995) notes the influence of political and social frames in decision-making: "Much of the knowledge that people bring to bear on a decision comes from their direct experience... [because] research and analysis often play a tiny part in the informational mélange" (p. 576). The study finds that schools with and without shared decision-making structures made decisions on generally the same issues. Schools with SDM did not focus more on curricular or pedagogical matters. The only variance was that schools with SDM were slightly more innovative, but the author attributes this more to the principal than to the SDM structure. She then asks: "why are teachers so resistant to change, and why were principals more the champions of reform?" Weiss determines that the fourth "I" – Institution -- plays the strongest role in teachers' reticence to change, while a principal may feel less tied to historical norms. Much of this could be attributed to the tenure of teachers vs. that of a principal at a given school. Weiss (1995) states, "A large body of sociological work has found that people tend to espouse value positions that support the interests of their ethnic, class, or occupational status. These findings are summarized in the well-documented maxim: 'Where you stand depends upon where you sit'" (p. 578). While the initial findings from her research question the value of shared decision-making, Weiss determines that structure should not be rejected, but rather, additional factors should be considered when undertaking reform. From her findings, Weiss identifies



Note. (Weiss, 1995, p. 475).

Figure 5. The four "I's" of school reform.

important implications for any group initiating a reform or initiative. Reform efforts must take into consideration the pre-existing interests, ideology, information, and institutional rules and culture at a school. Furthermore, if teachers are going to be truly engaged in shared decision-making, they need to believe that the process is authentic and is something that is a permanent part of the school's culture. Weiss (1995) states: "With prior understanding of what these people believe, want, and know, reformers can craft policies that take these factors into account" (p. 589). I would add that reformers should authentically engage those closest to the classroom in the crafting of the policies themselves. We look at this in more depth in the next section.

Focus on Teachers as Organizational Actors

In the final analysis, teachers have to enact the policies and frameworks that may originate in the district or at the school level. That means that for teachers to become coherent organizational actors who value individual autonomy and collective coherency, they must be involved in the decision-making; the decisions that are a part of a larger institutional structure need to make sense to them. Further, they need to be systematically engaged in contextualizing those decisions so that their school looks like, sounds like, and acts like the Abelman and Elmore (1999) model of a cohesive school in which the individual and collective responsibility internally align and are in sync with the external demands (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012).

Additional research confirms the positive impact of teacher involvement in school policy and decision-making (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003; Spillane, Camburn, & Pareja, 2007; Spillane & Coldren, 2011). Sebastian et al. (2017) draw a correlation between teacher involvement in school decision-making and student participation in the classroom. The study identifies important factors correlated to student participation in class that are particularly relevant to this study. These include the role of principal as instructional leader, the importance

of building a culture of high expectations for students, and the value of developing a strong professional community of teachers. Sebastian et al. (2017) conducted a study in Chicago Public Schools in which they used “fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis” (p. 4) to draw correlations between certain aspects of organizational coherence and their perceived impact on student participation in class. The study included over 4,000 interviews with high school teachers, and administrative data from principals and sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What combinations of organizational supports are associated with school performance? Are these the same supports that are also associated with absence of school performance?
2. Is school leadership necessary for school performance? And conversely, is lack of school leadership necessary for absence of school performance? (Sebastian et al., 2017, p. 15)

The study applied configurational approaches to investigate how complex combinations of organizational supports influenced school outcomes. Using this approach, the researchers were able to make assertions about how specific organizational supports were only impactful when combined with other factors. Examples include principal instructional leadership as a necessary, insufficient factor unless it was combined with a high level of teacher involvement in school policy and teachers’ high expectations for students. They reported an inverse relationship between teacher feelings of safety and high levels of student participation in class. This was regardless of whether there was the presence of instructional leadership, or teacher involvement in school-wide policy decisions. Lastly, Sebastian and Allensworth noticed that a strong professional community of teachers (professional learning community) is a necessary factor in

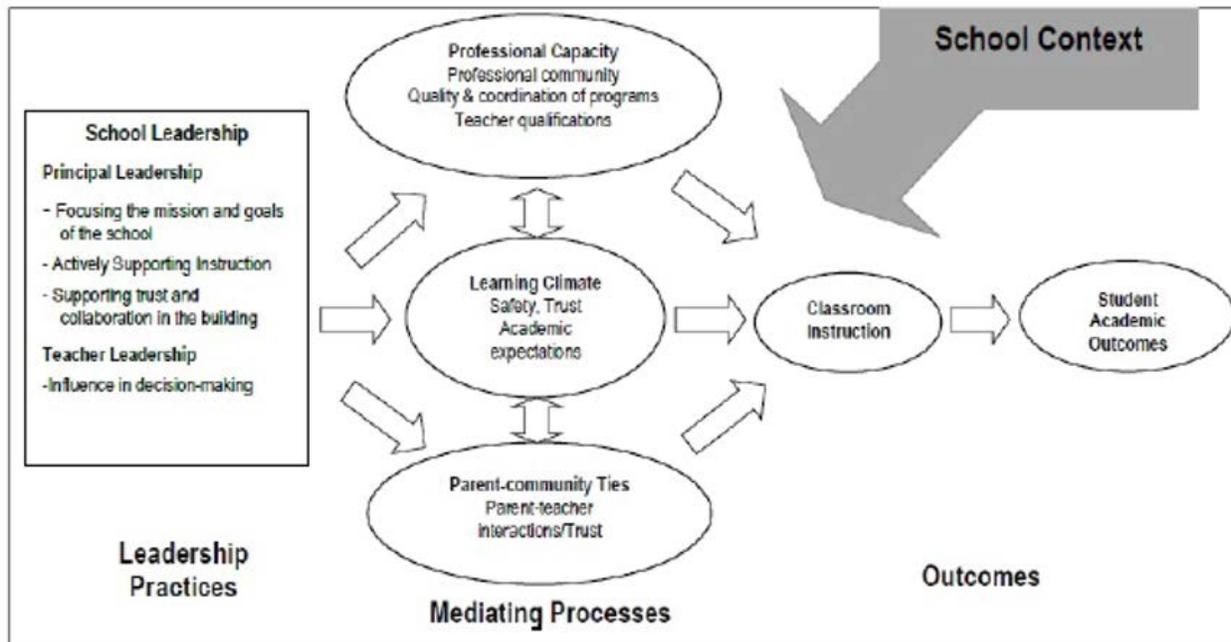
order to establish high levels of student achievement. The study speaks to the complexity of a school (or school system), and confirms the need for any approach to be multi-dimensional. The authors share a conceptual model created by Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, and Luppescu (2010) that articulates the complexity and the connection between leadership roles (both principal and teacher), key environmental processes such as professional capacity, learning climate, and family-community engagement, and the impact on classroom instruction and student outcomes (see Figure 6).

The participatory action research project and study examine how a district policy regarding the importance of academic discourse is enacted at the school level. Certainly, levels of coherence between the district and the schools as well as within school coherence influences how successful we are in enacting the policy. In reviewing the research in this area, I identified keys areas of focus that inform the central research question: To what extent does the structure of an urban school district and its leadership, both centrally and at sites, foster the implementation of academic discourse in support of English Language Learner and African American student engagement in learning?

In addition to the overarching question, an investigation of organizational coherence seeks to address these research sub-questions, including:

1. What fosters and inhibits the classroom implementation of academic discourse structures with principals, coaches and teachers at two schools?
2. How does a locally generated focus of practice (academic discourse) navigate through an organization in order to have an impact on instruction and learning?

Conceptual model of school leadership, mediating processes, instruction, and student learning



Note. (Sebring et al., 2010).

Figure 6. Conceptual model of school leadership, mediating processes, instruction, and student learning.

3. How do the leadership actions of a district administrator, in collaboration with a network instructional lead team, inhibit or support site leaders' ability to build teacher capacity and implement the strategies of academic discourse in the classroom?

The research questions touch upon the role of central office administrators, site-based leadership, and teachers to cohesively implement an instructional strategy to support students' ability to think critically and engage in rigorous, grade level tasks. From this investigation of the literature, I identified key aspects of organizational coherence, which will be crucial in our participatory action research process. These aspects include: the importance of central and site leadership to develop and sustain an instructional focus; the value of shared decision-making and distributive leadership when building a strong academic culture; the power of teams to collaboratively look at student data to inform decision-making in a cycle of inquiry; the cultivation of a shared belief in high expectations for all students; and finally, a shift in the orientation of central office partners to truly be in service to school sites. In this section, I discussed the issue of organizational coherence and its importance if central office and schools are going to develop a strong reciprocal relationship in support of the instructional core and improved student outcomes. Likewise, I examined the importance of organizational coherence at the school level and how it has an equally important role in supporting teaching and learning in the classroom. Lastly, I discussed the relationship between the principal and the teachers, and the importance of teachers in the decision-making processes at a school.

In this next section, I dive more deeply into the classroom pedagogy of academic discourse and its role as a key driver in developing student engagement and the critical thinking skills needed for students to be successful in high school, college, and career. I believe attention to academic discourse offers a frame, developed externally and supported by the district office

but focused on the instructional core, that is accessible to organizational actors at the school level. I believe it is a powerful component around which we can build a coherent system and can respond to the inside-out and outside-in coherence building that needs to happen if schools are to be successful.

Academic Discourse to Foster Critical Thinking

“Without language, one cannot talk to people and understand them; one cannot share their hopes and aspirations, grasp their history, appreciate their poetry, or savor their songs.”

(Mandela, 1994)

An English author and poet from the 18th century, Samuel Johnson said, “Language is the dress of thought.” Language, as Mandela says, is how we take in information and remember as a people together the past, live in the present, and aspire to a future for our children. In other words, language is how we think and it acts as the medium in which we interact and express ourselves daily. It is our system for communication, and, therefore, critical to teaching and learning. Vygotsky, Vakar, and Hanfmann (1962) discussed the thinking process as a series of phases, from imaging, to inner speech, to inner speaking, to outward speech. From this we can say that speech, or talking, is the representation of thinking. It follows that if education serves to develop students’ thinking, then student talk is the core representation of that thinking.

Throughout the history of U.S. public education, an emphasis on dialogue has been common. The current iteration of that emphasis uses the term academic discourse, but, by whatever name, it has had a place in the classroom, where language has been used to transmit ideas. Unfortunately, much of that discourse was structured so that the teacher did the vast majority of the talking while students were expected to silently listen, take notes, and occasionally ask a question. Otherwise known as the grammar of schooling, in general, the

teacher knows, transmits, and checks for student understanding, but does not frequently engage the student in inquiry and their own ideas (Tyack & Cuban, 2009). Early on, the emphasis was on students memorizing and reciting of facts (Goldstein, 2014). Over time, teachers realized the value of students using language to respond to questions posed by the teacher. With the advent of the Common Core State Standards comes a re-emphasis on the importance of students learning to think critically in order to develop claims supported by evidence and reasoning. This requires a level of peer-to-peer discourse beyond the teacher simply posing a question, soliciting a response, and evaluating if the response was correct. The structure of academic discourse requires what the practice literature of Kagan (2003) called PIES: Positive interdependency, individual accountability, equity of participation, and simultaneous interaction. In this section, I analyze the theories of learning and current research on academic discourse, or student academic talk, as a key strategy for improving academic achievement by developing critical thinking skills. I assert that developing student academic discourse empowers students to take ownership of their own learning, and significantly increases student engagement. When teachers are doing the majority of talking, they are likewise doing the majority of the thinking (and the majority of the work in the classroom). By building opportunities for students to engage in structured academic discourse in the classroom, students take on the work (or learning) of the classroom. Lastly, in order to maximize opportunities for students to talk, academic discourse needs to be clearly planned for, structured, and facilitated. Without structure, student talk perpetuates inequity and fails to promote the interdependency that is so important to authentic academic discourse. With structure, academic discourse has the potential to empower students, ensure equity of voice, and push critical thinking.

This section of the literature review is divided into three subsections: (1) a discussion of learning theory that supports academic discourse; (2) current research that supports academic discourse; and (3) a discussion of the pedagogical concerns for implementing academic discourse in the classroom.

Learning Theory that Supports Academic Discourse

As conceptual frameworks, learning theories describe the way in which knowledge is received, processed, and retained for the learner (Simandan, 2013). Regardless of whether one subscribes to behavioral, cognitive, constructivist, transformative, or geographical learning theory, there is a significant role for academic discourse as a key lever in the learning process. By developing student academic discourse, we empower students to take ownership of their own learning and significantly increases student engagement. By building opportunities for students to engage in structured academic discourse in the classroom, students more readily embrace the work happening in the classroom. Current discussion of academic discourse, of course, relies on a long history of learning theorists that emphasis how children, and for that matter, adults learn. Every teacher should be concerned with addressing the cognitive level of the students and meeting them at the place they are and moving them to a new level of understanding and deeper learning. As Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2001) state in their seminal book, *How People Learn*, the responsibility of moving a student from a novice to an expert learner, writer, and thinker is a long, but critical process. In this section, I will look at how learning theory supports academic discourse. While I certainly cannot fully explicate the learning theory of each of these theorists, I concentrate on key elements of four learning theorists who helped lay the groundwork for the current discussion of academic discourse: Vygotsky, Bruner, Dewey and Freire. I review Vygotsky's (1978) theory on the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and examine the role of

intersubjectivity in academic discourse. I discuss how academic discourse is a key component of discovery learning (Bruner, 1966). I review Dewey's work on the value of experience in learning, and how dialogue has a role in learning experiences (Dewey, 1971). Lastly, I discuss the ideas of Freire (1972) with regard to what he calls "the banking method" and how he views dialogue as a revolutionary act of liberation from oppression.

Vygotsky: Zone of Proximal Development, Value of Intersubjectivity

One of the greatest challenges for every teacher is to determine what each student already knows and what they are able to learn. The gap between these two points was coined by Vygotsky (1978) as the optimal zone within which learning can occur or the zone of proximal development. While traditional instruction did not promote an environment in which students play an active role in their own learning (nor that of their peers), Vygotsky's theory put forth a different paradigm in which both students and teacher become reciprocally responsible for the learning experience. This requires the teacher and students to collaborate in a manner whereby students make their own meaning, rather than having it dictated to them (Hausfather, 1996). Vygotsky argued that instruction should be designed for students to reach a level just above their current level. Teachers need to scaffold learning by engaging student interest, challenging students to reach the next level, and making tasks manageable for students (Hausfather, 1996). In this manner the learning becomes accessible. Vygotsky emphasized the importance of social exchange in accelerating cognitive development.

Social exchange is connected to the idea of intersubjectivity, a shared cognition and consensus essential to shaping our ideas and relations (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). This conceptualizes how people in their interactions with each other best construct meaning. In this manner, intersubjectivity is a process of making meaning of social, academic, and cultural life

(Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). Such meaning-making is key to student interaction, and likewise student academic discourse. Vygotsky demonstrated how structures and procedures must be in place to support this interaction and meaning making. In order for students to learn from each other, the physical classroom must be intentionally designed for such peer instruction, collaboration, and small group instruction. Likewise, the materials and structures must be designed to promote collaboration amongst the students (Driscoll, 1994).

Bruner: Discovery Learning and Spiraling Curriculum

The idea that there is pedagogical value in students interacting with, and learning from, each other has strong connections to Bruner's (1973) discovery learning. The constructivist method builds learning through students asking questions, formulating their own tentative answers, and extrapolating larger principles through hands on, practical experiences – a basic inquiry model of teaching (Joyce & Showers, 1980). Accomplished through independent student discovery rather than from the teacher delivering content, students become active participants in their own learning processes versus passive receptacles of the teacher-delivered knowledge. What lies beneath this method is the idea that learning can be deeper, more efficacious, and authentic when it is experienced in these ways by students (Bruner, 1990).

Discovery learning serves as a way of defining and providing structure to how individuals learn, and thereby acting as a guide for the educator. One misconception educators have with both discovery learning and academic discourse is that these things do not require structure, nor thoughtful planning. In fact, as Cuero (2008) indicates, strong structures set up conditions for the kind of student freedom for thinking that is important. She says that structure ensures quality learning, sets up the conditions for equitable dialogue and team activity, frees learners from indecision and fear by clear limits and expectations, and fuses all the elements of

meaningful learning. Such a misconception results in frustration on the part of both teacher and student. On the contrary, these strategies require an intense degree of planning and structure.

Three principles of discovery learning that guide instruction, and, therefore, should guide planning, are:

1. Instruction must be concerned with experiences and contexts that foster student willingness and ability to learn (readiness).
2. Instruction must be structured so that students can access it readily (spiral organization).
3. Instruction should be designed to facilitate meaning making and extrapolation (going beyond the information given) (Bruner, 1973).

Based on these principles, structured academic discourse is one way for students to be engaged in discovery learning. The benefits of such a model are: (1) it supports active student engagement through personalized learning experiences and the opportunity for students to experiment; (2) it encourages curiosity and builds on students' prior knowledge and understanding; and (3) it develops lifelong learning skills and metacognition.

Dewey: Criteria and Attributes of Dialogical Thinking and Learning

...all experience is an arch wherethro'

Gleams that untraveled world, whose margin fades

For ever and for ever when I move. (Tennyson & Millgate, 1963)

Like Bruner (1973), Dewey believed strongly in the power of experience to shape and inform learning and help students gleam so they can move into their "untraveled worlds" (Dewey & Boydston, 2008). Dewey spoke of educative experience as being a social process. He argued for the importance of the physical and social surroundings, including the "conditions of the local

community” (Dewey & Boydston, 2008, p. 40), in shaping and informing the learning experience. Dewey foreshadowed our contemporary concept of academic discourse with the notion that the teacher should not have the role of boss or ruler, but rather, should be facilitator of the group experience (Dewey & Boydston, 2008). In this way, the ultimate goal of education is to develop the power of self-efficacy and the ability to think critically. In the last ten years, partially this concept appears in another way in Carol Dweck’s (2006) growth mindset work, in which she champions the power of believing in one’s potential as a learner. Likewise, academic discourse promotes the idea of the teacher as facilitator or guide, and the importance of peer-to-peer learning within the context of relevant experience and structured opportunities to push critical thinking. Effective academic discourse is built on the model of dialogical and dialectical thinking in which students make meaning through discussion (Thompson, 2012).

Freire: Banking Method and Value of Dialogue

As Freire (1972) describes the bankrupt methods of learning in the banking model, he says: “Worse yet, it [banking model] turns them [students] into ‘containers’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (p. 72). In studying the roots of academic discourse, it would be negligent not to visit Freire’s (1972) concept of dialogue as a revolutionary act. The idea of dialogue being the liberation of the student (youth or adult) through cooperation, unity, organization, and cultural synthesis is a reaction to what Freire (2008) called the “banking method” of education.

Similar to the critiques of Dewey and Bruner about traditional pedagogy, Freire identifies the banking method as the concept of teachers depositing knowledge in the empty vessels (students), thus acting like a banker. Freire argued that the banking method creates the loss of

student consciousness because if the teacher is simply depositing knowledge into a student's "bank", the student has no opportunity to think critically about the knowledge being deposited. Students lose the ability to rationalize or conceptualize knowledge as individuals (or groups) and therefore lose their freedom to think for themselves. In this manner, the banking method perpetuates oppression and social control and dehumanizes the student. The alternative is problem-posing education conducted through authentic dialogue. That is, through inquiry and dialogue that students conduct "in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 1972, p. 244), they are liberated from the oppressive system of control and are able to think for themselves. Hence, the frame that we propose for academic discourse: meaning-making, rather than answer-getting. Freire contrasts meaning-making with the danger of "pseudo-dialectic" in which the teacher poses questions when she already has answers in mind. Contrary to liberation, this "guess what's on my mind" style of teacher questioning perpetuates control and a lack of free thought.

In this section, I discussed four giants of learning theory, their contributions to the education canon, and to the foundation for academic discourse. As mentioned in the previous section, it is important here to make a distinction between authentic freedom of thought through academic discourse, and a frequent misinterpretation in which a lack of structure in academic discourse is presented by teachers as true autonomy. I assert that a lack of structure and process in discourse leads to a continuation of oppression by "those who know" as they continue to dominate the discussion of a group with their own ideas and agenda. With structure and processes in place as Cuero (2008) suggests, equity of voice and the ability for freedom of thought results. In this next section, I examine how the ideas from these pedagogical thinkers

have impacted our current thinking about the democratization of education through the use of academic discourse.

Current Research: Emphasizing Academic Discourse

The discussion of the current research on academic discourse as a process of social learning, and teachers as guides in the Deweyian model, begins with a set of questions from Mehan and Cazden (2015). In their work on the history of classroom discourse and how that plays out in the current iteration of focusing on student talk and inquiry, they ask:

- What do students have to do to be seen as competent members of the classroom community?
- How is the prevalent structure of teacher-led lessons impacting equity of discourse?
- How could a different structure to lessons impact the quality and quantity of discourse?

From Traditional to Inquiry Questioning

The researchers set about to observe classroom teacher moves in relation to teacher initiation of questioning and student responses. The focus is on shifting from traditional Initiation-Reply-Evaluation (IRE), which is criticized for being “right answer” driven, factual, and yes/no oriented, to Initiation-Reply-Feedback (IRF), which can encourage more student reasoning and therefore mental processing and metacognition absolutely central to an expert’s growing competence (Bransford et al., 2001). Likewise, Mehan and Cazden (2015) analyze that the shift implies a change from known information questions to information-seeking questions. The idea behind this shift is that students who are able to be socialized to strengthen their academic discourse skills gain the ability to explain ideas in detail and use evidence to support reasoning. They state:

We are seeing a shift in the classroom language game from recitation to reasoning. A prominent goal of the reasoning game is to socialize students into academic discourse, that is, the genre in which ideas are presented (in written or oral form) in academic or scholarly contexts that privilege the analytical and the presentation of evidence to advance an argument (Mehan & Cazden, 2015, p. 20).

What they find is that teachers require a great deal of coaching to support their students to engage in productive discussions. When teachers were able to shift from IRE to IRF type structures, and to move from known information questions to information seeking questions, students exhibited more complex responses using evidence-based reasoning. Students also engaged their peers in dialogue to a greater degree and posed challenges and questions not just to the teacher. They name that further research is needed with regard to student led discourse (vs. teacher-led).

The Equity Imperative

Because Mehan and Cazden name the equity imperative in relation to student talk, they provide a strong rationale for why this is still an important action research project to undertake. As they say, “studies revealing cultural variations on the recitation script ...advocated for increasing the participation of minority students in classroom lessons in the name of educational equity. If minority students could be encouraged to take more turns at talk in classroom lesson, they could be better prepared to contribute more actively in the full dimensions of school life” (Mehan & Cazden, 2015, p. 19). This push towards reasoning over recitation does not come without its challenges because teachers tend to over-emphasize control and classroom flow instead of moving students toward more sophisticated thinking. That level of thinking requires a

different kind of teaching than most have been prepared to do, and the shift to dialogic classrooms is first a teacher transfer issue and then a student one.

When compared to students engaged in traditional whole class discussion, students engaged in peer-to-peer discourse have demonstrated greater gains over time in their argumentative skills and argumentative essays on new topics (Zillmer & Kuhn, 2018). According to Zillmer and Kuhn (2018), students were more likely to make counter arguments that “directly addressed and sought to weaken their opponents claims” (p. 79). In argumentative essay writing, students of the same study showed greater ability to recognize relevant evidence for an argument, and more frequently considered opposing positions and the merits of those positions in their own arguments (Zillmer & Kuhn, 2018, p. 80). This comports with Truong’s (2018) call to action that schools -- with high numbers of students who are often low-income, potential first-generation college-goers or from cultural minorities -- have the critical responsibility of preparing those youth to articulate ideas so that they can actually be prepared for college.

Norms of argumentative discourse develop through practice. Likewise, explicit meta-talk about norms increases the use and frequency, moving from unilateral to reciprocal, following the Deweyian considerations that experiential learning must be interactive and establish a continuity of learning as well as engage learners in reciprocal learning with the teacher and peers. Engagement and practice also improves the quality of the discourse itself, including the use of evidence (Zillmer & Kuhn, 2018).

In this section, I discussed the importance of questioning as a component of academic discussion, and the shift from traditional questioning, to one that is built in the context of true inquiry. I examined the implications of questioning strategies in particular, and academic discourse structures overall, on the goal of achieving greater equity of participation in the

classroom. In this next section, I dive into what the practitioner research tells us about the different structures and frames that can be used in academic discourse to deepen student learning and to avoid common pitfalls.

Pedagogical Concerns for Implementing Academic Discourse

In this section, I detail examples of specific pedagogy related to implementing academic discourse and the potential pitfalls that often create challenges for teachers. I review the value of academic discourse in supporting reading comprehension. In addition, I explain the role of questioning (and its various forms) as a strategy to engage students in discourse. I review cooperative learning as a mechanism for students to talk with each other in a way that supports accountability and promotes equity of voice. Finally, I discuss Socratic dialogue as a structure for building student efficacy and supporting critical thinking.

Approaches to Reading Comprehension

In their essay, *Effective Classroom Talk Is Reading Comprehension Instruction*, McKeown and Beck (2015) pose the question, “How can classroom talk be structured to serve effectively as reading comprehension instruction?” (p. 51). Research of the Initiate-Response-Evaluate (IRE) method, in which teachers ask one student to respond to a typically low-level question, has found mostly negative impact on reading comprehension or the development of comprehension ability. The teacher does the bulk of the cognitive thinking, and comprehension is not viewed as an interactive process by which understanding is co-developed as reading occurs. The study sought to weigh the pros and cons of two reading comprehension approaches: The Content Approach (Question the Author- QtA) and the Strategies Approach. The strategies approach occurs when a teacher explicitly teaches students how to implement specific routines to support reading comprehension, such as summarizing, drawing inferences, and predicting, as in

Palinscar and Brown's (1984) widely-used reciprocal teaching strategy. Scaffolding is applied by suggesting an appropriate strategy, and engaging the students in the evaluation of that strategy; and comprehension is improved, but only if the teacher pushes the students toward transfer and metacognition. Unfortunately, much of the actual implementation of reciprocal teaching in the study, and its specific strategies, stopped short of its intention. Teachers tended to focus on discrete skills and did not integrate them into a larger effort of understanding, transfer and metacognition that Bransford et al. (2001) recommend.

Conversely, the Question the Author (QtA) approach consistently moves the teacher from retrieval questions to questions that focus on meaning. The study found the use of QtA moved student responses from "verbatim reports of text information to meaning building" (Bransford et al., 2001, p. 55). The ongoing discussion element of QtA is credited with the success of the strategy over other strategies where a question is posed at the beginning of the reading and students answer the question at the end of the reading. The meaning building process is collaborative and cumulative in QtA. The study found that content approaches resulted in greater student comprehension based on the length of student contribution (twice that of the strategies-based classroom) and level to which contributions were directly related to the text, versus being about the strategy used.

Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, and Long (2003) sum it up: talk to create understanding rather than check understanding raises student achievement, encourages higher-level thinking, and encourages teachers to raise their own expectations of what students can achieve. Talk to create understanding encourages students to develop an argument, offer their logic, listen to others, sharing their thinking and when appropriate, change their minds. Dialogic talk supports students to ask more questions; the results support the value of student-to-student academic

discourse. On the contrary, questions that emerge from monologic talk are almost always from the teacher and are rarely seen-- by students-- as authentic questions, those questions for which the student believes the teacher doesn't know the answer and is sincerely searching for an answer.

Useful Questioning Strategy

Matsumura and Garnier (2015) conducted a study that included a longitudinal randomized controlled trial of a literacy-coaching program called Content-Focused Coaching (CFC); its aim is to improve classroom discussion about text and student reading comprehension. The main focus of the coaching in the program is on the Questioning the Author (QtA) strategy, briefly highlighted in prior section. The coaches plan with teachers, model a QtA lesson, lead teacher-learning groups, and debrief lessons with teachers.

Three primary factors that influenced implementation were principal leadership, teacher professional community, and teacher experience in teaching reading. The positive principal leadership role essential to effective implementation of the QtA strategy was communicating support to the coach for their literacy expertise. Interestingly, established cultures of collaboration had a negative impact on the ability of the coach to effectively integrate into the culture of the school. The study found a significant positive impact on the quality of classroom text discussion in the classrooms that were a part of the content-focused coaching (CFC) program. Likewise, the impact on student reading achievement was significant in second year, especially with ELL students. The study identified four factors that distinguished CFC from other coaching models and contributed to the success:

1. Professional training and support for coaches
2. In-classroom support for teachers

3. Targeted use of coaching resources
4. Inclusion of school leadership (Matsumura & Garnier, 2015, p. 421).

Lack of ongoing principal support for coaches was identified as a key factor that limited success of program. Limitations of teacher time and accountability pressures (testing season) were also named as key factors negatively impacting the success of the program. However, the overarching focus on content is critical, and the admonition about teaching discrete skills for comprehension remains a caution, as implementation requires a holistic approach to questioning that takes repeated practice by teachers to gain transfer and fluidity required to be fully expert as facilitators and co-learners; gaining expertise is often missing in many efforts to change classroom practice, and, as soon as the emphasis moves away from that strategy, teachers abandon the strategy for the grammar of schooling that is more deeply rooted in the rut of their teaching practices (Tyack & Cuban, 2009).

