

ABSTRACT

Monica Smith Jacobson, **THE BRIDGE: HOW AN INNOVATIVE, COLLABORATIVE TEAM OF PRINCIPALS AND CURRICULUM SPECIALISTS SUPPORTS EQUITABLE INSTRUCTION IN SECONDARY CORE CLASSROOMS.** (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, May, 2024.

At the heart of all educational leadership is the desire to ultimately improve outcomes for students. After observing the ongoing process of principals and curriculum specialists supporting this effort in silos, I recognized a need to develop a collaborative framework, a bridge, to support instructional initiatives. The research study explores the collaborative efforts of school leaders and curriculum specialists in supporting equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework. Being a former school principal turned district leader, I identified the need for a collaborative structure to enhance instructional initiatives. The Focus of Practice (FoP) centers on strategies employed by principals and curriculum specialists to bridge the instructional gap to better support teachers, thus students. Four co-practitioner researchers (CPR) that included two secondary principals and two secondary district curriculum specialists who actively sought insight from various educational leaders partnered in the study. The site of the study was an eastern North Carolina school district serving over 23,000 students. The study extends over three iterative cycles, incorporating 1-1 interviews, mini-Community Learning Exchanges, professional learning opportunities, and monitoring visits to promote collaborative practice among educational colleagues. Findings from the 18-month inquiry reveal three strategies, analogous to a bridge: constructing meaningful relationships, connecting strong and supportive instructional communities, and creating a pathway for continuous learning. These strategies promote collaborative effort to foster improved instructional practices. The study emphasizes the significance of collaborative work between school leaders and curriculum specialists, highlighting the positive impact on student

outcomes. The study concludes with a call for educational leaders to build bridges in their instructional efforts with the support of district leadership. The implications for practice and research extend beyond local contexts to educational policies and the broader field, emphasizing the importance of collective efficacy for the ultimate goal of improved student outcomes.

THE BRIDGE: HOW AN INNOVATIVE, COLLABORATIVE TEAM OF PRINCIPALS
AND CURRICULUM SPECIALISTS SUPPORTS EQUITABLE INSTRUCTION IN
SECONDARY CORE CLASSROOMS

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By
Monica Smith Jacobson
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Director of Dissertation: Matthew Militello, PhD
Dissertation Committee Members:
Lawrence Hodgkins, EdD
Carrie Morris, EdD
Lynda Tredway, MA
Sandra Garbowicz David, PhD

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my family who have been and continue to be instrumental in my journey.

To my mother, Judy, and grandmother Betty, thank you for making the way! You modeled strength, perseverance, and resilience that I strive for every day. You reminded me that through Christ I can do all things. I am profoundly grateful for your sacrifices and encouragement.

To my husband, Mark, my pillar of support throughout this endeavor and countless others - you held me up even when I was not easy to support. You were often the order to my chaos. Your commitment to this family is unwavering - thank you for filling the gap when I could only support in spirit and not in presence. I appreciate your understanding and nudges of encouragement to help me realize my aspirations.

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Special thanks to my fellow co-practitioners, I appreciate your willingness to embark on this journey with me - to share and learn with me. Your perspectives and contributions were invaluable.

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To all, *REMEMBER YOUR PURPOSE!*

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CHAPTER 1: NAMING AND FRAMING THE FOCUS OF PRACTICE (FOP)

As I have grown in my role, I have found the most efficient and effective way to ensure teachers focus on students' strengths is for administrators to focus on teachers' strengths first.

Lisa Westman (2018)

School after school, class after class, I can identify the standard, honors, or Advanced Placement course level with a glance at the class demographics. It is disheartening to know that many students who elect to “level-down,” or choose less challenging coursework, could succeed in more rigorous classes. However, they too often choose to avoid those classes with advanced coursework. As educators, we often consider student factors such as low achievement or lack of motivation that continue the cycle of students becoming disengaged and opting for less challenging coursework. This cycle widens the instructional gap between underrepresented groups and their peers in advanced, rigorous coursework. Therefore, educators seek remedies to increase knowledge attainment and student motivation. Teachers often find themselves ill-equipped to reengage students and seek assistance from other educational leaders. Therefore, this project's Focus of Practice (FoP), the area of action and research, is the following: *Strategies principals and curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms*. In preparation for this research, I considered how principals and district curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable practices in the secondary core classrooms through professional development and monitoring protocols. In this chapter, I detail the Focus of Practice (FoP), its rationale, the related assets and challenges, and its significance. I will further describe the Participatory Action Research design, questions, and activities.

Focus of Practice

The Focus of Practice (FoP) is the *strategies principals and curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary, core classrooms*. The FoP is important to close the educational gap that exists, thereby raising the performance of all students. It is necessary for teachers to feel confident in their ability to instruct all students with the same level of rigor. By establishing a network of school leaders and district curriculum specialists, classroom instruction will be better supported. The network of school leaders will also utilize their relationships and influence to increase collective efficacy and teacher self-efficacy. Improvement of student achievement is dependent on many factors, but none are sufficient alone. Spillane (2013) asserts that school administration can make an impact on classroom instruction. Developing a collaborative network of principals and district curriculum specialists through this FoP does just that. Spillane (2013) continues with the assertion that a principal's position and leadership within a school allows them the opportunity to complete the diagnostic work, perform the necessary work on the ground, and design or redesign infrastructures to meet student and school needs. This FoP helped school leaders build their capacity and the capacity of others more thoughtfully and effectively within a network of other educational professionals. Spillane (2013) shares, "Adopting a diagnostic mindset towards the practice of leading and managing instruction so as to design for the improvement of that practice is essential" (p. 40).

FoP Rationale

An impetus for the FoP was an audit conducted by the College Board that identified the lack of students of color in advanced coursework within a local high school. Presented with the challenge of increasing students of color in more rigorous coursework, a teacher-initiated Community of Practice (CoP) was formed. The CoP created a cohort of students of color to

enroll in honors and Advanced Placement courses together to build critical mass. As described by Steele (2010), “The term ‘critical mass’ refers to the point at which there are enough minorities in a setting, like a school or a workplace, that individual minorities not feel uncomfortable there because they are minorities – in our terms, they no longer feel an interfering level of identity threat” (p. 135). The CoP collaborated with teachers known to have success with engaging all students with rigorous coursework. I recognized that teachers who were selected by the CoP utilized particular equitable practices to support inclusion and engage all students.

As I transitioned to a district-level position, I recognized the same scenario playing out in many secondary schools. At the school previously noted, school leaders considered the factors contributing to the disengaged student and the persistent instructional gap. A review of this school’s data indicated that typically underrepresented groups in Honors and Advanced courses continued even with staff efforts to encourage students to elect advanced classes. This is a primary reason the PAR focused on the collaborative teaming of principals and district curriculum specialists to focus on practices to support equitable instruction. As Rigby and Tredway (2015) indicated, “Effective school leaders are the connective tissue in school reform, and substantial consensus among researchers verifies the importance of school leadership and influencing teacher practice to improve student outcomes” (p. 329). Effective school leaders must have the capacity to lead instructionally, and equitably while doing so. The role instructional leadership plays is further discussed in Chapter 2.

Analysis of Assets and Challenges

Through a Community Learning Exchange (CLE) conducted with teachers and school leaders, the assets and challenges of the FoP were identified. Guajardo et al. (2016) stated “When people participate in CLE’s, they explore how they can cross boundaries in efforts to collectively

construct solutions for organizational and community challenges that unfetter and mobilize the assets, strengths, and dreams of community members” (p. 38). The CLE axioms are the starting point for the collaborative work:

1. Learning and leading are dynamic social processes.
 2. Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes.
 3. The people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns.
 4. Crossing boundaries enriches the development and educational processes.
 5. Hope and change are built on the assets and dreams of locals and their communities
- (Guajardo et al., 2016).

During a CLE conducted in November 2020, the participants were beginning to determine what strategies principals and district curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms. During the personal narrative activity of the CLE, participants analyzed classroom photos and assessed their comfort level in these classrooms. In the latter part of the CLE, the participants unpacked the assets and challenges through a Think-Matching activity. The CLE closed with participants analyzing how their narrative associated with the assets and challenges they identified.