Cooperative Learning

In the early 2000s, two middle schools in Oakland embraced Kagan's (2003) cooperative learning strategies as a whole school initiative, and, although we cannot make a direct correlation between these strategies and achievement, the schools did show significant achievement growth. Cooperative learning makes sense because it is based on the Vygotsky premise of intersubjectivity and peers as mediators of learning. One of the first of those strategies, -- think/pair/share (TPS) -- was designed by Frank Lyman (1981) to fortify the importance of "think time" before responding, and the value of rehearsing with a partner before contributing to the entire class. While its use is often trivialized in schools, it still has important potential for student discourse and for creating conditions of equity in classroom discourse (Solomon, 2009) as well as a tool for formative assessment. For example, one of the current instructional coaches on the

middle school team, who was formerly a middle school teacher in Oakland, has devised significant ways for using TPS as a formative assessment tool (Retrieved from <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/participation-protocol-ousd>).

The advent of the Common Core Standards has generated newfound interest in academic discourse and the need for supporting cooperative and reciprocal learning as a vehicle for rehearsing and authenticating student input in those discussions. The Common Core emphasizes engagement in authentic academic discussion across disciplines (Zwiers, O’Hara, & Pritchard, 2014). In mathematics, one of the eight mathematical practices is constructing viable arguments and critiquing the reasoning of others. Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational, is one of the three key shifts in ELA. Likewise, argumentation is embedded throughout the Next Generation Science Standards:

1. Asking questions (for science) and defining problems (for engineering)
2. Developing and using models
3. Planning and carrying out investigations
4. Analyzing and interpreting data
5. Using mathematics and computational thinking
6. Constructing explanations (for science) and designing solutions (for engineering)
7. Engaging in argument from evidence
8. Obtaining, evaluating, and communicating information

Beers and Probst (2013) reinforce the value of student talk and make an important distinction between the sense-making of a constructivist approach to teaching and the more typical stand and deliver presentation or direct instruction models: “Student-centered talk that’s focused on

creating understanding--rather than teacher-centered talk that checks for understanding--is an important best practice” (p. 6).

The research is clear: when we shift from scenarios in which the teachers ask questions and students respond in a unilateral teacher-to-student format, toward scenarios in which students asks questions and other students respond, we see increases in:

- On-task behavior
- Length of student responses
- The number of relevant responses volunteered by students
- The number of student-to-student interactions
- Students use of complete sentences
- Speculative thinking on the part of the students
- Relevant question posed by students
- Higher performance on tests with lower-level questions or higher level cognitive demands (Cotton, 1988, p. 5).

Beers and Probst (2016), for example, offer up strategies for engaging in non-fiction text using student talk. Strategies such as “What did the author think I already knew?” authorizes the processing of reading with, and against, the text as an analytical reader, and attempts to make the reader even more discerning. These kinds of interactions are the kinds of reciprocity of learning, interaction, and using tools of teacher questioning that underscore the importance of constructivist models of teaching and give credence to the theories of Dewey (1971) and Vygotsky (1978).

Chen, Clarke, and Resnick (2012) suggest that teachers, principals and researchers observe and analyze academic discourse in classroom using Classroom Discourse Analyzer

(CDA) tool to code observations of classroom interactions (see Figure 7). Typically, the observer uses selective verbatim observation or a seating chart process to record teacher questions and the number and quality of student responses (Acheson & Gall, 1992). While there are limitations based on the time and expense of data collection, transcribing, and coding; it is a valuable framework to consider analysis of academic discourse including “teacher turns” and the quality, not just the number, of student responses, using the characteristics above from Cotton (1988) as a guide and as a metric for assessing the equity related to number of student responders. The multi-dimensional coding framework can be used to measure students: (a) knowledge of content (new idea [with justification or not], repetition, or no academic content), (b) evaluation of previous turns (agree, disagree, or being neutral), and (c) invitation to participate (statement, question, or command) (Chen et al., 2012, p. 90).

The focus on discrete skills has its place in discourse as we cannot do what we have not practiced as teachers; however, the important factor of all of these pedagogical strategies is the whole and not the parts of academic discourse. One key strategy for discourse brings all of the discrete skills together, and that is the Socratic seminar and the ways the dialogical focus has the potential to inform and transfer to the total classroom experience.

Socratic Dialogue

One crucial tool of classroom dialogue is a focus on Socratic dialogue; certainly nothing new in education as the name indicates – this is the process of probing questions to engage students in making meaning of visual or written text. Regenerated as a form of learning in the 1980s with the Paideia movement of Adler and Van Doren (1988), a key component of full implementation of dialogue in all classroom experiences centers on teachers engaging in seminars for their own professional learning as well as learning to facilitate seminars in their

Appendix A. A multi-dimensional coding framework for coding teacher turns in CDA.

| | |
|---|--|
| <u>Teacher helps students expand and clarify their own thinking</u> | |
| • Say More | • Asking students to expand on their own idea by saying more “Can you say more about that?” “Can you give an example?” |
| • Revoice | • Revoicing students’ reasoning and giving opportunity for them to verify “So, let me see if I’ve got what you’re saying. Are you saying...?” |
| • Press for Reasoning | • Asking students to explain their own reasoning “Why do you think that?” “What’s your evidence?” |
| • Challenge | • Giving students a challenge or counter example “Does it always work that way?” |
| <u>Teacher helps students think with others</u> | |
| • Restate | • Asking students to repeat or rephrase the ideas of others “Who can repeat what he just said or put it into their own words?” |
| • Add On | • Prompting students to extend the ideas of others “Who can add onto to that idea?” |
| • Agree/Disagree | • Asking students to apply their own reasoning to someone else’s reasoning “Do you agree/disagree? (And why?)” |
| • Explain Other | • Asking students to explain what someone else means “Why do you think he said that?” |
| <u>Teacher’s other moves</u> | |
| Other Moves | • Simple question, evaluation, confirmation, etc. “Yes or No?” “You are right!” “Yes” |

Note. (Chen et al., 2012, p. 105).

Figure 7. Coding possibilities for teacher moves.

classrooms. Both in Socratic seminars and the transfer to all classroom dialogue and questioning, the facilitator (typically the teacher) asks provocative questions and systematically teaches paraphrasing and building on the ideas of other students. Gradually, students become more responsible for developing questions, using embedded tools as mediators for developing stronger thinking and dialogue (McTighe & Lyman, 1988). A key factor in achieving a state of reciprocal dialogue in seminar is how teachers learn to cue, especially for think time (also termed Wait Time I and Wait Time II by Lyman) and how they prepare students for seminar by unpacking and sense-making of text prior to the seminar experience. “Cueing enables teachers to manage students' thinking by combating the competitiveness, impulsivity, and passivity present in the timeworn recitation model” (McTighe & Lyman, 1988, p. 19).

Tredway (1995), Mangrum (2010), and Roberts and Billings (1999) discuss the pedagogical strategies for implementing effective seminars that focus on deeper understanding of text and co-construction of knowledge. Since the seminar relies on intersubjectivity of Vygotsky to ensure what is now termed deeper learning, this strategy aligns with a constructivist philosophy of teaching and the ways we want to engage students. These include emphasis on choosing a text of merit, on developing opening questions for seminar that correspond to Bloom's level 5 and 6 or synthesis and evaluation, learning how to enter conversations without hand-raising, and focusing student attention to equitable participation and building on the ideas of others. While there are discrete skills for seminar participation, the teacher must ensure transfer of discrete skills to the seminar and classroom dialogue format. The Socratic seminar, in fact, has been recommended by many advocates of graduate exhibitions for use as one key metric for graduation (McDonald, 1993). In addition, a reliance on the deeper learning that seminars participation provides to K-12 students has demonstrated that students who engage in

this kind of learning complete high school on time and have stronger college-going rates (Kena et al., 2016). As such, the teacher acts as a moral and intellectual guide in preparing students; by constructing classrooms as cognitive apprenticeships, teachers act as the moral and intellectual guide to fully engage learners in democratic dialogue (Tredway, Brill, & Hernandez, 2007). Socratic classrooms support us to do what Meier (1995) firmly views as the role of schools: ensure that student ideas matter and are fully valued and that we treat our role as guides seriously because “schooling is a part of child rearing. It’s the place society formally expresses itself to young on what matters” (p. 14).

In my experience as an instructional leader, I have noticed that the idea of students talking with each other in class means different things to different people, including teachers, students, and administrators. For some, the idea of students talking signifies a loss of control of the classroom, or what students are allowed to do between moments of instruction. For others, student talk signifies a release of responsibility in the classroom where students will magically leap into a void and maximize the time without any planning, guidance or structure from the teacher. In this section we documented the pedagogical concerns and import of academic discourse. I discuss the role of academic discourse in supporting literacy and how questioning plays a vital role in enriching discourse and pushing critical thinking. I investigated how student discourse requires structures and processes in order to ensure accountability and examined specific ways in which opportunities for students to engage in discourse can be utilized for deeper student learning and engagement.

In this section of the literature review, I examined the research on the specific benefits and process for ensuring academic discourse is a successful structure for empowering students to think critically. This included: (1) a discussion of learning theory that supports academic

discourse; (2) current research that supports academic discourse; and (3) a discussion of the pedagogical concerns for implementing academic discourse in the classroom. Academic discourse is a vehicle to develop the critical thinking skills necessary for students to engage with the rigors of the Common Core, and to prepare them for college and our 21st century professional world where more than ever, work requires the ability to problem-solve and address challenges not by yourself, but as a unit, group or team. In the next section, I analyze my own specific role as principal supervisor in supporting this shift to a student-centered classroom where discourse is the norm.

Role of Principal Supervisor

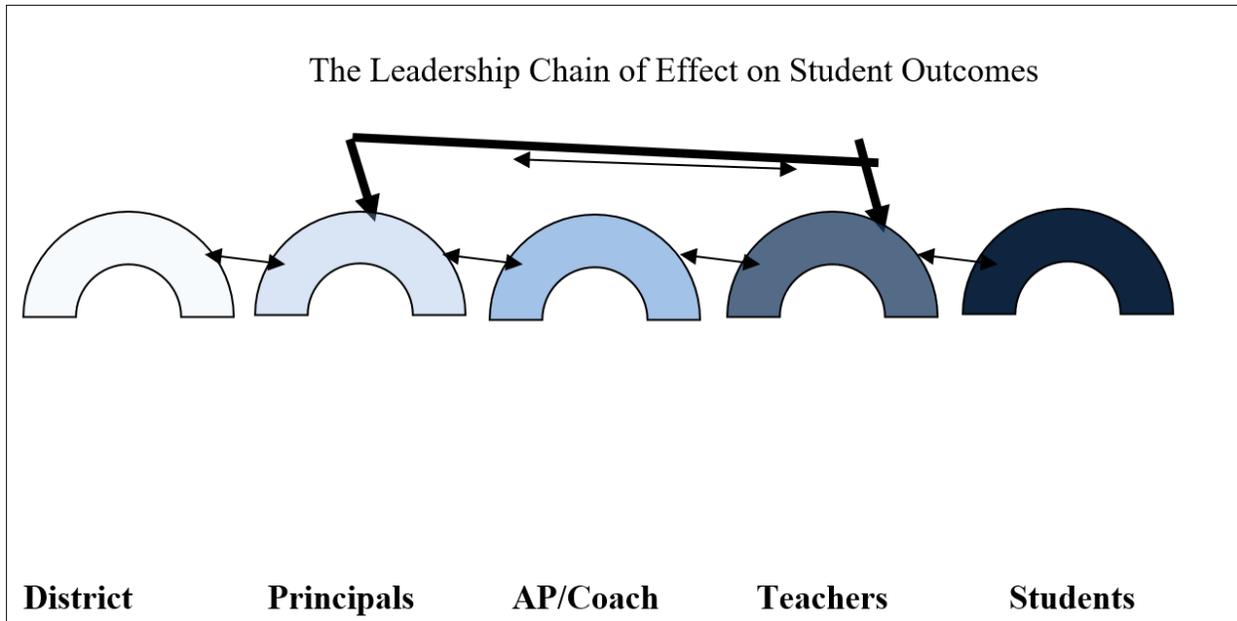
Essential to reforming central office to better support schools and school leaders is the role of principal supervisor. In recent policy documents, new standards for principal supervisor come from two sources: The University of Washington Design Lab Standards (Honig et al., 2010) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015). Both policy documents emphasize the role of the district supervisor as an instructional leader who models that function in his or her interactions with school site principals. In recent research, there has been an increased focus on the role of principal supervisor and the potential to positively impact equitable student outcomes (Corcoran et al., 2013; Honig et al., 2010; Resnick & Glennan, 2002; Saltzman, 2016), and a study from Oakland that specifically outlines what principals must do to support equity (Rigby & Tredway, 2015). Thus, the principal supervisor acts as a model in multiple ways: modeling how to observe classrooms and talk about practice, how to “show up” for equity, and how to coach teachers by the ways they coach principals.

Another critical role of the principal supervisor is what Honig (2014) calls both a bridge and a buffer between schools and central office. The principal supervisor role is critical to

impacting change on a systems level; the supervisor must foster the “team-ness” necessary to build coherence around an instructional focus. This requires prioritizing social interactions (Spillane & Coldren, 2011) to develop trust and collaboration in a team. Just as our theory of action for school sites is to leverage the leadership team for instructional change, we hope to engage principals and instructional leaders in a network team that can develop a coherent focus on instruction at the central level.

These roles can create coherence between the district office and the schools and, if the principal supervisor is effective, within individual schools. The leadership chain of effect on student outcomes (see Figure 8) can work if the principal supervisor leverages his or her district role and knits together the role and pays attention to the ways that the instructional focus coheres the actions of the principal and the teachers.

Both Elmore (2002), as discussed previously in this chapter, and Fullan and Quinn (2016) discuss the “right drivers” to impact schools, districts, and systems. The team that is developed must stay focused on instruction by using data in a cycle of inquiry to inform and support classroom practice. In this section, I discuss the ways a principal supervisor must model for principals – coaching and supporting principals, using both qualitative and quantitative evidence as a guide to incremental changes that improve teacher practice and move the needle on student outcomes, and models “showing up” for equity as a daily way of fostering equitable practice and outcomes. Then I talk about how the principal supervisor role can support the development of coherence both up (within central office) and down (in schools). I analyze the role of the principal supervisor as pivotal to both the bridging/buffering of the central-site relationship, and also to what happens in the schools. I am interested in seeing how my role as principal supervisor



Note. (Grubb & Tredway, 2010, p. 111).

Figure 8. The leadership chain of effect.

can be utilized to engage principals in the development of a district-wide focus on quality, grade-level student tasks that develop critical thinking through academic discourse.

Modeling as a Key Role of the Principal Supervisor

Most of the key roles that the principal supervisor should play are captured in two sets of standards (Council for Chief State School Officers, 2015; Honig et al., 2010) that guide principal supervisor practice (see Table 1).

Instructional Modeling

As the Honig and Rainey's Standard 3 suggest, the principal supervisor has to model what good instruction looks like, and that requires modeling classroom observations that focus on equitable access and outcomes (discussed further below) as well as professional learning protocols and processes that use exactly the kind of dialogue and interaction that we want to see in classrooms. Too often in my experience as a principal supervisor, I have been told by teachers that they have not been observed nor received feedback in years. Because of the way our evaluation system is currently set up in Oakland, the emphasis has been on supporting teachers in their first two to three years of teaching. This unwritten norm has left tenured teachers without support or feedback on their practice. I assert that, aside from the evaluation process, teachers should be receiving feedback on their practice on a bimonthly or at least a monthly basis. Bambrick-Santoyo, Peiser, and Lemov (2012) illustrate the specific components and structure principals and instructional coaches can use to give teachers feedback on instruction. He encourages "bite size feedback" that is actionable and can be implemented the following day in class.

Spillane and Coldren (2011), in discussing the processes of diagnosing and designing for school improvement, highlight "leading and managing instruction in schools and school

Table 1

Standards for Principal Supervision

| University of Washington Design Lab Standards (Honig et al., 2010) | Council of Chief State School Officers Standards (Council for Chief State School Officers, 2015) |
|---|---|
| STANDARD 1. Dedicates their time to helping principals grow as instructional leaders. | Standard 1. Principal Supervisors dedicate their time to helping principals grow as instructional leaders. |
| STANDARD 2. Engages in teaching practices in their one-on-one work with principals to help principals grow as instructional leaders. | Standard 2. Principal Supervisors use evidence of principals' effectiveness to determine necessary improvements in principals' practice to foster a positive educational environment that supports the diverse cultural and learning needs of students. |
| STANDARD 3. Engages in teaching practices while leading principal communities of practice (e.g., professional learning communities, networks) to help principals grow as instructional leaders. | Standard 3. Principal Supervisors use evidence of principals' effectiveness to determine necessary improvements in principals' practice to foster a positive educational environment that supports the diverse cultural and learning needs of students. |
| STANDARD 4. Systematically uses multiple forms of evidence of each principal's capacity for instructional leadership to differentiate or tailor their approach to helping their principals grow as instructional leaders. | Standard 4. Principal Supervisors engage principals in the formal district principal evaluation process in ways that help them grow as instructional leaders. |
| STANDARD 5. Engages principals in the formal district principal evaluation process in ways that help principals grow as instructional leaders. | Standard 5. Principal Supervisors advocate for and inform the coherence of organizational vision, policies and strategies to support schools and student learning. |

Table 1 (continued)

| University of Washington Design Lab Standards (Honig et al., 2010) | Council of Chief State School Officers Standards (Council for Chief State School Officers, 2015) |
|---|--|
| STANDARD 6. Selectively and strategically participates in other central office work processes to maximize the extent to which they and principals focus on principals' growth as instructional leaders. | Standard 6. Principal Supervisors assist the district in ensuring the community of schools with which they engage are culturally/socially responsive and have equitable access to resources necessary for the success of each student. |

systems” as a critical component of effective leadership (p. 13). He views leadership as a function that is distributed across multiple organizational actors and involves not just the leader at the top, the principal, but all the persons who are engaged in leading. As such, he notes that data do not define problems; rather using data and evidence must be a part of a process which emphasizes social interaction among stakeholders.

Thus, in my meetings with all principals and the instructional coaches as well as occasional meetings with teachers in the schools, I will be relying on all the academic discourse strategies and models of teaching that support meaningful learning and as were discussed in Section 2 of the literature review. In addition, I need to be conversant in multiple classroom observational techniques that actually provide the qualitative evidence we need to calibrate about effective teaching and learning with the principals, instructional coaches, and myself. In turn, I expect they will use these strategies for observing classrooms and talking with teachers. The strategies that work best are not the simple checklists that have become common in our work as walkthrough tools, as they are often, say, “drive-by” observations that offer a “rush to judgment” (Toch & Rothman, 2008). Instead, we should engage in more thoughtful ways of collecting and analyzing evidence that result in a conversation about teaching and learning – processes advocated by Acheson and Gall (1992) and Saphier, Haley-Speca, and Gower (2008). In particular, in this project, I will want to model the use of classroom discourse observations so that we can effectively calibrate our observations of equitable academic discourse. That will respond to CCSSO Standard 1 and University of Washington Standard 2; I will dedicate my time to helping principals grow as instructional leaders by supporting their observational practices and engaging with them in observing teaching practices so that we can have one-on-one calibration coaching sessions to determine what is effective instruction and how can they gather evidence to

support conversations and professional learning with teachers. Using observations as qualitative evidence is a strong component of modeling evidence use.

Modeling Evidence Use

Honig and Rainey Standard 4 and CCSSO Standards 2 and 3 indicate the important role of collecting and analyzing evidence to inform the leader's actions so as to then effect teacher practice and student outcomes. While student achievement data are central to accountability, and, of course, the formative and summative assessments of student learning are critical markers of success, what is important for the principal supervisor is examining the crucial evidence of leadership actions and relational trust across a school as the necessary pre-conditions for student achievement. For example, Grubb (2011) in examining the NELS data (National Educational Longitudinal Data) from 1988-2008 found that relational trust as an abstract resource was a key variable in student outcomes.

In addition, how the principal supervisor models the use of evidence in an iterative way, and authorizes incrementalism as a constant in the lives of schools is one of the strategic ways I want to support the principal in this study so that I understand how I can foster more effective use of the qualitative data that is supposed to result in stronger student outcomes. Thus, I want to authorize incrementalism as a way of being a principal supervisor and a way of being a principal. I realize that this has its own set of dangers as we can lose track of the goals while we are mired in the daily. However, learning to manage makes it possible to become diagnosticians and designers of incremental leadership actions that as Spillane and Coldren (2011) suggests are the bread and butter of school reform efforts.

Authorizing Incrementalism

Early in this chapter, I discussed the significant degree of change that Oakland Unified has experienced in a short period of time. With the change in leadership, there often comes radical swings in direction, and the embracing of new and different reform efforts. One important part of my role as principal supervisor is to embrace change, while also supporting school sites and leaders with as much stability and coherence as possible. Reforms efforts obviously take time, and it is important in my role to maintain consistency and coherence to see things through, rather than making radical swings one way and then another. I need to authorize the importance of a strategic incrementalism, in which change may happen slowly, but intentionally over time. One place we can look to for guidance in maintaining focus on a trajectory that leads to enduring results rather than immediate results is the field of health care.

Gawande (2017a) presents the idea of “incrementalism” in a medical context, as the way we can best address health care over the long haul. He contrasts this with “rescuers” (of which he includes himself) -- doctors who handle urgent emergencies through a process of elimination. The incrementalists in his framing are the primary care doctors, and he observes them to determine what it is that makes them so valuable to long-term health and well-being. Gawande’s (2017b) observations have strong parallels in education. First, he notices the primary care doctors do a lot of listening. Then they lower expectations and establish expectations for the near future that are achievable. For example, they monitor a patient over time with a goal of 50% reduction in symptoms. In one case, four years of systematic incrementalism did for a patient what no other treatment had to date accomplished – the patient was entirely cured of chronic pain, but only after tracking his progress over several years.

Gawande (2017a) argues we have a heroic expectation of medicine. I argue that the same is true in education, where yearly we hear promises of the benefits of new technology, or exciting programs, that promise dramatic results overnight. What Gawande (2017a) found was, the more complex the medical needs, the more benefit of primary care. His study demonstrated that by adding 10% service, the result increased life expectancy by over ten years. The number one factor that Gawande (2017a) gives for the difference between primary and emergency care is the relationship that is built over time. We can learn from his emphasis on building relationships and trust with patients by understanding how to do this with school leaders, to better know how to treat their conditions because school “practice takes shape in social interactions”, and school practice only changes by careful attention to incremental evidence to inform change (Spillane & Coldren, 2011). Gawande (2017a) asserts, “There is a lot about the future that remains unpredictable. Nonetheless, the patterns are becoming more susceptible to empiricism- to science of surveillance, analysis, and iterative correction. The incrementalists are overtaking the rescuers. But the transformation has itself been incremental. So, we’re only just starting to notice” (Gawande, 2017a, p. 44).

The parallel in education is for the teacher to deeply know each student and his or her needs in order to best support him or her. Gawande (2017a) states, “Success is not about episodic momentary victories, though they do play a role. It’s about the long view of incremental steps that lead to sustained progress” (p. 42). Likewise, when making decisions about next steps to support schools, teachers, and students, it is important that we consider the complex span of data that we should be analyzing beyond test results. The role of the principal supervisor is akin to the primary care physician, who supervises the principal over multiple years following the advice of Spillane and Coldren (2011) who urge principals and their supervisors to engage in iterative

diagnosis and design. “As diagnostic participants, school leaders themselves become the subjects of their own observations and analysis, along with the web of other leaders, followers, and aspects of the situation” (Spillane & Coldren, 2011, p. 19). Incrementalism, however, requires a strong understanding and regular use of qualitative evidence and that evidence should be the content of coaching conversations with principals.

Coaching Philosophy and Coaching Models

A coach is a guide and, as such, I take seriously the role in which I am guiding the principals to stronger practice. Dewey (1971) indicates that a primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of the actual experience...but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth. Above all, they should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile (Dewey, 1971, p. 38).

A primary role of the principal supervisor, therefore, is to coach and support the school administrators to be instructional leaders. Part of coaching for collaborative instructional leadership is leading site teams to stay focused on instruction, and using data to inform practice in a cycle of inquiry. This involves empowering teams of teachers to collaborate and make instructional decisions.

On the surface, coaching is a clear process of supporting a person or a team to improve their practice through iterative reflection. First, I discuss the role of coaching in building instructional capacity across all staff. Second, I understand that coaching can mean a variety of different things to different people, and there are many different coaching stances and styles that I describe in this section. It is worth noting that the right coaching stance can depend on who is

coaching and who is being coached (Aguilar, 2013), but more importantly, the coaching stance depends on a given situation and what is the focus of the coaching (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005). I discuss the importance of coaching as a key factor in improving instruction, key components of effective coaching, and the role of equity in the coaching.

Coaching Can Improve Learning Outcomes

Grissom et al., (2013) confirmed the importance of instructional coaching by site leaders. Their study used data from 127 schools to look at the efficacy of five instructional leadership functions that purport to support teaching and learning;

1. Coaching teachers to improve their instructional practice.
2. Developing the school's educational program or evaluating the curriculum
3. Evaluating teachers through a formal process
4. Informal classroom walk-throughs to observe practice.
5. Planning or participating in teachers' professional development

The study found that *overall* time used on these five functions does not associate with a difference in student achievement or school performance; however, individually some of the five functions do have a significant impact on student achievement. In particular, the study found that coaching had the highest degree of impact on student learning. The study found that walkthroughs, rated fourth, when conducted solely in order to collect information about teacher practice had little impact on student achievement; however, when walkthroughs were used to coach or support professional development, they did impact student achievement. Implications for principal practice were particularly insightful:

1. Tether observations to school level goals and agreements about instructional practice.
2. Be explicit about the purpose of observations.

3. Use observations in multiple ways including: for coaching teacher with evidence for sharing with the teacher's coach, to inform professional learning
4. Use informal monitoring time to have conversations about practice with teachers.
5. Cross-pollinate practices by co-developing ways for teachers to share practices.

Grissom et al.'s (2013) study confirms that just being visible is important, but insufficient to change instructional practice. Time spent directly coaching teachers can have a positive correlation to academic gain and school improvement if specific, evidence-based, and the aggregate evidence from multiple classrooms transfer to in-house professional learning sessions (Grissom et al., 2013).

Coaching stances. The coaching literature on coaching stances includes multiple approaches; all of the stances emphasize facilitative coaching, which relies to a certain degree, on Socratic questioning techniques of classroom academic discourse. The coach asks questions based on the responses of the coachee, using those responses to make strategic moves in the coaching relationship. Relying on three types of coaching models as a guide to my practice is part of my work in understanding how to fully support principals at school sites: (1) cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2006), which understands the epistemological stance of the coach as responsible for building the knowledge base by supporting the principal in sense-making and co-constructing their practice; (2) the blended coaching model of Bloom et al. (2005), which authorizes the coach to be more fluid in approaches depending on the coaching topic; and (3) Aguilar's (2013) approaches to individual coaching and coaching teams.

Cognitive coaching. Without coaching, educators are unlikely to apply knowledge learned in trainings to their own practice. This constructivist model of coaching is based on the idea that explicit processes are needed in order to foster learning (Knight, 2009).

First introduced by Costa and Garmston (2006), cognitive coaching is based on reciprocal reflection (of coach and coachee), and self-directed learning through meta-cognition. The cognitive coach uses non-judgmental questioning strategies, including pausing, paraphrasing, and probing, to engage the coachee in reflection, problem solving, decision-making, and planning (Cornett & Knight, 2009). Costa and Garmston (2006) named five states of mind that the coaching relationship is seeking to achieve: Efficacy, Consciousness, Craftsmanship, Flexibility and Interdependence. In this framework, efficacy is grounded in the belief that a person's efforts will have an intended result. Consciousness refers to internal and external awareness, of self and others at the same time. Craftsmanship is the seeking of excellence using data. Flexibility refers to an openness to multiple perspectives, and interdependence speaks to the holding an egocentric, allo-centric, and macro-centric balance that recognizes the self within the group and the larger environment (Costa & Garmston, 2006). The cognitive coach is simultaneously surveying these states of mind within themselves and their coachee. The model seeks to foster growth in those areas. Studies examining the use of cognitive coaching in supervisory relationships, university classes, and teacher preparation programs have gleaned the following eight major findings:

1. Cognitive Coaching was linked with increased student test scores and other student benefits.
2. Teachers grew in teaching efficacy.
3. Cognitive coaching impacted teacher thinking, causing teachers to be more reflective and to think in more complex ways.
4. Teachers were more satisfied with their positions and with their choice of teaching as a profession.

5. School cultures became more professional.
6. Teachers collaborated more.
7. Cognitive Coaching assisted teachers professionally.
8. Cognitive Coaching benefited teachers personally (Costa & Garmston, 2006, p. 3).

As a constructivist method, this model's strength lies in the fact that co-construction of knowledge and skill is ultimately more likely to stick in practice. This is very much in line with the constructivist nature of participatory action research I am embarking on in this study. The weakness lies in the reality that if there is nothing to cognitively “coach out of someone,” meaning if there is no experience level or knowledge level, then the model cannot work, and the coachee requires more direction in order to be successful (Tredway, personal communication, 2017). I will discuss the directive approach more in the following sections.

Blended coaching. Bloom et al. (2005) advocate for a blended approach to coaching, whereby instructional (directive), consultative, collaborative, and facilitative coaching stances are applying depending on each given situation. This approach emphasizes the dynamic aspect of coaching. Bloom et al. (2005) contend that the blended coaching required for instructional leadership should not be conceived as a continuum. They created a Mobius strip (see Figure 9) to better represent the fluidity needed when applying these coaching strategies. The Mobius strip illustrates how a coach's “ways of doing and ways of being are inextricably linked, as well as the instructional and facilitative strategies that support them” (Bloom et al., 2005, p. 57). The coach must gain expertise in moving from a facilitative approach that is consultative and focuses on the “doing” of the principal job, to the transformative and “being” role required of the position. At times, especially with novice principals, they need more direction; as principals grow in experience and knowledge, the coach can assume a different role.



Note. (Bloom et al., 2005).

Figure 9. Blended coaching strategies in mobius strip.

Combining approaches. Aguilar (2013) emphasizes the importance of three key actions: (1) start with core values; (2) take the time to build trust; and (3) lead with listening. These three actions complement what has already been discussed in this chapter regarding the importance of building relationships and being attentive to social interaction. In terms of coaching stances, Aguilar (2013) emphasizes two fundamental types: directive and facilitative. The facilitative approach is chosen as a coaching stance when the coachee is at a point where they can surface realizations, options, and actions themselves; much like is useful in cognitive coaching, they have the knowledge and it is the coach's responsibility to coach the knowledge and direction "out of the coachee's knowledge base." The coach uses questioning and listening to surface the person's own ideas, which are typically more powerful as next steps. However, the coach needs to pay careful attention to the discussion of next steps so that they are grounded in equity, as indicated in the next section.

Directive coaching, on the other hand, is required when the coachee is not at a point to be able to reach conclusions himself or herself and requires clearer and specific direction from the coach; that coachee is typically still in the "doing" stage of Bloom et al. (2005). This is sometimes necessary when a person has not yet developed the capacity, nor experience, to draw his or her own conclusions or form a course of action. In other situations, the person may not realize a course of action that is urgent and necessary in a given situation, and therefore requires direct instructions for next steps (Aguilar, 2013). My knowledge and skill at adapting and differentiating for school leaders, depending on their context, their current knowledge base and years of experience, will be instrumental in understanding how I as the supervisor support the principal to support instructional reform as a part of our larger emphasis on equity and excellence for our students.

Showing Up for Equity

At all times, the coach and in this case the principal supervisor should be on the lookout for making the case for equity. In the Council of Chief State School Officers Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015) standards that take into consideration the work of Honig et al. (2010), two standards stress the ways that supervisors have to maintain a focus on equity: Principal supervisors should “foster a positive educational environment that supports the diverse cultural and learning needs of students” and they should “assist the district in ensuring the community of schools with which they engage are culturally/socially responsive and have equitable access to resources necessary for the success of each student” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015, p. 8).

Promulgating standards about normative behavior is a common practice, but often those standards do not clearly communicate precisely what principals or principal supervisors should do to consistently show up for equity, identify and name equity traps, or dramatically change the ways that teachers and principals talk about students and maintain equitable access. Academic discourse is fundamentally an issue of access to the deeper conversations, and can be supported through observational practice.

A study of Oakland principals and the current principal evaluation system in Oakland with its emphasis on equity as a key component of the total evaluation system is a leverage tool for me in the all-important role of modeling equity as a way of being. Rigby and Tredway (2015) drew on the analysis of 100 hours of principal videotape that was used as a part of the redesign of the evaluation system to look specifically at ten Oakland principals and put teeth in the normative standards of exactly how principals show up for equity. They call the principals equity warriors – people who are allied with each other to support social justice in the district, schools

and classrooms every day in every way. They have a command of the equity stance of using a non-blaming, not-confrontational ways to talk to other adults about equity (Eubanks, Parish, & Smith, 1997). In their study of twenty hours of videotape analysis of the ten principals, they found actionable indicators that can specifically guide principals and myself, as the principal supervisor, in ensuring that we point to the equity dimensions of our work. Therefore, an equity warrior engages in these three key verbal actions: (1) they name any instance (positive or negative) of practice with equity language instead of assuming the adults know this is an equity example (i.e., I am so pleased to see how everyone at this table kept their focus on how we can fully serve this family – that is what equity looks like every day in this school); (2) they recast the typical micro actions in school or district settings in a larger structural context (i.e., a discipline issue becomes a part of the school-to-prison pipeline discussion; students not engaging in classroom dialogue becomes a reference to opportunity to learn standards); and (3) they are clear about next steps that will create more equitable conditions (i.e., I have discussed with you how you consider your low class not as capable, and I want you to employ more of the think-pair-share strategies you are using in classes you consider more capable with all of your students). Not all of the ten principals practiced each of these, but from the evidence, the researchers could specifically call our attention to these verbal actions that leaders can use to build equity awareness and change practices.

Secondly, the Oakland principal evaluation offered principals and the principal supervisors guidelines about “showing up for” and coaching for Dimension I Leadership for Equity: “An OUSD Principal creates and sustains equitable conditions for learning, interrupts inequitable patterns, and advocates for just and inclusive schools”. The equity dimension includes indicators of leader actions at each level or step, and including how the principal at Step

2 articulates and connects “micro” fairness issues to “macro” context, framing equity within larger institutional inequities and moving in Step 3 to observe how this practice has transferred to the teachers and other adults in the building. Figure 10 offers a synopsis of the Equity Element 1; the full dimension and indicators are in Appendix A.

The principal supervisors met once a month to review how we could support principals at the school sites, and we calibrated our practices using all the dimensions, but I concentrated on ensuring that I practiced the leadership actions recommended in the research and emphasized in our district processes.

These modeling practices related to facilitating meetings, coaching and reinforcing equity are the foundation of building vertical coherence between the district and the schools, thereby making visible how the leadership chain of effect could actually reach every student in the Oakland middle schools that I supervised, and horizontal coherence that I wanted to see with the network of Oakland middle school principals and within each school setting. In the next subsection of discussing my role as district supervisor, I discuss the key research on and elements of that coherence.

Coherence Up and Down

The long and the short of all this is that the leader who helps develop focused collective capacity will make the greatest contribution to student learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 57).

With the seemingly endless urgent issues and crises that draw attention away from what is actually happening in the classroom on a daily basis, it is no wonder that building a coherent framework within which to stay focused on instruction is such a challenge for both central and site administrators. Without question, there are political crises to attend to, including urgent parent complaints, budgetary and human resource issues, and safety issues that demand the

| Equity (E) Element 1: Equity Framework | | |
|--|--|---|
| Step 1. Developing Leader Capacity | Step 2. Cultivating School Level Capacity | Step 3. Ensuring Collective Responsibility & Accountability |
| <p>E 1.1 Equity Framework: Personal Commitment and Communication:</p> <p>Principal develops personal commitment to, and communicates and acts on, a framework that interrupts inequity and advocates for an equitable learning environment.</p> | <p>E 1.2 Equity Framework: Building Capacity for Dialogue and Action:</p> <p>Principal engages with and builds the capacity of staff and students to dialogue about equity issues and to take actionable steps to interrupt inequity.</p> | <p>E 1.3 Equity Framework: Collaborative Engagement:</p> <p>Principal involves and coordinates the actions of all stakeholders (staff, students, families, partners, and community), ensuring collective responsibility for ongoing engagement with equity outcomes.</p> |

Figure 10. Oakland principal leadership guide for development and support.

immediate attention of the school or district leader. So, how can an administrator attend to these urgent issues and stay focused on instruction at the same time? In this first section, I look at the importance of coherence both up (at the central leadership level) and down (at the site level). I use Fullan and Quinn's ideas (2016) to address the role of principal supervisor in developing organizational coherence and how this can act as a framework within which to see change as well as the Spillane and Coldren (2011) analysis of the role of the principal in diagnosing and designing in the context of a distributed leadership frame.

Role of Principal Supervisor in Organizational Coherence

While much of the coherence literature is focused on the role of the school principal at the school site, Honig et al. (2010) and Honig (2014) call for the principal supervisor to actually engage in teaching practices and model effective instruction in coherent and strategic ways from the district office to the school house. Fullan and Quinn (2016) use examples from a variety of schools (including many middle schools), and school districts, including Ontario, Canada, Garden Grove, California, and districts in Northern California in and around the Bay Area, to present a coherence framework that can guide the principal supervisor to manage up and down in the interest of building coherence. The framework includes four quadrants: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability. These four components of coherence form a circle around leadership. As an example of "focusing direction", they highlight Ontario's adoption of three specific and clear goals:

1. Increase literacy and numeracy proficiency and high school graduation rates.
2. Reduce the achievement gap for subgroups (ELLs, Special education, schools in poverty) relative to the three core achievement goals.
3. Build public confidence in schools.

In a study of 477 schools in Chicago, Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, and Luppescu (2010) found that 100 schools made significant and sustained progress in comparison to alike schools. According to the researchers, the key driver of that success was school leadership, or what Fullan and Quinn (2016) call the “lead learner.” Bryk et al. (2010) noted four interrelated factors: the professional capacity of teachers, school climate, parent and community ties, and what they term instructional guidance system. Fullan and Quinn explore the idea of the lead learner (in this case either the principal or the principal supervisor) who needs to concentrate the group on a few goals and then build a clear plan of action to reach those goals. They recommend that this is accomplished by building “a collective understanding and engagement around the priorities so that every teacher and leader can answer, with equal ease and precision, the following questions; What are we doing? Why are we doing this?” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 56).

Fullan and Quinn make frequent references to John Hattie’s longitudinal data on the impact of specific instructional strategies, including the role of teachers as facilitators (minimal impact) versus the role of teachers as activators (high impact). They advocate for pushing beyond student voice to student agency in driving learning. The authors raise the fact that educational systems around the world have spent the last ten years focused on developing basic literacy and numeracy skills. While these continue to be fundamental to addressing equity, they are insufficient if we are to prepare our students for the rigors of high school, college and beyond. The authors call on schools and school systems, including the district supervisor, to develop “deep learning practices” while they continue to attend to a focus on the basics (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 89). Questions district supervisors should ask themselves when shifting to “deep learning” include:

1. Does the district have clarity of learning goals?
2. Have high-yield pedagogical practices been identified and shared?
3. Does the district create a culture of learning for all educators?
4. Does the district provide resources for collaborative learning structures and processes to thrive? (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 101)

But, of course, the processes for building coherence, common language and common practices has been the bane of school reform, and keeping track of the iterative and slow progress requires a strategic focus on incrementalism.

Principal Supervisor: Bridging and Buffering

The role of principal supervisor is unique in that it is embedded in both central office and school sites. This positioning puts the principal supervisor in the dual roles of what Honig et al. (2010) calls bridging and buffering. The principal supervisor acts as a bridge between central supports and school sites in order to share resources and best practices, monitor and hold accountable, and communicate relevant information. Simultaneously the role requires buffering sites from central interference, distractions, and rabbit holes. In this section, we will discuss the ways this plays out and how to best maximize the position to support in this duality.

Corcoran et al. (2013) examined the differences in structure and role of principal supervisors in six large school districts in the country: Charlotte-Mecklenberg, Hillsborough, New York City, Prince George's, Gwinnett, and Denver. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do districts select, prepare, and provide professional development to principal supervisors?

2. To what extent are principal supervisors expected to assume an instructional leadership role within the district, and how are they supported in this role?
3. What levels of operational/instructional support are provided to principals?
4. How are principal supervisors and principals evaluated?

The study reviewed the number of schools being supervised in each district, the configuration of central support staff, and the “lines of report” for each. While these factors varied across the districts studied, patterns and trends emerged. The report concludes that districts should:

1. Define and clearly communicate throughout the organization the role and required competencies of principal supervisors.
2. Narrow principal supervisor responsibilities and spans of control.
3. Strategically select and deploy principal supervisors, matching skills and expertise to the needs of schools.
4. Provide principal supervisors with the professional development and training they need to assume new instructional leadership roles.
5. Establish information-sharing policies or procedures to ensure clear lines of communication and collaboration between principal supervisors and central office staff.
6. Provide early and sustained support to new principals in the form of coaches.
7. Hold principals—and principal supervisors—accountable for the progress of their schools, and ensure alignment in the processes and measures used to assess teacher, principal, and principal supervisor performance.
8. Provide clear, timely, and actionable evaluation data to principals.

9. Commit district resources and engage external partners in the process of developing future school and district leaders. (Corcoran et al., 2013, p. 7)

While many of these findings specifically focus on the professional development, growth, and evaluation of both principal supervisors and principals in relation to instructional leadership, a key recommendation (number 5 above) focuses on the alignment, collaboration, and coherence between school leadership and central office.

Oakland Unified School District is in the midst of redefining the role of principal supervisor to be more of a principal coach and driver of instructional change versus the more traditional role of supporting plant management and compliance-driven deliverables. The former involves supporting principal's growth as instructional leaders. One of the key findings of the Grissom, Loeb and Master's (2013) study of 300 school principals indicated that they needed to spend more time on instructional leadership, and it follows that the modeling for that role needs to be assumed by the principal supervisor. Just as the role of principal has been redefined to focus much more on regular coaching and support of teachers, the role of principal supervisor is being redefined to focus on regular site visits and observation and feedback to principals in their newly defined role. This has meant prioritizing resources to smaller networks of schools that enable more hands-on, weekly support.

Saltzman (2016) analyzed the roles of principal supervisors in two urban districts and noted the tension in the role and the shift in focus of principal supervisors. She names how principal supervisors function as part coach and part evaluator, while keeping principals focused on teaching and learning. However, to accomplish their roles of coaches, principal supervisors focused on fewer schools and on instructional leadership, deferring operational support to others, sometimes in their own network. In the prior system, there were few visits to schools (once every

couple of months), and it was compliance oriented. In these two districts, principal supervisors are now playing a direct role supporting principals with instruction, assessment, and personnel issues. The challenge named is the one we are facing in Oakland, which is how to decrease school to supervisor ratio, particularly in tight financial times. Saltzman recognizes how the shift requires hiring staff to address parent complaints, child-family support services, and other things that had once fallen on associate superintendents. The Chancellor of DC Schools is quoted as saying, “One of the things we realized is that for instructional superintendents (principal supervisors) to really maximize teaching and learning, they can’t be responsible for anything else but teaching and learning” (Saltzman, 2016, p. 55). In the next section, we explore and assess examples of how principal supervisors can support site leadership to stay focused on instructional leadership.

In this section, I have reiterated the importance of modeling as a key variable in the principal supervisor’s ability to create coherence between schools and districts, and within each school. In particular, I discussed how the principal supervisor must use a variety of coaching stances to support principals and how these stances are dependent on both the situation and the actors. I have discussed how my role, and that of the principal, must stay focused on instruction in order to achieve student academic growth. I have highlighted the role of the principal supervisor to be both a bridge and a buffer between central office and school sites in order to affect change.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the literature has uncovered several key points to assist my participatory action research project. In order to change outcomes for students who have been traditionally underserved by our educational system, we need to act bottom up from the classroom, while also

working top down from the central office in support of schools. To do this requires a critical analysis of organizational coherence at the central office and at school sites. This investigation of the literature surfaced key aspects of organizational coherence, which will be crucial in our research process. These aspects include: the importance of central and site leadership to develop and sustain an instructional focus; the value of shared decision-making and distributive leadership when building a strong academic culture; the power of teams to collaboratively look at student data to inform decision-making in a cycle of inquiry; the cultivation of a shared belief in high expectations for all students; and finally, a shift in the orientation of central office partners to truly be in service to school sites.

The literature is clear that student outcomes will not change unless all levels of the system develop a strong focus on instruction. That focus on instruction requires alignment across divisions in support of an instructional lever to push students to think critically and build a sense of self-efficacy and engagement in learning. Academic discourse must be a common denominator in all classrooms if we are to empower students to think critically and take ownership of their own learning. And the principal supervisor has to be the guide and the coach in order to ensure that equitable access to classroom tasks and dialogue are a reality for all students.

While our world has shifted – especially in terms of requirements for employment and types of careers, education has been slow to change in order to accommodate the requirements asked of us. As we see in this literature review, the reticence to change is neither for lack of research nor practice. The review of literature demonstrates that we are fully aware that we need to shift, and the necessity for this shift stretches back to the turn of the 20th century (or possibly much further), when Dewey introduced his ideas and Vygotsky first introduced the zone of

proximal development. Yet, the implementation of these shifts persists as a challenge today. Thus, we ask ourselves, “Why is that?” I believe the reticence comes from the fact that these shifts in pedagogy are hard and complex, and require a change in paradigm that was probably not familiar to us in our own educational experience of primary, secondary and college schooling.

Some may argue that the system itself does not want to shift. This argument follows that such a shift would disrupt the status quo and would overturn a world order, which we all play at least a tacit role in perpetuating. That is, the perpetuation of inequities along the lines of gender, race, and class that keep certain groups on top and others subjugated (Mills, 1997). We have an obligation to act differently if we are truly in the service of social justice and working to create equitable outcomes for our most underserved youth. The way to do that is by giving our youth the tools to think critically and to engage in learning through inquiry and questioning.

Empowering students to engage in academic discourse is a way forward on that path, whereby students take control of their own learning and build a sense of self-efficacy, which will serve them in high school, college, and beyond.

The research emphasizes the importance of building relationships and trust both centrally and at the site, with school leadership and with teachers. A part of my role is to support all stakeholders to stay focused on instruction in order to achieve student academic growth. This requires adopting a variety of coaching stances when working with site and central partners, so that the coaching best fits the conditions of a given situation. Coaching is also a part of the bridge and buffer role between central office and school sites that my position requires in order to affect change.

As we see from this review of the literature, there is a wealth of research that has been done on organizational coherence, learning theory, academic discourse and coaching. Within this

canon, this research study is limited by its small sample size and specific context. What my research humbly seeks to add to this literature is how espoused theory is actually enacted from the perspective of a district supervisor. To my knowledge, no participatory action research project has been done by a district supervisor seeking to gain insight into the application of these theories, and the practical application of the supervisor standards. By applying these theories to my daily collaborative work with schools and school leaders, I hope to surface the authentic challenges that exist among well intentioned educators seeking to improve outcomes for those traditionally underserved by our system. The results will hopefully inspire and guide future research in all these areas.

The next chapter explores the context within which this participatory action research will be conducted. I will describe the people, setting, and history that informs the Oakland Unified School District context. The following chapter describes the research design, including the methodology for collecting, analyzing, and acting on qualitative and quantitative data in a cycle of inquiry.

CHAPTER 3: CONTEXT FOR THE FOCUS OF PRACTICE

“Everything we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see.”
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (King, Carson, Carson, & Armstrong, 1992)

Introduction

The first step to inquiry is seeking to deeply understand the context within which the action research project occurs. Preliminary observations tell but a mere shadow of the story necessary to fully grasp the context of a given situation and the actions and motivations of its actors. Action research based merely on the shadows of face value observations would undoubtedly lead to misguided conclusions. When we unpack the history and context of place and people, both at the micro and macro levels, we are able to surface a much deeper understanding of challenges and root causes. Some of those challenges were identified in Chapter 1 in the fishbone diagram and discussion. In this chapter, I discuss more completely the context of place, people – including the co-practitioner researchers (CPR), diagnostic evidence to date, and my role as the lead researcher.

The context of this participatory action research study is focused on the implementation process of academic discourse as an innovation or key lever to positively change the instruction and thus, the learning of our English Language Learners and African-American students. The overarching question which frames this research is: *To what extent does the structure of an urban school district and its leadership, both centrally and at sites, foster the implementation of academic discourse in support of Long Term English Language Learner and African American engagement in learning?* In order to engage in inquiry on this topic, this chapter interrogates how the history and context of Oakland Unified School District influences the public education ecosystem within which the two schools of this study strive to positively impact outcomes for our most underserved middle school youth. Just as the history and context of the school district

shape the two schools of this study, the history and context of the city of Oakland profoundly shape the educational eco-system of the city itself. Thus, in order to delve into the following sub-questions for this study, we must unpack the Oakland context. In this action research project, we seek to answer the following sub-questions:

1. What fosters and inhibits the classroom implementation of academic discourse structures with two principals, coaches and teachers?
2. How does a locally generated focus of practice (academic discourse) navigate through an organization in order to have an impact on instruction and learning?
3. How do the leadership actions of a district administrator, in collaboration with a network instructional lead team, inhibit or support site leaders' ability to build teacher capacity and implement the strategies of academic discourse in the classroom?
4. To what extent do we see a change in the degree and quality of academic discourse in the classroom?
5. How has my own engagement in this research process shifted and informed my understanding of research and my practice as a leader?

In order to interrogate how a locally generated focus of practice navigates through an organization, we must understand the context of the organization itself. In order to engage in inquiry about the implementation of academic discourse, we first examine the history of this initiative in our school system and what, if any, baggage comes with such an initiative. Likewise, in order to investigate how district leadership can most be in support of schools, we must first grasp the history of the district-school relationship in OUSD and how that has been impacted by budget crisis, changes to state law, staff retention, union engagement, and policy changes.

The theory of action for this study is as follows:

- *IF we conduct regular classroom observation with feedback, focused on academic discourse. And*
- *IF we engage central and site educators in classroom learning walks focused on academic discourse, and*
- *IF central and site teams use the data from these classroom observations and learning walks in a cycle of inquiry to inform teaching practice (specifically opportunities for students to engage in academic discourse),*
- *THEN we will see a change in classroom practice (increase in student discourse), an increase in student engagement, and a positive impact on outcomes for traditionally underserved students.*

District Context

The context of this project is a Middle School Network of eight middle schools in the Oakland Unified School District in the diverse city of Oakland, California. Within that network, the participatory action research (PAR) project focuses on one middle school in particular. How this school is situated in the network, and in the larger district context, has a direct impact on the ability to achieve positive outcomes for our most traditionally underserved youth. In this first section, I review the impact of the economic and political history of California and Oakland on the Oakland Unified School District, and the schools that lie therein. This serves to better understand the underpinnings of both the assets and challenges of implementing a local instructional initiative at the middle school in this study.

Economic and Political History

The current economic context of public education in California starts with Proposition 13, which essentially changed the property tax structure for California, and dramatically defunded education in the state starting in 1978. Revenue from property taxes decreased by 57%, which had a profound impact on the state's public education system. The impact of Prop 13 is chronicled in the film *Learning Matters: First to Worst* (Merrow et al., 2008). Preceding Prop 13, California ranked as one of the highest performing education systems in the country. Since Prop 13 passed in 1978, schools and school districts have struggled to adequately fund public education. Large urban school districts such as LA Unified, San Francisco Unified, and Oakland Unified feel this most dramatically, as funding is also based on average daily attendance. This defunding of education in the state was further exacerbated in Oakland in 2003. Oakland Unified suffered a huge set back when a \$35 million deficit was uncovered, caused by overspending, a generous pay raise for teachers, and declining enrollment. A year earlier, the district had negotiated a 24% salary increase with the teachers' union. The district was "taken over" by the state, which gave it a \$100 million loan that the district is still paying back today.

As a condition of the loan, the California Department of Education altered the political structure of governing the district and choosing the superintendent. The school board lost its decision-making authority and became an advisory body. The superintendent was fired, and a state administrator was appointed to manage the 48,000-student school district. With this also came an influx of philanthropic funding (including \$14 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2004) to support school reform, and the small schools movement in particular. The small schools movement sought to create smaller learning communities by breaking larger comprehensive middle and high schools into smaller units where student support could be more

individualized. In Oakland, this meant dividing three large comprehensive high schools (Fremont, McClymmonds, and Castlemont) and three large comprehensive middle schools (Havenscourt, Elmhurst, and Calvin Simmons) into smaller school units. Additionally, a number of free standing small schools were created (Ascend, Urban Promise, Life Academy, Explore, and Greenleaf to name a few). The small schools movement met with varied success. What the small schools have had in common is that they all served and continue to serve low income students of color. For the next six years, a state administrator managed OUSD. Then, in 2009, the school board regained the majority of its authority, and a new superintendent was selected by the school board. In the seven years since, the district has had four different superintendents. This instability and ongoing change has ripple effects throughout our schools and inevitably impacts the educational experience of our young people. With so much change in leadership, there comes shifting priorities, and instructional focus. The constant shifts make coherence of instruction a challenge.

As the political and economic policy fronts changed, Title 1 funding decreased under the Obama Administration. At the same time, California governor Jerry Brown passed a new funding structure, called the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), to redistribute state dollars in a manner that prioritizes funds for students who are English language learners, foster youth, or eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. Despite the increase in funding resulting from LCFF, the first winter of this study surfaced new budget challenges in OUSD, requiring a dramatic reduction in central staff and significantly less unrestricted dollars to sites for the following school year. This was in the wake of the unexpected departure of the former superintendent (who accepted a job as superintendent of a large urban district on the East Coast). An interim superintendent was appointed, and a new superintendent started on July 1, 2017.

When leadership at the district level is unstable, this has a direct impact on how schools are able to apply resources in service of a coherent academic focus. The political context is important to this study because it illustrates the challenges that a district in the midst of change pose to the schools. Along with the political context, the instability experienced by schools is a product of the fiscal context. The fiscal context is important to the study because it reflects the insufficient level of financial resources that are available to the school of this study. Fiscal instability not only impacts school budgets, but also impacts funding for central supports to schools. While these aspects of the contextual reality of a district or a school are things that are not in our immediate sphere of influence, they are important to consider when reflecting on how the role of principal supervisor can act to stabilize how a school experiences district support and mandates. Reductions in financial and human resource support to schools also presents an opportunity to do things differently and can compel an organization (district or school) to be more efficient, coherent, and streamlined.

In the following section, I articulate the city context within which Oakland Unified School District and its schools were situated during the study. This context paints a picture of how the PAR project intended to address the challenges and utilize the assets of the school.

Oakland: The Town

In order to understand the context of a school, and a school district, one must understand the larger context of the city within which the school and the district exist. The city of Oakland, with a population of 419, 267 is the third largest city in the San Francisco Bay Area and the eighth largest in California. Despite its size, citizens of Oakland often call it The Town or Oaktown, due to its small-town feel. While Oakland has a rich history as a port –the fifth busiest in the United States, it remains a sort of step sister to San Francisco. The port has contributed to

a strong working class and a powerful union-oriented culture. Oakland has three major sports teams: the Oakland Raiders football, the Golden State Warriors basketball, and the Oakland Athletics baseball teams (two of which are leaving in the next year). The city is the home of a major health care organization (Kaiser Permanente) and a large manufacturer of household products (Clorox). Recently, there has been an influx of tech industry companies moving to Oakland (including Pandora and Uber) based on skyrocketing costs in San Francisco. While the influx of tech companies has been a financial boon to the city, it has put pressure on low and middle-income families who are increasingly finding themselves priced out of the rising housing market. It is these families who are most served by the middle schools of this study (Oakland Unified School District Office of Research, Assessment and Data, n.d.).

Oakland is ranked in the top five most ethnically diverse cities in the country. It is a city of growing immigrants in its schools, and a city in which political activism has been a consistent part of the city life that has affected the school district. Birthplace of the Black Panthers, Oakland is known for its history of political activism. Recent political activism in the city has focused on the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the Occupy Oakland movement. Oakland had a steady influx of immigrants in the 20th century, as well as African Americans migrating from the South in the 1940s to work in the war industry and more recently from Mexico, Guatemala, China, and Yemen, and the Pacific Islands. The continuing influx of immigrants to the city has added significantly to its cultural heritage and vibrancy, while also creating added challenges to a school system that seeks to provide adequate services to the increasing second language learner population. The political activism and the history of social justice movements that continue to thrive in the city provide a strong context for a focus on academic discourse and critical thinking.

Likewise, the presence of a large immigrant population provides even more rationale for the importance of promoting academic discourse to support language acquisition.

District Organizational Structure, Budget, and Instructional Shifts

In this section, I discuss the context of the school district itself as it pertains to the PAR project. The Oakland Unified School District has 36,668 students in pre-K through 12th grade in 86 district schools, including 13 middle schools. Oakland also has 37 district-authorized charter schools, enrolling 12,932 students. There are 2,474 teachers, 1,748 other school staff, and 755 central office staff in the district. 41.2% of students are Latino, 26.2% African American, 13.6% Asian, and 11.1% white. 72.5% of students in OUSD are eligible for free or reduced lunch. There is a 64.2% four-year cohort graduation rate. The average teacher salary is \$60,958, which is below the majority of the averages for districts in the Bay Area. 30.8% of students are English language learners, and 50.3% speak a language other than English in the home. This section on the district context is divided into three subsections; current leadership and budget crisis, district academic focus, and network structure for supervision and support. The first subsection highlights the challenges the district has faced with changes in leadership and fiscal instability. The next subsection dives into how the district has supported the instructional shift to the common core state standards. The last subsection delves into the ways in which the district has structured school support in the form of various network configurations.