I present the micro, meso, and macro-level assets and challenges from the CLE on a fishbone diagram (see Figure 1). The diagram, as described by Bryk et al. (2015), “...assists in working through this problem analysis and visually representing the product of discussions” (p. 68). The school leaders and teachers are at the micro-level. Both school leaders and teachers are eager to address the underperformance of students in the classroom. The meso level includes our district personnel, who provide support to school-level initiatives. Oftentimes, the support is a

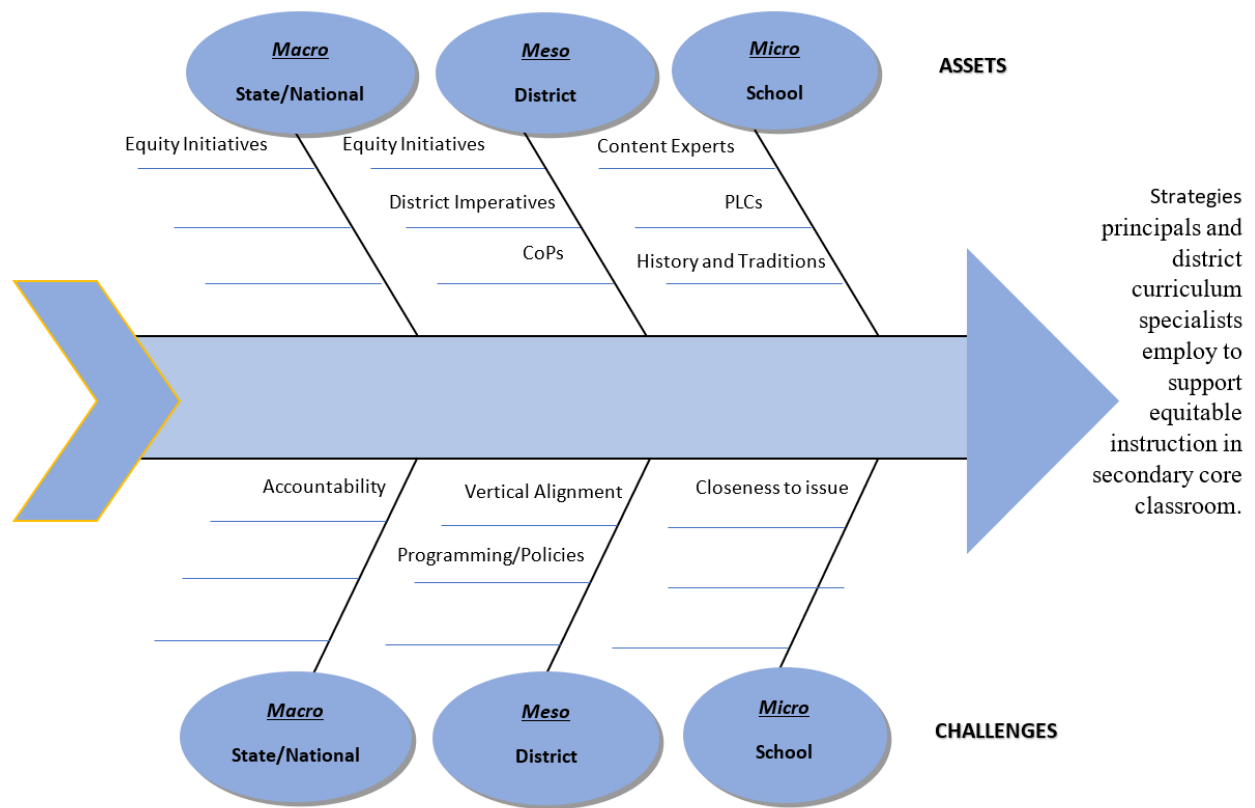


Figure 1. Fishbone diagram: Analysis of assets and challenges of FoP.

one-size-fits-all approach that does not address specific student or school needs. This issue of consistency among school and district programming is visible at the macro level of state and national policy and programming. A shift of policy and programming from equality to equity will serve students and schools well.