Leadership and Budget Crises

The 2016-17 school year was a tumultuous one for Oakland Unified School District in terms of leadership. In July, 2016, Superintendent Wilson announced the Chief of Schools was leaving the district and that the position was going to be left unfilled for the school year. The Chief of Schools position was the direct supervisor of the network superintendents, including

myself. In its place, the Superintendent had the network superintendents collectively select a liaison from among the group to represent and communicate at the executive cabinet level. In December, the Superintendent made a surprise announcement that he was leaving to take a position as Chancellor of DC Public Schools. This is significant to our action research because it impacts organizational coherence and creates an opportunity for more direct coordination with central departments.

Then, on January 2, 2017, a financial crisis ensued that, to date, has not been resolved. An article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* indicated there was a \$30 million projected shortfall for the 2017-18 school year. There had been rumors of this circulating with principals and at the central office; however, nothing had been publicly communicated regarding such a shortfall. That same week, the Superintendent, before he departed for DC, met with central office leaders with information about the article. His message was that there was no budget crisis, but that important decisions would need to be made regarding district priorities for the upcoming school year. The following week executive cabinet members met with principals to communicate this same message.

What followed was six weeks of discussion and debate by the district and the community as to the how, and what, to prioritize for the upcoming school year. At the end of February, the school board passed a budget that included \$14 million less in expenditures. Each department was then tasked to make the cuts necessary in their plans for the upcoming school year. The impact on schools was been mixed. In middle schools, a ballot measure supporting art, music and world language made up much of the difference in funding from the prior year, however during the budget process, schools traditionally made “appeals” for additional staffing based on needs not considered in the budgeting formula (including electives and PE). That school year, we were

able to grant 40% less appeals, resulting in less funding to pay for teachers than had been the case during the previous budgeting season.

In March 2017, an additional announcement expanded the financial crisis: the Interim Superintendent, announced that we were at risk of becoming fiscally insolvent for that current school year if we were not able to cut expenses and severely limit spending for the remainder of the school year. Both site and central department budgets were frozen, and a moratorium was placed on new hiring. There was concern that if we were not able to significantly reduce spending for the remainder of the school year, we were at risk of going into state receivership again. That would mean the state would take over our school district and both the superintendent and the school board would be relieved of their duties. What ensued was additional cuts needing to be made, both for the remainder of the 2016-17 school year, as well as significant central office cuts for the 2017-18 school year. The cuts to the 2017-18 central office included dramatically reducing the Teaching and Learning Departments who provided direct content support to sites with regard to pedagogy and implementation of the Common Core. In this section I review the history of the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the impact on our schools because these larger political and financial crises impact the ability to implement the common core.

Academic Focus: Moving to the Common Core

The original rollout of the Common Core State Standards in OUSD took the form of “The Three Shifts”: writing with evidence, reading complex text, and academic discussion. During the period of the Three Shifts, the instructional division of the district developed a set of tools and resources to support academic discussion. This included a video library of academic discussions from classrooms of different contents and grade levels, an academic discussion

continuum, and professional development from Jeff Zwiers and his colleagues who championed academic discourse and discussion and was a primary source of direction for district efforts (Zwiers et al., 2014). The district facilitated instructional rounds at every site focused on academic discourse (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). During the instructional rounds process principals participated in rounds at other schools as a way of cross-pollinating their understandings of effective instruction. At this same time, the state of California phased out the California State Test (CST) and introduced the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium Test (SBAC). The SBAC significantly ratcheted up the rigor in alignment with the Common Core State Standards. When the new Superintendent arrived in 2014, the focus on the “Three Shifts” was de-emphasized and ultimately replaced by “the Four Ts”: text, talk, time, and task.

A change occurred also in the accountability metrics for student achievement. At the national level, the move to the Common Core coincided with the sun-setting of No Child Left Behind and opportunity for states to apply for a waiver from the requirements of NCLB, giving them greater flexibility to determine their own accountability measures and strategies for improving teacher effectiveness. While the state of California did not apply for the waiver, a group of the largest school districts in the state applied and were granted a waiver, which came to be called the Core Waiver. From this, OUSD developed a more holistic way of measuring school growth and success. This was called the School Performance Framework (SPF) and was made up of sixteen different academic and social emotional metrics for measuring schools in terms of overall performance, and performance of specific target populations, as well as growth towards proficiency. The academic indicators included the SBAC, the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), and high school readiness. Some of the social emotional indicators included chronic absence, suspensions, reclassification of English language learners, and survey results from

students, teachers, and families. While there was no indicator that directly measures academic discussion on the SPF, the assumption was that academic discussion was a tool that supported student growth and engagement in all areas of the SPF by developing critically thinking, promoting student engagement and ownership over one's own learning.

Network Structure for Supervision and Support: Then and Now

Districts tend group and then re-group schools for the purpose of support and accountability; a good analogy for those of us in the schools and as supervisors is “moving deck chairs on the Titanic”, as reorganization is not typically about doing a better job of supporting schools (Cuban, 1990; Grubb & Tredway, 2010). The re-grouping, instead of supporting schools, can cause considerable upset in a district already upset by leadership transitions, and often does little to change the school trajectories. At the same time, the supervisor responsible for the schools keeps shifting with little long-term knowledge of the school setting and its assets and challenges. Corcoran et al., 2013 advocate for reducing a principal supervisors' responsibilities and span of control (including the number of schools in a portfolio) as an important way to increase needed support to schools and school leaders, while also reducing the amount of non-instructional work. In the six years prior to the start of this study, there was three different network configurations in OUSD. When I first became principal of Urban Promise Academy in 2012, the structure included two middle school networks, three elementary school networks, and two high school networks. When the superintendent from 2009 to 2013 began his tenure, he restructured the network system so there were three K-8 networks, each with twenty schools, and one high school network. In addition to saving money by consolidating networks, the purpose of this change was intended to better align the elementary and middle schools in a given area of the city. While this may have helped with alignment, the sheer number of schools in a given network

proved to be challenging for any one supervisor, even with additional support staff. Likewise, the sheer number of elementary schools in a given network often overshadowed middle school needs. Middle school leaders (including myself) complained of not having a cohort of middle schools with whom to collaborate and align. This became evident to the district leadership, who then created a position to specifically support middle schools across all networks (Director of Instruction for Middle Schools). District leadership was moving in the direction of re-establishing a middle school network, when the next superintendent arrived and promptly reorganized the networks into three elementary school networks, one middle, and one high school.

Recent research sheds new light on the role of principal supervisors, the ratio of principal supervisor to number of principals that is possible for adequate support, and the importance of small networks of schools in urban districts to support student success (Corcoran et al., 2013). Superintendent Wilson, based on his experience in Denver with the Wallace Foundation research for the Corcoran findings, brought the idea of smaller networks of schools to Oakland and prioritized resources to support these smaller networks. After the first year of his tenure, Superintendent Wilson and his Chief of Schools Allen Smith added another elementary network to further reduce the number of schools in a given network, and created an “Elevation Network” to support specific underperforming schools with transformation. However, this required substantial district resources, and, as a result, became one area of scrutiny in the 2017-18 budget issues referenced in the introduction. Because of budget cuts, one elementary school network was consolidated for the 2017-18 school year. The middle school network, Elevation Network, and the High School Network continued in their same configurations. This was relevant to this study because changes in which schools were in which networks had an impact on the level of

support a site received from central office and the degree to which network superintendents were able to move beyond crisis management to strategically align central office divisions in a coherent direction. In the next section, I highlight the current structure of the middle school network and how central office partners are aligned in support of this network.

Middle School Network Current Structure

At the start of the study, there were thirteen middle schools in the school district; eight were included in the middle school network (the other five were part of the Elevation Network and were undergoing transformation). Of the eight schools in the Middle School Network, two were large (800 students or more), two were medium (500-600 students), and four were small (300-400 students). Geographically, two of the schools were in the East Oakland neighborhood of the Fruitvale, two schools were above the 580 Freeway (considered more affluent neighborhoods), one school was in what is known as “Deep East Oakland,” one was in the Rockridge neighborhood of north Oakland, and one was in central Oakland between the Dimond and Laurel Districts. Seventy percent of the students in the middle school network received free or reduced lunch; 37% of the students were Latino, 26% African American, 16.5% Asian, and 12% white. Fifteen percent were receiving special education services. Of the eight principals in the network, one was in his sixth year at the school, one was in her fourth year, two were in their third year, and four were in their second year. This was important because part of the theory of action for this study was that a cohort of school leaders and coaches could collaborate in such a way as to support each other and help to shape the direction of the network and the district overall. In addition, networks each had a small central team focused on direct support to the sites.

Each network was comprised of a network superintendent, a part time executive assistant (shared with at least one other network), and a network partner. The network superintendent was directly responsible for supervising the schools and principals within their network. The role of the network partner varied slightly depending on each network. In the case of the middle school network, the network partner was the lead on supporting all things operational at the schools. This included facilities, budget, attendance, enrollment and custodial services. The network partner also handled escalated family complaints. The executive assistant was responsible for managing the network office, and supporting sites with administrative duties such as purchasing, contracts, and travel. The executive assistant was also the first contact at the network level for family concerns.

These were the formal professional learning supports for principals and district supervisors. The principals had monthly principal cohort meetings, learning walks that were similar to instructional rounds, weekly observations and coaching. I met twice a month with the eight principals for a full day of principal professional learning. These sessions focused the morning on instruction and the afternoon on operations. The literature on principal supervisors says they too need regular opportunities for professional growth and development (Corcoran et al., 2013; Honig et al., 2010). For the previous two years, the formal professional learning for district supervisors worked with an outside organization, New Leaders for New Schools, to learn more about the shift to common core standards, the instructional core, and how to utilize learning walks support instructional leadership at the sites. This was conducted in all-day sessions every other month, which included learning walks together to calibrate and practice. Due to limited budget, we did not continue this professional learning in the following school year. I considered my role as supervisor and evaluator as a learning opportunity for principals and myself. As part

of my supervisory duties, I evaluated each principal using the Leadership Growth and Development Plan (LGDP), developed in collaboration with multiple Oakland principals and approved by the administrators' union in 2016.

To create greater alignment across departments of central office in service of schools, each department in the system designated a specific person to serve a given network. In the middle school network, we created two network teams: a Network Instructional Leadership Team and a Network Community and Operations Team. The Network Instructional Leadership Team was comprised of specialists from each content area; science, math, ELA, ELD, and history. In addition, on this team were representatives from special education and from educator effectiveness (the division responsible for teacher growth and development). This team met weekly to coordinate and align support for sites and plan professional learning for both teachers and principals. The Network Community and Operations Team met once a month and was comprised of representatives from the offices of fiscal, human resources, accountability, custodial, buildings and grounds, mental health, restorative justice, and parent-student engagement. Similar to the instructional team, this team focused on aligning and coordinating services and support to specific schools. In addition to these two teams, I set up monthly 1:1 check-ins with each of these individuals. These meetings all happened on Monday and Friday, leaving Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday as the times to visit sites and work directly with the principals. A key part of the work in the action research project centered on the coordination of this team of services. In the next section I discuss my role as supervisor in more depth.

Principal Supervisor: How the Journey for Equity Informs the Work

“Information is not knowledge. The only source of knowledge is experience.”

Albert Einstein (1954)

As the lead researcher in this PAR project, my personal experiences, as well as my experiences as a teacher, principal, and central office administrator, informed the project and made me uniquely positioned to lead this participatory action research study. In this section, I share my personal life experiences because those experiences provide the foundation for why I am in this work. I review my career as a teacher and how it shaped my values as an educator. I discuss my experience leading professional development and teacher action research as a program manager for an education fund. Then I review my role as principal of a middle school in Oakland. Finally, I discuss my transition to central office and how I operated with a belief in improving organizational coherence in order to best serve schools.

Leading for Social Justice

The foundational belief system that shapes my professional career is grounded in the personal experiences that have informed my own social justice and equity lens. It was at the University of Colorado that I met my future wife. Developing a life-partnership with a person of color (she is African-American) started an ongoing journey that has helped me to look deeply at my own unearned privilege, and my role in perpetuating the inequities that exist in our society. It has helped shape my identity as a white male, as an ally, and as part of a bi-racial couple. Likewise, being the proud father of two wonderful bi-racial daughters profoundly shapes my identity. It shapes how I see the world and how I am as an educator. My work as an educator is grounded in the deep seeded belief that every student can achieve at high levels, and that the responsibility is on us as adults to create the conditions whereby our traditionally underserved students can thrive. I believe our students can defy the status quo, and that we can transform our neighborhoods, our city, and our nation by creating the conditions that foster equitable outcomes for our young people. This belief is very much a part of my identity as an educator. Because of

this, I struggle when I see colleagues holding low expectations for our young people by couching low expectations in a veneer of cultural responsiveness; they are not mutually exclusive and in fact should go hand in hand. For me courageous conversations have that at the core and push people to face their own biases and preconceptions of what our young people are capable of.

A part of my identity, I want to be more conscious of, in deeds and words, what it means to be a white, male educator in a central office position of power. When I walk into a school in a suit, I know I engender a certain degree of suspicion, distrust, and even antipathy on the part of some teachers. I see an important part of my role as being in relationship with those who have experienced frustration, betrayal, or neglect from people in positions like mine. This includes teachers, families, and students. I feel responsible to not give up, despite the animosity. I feel compelled to prove through actions and words that I will be an advocate for young people and their families. To me this means making decisions in the best interests of students, rather than based on what is most convenient for adults. This means always keeping students at the center, and believing in them, especially when they do not yet believe in themselves.

My motivation for this research is two-fold. First and foremost, I am driven by a determination to get it right in public education. For me, getting it right means abolishing the opportunity gap and eliminating disproportionality in our schools. I am motivated to enter this program because I believe that only through collaborative, equity-focused action research are we going to accomplish that goal. Collectively we can crack the code and iterate for social justice in our educational system. My motivation is also personal; I feel this research process will help me to develop as an educator and to do my job better. I see this research as an antidote to the stagnant and myopic thinking that can come from working really closely with a small group of colleagues over a couple of years. When it comes to advocacy and alliances, I actually do not

feel that I do enough. I feel compelled to do this work as an act of advocacy and action, and yet, I struggle to find examples of how that actually plays out for me on a daily basis. Because of that, I feel like I need to do more, and to do what I do differently. Doing more and doing different are what I hope to do through this action research project. During this research process, I will push myself to call out specific examples of equity where it exists, and where it does not yet exist.

Teaching career. I started my career in education as a paraprofessional in Boulder, Colorado, working part time with three students with special needs at the local elementary school. I worked there during the day, and then biked to my full-time job cooking at an upscale restaurant for the evening. At the time, I had no idea what I was doing, and as I think back now, I realize I did not even have a sense of what their IEPs said or what their specific needs were. All I knew at the time was there were behavioral issues for two of the boys, and the third had verbal and processing challenges. When my wife and I moved to Washington, D.C. to go to graduate school for teaching, I worked as a substitute teacher in Prince George's County while taking prerequisite classes at a local community college. As a long-term sub at an elementary school. I was befriended by a music teacher who taught me some of the fundamentals of managing a class and having a teacher presence with the students. I received a MA in Education at the George Washington University with a focus on English language development (called ESL at the time) and history. During the program, I had student teaching experience at a number of schools in and around the DC area, including Bell Multicultural High School. At Bell Multicultural, I was mentored by an outstanding teacher, Beth Greenstein, who helped me to develop as an English teacher, with a lens of supporting English language learners. At the end of my program. I was hired to teach at Bell Multicultural, and stayed there for two years, until my wife and I decided to move to New York City. During my tenure at Bell Multicultural High School, I engaged in my

first action research study through a program at George Mason University. For my action research, I studied classroom engagement strategies to support English Language Learners.

In New York I got a teaching position at a school called Newcomers High School, in Long Island City, Queens and stayed for four years. Located just across the river from Midtown Manhattan, Newcomers High School is a school specifically for new immigrants to the U.S. During that time, I was awarded a Fulbright Exchange to teach for a semester in Mexico. There I taught at an Escuela Normal (a college for future teachers) in a small mountain town in the state of Mexico called Atlacomulco where my students were preparing to be teachers of English. The Fulbright Exchange showed me where many of my students came from, and the education system they experienced before coming to the US. These experiences laid a foundational understanding of language acquisition (both as a learner, and a teacher), and the importance of oral language use to develop critical thinking skills.

San Francisco Education Fund. When we returned to the United States, I finished the school year at Newcomers High School. In moving to San Francisco, I found a job at the San Francisco Education Fund, a local education fund that provides grants and professional development to teachers in the public school system. There I facilitated three teacher professional development groups, which supported teachers to engage in action research projects. These projects focused on achieving equitable outcomes, particularly for students who had been traditionally underserved by the public school system and included the English Network, the Math/Science Network, and the Leadership Institute. The former two were voluntary professional development groups that engaged in cycles of inquiry around a particular pedagogical interest of the teachers. The latter group, the Leadership Institute, was a group of teachers who developed action research projects related to some aspect of their own teaching

practice, and then used that action research as a platform for policy change at the school, district, and state level. Across the board, there was a common theme of this group: without the support of their principal, it was very difficult to affect positive change for their students, particularly those who had been underserved. It was leading this group, in particular, that inspired me to pursue my administrative credential to become a principal, something that I never imagined I would ever want to do. It motivated me to see beyond my own classroom to the broader landscape of a school ecosystem, and the importance of empowering teachers to effect change in their school and district. It also honed my skills as a facilitator of professional learning and a practitioner of action research as an authentic way of effecting that change. This next section illustrates my experience as a school leader and how it informed my approach to my current position. I share how the experience developed my schema for the role of teams in building authentic distributive leadership in a school.

My Role as a School Leader

The role of a school leader is to build a cohesive, collaborative culture of high expectations and self-efficacy in which learning and continuous improvement are the goal for both adults and students. Through valuing distributive leadership and the power of teams, I enacted my values about leadership and the experience shaped my belief in the power of collaborative teams. I share how my school tended to the whole child while keeping a laser like focus on instruction, and in particular, the value of using cooperative learning strategies to transform student outcomes.

With a nudge from a dear friend, I applied and was accepted into the New Leaders for New Schools program and began a one year intensive residency at Urban Promise Academy (UPA), a public middle school in Oakland, CA. There I met a powerful mentor, Gia Truong, who

was principal, and a New Leader alum. At the end of my residency, Gia was promoted to Network Executive Officer (NExO) for Middle Schools, and I was tapped as the next principal of the school. Thus, I began the most intense, challenging, and rewarding five years of my life. At UPA, we focused on developing a distributive leadership model with a strong focus on collaboration and collective decision-making. We created a team for hiring, a team for developing our advisory structure (Crew), and a team focused on school culture (Student Focus Team). We also continued to grow grade level teams, department teams, planning partners, a student leadership team, and most importantly, the School Leadership Team (similar to an Instructional Leadership Team). During my time at UPA, we developed a comprehensive program to expose every student, every year to college experiences, starting with community college visits in 6th grade, local University of California visits in 7th, and a two night, three-day college trip across California in 8th grade. For the 8th grade trip, students had to complete a full UC college application and write a college essay. On the trip, students visited with UPA alumni at various colleges, as well as meeting with various student groups such as Mecha and the Black Student Union. We also developed a comprehensive outdoor leadership program in which every student, every year, would have an overnight camping experience; 6th graders to the Presidio in San Francisco for one night; 7th graders to Point Reyes National Seashore for two nights, staying in cabins in the wilderness. In 8th grade, students learned to use water filters and camping stoves, and hiked into the Big Basin National Park. There they cooked all their own meals; set up their own tents; and filtered their own water. For many, these trips were the first time they had ever seen the ocean or camped in the wilderness.

At a time when No Child Left Behind was forcing schools to focus most of their resources and time on English and math, we developed an arts integration program that included

an exposition of work where every student presented an integrated project to their family and community in English and STEM at an event we called Expo. We also developed an art program where every student took two intersession classes a year in drumming, dance, and adolescent health. Most importantly, we focused on instruction as a way to transform outcomes for students. The School Leadership Team met weekly for two hours to plan professional learning, review data, and engage in a cycle of inquiry focused on a few key instructional foci. For a number of years, we delved deep in cooperative learning structures and assessment FOR learning. From there we evolved the focus into formative assessment and academic discussion. We collectively developed a theory of action to articulate the direction we were going as a school, and then used peer and community walkthrough processes to inform the evolution and development of our learning.

The collective work bore fruit. When I left UPA, the school had the highest achievement in math on the state test than any other middle school in our district. We had the highest reclassification rate of English language learners and the highest attendance rate of any middle school in our system, as well as highest scores on the California Healthy Kids Survey, which surveys students, teachers, and families yearly related to social emotional factors including safety, relationships, and engagement in school. We had significantly diversified our staff and were retaining much more of our teachers than when I first became principal.

The experience as a school leader continues to deeply affect how I lead as a principal supervisor, and central office administrator. First, it instilled in me a belief in the power of both teams and community to transform schools. It helped me to develop structures to support collaboration and alignment that I use in my daily work with principals and instructional teams. And lastly, it concretized a deep belief in instruction being the key driver for changing student

lives. In this next section, I share how my experiences as a site administrator transferred to my current role as a principal supervisor.

My Role in Central Office

Honig and Hatch (2004) articulate the challenge of both “bridging and buffering” between central office and school sites. In this section, I discuss my current role as principal supervisor and how my experience as a school leader has shaped my work in support of schools and principals. I assert how my role in central office will directly impact the ability for central office partners to effectively support and resource a local pedagogical initiative -- in this case academic discourse. This concept of bridging and buffering is how I see my current role as network superintendent of middle schools. Particularly in a time of superintendent transition and budget crisis, the need to buffer sites and school leaders from the tumult so they can stay focused on student outcomes is increasingly important. At the same time, sites and site leaders need to know what is going on, and how it could affect them and their school community. In this section, it is important to focus on what my current support is, what I am projecting it to be in addressing the questions for the focus of practice, and how I see formative evidence fitting into the overall data picture in schools.

My support includes coordinating and facilitating principal professional learning twice monthly with the cohort focused on both instructional and operational leadership. We hold summits with the instructional leadership teams from every site, once every six weeks, in which we facilitate teams to conduct cycles of inquiry based on their specific focus areas for their site. I visit each site weekly, meet with the principal, observe classrooms and plan principal feedback to the teachers. With the principals, I co-construct professional goals with each leader and engage with them throughout the year in observation and feedback related to their goals (the evaluation

process is called the Leadership, Growth, and Development System, or LGDS). This can include observing them facilitating site professional development, leading team meetings, engaging with families, giving feedback to teachers, and conducting one on one meetings with their direct reports. In addition, I work with leaders on site budgeting, operations, hiring, teacher evaluation, site planning, and navigating central office supports.

In August 2016, we developed six network student outcome goals for the year, aligned to the School Performance Framework (SPF) mentioned above. These goals were mapped backwards from the 2020 District Strategic Plan and include both academic and social-emotional components. They are also based on stretching from previous year achievement in the six areas of focus. The goals are as follows:

1. 45% of all students will meet or exceed standards on the English state assessment.
2. 35% of all student will meet or exceed standards on the math state assessment.
3. 45% of all students will read at or above grade level as measured by the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI).
4. 25% of all Long-Term English Language Learners will be reclassified as English proficient.
5. 7% or less of all students will be considered chronically absent.
6. 5% or less of all students will be suspended.

My role is to support schools, and specifically school leaders, to collectively achieve these growth goals and to ensure that the iterative evidence from their school supports their work to meet the goals. For each of these growth goals, we collectively develop a theory of action for how to achieve the intended outcome. The past year was an ongoing process, which served to model what it means to engage stakeholders in the development of a problem of practice and

theory of action to address that problem of practice. Though imperfect, the process was a significant step forward in terms of how to engage both central and site-based stakeholders in the development of a theory of action to address a problem of practice. We enlisted the Teaching and Learning Department to assist with this process, which included principal professional development sessions focused on the common core shifts in both English Language Acquisition (ELA) and math. In my role as principal supervisor, I did a cross analysis of evidence from three different sources to identify patterns of instructional strengths and growth areas across the network of schools to inform the direction of this research study. These three sources were: (1) weekly site visits and classroom observations, (2) aggregate data from administrator observations of classrooms using the Teacher Growth and Development System, and (3) evidence from learning walks conducted with site leaders, central partners, and onsite coaches.

Weekly site visits and classroom observations. A core part of my work in support of schools, and school leaders, is weekly site visits to schools focused on instructional leadership. I hold three days a week sacred for such site visits (the remaining two days are held for standing meetings with central office partners). During these site visits, the principal and I observe 3-4 classrooms to calibrate observation and feedback, strategize coaching support for individual teachers, and identify patterns of strengths and growth areas across classrooms to inform weekly site-based professional development. At these visits, I record observational notes and identify next steps in discussion with the principal. A clear pattern across the network emerged this year from these weekly visits. Students are not getting access to the type, and level, of academic discourse necessary to push critical thinking to the level needed to access Common Core standards.

Teacher Growth and Development System. Oakland Unified uses an evaluation structure called the Teacher Growth and Development System (TGDS). Administrators meet with individual teachers throughout the school year to set instructional practice goals, plan lessons, debrief classrooms observations, and evaluate strengths and growth areas. The process also includes a self-assessment of the lesson by the teacher, and peer observations and feedback. Below Table 2 illustrates an aggregated summary of these observations from the past fall, by TGDS dimension. These data from classrooms across the network observed using TGDS highlight two salient patterns: (1) building positive and respectful classrooms, and building and maintaining classroom routines were a strengths; and (2) using questioning strategies that require evidence and elaboration, and developing student collaboration and communication were areas for growth. In addition, the area of planning to support equitable engagement and access was a consistent area for growth. All three of these growth areas are indicative of a lack of opportunities for students to engage in structured academic discourse to support critical thinking. These clearly confirmed evidence from my weekly site visits and classroom observations.

Learning walks. The third source of evidence was a learning walk process where central partners (and myself) visited classrooms in every school, with site leaders, to identify patterns and trends in priority aspects of the learning process. These included aspects such as amount of time on task, degree to which learning is teacher or student centered, and the level of critical thinking students engage in during academic discourse. We also sought to gauge the degree to which students were engaged with grade level text in their classroom. Unfortunately, the instrument used in this process was not sufficiently valid to glean stand-alone data regarding a problem of practice; however, when combined with the other two sources, the process and dialogue of the learning walks led the group to identify and confirm a few key points which

Table 2

Middle School Network TGDS Fall Cycle Strengths and Areas for Growth

| FALL CYCLE | | |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| | Strengths | Areas for growth |
| MSA (average across the network) | 2A1 Builds positive and respectful classrooms 2C Builds and maintains classroom routines... | 3C2 Uses questioning strategies that require evidence and elaboration 3C3 Develops student collaboration and communication |
| Brower | 2A1 Builds positive and respectful classrooms 2B1 Builds growth mindset | 1A2 Establishes criteria for master (lesson planning) 3C3 Develops student collaboration and communication |
| Catterston | 2A1 Builds positive and respectful classrooms 3B2 Uses instructional strategies to support equitable engagement and access | 1B2 Plans for student communication and collaboration 1B3 Plans support for equitable engagement and access |
| Bridgelawn | 2A1 Builds positive and respectful classrooms 4A Reflects on student outcomes | 1B3 Plans support for equitable engagement and access 3C3 Develops student collaboration and communication |
| Morntin | 4A Reflects on student outcomes 2A2 Uses CRT | 3C3 Develops student collaboration and communication 1B3 Plans support for equitable engagement and access |
| Rawlings | 2A1 Builds positive and respectful classrooms 2C Builds and maintains classroom routines | 3C2 Uses questioning strategies that require the use of evidence and elaboration 3C3 Develops student collaboration and communication |
| Ringston | 2A1 Builds positive and respectful classrooms 2C1 Builds and maintains classroom routines | Domain 1 (lesson planning) across the board 3A Clearly communicates the content language objective and criteria for mastery |

Table 2 (continued)

| FALL CYCLE | | |
|------------|--|--|
| | Strengths | Areas for growth |
| Ute Bay | 2A1 Builds positive and respectful classrooms 4A Reflects on student outcomes | 1B2 Plans for student communication and collaboration 3C3 Develops student collaboration and communication |
| Panchette | 1B1 Plans for meaningful tasks 4A Reflects on student outcomes | 3C2 Uses questioning strategies that require the use of evidence and elaboration 3C3 Develops student collaboration and communication |

informed the development of a problem of practice. From this process emerged a confirmation of the level of student engagement in grade-level tasks using structured academic discourse to foster critical thinking was significantly lacking. What we found was that when there was a lack of structure to the discourse, the level of critical thinking decreased significantly (Cuero, 2008). We believe that by addressing this problem of practice, we can dramatically increase equitable outcomes for students across all content areas. The next section outlines the co-practitioner researchers (CPR) who are essential in conducting this participatory action research project.