Micro Assets and Challenges

A primary asset is the teachers' content expertise and the efficient functioning of their professional learning communities (PLCs) at the school level. In my tenure as a principal, the school met growth, in seven of eight years, with the math department exceeding growth in each of those years (see Table 1). Due to both teachers' and school leaders' longevity and invested time, understanding and acknowledging the school history and traditions are assets. However, that connection can prove as a challenge as teachers and school leaders can be too close to the issue to reflect without bias. This school's accountability success, especially amongst the math department teachers, produced a focus on those who "do," not recognizing those left behind or the unengaged. Students being left behind or unengaged is often attributed to the students themselves.

Meso Assets and Challenges

At the meso level of district support, the District implemented new initiatives to address individual schools' problem of practices. District leaders collaborate with school leadership to implement Community of Practices (CoPs) to address various problems of practices at schools. In 2020, our District supported 87 CoPs. Militello et al. (2009) describe the benefit of CoPs, "Members of school communities of practice collaborate with the goal of supporting their work toward instructional improvement. As the name implies, communities of practice examine

Table 1

School Math Growth and Proficiency Data

Growth/Proficiency	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Math Growth	2.1	2.0	.1			
Math Growth Index	6.52	5.74	.26			
Math Proficiency	52 (combined w/English 2 and Math 3)	58.4 (combined w/English 2)	53	49	46	43

their practice. They analyze data related to the work to inform their planning and decisions; the dialogue results in learning that builds coherence and capacity for change” (p. 29). Equity is another district focus, as indicated in the District’s Imperatives. Equity is an overarching concept of the Imperatives with the expectation that it is embedded in all practices related to curriculum, instruction, professional accountability, and professional culture. However, the impacts of local norms and the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the slow movement of supportive programming. If these challenges are addressed, equity initiatives coupled with collaborative practice lend themselves well to principals and district curriculum specialists employing strategies to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms.

Macro Assets and Challenges

Considering macro assets, equity initiatives at the state and national level are a driving force for related district and school initiatives. Addressing equity issues at the state and national levels encounters similar challenges as those faced by district-level equity initiatives. As a plan to remedy such issues, “the U.S. Department of Education (USED) required all State educational agencies (SEAs) to submit a new State Educator Equity Plan in accordance with the requirements of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). In its plan, each SEA must, among other things, describe the steps it will take to ensure that ‘poor and minority children are not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers” (NCDPI, 2015).

As accountability measures provide performance data and highlight learning gaps, they also promote inequities, particularly with reward systems. In North Carolina, high school teachers are financially rewarded for student proficiency in Advanced Placement courses, evidenced by the College Board exams. As a result of this legislated teacher bonus, teachers

often target students who have traditionally performed well in honors and Advanced Placement courses. This identification begins with foundational courses and omits students who have failed to be engaged over the years.

The micro, meso, and macro-level assets are beneficial to school principals and district curriculum specialists in addressing the FoP. District specialist content expertise, strong school leadership, and equity programs at all levels supported the work within the PAR. Although challenges exist, school principals and district curriculum specialists were willing to be reflective and confront conflicting programming and policy to address the FoP. Gutiérrez (2013) would describe these efforts as the political nature of teaching.

Significance

The significance of principals and district curriculum specialists employing strategies to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms is multifaceted. The FOP and the PAR hold importance in the local context, educational practice, various policies, and areas of research. The FoP affected school leaders, teachers, and ultimately students within our district. However, it has significance to schools across the nation. Equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms is an issue relevant to teachers across our country. Having the capacity to provide equitable instruction is a necessity for teachers. School leaders and district curriculum specialists are in a unique position to provide professional development opportunities that teachers may not be afforded in pre-service programs, all within a relevant setting.

Context

The specifics of the FoP are important to our district as we focus on equity initiatives and instructional leadership. As previously shared, Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors classes are typically not reflective of a school's racial demographics. At the school where the CLE was

conducted, students of color made up a small percentage of the AP and Honors classes. Student demographics at the school were, in 2020-21, approximately 50% Black, 36% White, 7% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 5% Multiracial, and less than 1% Other (see Figure 2). There is a startling difference in student demographics compared to the students designated Academically-Intellectually Gifted (AIG), as shown in Figure 3. AIG students have overwhelmingly been directed toward Honors and AP classes at the high school level. School leaders are purposeful in their efforts to increase the participation of underrepresented students while increasing the success of all students in advanced coursework. Even such, school leaders are also recognizing that pre-service programs for teachers and educational leaders have not traditionally prepared them for the structuring of equitable classrooms. Therefore, it is essential for school leaders to grow in their ability to build the capacity of classroom teachers concerning equitable classroom practices.