Co-Practitioner Researchers

Key to this participatory action research (PAR) project is the collaboration of co-practitioner researchers who play critical roles in relation to the focus of practice. Given the importance of organizational coherence in this study, the role of central office instructional partners will be invaluable. Because the study focuses on the implementation of academic discourse as a locally generated instructional strategy, I hope to enlist four central partners who play important decision-making and implementation roles in teacher and learning. This includes the Deputy Chief of Teaching and Learning, who leads the Teaching and Learning Department. This department includes specialists in all content areas and also plays a role in defining the instructional priority areas for the district each year. Within the Teaching and Learning Department, the English Language Arts division has been a strong champion of academic discourse in service of critical thinking. In particular, the ELA Secondary Coordinator has been a strong partner this year in supporting the work in classrooms. My hope is to get her agreement to participate as a co-practitioner in the project. The Executive Director of English Language Learners and Multilingual Acquisition (ELLMA) will also be a key partner. This is a person who worked with me at Urban Promise Academy, where she had the role of Instructional Facilitator

when I was principal. Together with the Instructional Leadership Team, we focused intensely on supporting academic discourse in the classroom. After she was promoted to her current position, she developed an academic discussion continuum that articulates a growth trajectory for teachers implementing academic discourse in their classroom. We will use this resource in our study.

This study will also require the collaboration of partners at school sites. I will be enlisting two principals to participate in this study. The type of leader I will be looking for is someone who has strong capacity to lead a team, and who prioritizes instructional leadership over operational management. These two leaders will need to be interested in prioritizing academic discourse as a primary instructional focus for the year. In addition to getting consent forms from two principals, this study will require the consent and participation of the Instructional Teacher Leader (ITL) on the two sites. The ITL is a new position this year that is the main instructional partner for the principal on the site. This role includes helping to lead the Instructional Leadership Team, coaching teachers, and shaping the direction of professional learning on the site. Lastly, I hope to get consent forms from two classroom teachers on each of the two sites. These teachers will need to be interested in focusing intensely on implementing academic discourse as a key strategy in their classroom this year. More clarification will be in chapter four as to who I expect to be in the study and what role they will play.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I delved deeply into the context within which this action research study will be conducted; I believe that context and my commitment to this work as an equity warrior (Leverett, 2002). In order to more fully grasp the challenges and strengths of implementing a locally-generated instructional focus such as academic discourse in service of equitable outcomes for students, it is necessary to describe and interrogate the city, district, and school

setting. Likewise, every context is shaped by its history and the figures who have played a role in shaping that history. Finally, the context of a participatory action research (PAR) project is deeply impacted by the participants themselves, including the co-practitioner researchers (CPR). Each brings valuable experience, lessons learned, and a deeply-seeded belief in our students' potential. That is the equity focus I stand on as an administrator and will carry with me in implementing this work more strategically.

This chapter highlights a history of diversity and activism, which makes the development of productive academic discourse in service of critical thinking all the more important in order to develop community, minded, productive citizens. The rapid change and instability that has plagued the district is another important piece to be cognizant of when considering how our system can be more coherent and aligned in support of schools, classrooms, and students. This following chapter lays out the methodology to guide the research. The chapter seeks to demonstrate how the research plan will address the research questions through cycles of inquiry with systematic data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the research design that I used to gather evidence to respond to the research questions. The chapter describes the methodology I used to collect and analyze data related to the focus of practice and research questions articulated here. The focus of practice for this research was to study the implementation process of academic discourse as an innovation or key lever to change instruction in order to impact student outcomes for English Language Learners and African American students. To do this, as a researcher, I asked the overarching question: *To what extent does the structure of an urban school district and its leadership, both centrally and at sites, foster the implementation of academic discourse in support of Long Term English Language Learner and African American engagement in learning?* Sub-questions for the study include:

1. What fosters and inhibits the classroom implementation of academic discourse structures with 2 principals, coaches and teachers?
2. How does a locally generated focus of practice (academic discourse) navigate through an organization in order to have an impact on instruction and learning?
3. How do the leadership actions of a district administrator, in collaboration with a network instructional lead team, inhibit or support site leaders' ability to build teacher capacity and implement the strategies of academic discourse in the classroom?
4. To what extent do we see a change in the degree and quality of academic discourse in the classroom?
5. How has my own engagement in this research process shifted and informed my understanding of research and my practice as a leader?

The theory of action for this study was as follows:

- *IF we conduct regular classroom observation with feedback, focused on academic discourse. and*
- *IF we engage central and site educators in classroom learning walks focused on academic discourse, and*
- *IF central and site teams use the data from these classroom observations and learning walks in a cycle of inquiry to inform teaching practice (specifically opportunities for students to engage in academic discourse),*
- *THEN we will see a change in classroom practice (increase in student discourse), an increase in student engagement, and a positive impact on outcomes for traditionally underserved students.*

In this chapter we examine the methodology used in this study. This will include a review of the research design and the rationale for using participatory action research to conduct such a study. We will discuss the cycles of this action research process and the steps taken during each cycle. Given the importance of specific situations and localized settings in action research (Stringer, 2014), we will describe the setting and the population involved in this study. We will then discuss the data sources and collection methods used, as well as a rationale for why these collection methods (all qualitative in nature) best informed the research questions articulated in the chapter. This will be followed by a description of how we coded and analyzed the data using specific methods to identify themes, patterns, and categories. Finally, we will name important ethical considerations, ways in which confidentiality was be maintained, and any limitations the study has.

Research Design

This study was designed as participatory action research. Participatory action research was particularly well suited to investigate this study's research questions and the process stated in the logic model (see Figure 11). Origins of action research in education come from both Dewey and Freire. As Herr and Anderson (2004) pointed out in their book, *The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty*, Paulo Freire championed a generative process of communities identifying issues of critical importance to them and collaboratively taking action to address these issues. John Dewey also emphasized the value of experience and action in generating knowledge (Herr & Anderson, 2004). As educators, the learning stance taken in action research was particularly valuable as we continued to iterate and develop our craft for an ever-changing world. Participatory action research also recognized the invaluable role of the practitioner and those participants who were closest to the work itself. In doing so, the research took on an immediate relevance to all participants that could not be captured in other forms of research. Likewise, by engaging participants in the inquiry itself, there was the opportunity to make corrections in the moment that had the potential to positively impact those involved in the work. As Stringer (2014) states, "Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives (p. 1). To engage in this type of research, it was important to develop a research design in order to set the path for that learning.

Participatory Action Research Cycles

This research study was divided into three specific cycles. PAR Cycle one was conducted in fall 2017. In cycle one I first met one on one with the principal, and then together with her on-site instructional teacher-leaders (instructional coaches). We discussed the research project with

| LOGIC MODEL | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|---|---|
| GOALS | INPUTS/ACTIVITIES | TIMELINE | ENDS | | |
| <p><i>SMART-E: Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic, Timed, & Equity-Focused</i></p> | <p><i>In order to address the goals, the following inputs will be provided and activities will be accomplished.</i></p> | | <p><i>If the activities are accomplished they will produce evidence of service delivery and fidelity of the goals (<u>outputs</u>), short and long-term changes (<u>outcomes</u>), and long-term systemic changes (<u>broader systemic impacts</u>).</i></p> | | |
| | | | OUTPUTS (FIDELITY) | OUTCOMES | BROADER SYSTEMIC IMPACTS |
| <p>Increase in structured classroom academic discourse, leading to improved student engagement, and a positive impact on outcomes for traditionally underserved students.</p> | <p>Forming group of co-practitioner researchers and calibrating in the use of academic discourse.</p> <p>Monthly instructional learning walks with stakeholders.</p> <p>Weekly classroom observation and feedback.</p> <p>Looking at student work using a student work protocol.</p> | <p>Cycle 1 fall 2017</p> <p>Cycle 2 spring 2018</p> <p>Cycle 3 fall 2018</p> | <p>Calibration of data collection protocols with the group.</p> | <p>Increase in use of academic discourse to push critical thinking.</p> <p>Improved functionality of district teams to have some utility in support of high quality instruction at schools.</p> | <p>Decrease in student discipline issues.</p> <p>Increase in student achievement.</p> <p>School-wide increase in academic discourse in the classroom.</p> <p>Increased student engagement.</p> <p>Increase in principal sense of self-efficacy.</p> <p>More supportive central office support experienced by sites.</p> |

Figure 11. Logic model.

them. Once we identified and confirmed all the site participants, we began the process of calibrating and aligning with the group around structures for academic discourse. We also identified with the group the types of support that they would need at the site in order to implement and support academic discourse in the classroom. We mapped out a calendar for the first cycle of observations and feedback sessions and learning walks, aligned to the site's professional learning schedule and plans. There were a number of pre-established structures for coordination and collaboration that were beneficial to this research study. This included weekly site visits by the Network Superintendent, who supported the principal with observation and feedback sessions focused on key components of academic discourse and student engagement in grade level, rigorous tasks. Likewise, the principal met weekly with the instructional teacher leaders to discuss coaching and support for the teachers. In turn, the instructional teacher leader met with a middle school cohort of instructional teacher leaders, which was facilitated by the School Improvement Coach (with support from the Network Superintendent). Once a month there was a professional learning space for all instructional teacher leaders and principals to meet together and engage in the learning walk process focused in part on academic discourse (under the larger umbrella of the instructional core and the alignment of teacher and student actions focused on grade level tasks with rigorous content). In addition to these meetings, we held monthly meetings with the central co-practitioner researchers to elicit feedback, align central support in service of sites, and identify specific services to be deployed to sites.

PAR Cycle two of the research process began in the spring semester of the 2017-18 school year. The direction of cycle two was largely dependent on how things developed in cycle one. That having been said, we expected cycle one data collection to establish a baseline from which to engage in a cycle of inquiry regarding the development and implementation of

academic discourse strategies in the classrooms being studied. The calibration and alignment of the group in cycle one with regard to academic discourse strategies and structures then shaped the ongoing learning of the group in cycle two. Cycle two included regular monthly meetings of the group, as well as ongoing bi-monthly network principal meetings (one per month also included the instructional teacher leaders). In cycle two, there continued to be weekly meetings with the central partners to coordinate support for schools of the network. This was an opportunity for central office co-practitioner researchers to align on the support the focus school was receiving, as well as analyze data from classrooms and schools with regard to implementation of academic discourse in the classroom. Part of that alignment was planning for communication with site leaders, coaches, and teachers.

Setting and Population

This research was conducted in a middle school in Oakland Unified School District. The school was selected from the Middle School Network. A setting for the study was the space at each school where professional learning and planning took place (usually a particular teacher's classroom or a room such as the library), as well as places where observation debriefs occurred.

The selection of Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and a middle school from the Middle School Network was based on the researcher's scope of work in the district and the middle school network purview. Because of my role as Middle School Network Superintendent in OUSD, I had pre-established relationships with middle school and central office staff that enable a certain level of access and experience which was beneficial to this research process. To the extent that the action research yielded valuable learning, the relationship and trust between the lead researcher and the co-practitioner researchers was essential, and needed to be "carefully nurtured so it is retained throughout the life of the research project" (Algeo, 2012, p. 1). Building

and sustaining trust in the action research process engendered the “honesty, and respect [which] are pre-conditions of the search for truth/truths” (Zuber-Skerritt, 2005, p. 54).

Participants in this research included the principal and coaches (instructional teacher leaders) at the site. From the central office, co-practitioner researchers included the Deputy Chief of Teaching & Learning who leads the Teaching & Learning Department responsible for central support for teaching and learning at sites; the Director of Professional Learning who partners with Teaching & Learning, as well as network offices to lead professional learning for both administrators and teachers in the district; the Executive Director of the Office of English Language Learners & Multi-lingual Achievement who was responsible for developing and supporting the use of two of the tools used in this study (EL Shadowing Protocol, and the Academic Discussions Continuum), the Director of African American Male Achievement who was instrumental in supporting the transfer of the EL Shadowing protocol to focus on African American student engagement. The Middle School Network Superintendent was a lead researcher and author of this researcher. This person was the direct supervisor of the principals in the middle school network, and led and coordinated all central support for middle schools in OUSD.

Data Sources and Collection

This section will discuss the specific data sources and collection methods to be used in this study to answer each of the research sub-questions (see Table 3). Data sources included observation and feedback notes, learning walk protocols, interviews with stakeholders, memos from co-practitioner researchers, and other artifacts from the classrooms, schools, and professional learning settings involved in the study.

Table 3

Research Questions and Data Sources

| Sub-Research Question | Data Source |
|---|---|
| What fosters and inhibits the classroom implementation of academic discourse structures with 2 principals, coaches and teachers? | Interviews with stakeholders (principals, onsite coaches, teachers, and students) |
| How does a locally generated focus of practice (academic discourse) navigate through an organization in order to have an impact on instruction and learning? | Memos about central shifts |
| How do the leadership actions of a district administrator, in collaboration with a network instructional lead team, inhibit or support site leaders' ability to build teacher capacity and implement the strategies of academic discourse in the classroom? | Memos with central office partners |
| To what extent do we see a change in the degree and quality of academic discourse in the classroom? | Observation notes |
| How has my own engagement in this research process shifted and informed my understanding of research and my practice as a leader? | Personal memos |

Classrooms in the study were observed at least once per month for the length of the study by co-practitioner researchers (Kachur, Edwards, & Stout, 2010). Three types of observation tools were used to collect data from classroom observations; a general classroom observation protocol, a student shadowing protocol, and an academic discourse protocol. A general observation tool was used when observing overall classroom instruction, including both student and teacher actions. A student shadowing protocol was used when focusing on a particular student involved in the study (either an English language learner or an African American student) and their level of engagement and participation in a given activity (McDonald, 1993). An academic discourse protocol was used to specifically observe the level of academic discourse occurring in the classrooms involved in this study (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). Finally, learning walk protocols were used to monitor patterns and trends across both schools and all classrooms (Skretta, 2007).

In tandem with classroom observations, interviews were an important part of the data collection process (Stringer, 2014). Interviews occurred as part of the observation debrief process, as well as with all the stakeholders at key points in the study (Creswell, 2009). Finally, memos were a valuable part of the data collection process (Saldaña, 2015). Please see the Appendix B for protocols developed for this study.

Data Analysis

Any researcher who wishes to become proficient at doing qualitative analysis must learn to code well and easily. The excellence of the research rests in large part on the excellence of the coding.
~ Anselm L. Strauss

Herr and Anderson (2004) stress the importance of qualitative data analysis being a collaborative process with participants. They point out that good qualitative data analysis does not happen after all data is collected, but rather, *as* data is collected. They name this as key to the

action research process itself. Given the large quantity of potential data that was generated by using the aforementioned collection methods, the data analysis process attempted to make a large amount of data manageable through data reduction. Key to this was the coding process, which created “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) provide common types of coding categories, but emphasize that your central questions shape your coding scheme. Inductive coding was used as an iterative process with grounded codes such as tags, categories, and themes. The researchers looked for connections between codes, find descriptive themes, sub-categories, relationships and cause-effect patterns. A matrix of codes and themes was created during the analysis process (Hesse-Biber, 2010). For example, interview data was transcribed, and then analyzed for themes. Likewise, document analysis was done of field notes from observations. Berkowitz (1997) suggests considering six questions when coding qualitative data. These six questions guided the coding in this study.

1. What common themes emerge in responses about specific topics? How do these patterns (or lack thereof) help to illuminate the broader study question(s)?
2. Are there deviations from these patterns? If so, are there any factors that might explain these deviations?
3. How are participants' environments or past experiences related to their behavior and attitudes?
4. What interesting stories emerge from the responses? How do they help illuminate the central study question(s)?
5. Do any of these patterns suggest that additional data may be needed? Do any of the central study questions need to be revised?

6. Are the patterns that emerge similar to the findings of other studies on the same topic? If not, what might explain these discrepancies?

By using these questions to guide the coding, the researchers used an inductive process to build themes, patterns and categories. This assisted in the analysis of the data listed in Table 4, including interview transcripts, observation notes, and the memos being used to answer the research sub-questions. Once a comprehensive set of themes was established from the coding and analysis of these data sets, a deductive process assisted the researchers to look back at the interview transcripts, observation notes, and memos from the lens of the established themes. Thus, the researchers identified if additional evidence in the data supported these themes, and if there was additional information that needed to be gathered in the following iteration of the inquiry cycle. In this manner the process began inductively, but then included deductive analysis to help push the research deeper (Creswell, 2009). By using a variety of different data sources and methods, the analysis was triangulated and provided for a broader scope of perspectives. This ultimately strengthened the analysis and identification of themes, which was then pursued in the inquiry process (Herr & Anderson, 2004).

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

The security of the data collected for the study, as well as the confidentiality of the participants was of the utmost importance. Chivonne Algeo (2012) states: “The establishment of trust can be formalized using documented consent forms and codes of conduct and through informal behaviors and reassurances of the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant’s involvement on the action research project” (p. 1). In order for the action research to be beneficial, the action researcher must address “issues and problems in action research which require an ethical code of practice to be negotiated between the researcher and the participants”

Table 4

Qualitative Data Sources and Methods

| Data Collected | Data Collection Tool | By Whom |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| Network superintendent site visit meeting and observation notes with principal | Site Visit Agendas & Notes | Network Superintendent & Principal |
| Observations and reflections during action research cycle | Action Researcher Memos | Network Superintendent |
| Observations of school professional development sessions | School PD Observation & Debrief Notes | Network Superintendent & Principal |
| Central network team meeting notes | Central Network Team Agendas & Notes | Rotating notetaker at weekly meeting |
| Monthly check-ins with each central partner | 1:1 Monthly Check-In Agendas & Notes | Network Superintendent and respective Central Partners |

(Meyer, 2000, p. 9). In this study, all data was stored in a secure, locked area of the office of the middle school network superintendent. This included the transcription of interviews, observation field notes, and documents collected during the study. Pseudonyms were used for all district, school and classroom participants. IRB approval from East Carolina University (ECU), as well as supervision from my dissertation chair, provided safeguards for the study. Throughout my study I also had an ECU coach, who visited me during the data collection and supported me with the analysis process.

It is also important to note the bias inherent in the role of lead researcher in a participatory action research study. As Creswell (2009) states, “[g]ood qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background, such as their gender, culture, history, and socioeconomic origin” (p. 202). In addition, the role of a participatory researcher requires the naming and recognition of personal values, assumptions and biases at the start of the study (Creswell, 2009).

Study Limitations

While the participatory action research focused on the location-specific research questions articulated earlier in this chapter, we hoped the process and findings would prove useful to others in schools, or school districts, which share similar conditions and who wish to initiate a similar initiative. Although this type of research is not generalizable, it is generated from challenges and issues that many urban schools and school districts face, and therefore will be valuable data. More importantly, the goal of this research was to benefit the specific people and context where the participatory action research took place.

Chapter Summary

Given the importance of engaging stakeholders in the implementation of any educational initiative, this study was appropriately designed as participatory action research. Likewise, positive change and innovation in education happens best when it is iterative and provides space for qualitative data to inform practice in a cycle of inquiry (Spillane & Coldren, 2011). By utilizing observation tools and learning walk protocols that were developed and revised by the co-practitioner researcher team, the data followed the same iterative path. These tools were triangulated with both interviews and memos conducted with participants. Lastly, the trust and relationships that were established already, and continued to develop through the inquiry process, greatly benefited this study's outcomes (Creswell, 2009). The next chapter will summarize and analyze the first action research cycle for this study.

CHAPTER 5: CATCHING A DRIFT

Introduction

Amidst daily school crises and the need to put out proverbial fires in urban public schools, a common challenge faced by school leaders is to develop and see to fruition, coherent and unified instructional foci for their schools (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). While most school leaders realize the importance and value of aligning their school community to a particular instructional focus area in order to facilitate academic progress for their students, the ability to actually implement such a reform effort often proves elusive as schools struggle to collectively rally around a single instructional practice area for improvement. This chapter turns to challenges that a school faces even when they manage to identify and focus on improving an instructional practice. I focus here on how the school that does manage to coalesce around a particular focus area can just as quickly drift off course and get bogged down in competing priorities. The data will show that competing priorities can come either from the district, or from within their own community and that when a school drifts from its stated instructional focus area, professional development and coaching become fragmented and disparate. It becomes difficult for teachers and school leaders to maintain their focus on any one area. At the end of a school year, school leadership and teachers have a hard time naming any school-wide growth, and students, particularly those furthest from success, experience an ever-widening opportunity gap.

Prior to the participatory action research, the school of this study fit the profile of a school challenged to even identify a focus area. Through frequent leadership transitions and staff attrition over the course of many years, the school could not rally around a coherent instructional reform effort. They jumped from one idea to the next, and saw very little change in instruction, or academic growth from year to year. One of the primary goals of the study was to disrupt this

pattern by supporting the school's leadership and central partners to align professional development, coaching, and observation and feedback with a particular instructional practice area, and to *stay focused on that area for the duration of a year* (ideally multiple school years). The theory driving this research was that if the school itself selected the focus area, if they stayed true to their implementation plan, and if they channeled resources and attention to the improvement of their stated instructional practice, then they would see growth in both teaching and learning. The school had not experienced academic growth for many years prior, and thus the opportunity gap for students at the school continued to widen.

The first cycle of the participatory action research lasted from August to January, 2017. During this cycle, the school launched its site-based instructional reform effort, experienced a drift away from their focus area, and then ultimately course-corrected and got back on track. This chapter reflects upon, and analyzes, the first cycle of participatory action research. Extensive qualitative data were collected in order to draw conclusions and make assertions. Table 4 lists the five data sets used for this analysis, organized by the data collected, in what form, and by whom. When analyzed and coded, the notes from these meetings and visits provided a thorough accounting of events during this cycle, the intentional and unintentional actions taken along the way, and the thought processes of the parties engaged in this study.

In order to best analyze the content of these qualitative data sets, I first reviewed over 100 pages of meeting and observation notes and highlighted any point in which there was a relation to the focus of this study. I then reviewed all of the highlighted areas in each data set and created a brief sub-code which summarized the gist of each given highlighted area. I then organized themes and patterns from the sub-code to build four base codes (see Table 5). The coding allowed me to categorize the actions of the various stakeholders, and the implications of those

Table 5

Coding of Data

| Code | Sub-Code | Quantity |
|-------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Alignment Threat & Drift | Central role | 6 |
| | Conferring | 4 |
| | Coherence falters | 3 |
| | Learning theory | 2 |
| | Site coaches by department | 3 |
| | Roots of drift | 6 |
| | Catching Drift: Alignment Acts | Focus on student talk |
| Walkthrough tool | | 5 |
| Central partners/team | | 5 |
| Principal acts | | 3 |
| Structures & systems | | 3 |
| Research on student talk | | 3 |
| Site Team | | 2 |
| Network Superintendent Role | | Learning Theory |
| | Supporting principal growth and development | 5 |
| | Network alignment champion | 6 |
| | Principal coaching | 6 |
| | Relationship development | 3 |
| | Bridget and Buffer | 5 |
| | Principal Role | Teacher Observation/Feedback |
| Building Team | | 2 |
| Role in the Drift | | 6 |
| Modeling discursive protocols | | 1 |

actions. Then, I developed theories and assertions about what occurred in cycle one and the root causes of those occurrences.

The first cycle illuminated how the actions of both central and site-based partners can manifest as either agents of alignment or can foster unintentional misalignment. The next section will describe the course of events which resulted in a drift away from the instructional reform effort.

Coherence Falters, Goal Implementation Goes Astray, Drift Happens

At the start of the 2017-18 school year, the school seemed poised for emerging cohesion in which they “were developing internal accountability, led by a principal with vision and an eye for collective leadership” (Grubb & Tredway, 2010, p. 156). Addressing a common pitfall of reform implementation (Cuban, 1990) the teachers, with the principal, collaboratively decided on an instructional focus, academic discourse and the use of talk protocols as a means of facilitating that talk. The Central Network Team was knowledgeable of, and in agreement with this goal, and was actively supporting the school. Central and site actors appeared to be “on the same page,” and early evidence from a meeting I held with the principal in August, 2017 focused on a discussion of the initial observations in math, science, and humanities classes on academic discourse protocols. However, early in the semester, the focus was derailed, and the implementation seemed to falter. During my regular site visits and observations, it became clear the school was shifting away from academic discussion as their instructional focus. My analysis of the evidence suggests that the school did not stay on course because of two reasons. The first reason was a professional development series from central office offered an alternative path to address what school leadership felt was an urgent need. A central office partner provided a specific strategy in professional development to school coaches aimed at addressing their stated

challenge of low reading levels. This strategy, called conferring, caused the school to detour from their instructional focus on academic discourse. The second reason was the school rationalized this different course of action based on their own analysis of student data and faulty interpretation of learning theory. The drift that ensued was justified by the principal as a preliminary step moving toward academic discourse. There is no blame game here; this instead provides an example of just how challenging it is to stay on course. The course of events highlights the delicate balancing act between trying to maintain an “inside-out” mindset from the teachers and principal to ensure central support is consistent with their goals, while there is a push from “outside-in” of central office supports, based on their expertise and attempts to support a call for help from the school. This next subsection reviews the series of events that led to this temporary drift away from academic discussion as the instructional focus.

Knee-jerk Reaction to New Data

In September, the school’s humanities department, facilitated by the humanities site coach and supported by the principal, began the year by trying to work with the six teachers in that department to identify what aspect of the school-wide focus on academic discussion they would begin with. Initially, they landed on questioning strategies as a common theme; however, when their first cycle of inquiry started in October, they pivoted to the strategy of “conferring” as a pre-strategy to address the extremely low reading levels of their incoming 6th grade class. I was surprised to hear from the principal that her ELA department was going to shift the focus of their first cycle from academic discussion to “conferring” as a reading strategy. This concerned me because of the aforementioned history at the school of not sticking to any one particular instructional strategy, and jumping from one focus to another without staying with a single strategy long enough to see whether it had a positive impact.

What had emerged from the initial administration of the fall reading assessment was that their 6th grade class was entering the school with only 5% of the students reading at or above grade level. To give context, the year prior, 12% of the 6th grade entered reading at grade level or above. Addressing this significantly low percentage of grade level readers immediately became a priority for school leadership (pushing the prior priority of academic discourse into the background). I interrogated the principal about this shift to the practice of conferring, to try to discern what had precipitated the change in direction. She referenced the extremely low reading scores in the fall and that the new ELA site coach had advocated strongly for this focus on conferring.

Misinterpreting Learning Theory

The question of how to address below grade level reading levels was a challenge not unique to this school. In fact, how to support teachers to use rigorous, grade level text while addressing the large number of struggling readers in their classrooms had been an ongoing debate amongst principals of the Middle School Network. Principals no doubt felt pressure from their teachers who expressed this challenge, and a feeling of not being able to teach to the rigor of the newly adopted English language arts curriculum while there were so many students struggling to access the text. This resulted in pushback from teachers, and subsequently from principals, when encouraged to increase the amount and quality of academic discourse in the classroom. As one principal stated in a professional learning session, “I can’t focus on academic discourse when what is at the forefront is the fact that I just need my students to be able to read” (Researcher Note, October 5, 2017).

Ironically, Mehan and Cazden (2015) demonstrate that academic discourse serves two purposes: (1) student talk done well is arguably the best vehicle to support student access to

complex, grade level text, and (2) student talk provides the unique opportunity to engage in grade level cognitive thinking even when a student cannot yet read at grade level. Vygotsky (1978) made a strong argument for the connection between student talk and student thinking. He developed the idea of the zone of proximal development to articulate the optimal space for learning; the sweet spot between what students already know and what they can learn. Vygotsky intended this to be in reference to cognition and critical thinking, not in relation to skill building such as reading fluency. As Piaget and Inhelder (1969) indicated, by middle school, students are beyond the concrete thinking level and approaching the formal operations level.

Thus, there seemed to be a major misunderstanding of learning theory in the work at the school during the first cycle of this study. In general, teachers, coaches, and the principal wrongly concluded that students needed to read text with fluency before they could think (and discuss) critically about text. They selected the strategy of conferring to address this perceived need for students to first read text with fluency before thinking critically about it. This was problematic because it made an incorrect assumption that reading fluency was a precursor to critical thinking, rather than a more accurate understanding of critical thinking through academic discourse actually promoting student access to complex, grade level text. In a study of academic discourse in middle school math and science classes, Adey and Shayer (1990) based their theory of cognitive acceleration for those students who seem to “be behind” on three core principles: conflict challenge to promote the movement from concrete to formal operations, social construction of knowledge by maintaining student dialogue with partners and with the class, and an emphasis on metacognition – how do you come to know what you know? The intervention in the use of structuring careful academic tasks (Cuero, 2008) or setting up cognitive conflict

(Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) along with preparing carefully how to engage students in dialogue actually supports stronger performance in science and math outcomes.

While reading at grade level and reading text in English at grade level are two important areas of focus, hinging academic discourse on reading ability is counter to what we know about language acquisition and discourse. We often ignore the cognitive levels of students and focus on reading Lexile levels of students, which in turn tends to treat the student only at skill level instead of taking into account the importance of the cognitive. Two research findings are important here: (1) “For most teachers, implementing productive discussions requires not only a substantial change in their discourse practices but also a shift in their knowledge and beliefs about teaching” (Wilkinson, Murphy & Binici, 2015, p. 45), and (2) effective classroom talk (rather than the typical classroom talk we are accustomed to) actually promotes reading comprehension when teachers shift the way they ask questions and authorize multiple responses (Greeno, 2015; McKeown & Beck, 2015).

Impact and Influence of Central Office Partners

While I had been made aware by the principal of this shift to conferring, I was not entirely clear on where this idea had come from, how the shift occurred so quickly, and how it happened right under my own nose. It was only when speaking with a central partner during our monthly 1:1 check-in that I learned the origin of the focus on conferring was the centrally-led professional development for school coaches. As stated in the notes from the meeting (Meeting Notes, October 10, 2017), we discussed the shift of focus of the school’s humanities team from academic discourse to conferring. The content specialist specifically working with the school shared that the site coach had gleaned the idea to use conferring from a PD series for coaches

which the central department of English Language Arts (ELA) organized in the first part of the school year. This was a major “aha” for me.

What I had discovered was the strategy of conferring was introduced by the district level ELA coordinator in a professional development session for site-based coaches. When I looped back to the ELA coordinator about this, she explained that the mini-series was in response to principal and site-based coach concerns about how to address the needs of students reading multiple years below grade level while implementing the English curriculum (a curriculum which uses grade level text). The district ELA coordinator presented “conferring” as one manner in which teachers could support their students while continuing to teach the grade level curriculum. Evidently, the central ELA department had offered this professional development theme as a structure for coaches to introduce to their teachers. In other words, the ELA member of my very own Central Network Team had introduced this focus to the coaches in the fall, and it had contributed to the ELA site coach shifting focus and proposing to her principal that they pivot to this, rather than continue with the focus on academic discussion they originally embarked upon. The site coach at the school, who was new to her site team and looking for a good entry point, picked this up. To me this is an example of central partners acting with good intentions to be responsive, but not seeing the potential negative ramifications that would lead to a derailing of the site’s focus.

A Shifting Focus of the Professional Learning Community

I observed the initial site-based professional learning community session (PLC) when the principal reviewed student reading data with the department. In collaboration with her new humanities focused school coach, the principal had built a rationale for why it was important to first focus on conferring as a pre-strategy before embarking on the original focus of student

academic discussion. In the PLC session, she hoped to convince the teachers that this was a good course of action to follow. In the session, one teacher suggested looking at the strategies that the two reading intervention teachers were using as models for what they could do in their own classrooms. Another teacher raised the challenge of teaching the ELA curriculum using grade level text while so many of their students were still far below grade level (PD Observation Notes, October 4, 2017).

As I reviewed the qualitative data from this PLC session, I realized there was a missed opportunity at that moment to dive deeper into the literature to validate why their original stated focus area of academic discussion was also an appropriate way to address this perceived challenge of students reading multiple years below grade level. This could have been the moment to use the pre-existing research to solidify the importance of academic discourse to support students to access grade level text. Unfortunately, the principal and site-based coach were already set on a different direction; conferring. Ultimately the group agreed to focus on conferring as a way to identify individual student needs related to reading.

School level acquiescence. In a form of street level bureaucracy in which the public servants on the ground make decisions that they think are the right decisions and act autonomously (Lipsky, 2010), the principal justified the move toward conferring as a step toward academic discourse. She viewed conferring as a prerequisite for engaging in academic discourse because the reading abilities of 6th grade students were not strong. She indicated in a meeting that this was a way “to start teaching the pre-skills necessary so that group work can happen- as well as teaching reading strategies- that would be done during conferring” (Meeting Notes, October 10, 2017). She said in this same meeting that this was not the “end goal, but a stepping stone to get to the next piece.” The tracking of how this unraveled was evident in the meeting

notes, where the principal stated, “Humanities [has] taken a step back, or pre-step to focus on how to confer with kids and progress monitoring first. Do we know what is happening with the individual prior to putting them into a group, especially in humanities? This is a way to start teaching the pre-skills necessary so that group work can happen, as well as teaching reading strategies. That will be done during conferring” (Running Notes, October 17, 2017).

There were other indications that the drift was happening, but it was rationalized as an attempt to prepare students for academic discourse. In addition, while teams were still meeting in professional learning communities to plan instruction, that did not focus on academic discourse, but on how to arrange groups for effective conferring. And while the principal was observing the practice of every teacher regularly, she reported that she did not have time to debrief with each of them. To a large degree, that admission does not comport with what we know about effective observation – there must be a time to talk to individual teachers and to use the evidence from classrooms to determine professional learning opportunities. Otherwise, observations by themselves do not lead to change, which is further discussed below in teacher transfer (Grissom et al., 2013).

The school’s inquiry plan for how they would narrow their focus during a two-month cycle (October 2017-November 2017) highlighted two strategies: Conferring (required) & Instructional Read-aloud (optional). On the Inquiry Plan document, they identified five focal students per teacher for special targeted support. Their student-learning goal for the six to eight week cycle was, “Each focal student grows by at least 1 letter. Improved reading inventory ratings.” To achieve this goal, they proposed that twice a week, teachers would provide reading mini-lessons that “address a purpose for reading.” Teachers would guide students to independent leveled sustained silent reading for 30 minutes and confer with three to five students. They

identified three narrow and feasible leadership practices to support this focus; facilitation of teacher PLCs, modeling of strategies, and push-in side-by-side coaching. They hypothesized that this strategy would “help all teachers in both supporting students in doing the ‘heavy lifting,’ and providing the explicit teaching of reading that is needed for a balanced literacy program” (Site Visit Notes, 2018). Their final reflection of the fall cycle was, “We will continue this cycle through December, although data may shift for individual teachers. We will plan whole site PD to reflect site academic goals (e.g. fortifying language output and communication/collaboration structures). The next cycle of inquiry for our humanities PLC will focus on how strategic academic discussion structures (utilizing an academic discussion rubric) can support student output (in writing)” (Site Visit notes, 2018).

Learning walks to measure progress. In addition to supporting their instructional focus through professional learning on Wednesday afternoons, the school instructional leadership team developed a tool to measure progress during their humanities learning walk. The learning walk tool included four sections: mini-lesson, independent reading, conferring and academic discussion. When the team conducted their learning walks, three observations emerged. The first was that conferring is not a strategy that is conducive to being observed during a learning walk. We witnessed conferring happening in one of the classrooms that we observed; however, even in this classroom, it was very difficult for the learning walk team to glean insights from the observation that could inform next steps for coaching of the teacher or inform professional learning that might be useful to the teacher. This was clearly not a strategy to focus on during a learning walk. The second observation was specifically related to academic discussion at the site. Overall, academic discussions in the classrooms we observed fell into the “emerging” category on the learning walk tool.

Although “drift happened” and the site strayed from their stated instructional plan of developing strong structures and practices for academic discussion in the classroom, fortunately the drift was temporary. The school was able to get back on track and move forward with their focus on academic discussion. This is not always the case with the instructional trajectory of a school. Schools can easily fail to realize they are off track or that they have diverged from their stated focus. Some schools struggle to get clear on their instructional focus in the first place. In these cases, teachers may never know what the schools’ instructional focus for the year is, and what instructional strategies they should be prioritizing in order to improve their own practice and the overall student experience. In those situations, teachers are out on their own, adrift, without any clear direction from their school’s leadership and leadership team. Teachers in these situations often express experiencing professional learning as a series of disconnected “one-offs” that do not seem to go anywhere nor appear to have any relation to what is happening in their particular classroom. In settings like that, the ability of the school to move forward and collectively improve outcomes for students becomes negligible (Blasé & Blasé, 1999, Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Brayman, & White, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Unfortunately, these conditions are more prevalent in schools attempting to serve traditionally underserved communities (Cotton, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). In the case of this study, the school leaders and central partners were able to catch the drift and to take corrective actions to get the school back on track with its instructional priorities. This next section analyzes the two fundamental aspects of how the drift was caught and how the course correction occurred.

Forces and Factors to Maintain Focus and Catch the Drift

Important factors promoted alignment and coherence from the get-go. And yet, despite the optimal conditions, a drift occurred away from the instructional focus early in the year. Fortunately, that drift was caught, and the school was able to get back on track with their original instructional reform effort. In this section, I assert that this cycle was ultimately successful because of both the pre-work to align the work and the “during cycle” actions which allowed for course correction.

The first part of this section highlights those key components of alignment that were established in advance to create ripe conditions for implementation of the coherent site-based initiative. The second part of this section discusses the “during cycle” actions which contributed to the school getting back on track when they drifted from their original reform effort.

Conditions ripe at site. In many ways, the conditions for positively implementing a site-based focus on academic discussion could not have been better. The school used the spring of the previous year to identify this focus, and built the focus into their school site plan, which they had engaged their community in developing.

In the year prior to this study, the principal struggled to develop a strong instructional team due to a significant number of staff who were out on personal leave during the year (including six key staff members on maternity leave). This resulted in the principal having to take up a great deal of discipline and culture work, making it difficult to focus herself, and her team, on the instructional work. Being fully staffed and having the right people on the team are two important pre-conditions to establishing a strong instructional leadership team which could meet weekly to drive the instructional work. Fortunately, at the start of the year in which this cycle began, the principal had taken the necessary steps to put in place a team with the capacity

and stability to focus on instruction. The site strengthened their leadership team by moving their former site-based coach into their newly vacant assistant principal position, and hiring a new coach focused on humanities to collaborate with their math-focused coach (having both a math and a humanities coach on-site represented the highest level of coaching support the district provides).

A high capacity central office department established a partnership with the school to be one of their high priority “focus schools.” This meant that the school would receive regular, weekly support from a skilled content specialist to drive professional learning and assist the leadership team to lead this initiative. We further identified a process goal of engaging in cycles of inquiry to inform teaching practice. Within this domain, the school collectively identified academic discussion as the focus for their professional learning this year.

Using adult learning spaces to align and cohere. A second contributing factor to the conditions at the site was the principal’s participation in professional learning. New in the middle school network plan for school year 2017-18 was that principals came to the bi-monthly principal professional learning meeting with their content lead (site-based coach) as a thought partner. Without a site thought partner at these professional learning sessions prior, we found that principals had been in the position of constantly making meaning and then trying to translate the learning from the session to their leadership team back at their sites. Likewise, principals often expressed that they struggled to use the professional learning time to effectively plan in the absence of an instructional thought partner from the site to share the responsibility of implementation. By coming to these spaces with one’s site-based coach as a thought partner, our hope was to increase the value of these adult learning spaces to align and build coherence around particular focus areas. Another intentional act of alignment was to assign a specific central

partner to be the direct support for the school of this study (more on this later in this section). This central partner had expertise and skill sets in the particular area which the school was focused. We strategically planned for that same central partner to collaborate and plan with the school team at each central professional learning session, in order to further develop the coherence and alignment of the central support to the school. This intentionality came out of prior feedback from the school principals that it was frustrating to work with a different central partner at each professional learning session, and therefore always having to spend time catching the central partner up on the work and progress of the school. Therefore, at each principal professional learning session, there was the principal, the site-based coach, and the central partner assigned to support that particular school.

“Focus school” model. During the late spring of the prior year, the central department focused on supporting English language learners invited the school to be a “focus school” for 2017-18. This meant the school was eligible to receive intensive support with developing language and literacy for their large English language learner population. For this reason, assigning the central partner from that department to support the site coach who is focused on humanities, and language learners, intentionally aligned with the partnership between the school and central department. Likewise, the school’s instructional focus on academic discussion was synchronous with that particular department’s focus on language development. Since that central department was specifically targeting the school as one of their “focus schools” that year, it meant the school received more intensive support from that department to best serve their English language learners (of whom 68% of the school’s student body was composed).

During Cycle Actions

During the first cycle, two areas were instrumental in ensuring site level work. First was the coordination between central office and the school. Secondly, walkthroughs for calibration were a constant feature of our work together and the site level work.

1:1 monthly coordination. Because of this partnership agreement between the school and the department, my 1:1 monthly check in meetings with that department specifically discussed how this school was progressing in its goals, what supports were being provided, and how we could coordinate our support between principal, coaches, and teachers. Likewise, my other 1:1 meetings with central network team members were organized to talk about specific support for the school, teachers, coaches, and principal.

With the teacher evaluation coordinator, I checked in about how the principal and assistant principal's evaluations of teachers were progressing, what support they needed and how the partner could deliver that support. Likewise, with the central English language arts and math coordinators, I discussed how the implementation of curriculum was progressing, which teachers were struggling or showing growth in their practice, and what supports for professional learning were being provided to the site. We also discussed the support for the on-sight coaches in both math and English Language Arts (ELA). These regular 1:1 meetings provided an important space to align central efforts in support of the school.

Walkthroughs to identify needs and measure growth. As part of our network's fall ELA cycle of inquiry, we also engaged in learning walks, where pairs of school leaders visited each other's schools accompanied by their site-based coaches. The purpose was to walk through ELA classrooms to look for evidence of both academic discussion (the focus of the middle school network) and an additional focal area specifically generated by the site. In some cases, the

site focus was the same as the network focus (as was the case for the school of this study). These walks were led and facilitated by the site principal and site-based coach, and attended by a central partner (such as the ELA coordinator or myself), and the partner school's principal and coach. We intentionally turned over the facilitation of these walks to the sites, to build their muscle to conduct learning walks on a more frequent basis in order to inform professional development and coaching of teachers. We modeled this, and supported site teams to develop their own learning walk tool, which was to include both site-based criteria, as well as the academic discussion criteria. Not only did these walks create a space for central and site-based leaders to align around a specific instructional practice, but they also provided an opportunity to monitor the progress of the stated reform effort.

I have identified the conditions and the ongoing during cycle supports we provided that actually supported our theory of action about how to achieve transfer, which I describe next.

Theory of Action for Transfer and Application to Mirror Input

Overall, support for the school, school leaders, and teachers for this cycle was based on the following theory of action:

- *If* principals provide consistent, focused feedback to teachers, and
- *if* coaching support is coordinated and aligned to that same focus, and
- *if* both of these actions inform coherent professional development and professional learning community work,
- *then* we will see a transfer to teacher practice, which will result in a positive change in student outcomes (Grissolm et al., 2013).

Conversely, if the inputs (modeling, professional learning, observation and feedback, and coaching) stated in the proposition did not occur in an aligned and coherent fashion, we expected

to see a limited transfer to the classroom, or at best, a transfer that mirrored the degree to which the inputs were implemented coherently (Elmore, 2002). The transfer mirror in this case would depict a transfer gap. By being public and transparent with central and school-based leaders about this theory of action, the goal was to build a stronger purpose and rationale for the actions of all stakeholders in support of the reform effort.

Principal Reinforces Instructional Priority Area

Next, I interrogate the critical role of the principal in building the conditions for alignment and coherence of the instructional focus at the site. What emerged from the cycle was the imperative actions of the principal to support and reinforce the instructional focus through a few key channels. As stated in the theory of action, these channels included observation and feedback cycles, supporting site-based coaches to support teachers, and modeling good instructional practice in professional learning spaces to reinforce the academic discussion protocols and structures for teachers to implement in their classrooms. The sub-sections below delve deeper into each of these channels the principal took to enact the theory of action stated above.

Observation and feedback. With strong staff members in key positions for this year, the principal was eager to focus her own professional growth on building and leading school teams, and on observation and feedback to teachers. Additional support for the latter focus area came in the form of a four-day workshop by an external organization focused on providing quality observations and feedback to teachers and reframing the use of data conferencing to focus on the alignment of student work to grade level common core standards. The training was conducted in two parts: two days in July and two days in September. The Middle School Network paid for the cost of the principal and either an assistant principal or site-based coach to attend. In the case of

the school in this study, both the principal and assistant principal participated. As Network Superintendent, I attended as well. This was to be the basis upon which we followed up with both principal professional learning and site coaching of principals throughout the year. This next subsection shares the challenges and successes the principal had in implementing the techniques and strategies of this training.

Challenges of principal observation and feedback. Grissom et al. (2013) contend that walkthroughs and classroom observations by school leadership can only be a powerful tool to changing teacher practice if they are followed by direct feedback and debrief with the corresponding teacher. For the first couple of months of the 2017-18 school year, the principal observed classrooms in accordance with the summer training, but she reported struggling to find the time to offer face-to-face feedback to teachers on what she observed in their classrooms. In my meeting with her, she shared this challenge, and agreed to accept my help to construct a month-long observation and feedback schedule that calendared both the classroom observation and the post-observation debrief session with each teacher (Site Visit Meeting Notes, 10/14/17). This is consistent with the Relay Training and the Leverage Leadership model (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2016) of instructional leadership that we used as a basis for how principals act as instructional leaders in support of classroom instruction. Once the principal and I had co-constructed the observation and feedback calendar for the months of November, 2017 and December, 2017, the principal was able to consistently make academic discussion a focus of her observations and feedback with teachers. In October, she conducted eighteen of 26 observations, and completed only nine of eighteen debriefs with the teacher. In November and December, once we created an achievable schedule of regular observation and feedback, she was able to complete 27 out of 27 classroom observations and 26 debrief sessions with teachers (Principal's

Observation Schedule Document, November 2017-December 2017). The development and implementation of a consistent observation and debrief schedule allowed for the principal to align her direct feedback to teachers to the school's instructional focus area.

Aligning school and network foci and metrics. Part of identifying academic discussion as the instructional priority area for the network came from reviewing the data from the teacher growth and evaluation system. When the principal ratings of teacher domains were aggregated for the prior year, domain three of the District educator effectiveness evaluation framework emerged as one of the weakest areas of the framework for middle school teachers. This confirmed what school leaders and central partners noticed during learning walks conducted the prior year. One of the weakest areas across all schools was domain three. Domain three included:

- Establishing a clear purpose for learning (3A)
- Engaging students in meaningful tasks (3B).
- Fostering communication & collaboration skills (3C).
- Monitoring student progress towards mastery (3D).

Of these four areas within the domain, 3B and 3C were rated the lowest. These two areas clearly emphasize student academic discourse as critical to pushing student thinking and lifting student voice. In the spring of the year prior to this study, the Central Network Team shared these data with the principals as a rationale and guide for helping to identify an instructional focus area for the upcoming school year that would be relevant to the needs of each school. While some principals chose to go in a different direction with their schools' instructional focus areas, the principal in this study intentionally decided to align her own school's instructional priority area to that of the middle school network. Her data from the prior year's teacher growth and development evaluation system had mirrored the overall data of the middle school network.

In addition, the preliminary learning walks and classroom observations at the beginning of the school year confirmed the need to improve the quality and quantity of student talk in the classroom. For these reasons, she and her team adopted academic discussion as their instructional focus area for the year. The principal showed a high degree of alignment muscle by intentionally aligning her school's instructional focus to that of the whole middle school network, to the language and data from the teacher growth and development system, and to what emerged from learning walk data. In debriefing this with her, she stated that in aligning her school's focus to these aspects of the larger system, her hope was to better maximize and leverage the professional learning time, as well as the resources and supports of the district, in support of her site-based initiative. Furthermore, the network process modeled for the principal a way of engaging her teachers in using qualitative data to inform the selection of an instructional focus area. This awareness of the importance and value of alignment on the part of the principal was a critical component of what ultimately led to a change in teacher practice and student learning.

Keeping it alive: Modeling protocols and discourse structure. Section one of this chapter illuminated how, despite the conditions being ripe for an aligned and concerted focus on supporting student talk structures in the classroom, the school drifted away from the focus on academic discussion in the fall semester. Despite this drift, there were a series of actions taken by the principal that kept the focus on academic discussion alive and promoted the use of such strategies and structures in the classroom. I assert that these actions positively contributed to an attempt at implementing talk structures with five out of the six humanities teachers at the school (Site Visit Meeting Notes, September 2017-December 2017).

First, the principal consistently modeled the use of talk structures and protocols in weekly professional development sessions, regardless of the topic of the professional development on any given day. As part of my site visit schedule, I visited Wednesday professional development three times during the fall semester. On all three occasions, the principal modeled academic discussion by integrating different protocols into the topic for that session. She had teachers use the structure with each other, and then she debriefed the content and the process of the discussion afterward. She also consistently referred back to materials and resources where talk protocols and structures could be accessed for teachers to use in their own classrooms with their students (Site Visit Meeting Notes, September 2017-December 2017).

This subsection shared the intentional actions taken both the year prior and at the inception of the fall semester, to establish conditions of alignment in order for the school to successfully implement an instructional focus area which would transform teaching practice, and positively impact student learning. While the establishment of these conditions ultimately had a positive impact on teaching and learning, they were not sufficient enough to avoid the faltering of this coherent vision and a drift away from the stated instructional focus. The next subsection looks at how the school leaders, in partnership with central partners, were able to catch the drift and course correct.

Catching the Drift

One benefit to a cycle of inquiry process is the awareness and attention that it allows stakeholders to apply to their work. It was the observations and reflection themselves that allow for course correction and growth. In addition, I assert that the relationships, transparency, and trust developed between school and central leaders are critical activators of growth and development. Next, I discuss both factors in more depth.

Although the structures and systems put in place were not sufficient to stop a drift from happening away from academic discussion, those same established structures and systems did help to catch the drift when the process got off track and allowed central and school actors to name it and “right the ship.” In the past, getting off track might not have even been noticed or corrected. The significance of this was the establishment of safety nets in our structures.

Although all stakeholders were not yet perfectly aligned, our systems and structures enabled us to correct when things went astray. These corrections can only happen when we observe the misalignment, and the stakeholders are in strong enough relationships whereby there is trust to reflect and discuss when this phenomenon of misalignment occurs.

Here, I make two key assertions, using evidence from cycle one. First, I assert that my concerted focus on building relationships across central partners and between central partners and school leader was insufficient to avoid a misalignment of support and derailing of focus; however, it did enable me to catch misaligned actions after the fact and take measures to correct them through dialogue and transparency with the various actors. Lastly, I predict that, over time, these structures and relationships will bear fruit as our system of aligned support iterates and improves. To explore these two phenomena, I use minutes from the weekly Central Network Team meetings, notes from site visits with the principal, and notes from the 1:1 monthly meetings with central partners who supported the site.

Components of relationship building with school leaders. Just as the principal acts as an instructional leader at the site in support of teachers, the principal supervisor models this same function for principals (Honig, 2014). The role of the principal supervisor is fundamentally to support the professional growth of the principal, and to act as “bridge and buffer” between the school site and central office (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015; Honig, 2014). I

worked with the principal at the school of study for two years, and, during that time, I visited the site and met with her biweekly. First and foremost, I saw myself as an advocate and champion for her and the school. So often principals see misaligned central office staff as wanting something from them rather than as a support who brings value to their site. As a former teacher and principal, I held the perspective that the role of the central office was to be in service of the school, versus schools being in service of central office. While this may seem obvious, central office partners do not always have this perspective, and particularly when they themselves have not worked at a site (nor been a principal). Since a precious commodity to a principal is time, I strove to be available, and be an added value to her work. That took the form of directing resources to her school, and simply brainstorming solutions to challenges she faced. As indicated in section one, at the beginning of the year, I co-created agreements with the principal about how we would work together. This included how we would communicate best, how we wanted to receive difficult information and hard feedback, and how we built trust. This became the foundation for our work together and something we could refer back to periodically when having difficult conversations or under stressful situations. I carefully built a relationship with the principal of this study over two years. This relationship became the backbone of conversations we were then able to have about her decisions and performance. Because of these established norms and ways of interacting, the partnership with the principal had a high degree of transparency. An example of this was the goal-setting session at the beginning of the school year.

Alignment of leadership goal setting. In October, 2017, when I met with the principal to establish her professional goals for the year as a part of her leadership growth and development process, I was interested in aligning the leader's professional goals to the school's priorities and focus areas for the year. She and I sought to ensure synchronicity by aligning her

own professional learning goals in the leadership growth and development system to the school's focus on academic discussion. Together, we identified two leadership areas based on the current context of the school, its priorities, and the principal's own growth areas based on this context.

Her first goal was:

I will build the capacity of the teams to share responsibility for leadership toward the shared vision. Specifically, I will:

- Co-develop team processes that support team development.
- Effectively manage the team and ensure alignment of team goals
- Monitor and support teams to assess and revise structures to engage in effective collaboration.
- Meet regularly with team and one on one to 'leverage the levers,' and move from doing it, to doing it well. (Site Visit Notes, 2017)

Her second goal was:

I will build capacity of teachers and coaches to focus on the Instructional Core, the relationship between their practice, each student, and the content, providing meaningful feedback to coaches and teachers that strengthens capacity for more effective coaching, greater reflection, and self-reliance in making improvements in classroom teaching and student learning. Specifically, I will:

- Monitor that coaches are doing observation and feedback on a weekly basis.
- Get to every single teacher once a month and provide feedback to both coach and teacher on what we want to see progress on. (Site Visit Notes, 2017)

In the goal setting meeting, she was honest about the fact that, while she had been getting in classes to observe teachers, she was struggling to give face-to-face feedback to teachers in a

timely fashion. This is a common challenge for administrators who have difficulty in arranging classroom observations on a regular basis, but then find it even harder to debrief with the teacher afterwards. Grissom et al. (2013) identified in their comprehensive study of the leadership actions that impact instruction and student outcomes that learning walks and observation have little to no impact on instruction nor student learning unless the principal sets up coaching conversations with the teachers and uses the aggregate information from observations to design professional development for teachers. Numerous additional studies indicate that without this feedback loop, the impact of classroom observation in actually changing instructional practice is negligible, however when feedback is administered on a regular basis and is also used to inform professional development, observation and feedback can be the most significant factor in positively impacting instructional practice (Acheson & Gall, 1992; Saphier et al., 2008). Through dialogue with the principal at the school, she and I were able to identify this as a growth area in her own practice and set a goal for regular observation and feedback to every one of her teachers (Site Visit Notes, 2018).

Leadership Coaching, Models and Methodology

One of the pivotal moments of cycle one came when the principal decided to support the humanities site coach to diverge from the focused path of academic discussion to one of conferring in order to attempt to address the low literacy levels of the student body. In that moment, I faced a decision about how to approach my own coaching of the principal. In the blended coaching model, the coach (in this case myself) is authorized to vary their coaching stance according to the situation and context of the moment, as well as the development of the coachee (Bloom, 2009). In this situation, cognitive coaching, whereby knowledge is co-constructed, played a role. My judgment was the principal and humanities coach would learn

more from consciously diverging from their stated focus and realizing the negative impact of that divergence, rather than having someone tell them they could not do it, and then end up resenting the fact that they were not being allowed to follow their instincts. Key to this decision was what Aguilar (2013) names as three important components of facilitative coaching: (1) start with core values; (2) take the time to build trust; and (3) lead with listening. In this case, I made a conscious decision to lead by listening and posing questions to surface the rationale the principal had in diverging from the school's focus area. By interrogating the decision, I was also clear to state my own concerns about this divergence and my reasons why I felt this was not a good idea. This created a reflective space she and I were able to return to afterwards, which helped to inform the learning.

What was missing from my coaching stance was actually looping back to the research to expose the misunderstanding that the principal and coach had in that moment about a student's ability to engage in a high level of cognitive discussion despite not yet reading at grade level. While my own research and experience led me to believe in the efficacy of academic discourse to support students to engage critical thinking about a grade level text, I failed in that moment to create a space where we could unpack the research on this topic and recognize the misunderstanding the principal and coach had in relation to what would best support students literacy development and cognitive thinking in that moment. I saw my role as pushing on her thinking and interrogating this change in plans by probing with questions. I also expressed my concern about shifting of focus, but I intentionally chose not to take a directive approach (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2004). While I was clear with her about how this felt like an example of getting off track, I did not feel that directing her to abandon her plan would have resulted in refocusing on academic discussion. Instead, it felt like it was important to name for

her what I saw happening; at that point it seemed as if she needed support to be as solid as possible with her staff about the rationale for the shift and how it fit into the year's trajectory of professional learning. What I focused on was the risk of getting off track from academic discussion; however, in retrospect I wish that I had dug deeper into the belief system that was manifesting itself in the decision to focus on conferring. This gets to an equity question about what people fundamentally believe about the capabilities of their students. If we are to expect students to engage in academic discussions to push their critical thinking, we must first believe students are capable of doing so, regardless of their reading levels. This is an example of what Rigby and Tredway (2015) call "showing up for equity" (p. 5). In this case, what I failed to do in the moment was identify and name the equity trap, which could have dramatically changed the way teachers and principals talked about students and built equitable access to rigorous curriculum.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Schools often set out on a voyage of instructional reform (or in some cases never even leave the dock), but once out of port they run the risk of drifting off course. They get distracted and end up chasing a separate instructional shiny object or urgent crisis. The drift never ends well, partly because the infrastructure is not set up, and there were no plans nor preparation for the journey. Such a large ship as a school cannot successfully change course that fast. This chapter was about when one such phenomenon occurred, how it happened, and what it took to course correct and get the ship back its instructional reform path. The chapter was not only a cautionary tale, but also an advice column for how to stay on course and how to course correct when the instructional ship does go astray and drift.