Practice

As aforementioned, the lack of student achievement is often attributed to student factors, not factors of teacher instruction or policy and programming instituted by leadership. Gutiérrez (2013) argues specifically that mathematics teaching is more than truth, but a social phenomenon that teachers must help students navigate. The FoP and PAR rely on school principals and district curriculum specialists to provide support for teachers. As principals and district curriculum specialists alter their practices to recognize teaching as a social phenomenon, they will see a change in instructional practice and the disengaged students' learning perspectives. Such practices are not exclusive to math curriculum within our district. The practices translate into other areas of study and schools across the nation.

Student Body Demographics

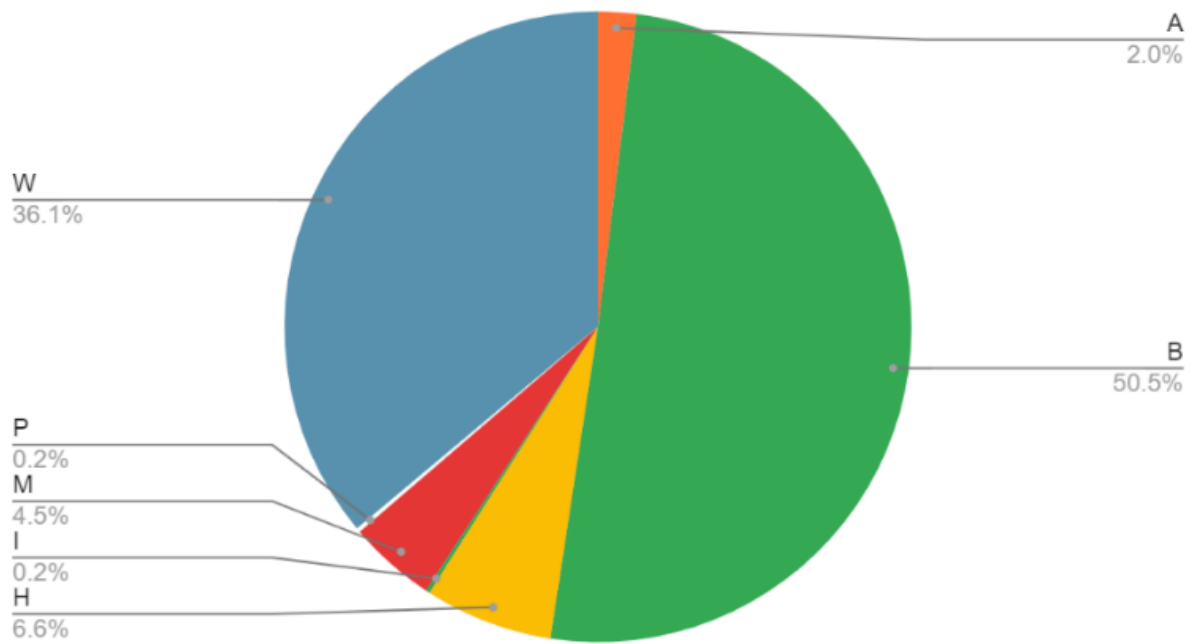


Figure 2. School's student body demographics for the 2020-21 school year.