Cycle one of the participatory action research study illustrated how delicate and challenging it is for a large urban district system to effectively support a school-based instructional initiative to fruition. Key to effective support from district level to school, and likewise from school leadership to classroom teacher, are the conscious and ongoing efforts towards alignment and coherence. Because a system is made up of so many moving people and parts, aligning is more than just a structural change. It requires a metacognitive awareness and an adaptive mindset on the part of teams, and the individuals who make up those teams. There must be a commitment to working towards that greater good, which in turn requires the stakeholders involved to truly believe in the importance and intrinsic value of coordinated and collaborative efforts necessary to change teaching practice and transform outcomes for students. When people go it alone (or refuse to make the difficult commitment to whole school reform) then ultimately the students and families lose. Likewise, in order to have impact, the central partner must consider the unintended consequences of any given actions and be ever vigilant for how the best of intentions can manifest in misalignment or drift. Fortunately, what emerged from this cycle of the study was the realization that alignment is a muscle that can be developed and constantly strengthened. And while it is imperative to put in place alignment and coherence pre-conditions, ultimately what is going to catch drift when it happens is going to be the level of transparency, reflection, and metacognition necessary when engaging in a cycle of inquiry. Furthermore, such reflective practices can only happen when there are trusting relationships developed to hold that collaborative space.

CHAPTER 6: CENTRAL OFFICE

Introduction

In my former work as both a school leader and now as a district leader, I have experienced the frustrations of both school and central office agents. As a school leader, my staff and I frequently expressed frustration with the stream of seemingly disconnected compliance-driven mandates from “the district” that were meant to hold us accountable to a narrow definition of student learning. We felt overwhelmed and confused by seemingly conflicting mandates because they were rarely accompanied by the support we desired and they did not feel in line with our school level goals and priorities. From our perspective, central office impeded, rather than supported the work that we felt important and aligned with our school vision.

When I transferred from the role of school leader to that of district leader, was that “the district,” I realized that the district was perceived as a monolith. However, the district is actually made up of many disparate departments, each with their own agendas, priorities, and visions of how to provide support to school sites. I also realized that “the district” is not a separate entity from school sites, and is actually comprised of both central office and schools. We are all “the district.” For that reason, I will continue to make a distinction in this chapter between the district and central office. I define the district as the larger entity comprised of both schools and central office departments. I define the central office as comprised of departments and agents who do not operate directly at a school site, but are charged with supporting school sites.

When I transferred to the central office, I saw firsthand how the central office struggles with its own issues of alignment and coherence across departments. This lack of alignment and cohesiveness across departments in central office is experienced by schools as conflicting messages, a lack of coherent support and as mandates unaligned with their school level vision.

This experience with the central office leads to a lack of trust in the central office's ability to support the school site. Thus, even when the central office has strong, relevant and targeted support to offer, school sites may not trust the support. For the central office to be effective, it must be predicated on a positive, trusting relationship with school sites based on a collectively shared vision and goals for changing student outcomes. Central office must send consistent, aligned and coherent messages to schools. The chapter explores how and to what outcome central office level actors in this study were able to build such relationships and send consistent, aligned and coherent messages to school sites. During the second cycle of the research, I looked at how two different central office level entities were able to provide effective support to a school site.

The first central office entity that I explore is that of the *central office partner* (or central partner). The central partner is a professional at the central office level who is assigned to work closely with a school site to support the school site in implementing a school level reform. In this chapter, I show how one such central partner increased her ability to be relevant to, have legitimacy in, and provide support to the school site. What emerges from my analysis is the concept of embeddedness. Through an analysis of multiple sources of data, I explore the conditions necessary for embeddedness to occur, define and describe what thorough embeddedness looks like, describe challenges to embeddedness and then conclude with the outcomes and possibilities created when a central partner fully embedded herself at a site. I find that embeddedness is critical to establishing the positive and trusting relationship necessary for a central office to be effective in its support of a site-based instructional initiative.

The second central office entity that I look at is the *central network team*. The central network team is comprised of central office representatives from different departments. This

team works together to determine how it can interact with the school site with a unified voice. The central network team was designed in response to complaints about inconsistent and conflicting messages being sent from different central departments to schools. In this chapter, I share how the development of this central network team created alignment in its messages in order to provide coherent and aligned support to the school site. I show how the team increased its relevancy, legitimacy, and ability to support schools when its members congealed as a team, delivering consistent messages to the school and interacting with the school in a way that showed the members were aligned in their vision for school level support. This section illustrates the need for a central office to develop a unified approach to working with schools, how a central network team developed to provide this organizational structure, and how this structure was implemented to best support a school. I explore the concept of the central network team as a “net to catch and hold” issues of alignment and coherence in order to actualize effective support for school sites. I share how the central network team developed over time and how its team members become *agents of alignment* in support of school and network initiatives. I also look at the structures and systems that supported the team to become better aligned in its work.

Proximity to Work and People: How Central Partners Are Most Effective

In this section, I examine how a central partner built a trusting relationship with the focus school of this study, a relationship that allowed her to successfully work with the school leader, the school leadership team and the instructional coaches at the school to support positive change and the implementation of the reform. I outline the conditions and actions which enabled this supportive partnership to grow and flourish. While the relationship was not without its bumps and dips, in the course of this study it emerged as one which all parties agreed was uniquely

fruitful and supportive, and set the conditions that enabled the school to get traction in their instructional focus area of improving student talk in the classroom.

What emerged from the analysis of this relationship was a concept I call embeddedness. I show how the success of this partnership was influenced by the degree to which embeddedness occurred. When the central partner was embedded in the fabric of the school, her credibility significantly increased in the eyes of school leadership, trust developed, and the central partner was well positioned to affect change that enabled implementation of the reform. Likewise, when the central partner was truly embedded at the site, she was able to better understand the context of the school, its needs, and its vision for change. I start this section by exploring the preconditions that enabled the central partner to make herself relevant to, legitimate in the eyes of, and supportive of the school site.

Preconditions for the Partnership

The success of the partnership between the central partner and the school site of the PAR study was predicated on a number of factors that preceded the start of the relationship. Before the central partner even initiated contact with the school site, a series of steps were followed that ultimately supported the partnership's success. Through an analysis of data from monthly meetings between myself and the central partner, there emerged three pre-conditions which facilitated a successful partnership. First, there was a deliberate and thoughtful selection of "just the right number" of schools that demonstrated both the need and the capacity to partner. Second, participation by the schools was voluntary and was encouraged only if the central support matched the direction and vision of the school. Finally, the central partner clearly articulated in advance a set of expectations for the partnership. In this section I discuss each of these pre-conditions in more detail.

The just right number of schools ready to partner. During the prior spring, the central partner came to me to discuss possible schools to work with in the upcoming school year. She came with the position that, given her limited capacity, she proposed to focus her support intensely on one to two sites (rather than giving a light touch to all possible schools). She wanted to partner with “the just right” amount of schools. She clearly realized that taking on too many schools would mean not serving any school well.

We discussed which schools had the need and capacity to support the implementation of this reform. We wrestled with questions of readiness, including, “What defines a school’s readiness to partner?” and “How should we be targeting the highest needs schools, while thinking deeply about which schools have the capacity and the openness to benefit from such a partnership?” With these questions in mind, we identified two schools to approach about a potential partnership the following school year. One of the schools became the focus of this study. Several factors influencing participation and expectations supported this decision.

Voluntary participation creates authentic buy-in. Key to note is that the partnership was offered as an invitation. It was not mandatory for a school site to participate. If the support was a value-add (which we believed it was), then it should not be forced upon a school. Rather, the school site should elect to participate. What I emphasized to school sites was that if this potential partnership did not feel like a beneficial opportunity, then the school was under no obligation to agree to it.

Clear expectations for partnership. The central partner established a clear set of expectations in advance which she shared with potential partner schools. From there, we approached the leaders of these schools with the offer to partner. The parameters of that partnership were explained to the school leadership and a discussion ensued. From this

interaction, the focus school of this study decided to accept the offer of partnership for the subsequent school year.

Next, I explore what the initial stages of embeddedness looked like as the partnership kicked off the following year. I recount how the relationships developed between the central partner and the school site stakeholders proved key to the partnership bearing fruit. Two factors surfaced from the data that were important to the success of the partnership; credibility and communication. I address each of these factors in turn.

Essential Relationships Built Through Embeddedness

From the inception of the partnership, the central partner recognized the importance of building trusting relationships with key stakeholders at the site in order to foster strong, productive collaboration. Two factors affecting the development of this relationship surfaced as I analyzed the data from my meeting notes. The first factor was the issue of building credibility with the school community and the role that the school leader played in building the credibility of the central partner. The second factor was the role of communication, particularly between the central partner and the school leader, and how it impacted the collaborative relationship that developed.

Gaining “school cred.” Through the triangulation of my notes from one-on-one meetings with the school leader and notes from my monthly check-in meetings with the central partner, I was able to see two different perspectives of the same events. Together, these perspectives reflected the development of the relationship between the school leader and central partner, as well as how that relationship increased the central partner’s credibility with the teachers and school site coaches.

The notes from my meetings with the school leader indicate the school leader noticed that the central partner's initial facilitation of professional development to the staff did not go over well because a trusting relationship had not been built. Initially the professional development facilitated by the central partner was focused specifically on addressing the needs of language learners rather than the school reform initiative to increase student talk. In the 2017 Site Visit Notes, the principal reported this not being well received by staff because it did not feel directly connected to the school focus on student talk. She articulated that, at first, teachers didn't see the relevance nor the through line of the professional development sessions to the school's priorities. The principal then made a decision to take on more of the facilitation herself, and to model some of the student talk protocols and structures in each professional development session. She felt that with the relationship and trust she had with staff, they were much more receptive to this. Later, when the teachers observed the school leader's direct support of the initiative, and once trust had been built between the central partner and the teachers, the central partner's facilitation was better received by staff.

The central partner worked hard to gain trust and build a relationship with the school site staff. Most important, I argue, is that she was persistent in developing these relationships. She came back time and again, never gave up, never moved on and put in the time necessary to build trust. In this case, key to developing this relationship with staff was the regular presence of, and engagement by, the central partner in the school. For example, the central partner consistently attended the meetings of the school sites instructional lead team (ILT). The central partner did not just go to one of this team's meetings. She prioritized going to the meetings every week. Once seen as a regular attendee of these meetings, the central partner began supporting the team in developing much needed structures, consistent agendas, and processes to discuss issues as a

team. In another example, the central partner became a critical partner and a support to the school site coaches, building their capacity, being a thought and collaboration partner, and guiding their work and the alignment to the larger work of the school. Her active participation in existing structures at the school were essential and foundational pieces necessary for her to gain credibility with school staff, which in turn led to staff being more receptive to growing and improving their own practice in support of the school-wide initiative to increase the quality and quantity of student talk in the classroom.

The communication age. Another essential factor to building relationships was the degree to which the central partner and school leadership built and maintained strong communication. In our monthly meeting, the central partner named regular communication with the school leader as a key component of aligning their work. Key to her collaboration and coordination with the school site was the ability to maintain regular communication. My notes of my meetings with the school leader show that she, too, identified the importance of communication.

In her work at another school site, the central partner explained how, without this same level of communication, her ability to form strong relationships at that school was stunted. The central partner noted that, at the other school site, the school leader acted as too much of a buffer between the central partner and the school site coaches; thus, the central partner had limited direct communication with school site actors. In that situation, the central partner met with the school leader *without* the very people who would ultimately implement and facilitate the work. Without all the right people in the room, the implementation suffered and the impact was negligible according to the central partner.

By contrast, the central partner was able to maintain a level of communication with all stakeholders at the school that is the focus of this study. Her due diligence in this area led to a greater degree of credibility and more willingness on the part of school staff to invest in the reform. The practice of engaging with more school level actors than just the school leader was important to the central partner's ability to embed in the school site.

Embeddedness Achieved

Next, I delve deeper into the concept of embeddedness, its positive impact, challenges to getting embedded, steps taken to address these challenges, and the missteps that occurred which delayed the full integration of the central partner into the fabric of the school leadership.

In this study, I define embeddedness as the outcome which results when a central partner goes beyond the occasional visits with a school site to invest a considerable amount of time to meet and engage regularly with school level leadership and staff. A central partner who is embedded in a school site has formed trusting relationships with leadership and staff. She is viewed as a member of the school team and is seen as adding value to the school. I argue that the regular one-on-one meetings with school leadership, regular attendance in the school's instructional leadership team meetings, and regular co-planning and facilitation of professional development, allowed the central partner to form strong, trusting relationships and truly embed herself in the school site context. This level of embeddedness allowed for the implementation of instructional reform that the school leader acknowledged (on page 9 of the Site Visit Notes) as effective. Next, I discuss two challenges that surfaced to jeopardize embeddedness and how these challenges were ultimately overcome.

Central partner “catch-up syndrome.” As discussed earlier in this chapter, only when the central partner had spent significant time to better understand the school site context and the

vision of the school, did she gain sufficient trust to partner with the school. However, this work was not without its challenges.

As noted in my meeting notes, the school leader articulated how, at first, she and other school level actors felt like they had to explain everything to the central partner to bring her “up to speed.” This challenge of “catching her up” highlighted her outsider-ness and frustrated school level actors because they had to use valuable time to catch-up the central partner in one-on-one sessions and team meetings, rather than pushing forward with planning and getting to the work. In the course of my work, the challenge of “catch-up syndrome” was articulated to me by other school site leaders at various sites, and, given the frequency of its articulation by other school leaders, is worthy of being named as a phenomenon. I argue here that embeddedness mitigates this challenge of “catch-up syndrome” by addressing the frustration on the part of school site actors. In the case of the PAR study, the more the central partner was embedded in the school site, the less catch-up syndrome manifested. Below, I discuss another derailment, how the school leader addressed this derailment, and how the school leader and central partner were able to keep the school focused on the instructional priority of improving the quality and quantity of student talk in the classroom.

The risk of agenda creep. As noted in the introduction, a significant risk to the development of a productive and trusting central-site relationship is the perception, real or not, that a central partner is promoting and pushing her own agenda or pet project, external to the priorities and foci of the school. School sites are quickly frustrated when they feel the “support” from central office is in fact subterfuge for compliance initiatives that do not feel relevant to the context of their school. The more an outside agenda seemed to creep into the work of the central partner at the school, the harder it was to approach embeddedness.

An example of this phenomenon that I call “agenda creep” emerged in the data when the central partner promoted her own agenda and the use of her department’s particular walkthrough tool to push the school to focus on a reform *other than student talk*. This was a prime example of a central partner entering a collaborative partnership while bringing her own unrelated priorities and agenda. The lack of relevance of the walkthrough tool was brought up by the school leader (as well as by myself when I questioned whether or not the tool aligned with the school foci). In our one-on-one meetings, the school leader reflected on the fact that, at times, what the central partner wanted to focus on was not always relevant to where the school was, nor the school’s priorities.

Embeddedness creates accurate diagnosis. To investigate more deeply, I share how once the central partner was able to move past agenda creep, she was able to contribute in valuable ways to the school. Most notably, she was able to more accurately diagnose the areas on which the school should focus and the school’s strengths, growth areas, needs, and opportunities. The one-on-one meeting notes between the central partner and myself reflect extensive diagnoses on the part of the central partner working directly with the school site in my study. The diagnostic moments included seeing when the school site instructional lead team lacked the structure or systems to move forward with their agenda. Likewise, the central partner was able to diagnose when there was a lack of alignment across departments at the school site. She was also able to diagnose the needs of the school site coaches as well as their strengths and growth areas. By being at the school site on a more regular basis and by participating in important school spaces, such as team meetings, professional development, classroom observations, and meetings, the central partner gained invaluable insight into the workings and needs of the school community. Likewise, in our meetings, the central partner and I were able to coordinate how I

could support her work through my own interactions with the school leader. I was then in turn able to coach the school leader in alignment with the diagnosis and the work of the central partner.

Conclusion. In this section I analyzed the role of the central partner in supporting the implementation of a school-based instructional initiative. I explored the concept of embeddedness as critical to the success of the central partner in affecting positive change in teaching and learning in the classrooms of one school. Within this concept of embeddedness, I highlighted the importance of establishing preconditions for central office-school site partnerships. The preconditions included the necessity of engaging the site leadership prior to establishing any plan to support the site and proposing the partnership as an option for the site leadership to elect if they deemed it as a value-add towards addressing their instructional focus areas.

As a result, I illuminated how the central partner developed credibility with the site staff through embeddedness and the importance of communication between the central partner and the school leader to embed the partner in the school team. Recounted were the dangers of central partner catch-up syndrome and how this frustrated school staff and impeded a successful partnership when the central partner was not sufficiently embedded within the fabric of the school. I also described what embeddedness looked like when it took hold and how, once embedded, the central partner could accurately diagnose the needs of the school.

Next, I shift the focus to explore the role of the central network team in supporting the implementation of reform at a school site. I explore the history and development of one central network team, and I look at how the team worked to fulfill the purpose of ensuring that the priorities and support of different central office actors were aligned in their engagement with the

school site. Specifically, I review the structures and processes developed to prioritize and ensure this alignment. I examine how a sense of agency was fostered among members of the central network team. And, finally, I surface how easy it was for misalignment to resurface and what steps were required to realign in those moments when the central network team risked getting off track.

Central Network Team: Building the Net to Catch and Hold Alignment

As noted in the introduction to the chapter, school sites are often frustrated by the pressure applied by compliance-driven mandates from central offices. When engaging with central office level actors, school sites complain that the meetings are dominated by the agenda of the central office rather than the needs of the school. The mandates often come without resources or support.

Furthermore, school sites, in my experience, routinely raise concerns about a lack of alignment and coherence across departments in the central office. “Don’t you all talk to each other?” is a question one school leader asked me. One example of the lack of alignment and coordination manifests when multiple central departments schedule different professional development opportunities on the same day. The lack of coordination results in the need for multiple school staff to be off site at the same time, at different professional development trainings. Situations like this pose a risk to the safety and well-being of students at the school site due to insufficient staff being at the school to keep students safe and focused on learning. Another example is the complexity of different departments working with the school site on competing pedagogical priority areas and instructional strategies.

The PAR study set out to explore how central office departments could work in better coordination to align their support of schools. Key to that goal was how to develop an effective

central network team comprised of members of the different departments working simultaneously with the same schools. My hope was a coordinated central network team could put all central office professionals working at the same school sites in the same room together to discuss their initiatives, plans and upcoming actions in order to better align their efforts.

The central network team became a net to *catch* and *hold* alignment of central office departments in support of school sites. This section is devoted to discussing the role of this central network team in doing this work of catching and holding alignment and coherence (and realigning when misalignment occurred). I first look at why and how the central network team was formed and the structures and systems developed over time to build and strengthen the collaborative work of the central network team. I discuss how and why members of the team became agents of alignment. As members of a team whose purpose was to create alignment among the actions of individual team members, they then went out into the school to do their work with commitment to the reform. That is, due to their membership on this team, they gained an increased commitment to the reform, personally committed to the reform and then became agents supporting alignment to the reform. I identify instances when the central network team and individual members of the team committed acts of alignment, which pulled school and central partners into closer alignment with the priorities of the central office and schools. I also take a closer look at where alignment was most effective to ensuring schools were supported and able to do the work they needed to do for students. Finally, I recount when alignment slipped on the team, why that happened, and what the role of the central network team was to ensure realignment.

Birthing a Team

It is important to first understand the context within which the central network team was established. When initially conceived of, such a team had not existed at the central office level. Though department teams existed by content (e.g. math department, English department, science department, etc.), collaboration and communication across departments and with schools was limited. At best, central partners aligned to the work of others in their content area, but rarely did they intersect with other departments serving the same schools or the same grade levels. The lack of coordination across departments meant that multiple (and sometimes conflicting) messages were sent to school sites. School leaders expressed frustration that messages from the central office did not always align with the priorities of the school site. Messages felt disjointed and left schools unsure what to focus on. Fortunately, new district leadership recognized the need to restructure, such that communications and work with school sites could become more coordinated and consistent. Central office network teams were encouraged to adhere to a vision of coordinating across central office departments.

Prior to the first meeting of the central network team assigned to the school site in the study, some members had never met each other nor did they know each other's names, despite working in the same central office building and serving the same schools. Likewise, it quickly became apparent that some of the central network team members had never interacted in person with the leaders of the schools they served. None of them were familiar with the school site plans, and none had looked at the student data from the schools they served.

My goal in building a central network team was to establish a space where the disparate strands of work by different departments at the central office level could be aligned and, therefore, result in greater impact at the school site. The intent was for the central network team

to create what I refer to as a *net of alignment*; in other words, that team should be able to catch and hold areas of alignment and allow individual agenda items to fall through the net. The net acted, therefore, like a strainer, to allow those acts that challenge alignment to be sifted out, leaving only those acts that created alignment. Building a strong team tightened the weave of the net, making it more likely to catch and hold alignment. It was my job as the network superintendent of middle schools to create an effective, coordinated central network team that could take specific, regular actions to build and support alignment of the work across departments in service of schools. When I reviewed the data from two years of central network team meeting notes, three pieces emerged that were paramount to building, leading, and coordinating a central network team. I outline and discuss these three pieces below.

Developing relational trust. Early on, I used protocols and built structures in our meetings that allowed us to cultivate and sustain relational trust. For example, I created and implemented equity-focused norms and structures to allow for members of the team to take risks, be vulnerable, and hold each other accountable to equity in participation and contribution. Instituting protocols for equity of voice helped to ensure that no one person dominated the meeting discussions, and that all voices in the room were being honored and heard. The discussion protocols could be as simple as using a “whip” when discussing a topic, whereby each person in turn would have the opportunity to give input on a given topic of conversation (or to “pass” if they did not have anything they wanted to add to the discussion). Every meeting included an “inclusion” activity, which allowed team members to get to know each other on a personal level. Examples of inclusion activities included “*Two Truths and a Lie*,” “*Favorite Concert Ever*,” and “*A Memory from Middle School*.” While simple and brief, the inclusion activities allowed team members to share and get to know each other on a personal, as well as

professional level. Finally, I created a structure for the roles of the team to rotate on a weekly basis. That meant that everyone took a turn at each of the team roles, switching each week. These roles included facilitator, timekeeper, notetaker, process checker, and snackster (who doesn't like a snack during a meeting...?). By rotating roles, we created a culture of group responsibility for the meetings. It was not just a meeting that I called each week. It was a meeting that the whole team took responsibility for on a weekly basis.

Naming and framing of coherence and alignment. A next step in the building of our team was co-constructing a purpose statement. Through many iterations and input from all team members, we ultimately landed on the following purpose statement:

The Central Network Team mission is to work collaboratively to create a coherent instructional vision by tailoring resources and opportunities for professional growth to teachers and school leaders in order to positively impact outcomes for middle school students in Oakland Unified School District.

The purpose statement helped the team to remain clear on our reason for being a team. Equally critical was to name coherence and alignment as primary foci of the team and to remind the members that the reason for creating the team was to increase coherence and alignment for the sake of more consistent and aligned work with the school sites. An “aha” for me was realizing that part of my leadership role was to reiterate this on a regular basis to the group. Like the important learning from Chapter 5 of needing to keep equity at the forefront of the work through regular framing, keeping the team centered on the idea of alignment and coherence in service of schools became a battle cry for me. I worked with the central network team members to develop their capacity to own their role in maintaining coherency and alignment. What quickly became clear from the data was that the structures and protocols, as well as the meeting themselves,

needed to be ongoing and regular in order to build coherency and alignment in service of schools.

Regular and consistent meetings. The importance of a consistently meeting emerged from the data as critical to maintaining coherence and alignment. When the team did not meet due to conflicts in their personal schedules, central network team members showed less commitment to aligning their work with the reform (and sometimes their actions actually worked against the reform). Thus, when we did not meet as a team, I observed team members quickly falling back to their default positions of working just on individual agendas.

The importance of agency. Once foundational structures and protocols were established and became routine, we were on our way to becoming a high functioning collaborative team. At that point, we were well poised to determine the instructional focus of our team. Together, we studied possible instructional priority areas (completing and discussing common readings), we observed classrooms and collected data across schools on existing pedagogical strengths and challenges. We analyzed the data to then identify the instructional priority upon which to focus for the year, which we did in consultation with teachers and leaders. In the end, we identified “student talk” as the instructional area of focus for the year. I argue that because team members felt agency in determining the focus area and because they saw the relevancy of the focus area to their own content area and work, they ultimately became agents of alignment and champions of the focus area.

Acts of derailment. While the data mostly highlighted acts of alignment, four areas surfaced in which the school’s focus on student talk as a pedagogical practice was derailed. This happened when forces out of the control of the team came into play. For example, teacher and school leader turnover and central office crises affected our ability to stay focused on the reform.

As well, there were moments when the central partner pushed her own agenda, an agenda which competed with the focus on the student talk reform.

The forces beyond our team control temporarily got us off track. However, in each situation, we tightened the weave of our net and were able to refocus on the reform. In this way, the net of the central network team was able to hold the alignment. In fact, if it were not for the net of alignment developed by the central network team, the derailment forces may have been strong enough to completely derail the work.

Conclusion

The second cycle of inquiry surfaced two key concepts with significant impact on how a school district's central office can be in support of a school-based instructional initiative. First is the concept of embeddedness. Through analysis of multiple data sources, I noticed the powerful impact on teacher practice and student outcomes when a central partner authentically embedded herself at a school site through the development of an effective partnership. While not without its pitfalls and moments of derailment, ultimately the act of embeddedness enabled the central partner to gain the trust of the school leadership and staff. Through embeddedness, the central partner became a part of the school's instructional leadership team, and became a trusted thought partner in spaces such as principal professional learning, as well as a co-facilitator of professional development at the school site. While the central partner at first brought her own agenda to the work at the site, embeddedness allowed her to see beyond that agenda to the actual needs of the site.

The second concept with significant impact on how a school district's central office can truly support a school-based instructional initiative was the power and influence of a high functioning team in supporting the alignment of the work across content areas in support of a

school's priority areas. The chapter narrates how the development of an effective central network team built the capacity of its team members to become agents of alignment. The development of this kind of team required attention to structures and protocols for how the team would work together. Staying on course required continuous framing and lifting up of the importance of alignment and coherence in order to maximize the impact of central office supports to schools. In the next chapter, I will look at what has developed since the end of the second inquiry cycle and how my own role as a central office leader has informed the degree to which central teams and partners have aligned their work in support of school-based initiatives. I explore the next steps for central partners and the team as we seek to strengthen support for schools and school stakeholders in service of students.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Introduction: Research for Equity

The study addressed the overarching research question, “*To what extent does the structure of an urban school district and its leadership, both centrally and at sites, foster the implementation of academic discourse in support of Long Term English Language Learner and African American student critical thinking and engagement in learning?*” By investigating the guiding question, and the sub-questions, the aim was to align central and site-based teams in support of structured classroom academic discourse, leading to improved student engagement and critical thinking. The theory of action was:

- IF we conduct regular classroom observation with feedback, focused on academic discourse. and
- IF we engage central and site educators in classroom learning walks focused on academic discourse, and
- IF central and site teams use the data from these classroom observations and learning walks in a cycle of inquiry to inform teaching practice (specifically opportunities for students to engage in academic discourse),
- THEN we will see a change in classroom practice (increase in student discourse), an increase in student engagement, and a positive impact on outcomes for traditionally underserved students.

As the research question itself suggests, the inquiry held a moral imperative. When central offices and schools are not aligned in a coherent vision and theory of instructional improvement, the students and families most negatively impacted are the families who are already traditionally underserved. In the case of Oakland, the data show that the students most

traditionally underserved are English language learners and students of color; particularly African American students (Oakland Unified School District Public Dashboards, n.d.). The narrative of students and families traditionally underserved plays out on a systems level and directly affects the classroom. Fisher, Rothenberg, and Frey (2008) highlight a series of research studies illustrating the opportunity gap exists: students living in poverty experience fewer opportunities to engage in academic discourse in the classroom. Lingard, Hayes, and Mills (2003) provide evidence of how teachers talk more and students talk less in classrooms with students from low-income backgrounds. In fact, in an early study on the subject, Flanders (1971) found that teachers talked approximately 50% of the time in classes of high-achieving students, as compared to classes of lower achieving students, in which teachers dominated 80% of the talk time. The opportunity gap holds true in classrooms with English language learners. Ho (2005) found that English language learning students “were asked easier questions or no questions at all and thus rarely had to talk in the classroom” (p. 5).

When student voice is not at the center of the classroom, far fewer opportunities for students to think critically and use higher order thinking skills are evident (Webb, 1992). The fishbone diagram (see Table 1) highlighted the assets and challenges of addressing the study’s equity challenge, and the challenges persisted as I engaged in the PAR.

The context of Oakland Unified School District was particularly poignant to the aim and goals of the study. Eliminating inequity is stated in our school district’s mission statement. The African American Male Achievement Initiative was founded in 2010 to address the African American male opportunity gap. In 2016, the Board of Education passed a specific equity policy intended to make a statement about how our district prioritizes equity. Two years later, the

Office of Equity was formed with the charge of helping ALL students graduate ready for college, career, and community success with programs designed to:

- eliminate the correlation between social and cultural factors and probability of success;
- examine biases, interrupt and eliminate inequitable practices, and create inclusive and just conditions for all students; and
- discover and cultivate the unique gifts, talents, and interests that every student possesses.

Yet, despite important efforts, inequities in our system continued to be pervasive and systematically dis-enfranchise students and families of color both academically and culturally. The phenomenon persisted in our middle schools and in the school of the study, in which (at the time of this study) 100% of the students were students of color and 77% of the students spoke a language other than English in the home. The school was threatened repeatedly over the course of the last fifteen years with closure or restructuring due to low academic performance. The school experienced significant teacher turnover on a yearly basis and experienced three principals in just five years. Conditions like these made alignment and coherence an even greater imperative and yet an even greater challenge. Prior to the study, the school had significant trouble staying focused on one to two priority areas. Instead, they drifted from one strategy to another without time to focus and make gains in a given area. My belief was: if alignment and coherence could be achieved there, then the school would improve.

To engage in the action research, I designed two cycles of inquiry based upon two semesters of the school year. The structure afforded time to see how the central office team developed and congealed as well as support the “norming and storming” phase of the site-based

instructional leadership team. I could observe principal and coach classroom observations and feedback for a full year. As the study progressed, I relied on a series of data sets, which, when triangulated, form a comprehensive narrative. The data sets were primarily based on agendas and notes from team and individual meetings, at the central office and at the site. Observational notes were key to collecting a holistic picture of the conditions that developed in the course of the study. Table 6 articulates the events observed, people involved, and the form in which the data were captured.

The Participatory Action Research team embarked on the research project with the goal of greater alignment and coherence between central and site leaders in service of improving outcomes for our students. Chapter three of the study emphasized the role of the co-practitioner researchers. In order to engage in this inquiry, I enlisted a team of central office instructional partners and the leadership of the school itself, including the principal and the two on-site academic coaches. A key component of the inquiry was the collaboration and ongoing reflection between and among the PAR team. The reflective, meta-cognitive nature of the action project was ultimately its greatest strength and provided a template for how to support other schools or central teams to engage in transformation.

I conducted the PAR process by utilizing the team meetings, 1:1 check in meetings, site visits, and observations as points of data collection and reflection. The spaces and places were already established as reflective spaces to debrief, consider implications, plan next steps, and iterate. Tapping into pre-existing structures allowed me to engage the co-practitioners in inquiry and cycles of continuous improvement in ways that did not feel like extra, or somehow outside of the realm of their work. The study allowed me to strengthen the coherence, alignment, and effectiveness of the teams.

Table 6

Data Collection Sources

| Observed Event | People Involved | Form of Data |
|--|---|---|
| Network Supervisor Site Visits (including observations of classrooms and debriefs of these classroom visits) | Principal, Network Superintendent | Agenda and notes from whole year |
| Network Supervisor Site Professional Development Observations | School staff, Network Superintendent | Observational notes from professional development, including debrief notes with principal |
| 1:1 Monthly Central Dept Mtgs | Central Partner, Network Superintendent | Agendas and notes |
| Network Instructional Leadership Team | Central Partners (from each content area), Network Superintendent | Agendas and notes |
| Classroom Walkthroughs | Principal, Site Coaches, Central Partners, Network Superintendent | Agendas, notes, site visit protocols and templates |

Alignment and Coherence as Frames for the Work

The overarching question that drove this research was: To what extent does the structure of an urban school district and its leadership, both centrally and at sites, foster the implementation of academic discourse in support of Long Term English Language Learner and African American student critical thinking and engagement in learning?

The sub-questions embedded in the guiding question were:

1. What fosters and inhibits the classroom implementation of academic discourse structures with a principal, site coaches and teachers?
2. How does a locally generated focus of practice (academic discourse) navigate through an organization in order to have an impact on instruction and learning?
3. How do the leadership actions of a district administrator, in collaboration with a network instructional lead team, inhibit or support a site leader's ability to build teacher capacity and implement the strategies of academic discourse in the classroom?
4. To what extent do we see a change in the degree and quality of academic discourse in the classroom?
5. How has my own engagement in this research process shifted and informed my understanding of research and my practice as a leader?

The theme of alignment and coherence emerged as critical to the implementation of the locally-generated instructional focus. In Chapter 2, I discussed the concept developed by Honig and Hatch (2004) termed "crafting coherence." Honig and Hatch frame coherence as a dynamic process that is neither fully top-down, nor fully bottom-up. Instead, they argue that crafting coherence requires sense-making of external policy, simplification of policy by site leaders, and

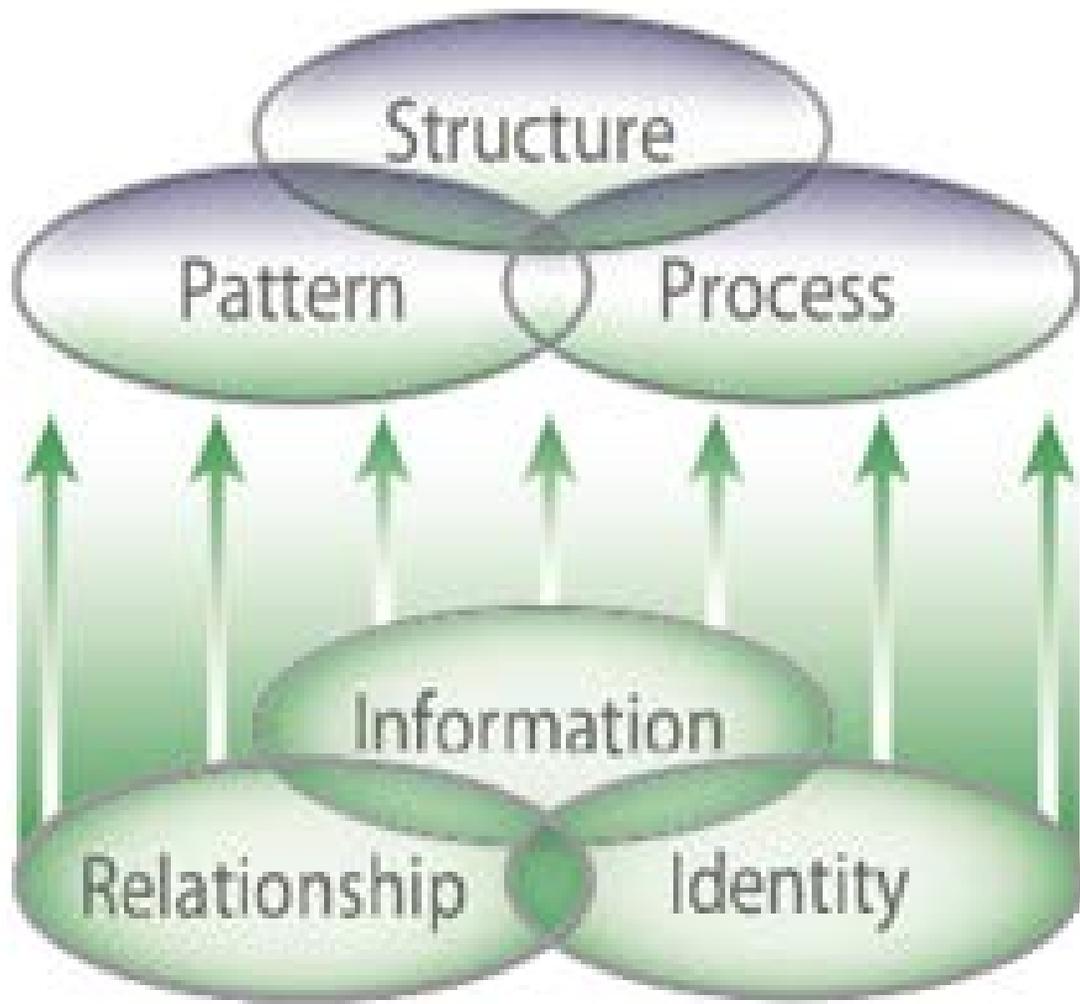
negotiation when necessary to ensure the external policy demands match the needs and context of the site. The PAR project confirmed the bidirectional nature of crafting coherence posited by Honig and Hatch (2004). What surfaced was the specific collaborative nature of the process and the necessary disposition of its stakeholders that neither Elmore et al. (2014) nor Honig and Hatch (2004) articulate in their studies. The project fills a gap in the literature by identifying and addressing the iterative assets and challenges that the persons closest to the work can document by using evidence from multiple sources. The regular and iterative evidence uncovered layers of the necessary alignment and coherence-seeking: alignment of the central office actors into a coherent team to support schools; alignment of the central team behind a site-based focus of practice; site leaders remaining focused on a specific site-based goal; and the interaction and collaboration between the central and site-based leaders to move the initiative forward. As we ventured down this path with a reflective and introspective stance, alignment and coherence included two vital components. The first component was the mindset, disposition, and meta-cognitive awareness of the co-practitioners. The second learning included a deeper understanding of the important structures, systems, and coordination needed to build and maintain alignment and coherence. I discuss next the distinction between the two learnings.

The bidirectional nature of mindset and systems change is referenced by Heifetz (1994) as an adaptive versus technical challenge. Another way of looking at the distinction between mindset and structure is using the framework of the National Equity Project, which presents the structure of work that is “above and below the green line” (Zuibeck, 2012). What was clear going in my study and what can be seen in the nature of the guiding question and sub-questions was the potential for all stakeholders to either “inhibit” or “foster” alignment and coherence. The study confirmed this phenomenon as we saw how actors at all levels, consciously and

unconsciously, promoted and maintained alignment and coherence of the stated focus at some points, and derailed or drifted away from the focus at other points. Given the number of actors involved in the work of a given school and/or district, the drift first documented in chapter 5 is nearly inevitable. The real learning is not whether drift will happen, but rather, how we notice the drift quickly and take action to do course corrections and get back on track when it does happen. The goal becomes course-correction in an expeditious manner so that the drift is almost imperceptible. By this I mean that the parties involved needed to first and foremost adopt an awareness of the necessity for alignment and coherence. One key learning from the study is that the mindset of alignment and coherence is a muscle, and the muscle requires building and maintaining.

Creating stronger structures, systems, and coordination were equally important to collectively building the alignment and coherence muscle of the teams and the individual members. In the framework for leading change, Zuibeck (2012) identified the components of alignment and coherence (see Figure 12). Structures, processes, and patterns are necessary aspects of teams building alignment and coherence that surfaced in PAR Cycle One. As noted in chapter 6, establishing team structures and processes builds alignment across disparate organizational levels and creates the opportunity for coherence and revised co-constructed norms to develop. In the case of the study, the development of the central team created a net to catch and hold alignment. Together, the mindset and the structure created a duality that enabled reflective inquiry to occur and for teams to course-correct during a cycle when practices drifted off course. A personal parenting example of course correction comes to mind here.

This year, my older daughter turned 16, which resulted in the terrifying (for her parents) project of learning how to drive. As I relinquished the driver's seat, and sat white knuckled in the



Note. (Zuibeck, 2012).

Figure 12. Below the green line: Theory of practice.

front passenger seat teaching her how to drive, I noticed that initially her handling of the steering wheel to stay on the road was delayed and herky-jerky. She would be drifting into oncoming traffic, and then, just as I was about to scream out and grab the wheel from her to bring us back into our lane, she would jerk us back herself (ok, I admit I did actually scream out and grab the wheel at least once). After repeated incidents of the driving behavior, and reflecting on how I myself handle the steering wheel, I realized that experienced drivers make minute corrections with the steering wheel every second. The iterative small changes result in imperceptible course corrections second by second. When I explained that to my daughter, and modeled it for her, her handling of the steering wheel dramatically improved. The analogy is fitting for the minute course corrections necessary to catch drift in the process of implementing a school-based instructional strategy such as academic discourse. With so many actors in the mix, teams can drift at any moment. The awareness and structural muscle to course-correct are critical to keeping a school on track. Drift happens. The ability to catch the drift is what matters most.

Central Partner Learning

In the literature review of Chapter 2, I referenced Honig et al. (2010), who studied the critical role of central office reform in support of school instructional improvement. The research surfaced five important dimensions of central office support of school transformation:

- Dimension 1: Learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals' instructional leadership practice.
- Dimension 2: Assistance to the central office–principal partnerships.
- Dimension 3: Reorganizing and re-culturing of each central office unit, to support the central office–principal partnerships and teaching and learning improvement.
- Dimension 4: Stewardship of the overall central office transformation process.

- Dimension 5: Use of evidence throughout central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools. (Honig et al., 2010, p. 17)

The study prioritized the development of the five dimensions in the work of the central instructional team. The importance of the dimensions was confirmed by the inquiry process. The inquiry contributed to the theory by documenting how these dimensions play out on the ground, and what specific strategies and mindsets were necessary to build the efficacy of central support. The evidence from the meeting notes, site visit observations and stakeholder reflections highlighted these specific strategies and mindsets, and surfaced the concept of “embeddedness” as both a mindset and a technical strategy for deepening the level of trust, relevance, and ultimately the impact of central partner work with site leaders. Likewise, the reflective experiences of the central partners and feedback from site leaders helped to recognize a common frustration by school actors which I named “catch-up syndrome.” The sighting – through the epiphany of understanding the minute actions of all organizational actors -- enabled the Central Network Team to modify the way central partners deployed themselves, so that “catch-up syndrome’ was mollified. Finally, the naming of “agenda creep” offered insight into a natural impediment to effective and aligned central support. Identifying and naming the potential pitfalls became a part of how we in central office could develop a more effective system to support the school site. The naming itself created a level of collective accountability held by central and site-based leaders. It allowed all stakeholders to realize they were not alone nor helpless when they experience drift or disconnect, mis-alignment or incoherence. Likewise, it raised the collective level of quality support and collaboration. What resonated for central partners and helped to shift thinking was naming the challenge of not “getting in the door” at school sites. That is, they, in

general, were not able to breach the protective wall that surrounded the academic culture of a school; school-based organizational actors instinctively kept people from the “outside” at an arm’s length. The “arm’s length” can stem from distrust, fear of being exposed, insecurity, or arrogance that there is nothing to be learned from a central office, which is often perceived as dysfunctional.

Introducing a New Framework for Central-school Collaboration

The findings have begun to inform how our district structures, and articulates, central partner support to schools. As central leadership developed the plan for site support the following school year, the chief academic officer asked me to present the concepts to the larger central instructional team as a framework for how central partners engage with sites. My peers spoke with me after my presentation about how the concepts resonated with them and how universal the concepts and feelings were for district central offices. The frameworks have become the foundation of how the network team is building a tiered system of school support based on differentiated needs. I also shared the concepts with a former colleague who is now working with districts statewide to improve central support of schools. He subsequently shared the concepts with central leaders of districts throughout the state and reported that the new framework resonated across districts. The next section explores the policy, practice, and research implications in more depth.

Implications for Policy

In 1982 United States Speaker of the House, Tip O’Neill coined the phrase, “All politics are local.” The implications of the study most lend themselves, not to national nor state policy change, but rather to local policy at the district level or within a district (network level). Nonetheless, significant policy implications emerge from the study to direct how systems of

schools (be they districts, or networks within districts) design central office structures to support schools with instructional initiatives. First, the study highlights how districts can adopt a framework to support instructional change that is neither completely top-down or bottom-up. Instead, the study suggests a middle path for a framework that does both, which I will call “necessary bilateral alignment.” As mentioned in chapter two, Honig et al. (2010) discussed the critical role of central office reform in order to transform schools. While the importance of central office held true in the study, what the literature was missing was the dispositional nature of central office supports for schools, and the overarching stance needed by central office in order to be in authentic collaborative partnership with schools. Top-down implementation is well-researched, but what is less researched is the stance that central stakeholders and school-based stakeholders must take in a collaborative process, The “necessary bilateral alignment” framework promotes the idea of schools determining instructional priorities based on the specific needs and context of their site, while being cognizant of a larger ecosystem within which the school operates. The bilateral alignment framework offers a process by which schools can determine the value and potential benefits of engaging in an instructional focus area nested in a larger, aligned instructional plan that can draw on a system’s capacity to support schools in their goals. While perhaps not a policy *per se*, the level of clarity in district-school interactions and choices about collaboration would better serve a district, or network of schools. We need to be clear about the manner and approach we use to build support systems that include agreements about bilateral alignment, bringing strengths from the school and the district to the collaboration table.

Another aspect of the local policy lies in how a district defines the parameters and guidelines for what central office support looks like. The findings from the study have formed

the basis for the development of guidelines and parameters in my district; the concepts of embeddedness, agenda creep, and catch-up syndrome are now part of our language and reflection. For example, embeddedness specifically has helped to shape the expectations for how central partners do not simply conduct “one-off” school visits, but instead become a part of the instructional leadership team at a site and schedule regular times to meet with the site-based coaches and principal to plan a school’s teacher professional development.

Implications for Practice

The implications of the study’s findings for a central or site leader are many. I elaborate on three implications in particular. First, the study emphasizes the importance of transparency and engagement in a cycle of inquiry. Simply put, if all school team members do not know they are engaged in a cycle of inquiry focused on a particular instructional practice, then they cannot be expected to get better at that instructional practice. The lead learner (in this case either the principal or the principal supervisor) needs to concentrate the group on a few goals and then build a clear plan of action to reach those goals (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Building “a collective understanding and engagement around the priorities so that every teacher and leader can answer, with equal ease and precision, the following questions; What are we doing? Why are we doing this?” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 56). What the PAR process illuminated was the fact that the more those two questions are raised explicitly, the greater the take-up by the stakeholders. While the recommendation may seem obvious, leaders are sometimes hesitant to be too explicit about the school’s area of focus out of fear that there will be push back and resistance. I speak from personal experience and from that of some of the principals I supervise. Ironically, the more transparent a leader is, the more opportunities for the team to engage in the development of the practice and process, and therefore, the greater the take-up of the particular focus of practice.

Another implication for central and site leaders was the importance of developing relational trust among collaboration partners. Investing time to build relational trust pays dividends when challenges arise later on and those relationships are tested. The intentionality of the relationship-building during the case study enabled a level of reflection and openness to feedback that I do not always experience when I have not invested the time to develop a relationship.

Leadership Development

The participatory action research process had a profound impact on my practice as a principal supervisor and central office partner. It has helped me to solidify my beliefs and approach to supporting schools and school leadership, grounded in equity, collaboration, and alignment. By solidifying and confirming my beliefs about the approach, I was then able to be more articulate and specific and build the central team's mission and vision for more effective action at school sites.

One particular sub-question focused on my leadership; *How has my own engagement in this research process shifted and informed my understanding of research and my practice as a leader?* I reflect here on the question and how the research study informed my leadership. Honig (2014) coined the term “bridge and buffer” to describe the role of the principal supervisor. This term aptly describes how I experience the role. Oftentimes I consciously buffer the school and its leadership from the seemingly unnecessary or misguided external mandates and demands, and, at other times, I am the bridge connecting the school to the resource or central partner that can best provide support. Being an effective buffer and bridge necessitates building the collaborative relationship to inform what is the right action or support to take in any given moment. At the beginning of the year, I confer with each of principal to develop a memorandum of

understanding of how we want to work together. I include what the principal needs from me to be successful, what my expectations are of the principal, how we best communicate, and what we can do to cultivate trust between us. In addition, as part of the evaluation and support system for principals (Leadership, Growth, and Development System, or LGDS), the principal and I reviewed the school's data and conducted a school walkthrough to build a shared understanding of the school's context. Based on critical conversations, and the prior year's LGDS end of year meeting, the principal and I established his/her professional learning goals for the year.

Throughout the year, I conducted site visits approximately once every two weeks. At the visits, the principal and I had a running agenda and took notes. The visits usually included visiting at least one classroom to observe and debrief, as well as planning out the feedback for the teacher.

As mentioned in chapter five, the instructional leadership practice of observation and debrief was one that research argues to be the most impactful. Grissom et al. (2013) confirmed the importance of the coaching of teachers by the school leader as the most impactful leadership practice to affect student outcomes. The implications from their study about principal practice were particularly insightful and directly informed how I supported the principal in the PAR process:

1. Tether observations to school level goals and agreements about instructional practice.
2. Be explicit about the purpose of observations.
3. Use observations in multiple ways including: for coaching teacher with evidence for sharing with the teacher's coach, to inform professional learning
4. Use informal monitoring time to have conversations about practice with teachers.
5. Cross-pollinate practices by co-developing ways for teachers to share practices.

(Grissom et al., 2013, p. 26)

In addition to a focus on observation and feedback in my weekly visits with the principal, we also discussed any operational or organizational management issues or challenges the principal was having, and troubleshoot ways to address those challenges.

From cycle one of my inquiry, I added new learning to the processes for engaging with all the principals I supervise. First, I needed to be more methodical about how I cultivated and sustained the relationship with each school leader and the leadership team. Part of that was simply being present at the site for important events by helping the principal and lead team to build out agendas and plans for staff professional learning. Communicating early and often to both principal, lead teams, and teaching staff was a priority. Central to the ongoing message was the foci for the year, why it was important (what was the theory of action behind it), what supports they should have expected to experience, and the goals and targets of that foci. Engaging in regular discussion and reflection about the principal's strategies for addressing the needs of the school by being specific about how they are going, how they are being measured, and what course corrections are being made based on what is happening. I could hold them accountable (in a positive way) to what they said they were going to focus on and how they were going to focus on it. Within that engagement was an overarching theme I articulated and reiterated of alignment and coherence. Where I struggled in the past was to schedule definitive observations of each schools' leadership team meeting. I needed to think through what I wanted to communicate to each team related to the work of the network and the expectations for how the leadership team functioned, as well as how observation and feedback needed to happen, and the fundamental structures of weekly PD and PLCs (aligned to the school's instructional foci and coherent across the year). Finally, I had the opportunity with teams to engage in self-assessment

based on a common rubric for a high functioning lead team, high-quality professional development, and effective PLC functions.

Self as Agent of Alignment

Clay Shirky (2010) said, “Revolution doesn’t happen when society adopts new technologies. It happens when society adopts new behaviors” (p. 1). Changing one’s behaviors and the behaviors of others is both the purpose of inquiry and its greatest challenge. The adage holds true of organizational behaviors as well. Arguably the biggest learning from the study was learning about myself and the imperative to change my behaviors in order to impact other people’s behavioral change. That impetus to change transformed me into the role of agent of alignment. Through the study, I internalized the role as champion of aligning practices and actions across the system and within myself. As a part of any larger system, such as an urban school district, agency in service of alignment has an impact that can reach all layers of an organization and can become a mantle for all stakeholders. However, alignment does not “just happen”, but rather, requires agents who act intentionally to ensure that it can and does happen. Furthermore, the agent acts in service of a particular idea or belief (in this case, the belief that alignment is imperative in order for instruction to positively impact student outcomes). An agent recruits other agents, and takes action in service of that belief or idea. A change agent is relentless and doggedly determined, despite obstacles or resistance. Lastly, an agent must listen, engage others, and be flexible and open to new possibilities and solutions. The path of the agency is much clearer to me after having engaged in participatory action research. The structure of an urban school district, both centrally and at sites, can either support or impede alignment and coherence. Yet, I am responsible for ensuring the alignment or coherence because misalignment and incoherence is an equity issue of great magnitude. Lack of coherence ultimately

impacts the ability of a school to build instructional practices such as academic discourse, which serves students who have been traditionally underserved by our education system. There is no silver bullet, but adopting a meta-cognitive stance, a disposition for coherence and alignment, and a role as agent of change can a system and fellow agents of change on a path toward improvement.

Metacognitive Coaching

The piece that stood out for me from the research and the actions of the study was within the cognitive coaching realm. First introduced by Costa and Garmston (2006), cognitive coaching is based on reciprocal reflection (of coach and coachee), and self-directed learning through meta-cognition. In my practice, I interpreted this as coaching through questioning, listening, and dialectic engagement with the coachee so that they reached their own conclusions and came to their own insights. The approach was confirmed by Aguilar's (2013) coaching directions, which emphasized the importance of three key actions: (1) start with core values; (2) take the time to build trust; and (3) lead with listening.

Avenues of Future Study

The study delved into the interaction between central and site leadership and how this interaction can either foster or inhibit the implementation of a school-based instructional reform effort. What the study did not do was delve into how the implementation of a school-based initiative is informed and influenced by the interaction between a site-coach and teachers. The critical relationship and interplay between these two site-based actors no doubt has an impact on the transfer of an instructional initiative into classroom practice. The perspective of the teacher is a critical lens that warrants a study unto itself. Such a study could explore the bridge (or gap) between instructional support (in the form of coaching and professional development), and

teacher practice or the implementation thereof. What surfaced during the course of the study was the clear existence of a transfer gap between the implementation of a change in instructional practice, and the antecedent professional development and coaching. Coherence and alignment between (and among) central and site-based leadership mitigates the transfer gap; however, we cannot ignore the importance of the collaborative actions of the site-coach and the teachers themselves. The importance of principal observation and feedback to teachers was highlighted in this study; however, the practice along does not represent the totality of the coaching necessary to support teachers in our highest needs schools. The participatory action research framework, in particular, could provide the ideal vehicle for coaches, principals, district leaders, and teachers to collectively investigate the transfer gap, ensure greater coherence, and offer a way forward for changing the relationships between central office and schools.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Continuing Review Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Mark Triplett](#)
CC: [Matthew Militello](#)
Date: 9/23/2019
Re: [CR00008039](#)
[UMCIRB 17-001481](#)
Talk Smart

The continuing review of your expedited study was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 9/20/2019 to 9/19/2020. This research study is eligible for review under expedited category #6&7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

| Document | Description |
|-----------------------|---|
| Consent Form(0.01) | Consent Forms |
| Int Questions(0.01) | Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions |
| Mark T Proposal(0.01) | Study Protocol or Grant Application |

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: LEADERSHIP GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM



OUSD Principal Framework Dimensions and Element Overview

| 6 Dimensions | 22 Elements (★ = Focus Element) |
|--|---|
| Dimension I: Leadership for Equity (E) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Equity Framework 2. Equity Goals |
| Dimension II: Leadership for Visionary Change (VC) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Shared Vision 2. Vision Actualization ★ |
| Dimension III: Leadership for Healthy Relationships and Culture (RC) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emotional Intelligence 2. Resilience 3. Relational Trust and Professional Culture 4. Politics and Conflict 5. Conditions for Student Learning ★ |
| Dimension IV: Leadership for Community and Family Partnerships (FCP) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family Partnership 2. Community Partnership (<i>Community, District, and Business</i>) 3. School Governance |
| Dimension V: Leadership for Effective Operations and Organization (EOO) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organizational Systems ★ 2. Policy 3. Equitable Resource Allocation 4. Distributed Leadership and Effective Teams 5. Talent Management |
| Dimension VI: Leadership for Instruction and Learning (IL) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Holistic Curriculum and Content ★ 2. Pedagogy 3. Data Driven Instruction ★ 4. Observation, Evidence, and Feedback: Instructional Core ★ 5. Conditions for Adult Learning ★ |

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following will be questions asked of participants in the study when conducting interviews.

1. How do you define student engagement in the classroom? What does it look like to you?
2. What has been your experience implementing academic discourse structures in the classroom?
3. What do you see as the greatest barriers or challenges to implementing academic discourse in the classroom?
4. What does quality central office support look like in implementing an instructional initiative like academic discourse?
5. What role does communication and collaboration play in that support from central office?
6. What has been your experience using cycles of inquiry as a way of growing teacher practice?
7. How can central office best support a cycle of inquiry focused on the implementation of academic discourse in the classroom?
8. What role does data play in a cycle of inquiry?
9. What data do you use, or envision using, to measure student progress in academic discourse to push critical thinking?

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

*East
Carolina University*



Informed Consent to Participate in Research Information to Consider Before Taking Part in Research That Has No More Than Minimal Risk

Title of Research Study: TALK SMART: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IMPLEMENTING ACADEMIC DISCOURSE IN AN URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Principal Investigator: Mark Triplett under the guidance of Dr. Matthew Militello
Dr. Militello: Institution, Department or Division: College of Education
Address: 220 Ragsdale, ECU, Greenville, NC 27858
Telephone #: (919) 518.4008

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to study the implementation process of academic discourse in classrooms in two urban middle schools in Oakland Unified School District as an innovation or key lever to change instruction in order to positively impact student outcomes for English Language Learners and African American students.

You are being invited to participate because you are either (a) the principal of one of the participating middle schools, or (b) a participating teacher at one of the participating middle schools.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

There are no known reasons for why you should not participate in this research study.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at your school. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is approximately 45 minutes.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to participate in one or more interviews. Interviews will be audio/video recorded. If you want to participate in an interview but do not want to be audio recorded, the interviewer will turn off the audio recorder. If you do not want to be video recorded, you will be able to sit out of field of view of the video camera and still be audio recorded. Interview questions will focus on the leadership of teaching and learning as it relates to student engagement in academic discourse in the classroom.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We do not know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We do not know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

The information in the study will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law.

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Consent forms and data from surveys and interviews will be maintained in a secure, locked location and will be stored for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

What if I decide I do not want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator Mark Triplett at 347-239-7509.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am – 5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the ORIC at 252-744-1971.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)

Signature

Date