AIG Demographics

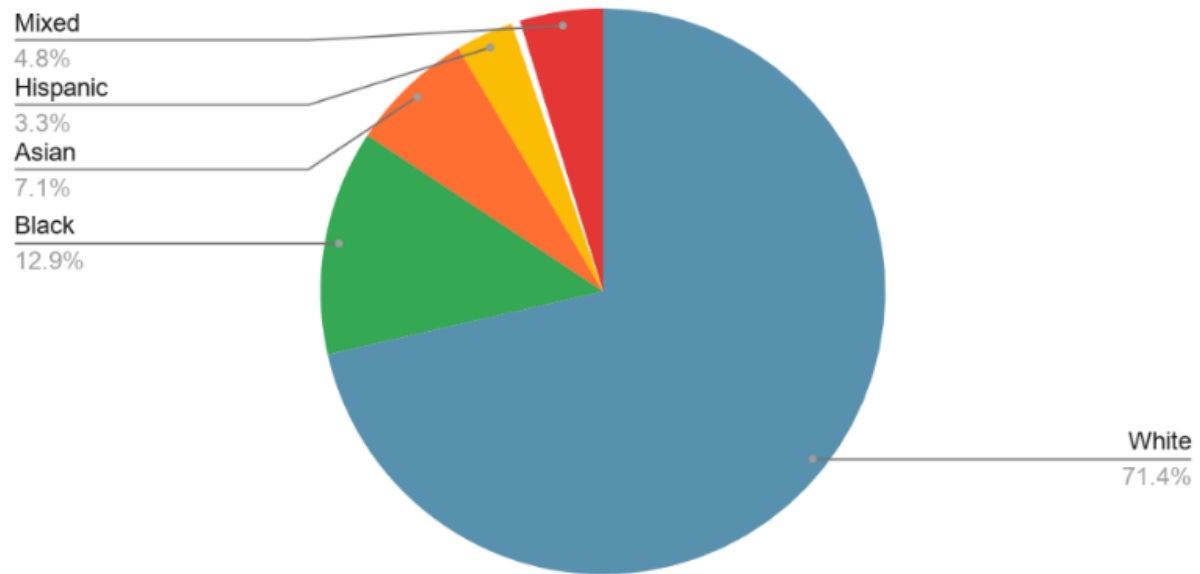


Figure 3. School's AIG demographics for the 2020-21 school year.

Policy

Change in practice for school principals and district curriculum specialists can impact policy at and beyond the district level. In particular, policy changes will support teacher preparation and professional development opportunities that directly address student equity issues. Additionally, an outcome of this PAR was to minimize the District's practice of a one-size-fits-all approach and allow school leaders the flexibility of enacting programming that benefits their Focus of Practice. This provides an opportunity to influence pre-service programming for both teachers and school leaders.

Research

The PAR was intended to encourage collaboration between principals and district curriculum specialists in supporting equitable instruction, which had traditionally been isolated work. Underperformance, such as leveling down in course selection, is often a result of disengagement. Too often, efforts by principals and specialists to support classroom engagement have been done in silos. The PAR work and FoP encouraged research to focus on collaborative practice among school principals and district curriculum specialists. This project added to the current research on collaborative practice, equitable instruction, and school and district level leadership.

Connection to Equity

In this participatory action research (PAR) project, I am focused specifically on the strategies principals and district curriculum specialists employed to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms. The focus of practice directly relates to equity as our district's advanced classes do not mirror the demographics of our schools, resulting from disengagement with traditional instructional methods. Based on the work of Hammond and Jackson (2015) and

Gonzalez (2017), a simple means to determining if one's teaching is culturally responsive is to assess the learning of their students of color and other marginalized students. Equity frameworks that influence the focus of practice are political and sociological. The work of Gutiérrez (2013) supports the political framework, while the research of Hammond and Jackson (2015), Wright (2011), and others reflect the psychological frameworks.

Political Framework of the Focus of Practice

Gutiérrez (2013) discusses how students' success in math occurs when teachers understand their teaching's political nature. This is applicable to other content areas as well. Gutiérrez (2013) emphasizes that teachers must understand who their students and communities are, how their society perceives them, and the challenges they encounter because of such perceptions. Gutiérrez's (2013) works focused primarily on the urban math teacher but are applicable to other content area teachers with similar dynamics. She argued that urban teachers are charged with the following (p.7):

- serving historically underserved and/or marginalized youth in inequitable circumstances
- negotiating their practice with those who may disagree with their definitions of "education," or "learning"
- working with fewer resources
- buffering themselves from stereotypes associated with urban schools

Like many other districts within our school settings, students who are traditionally underrepresented in advanced courses continue to avoid such classes even when they can self-enroll. This is prevalent even when the students have a proven ability in a subject area. Student factors contributing to this issue are too often the focus and not the organizational and structural

level challenges. Challenges include educators being too close to the issue, conflicting programs and policies, state and federal accountability measures, and policies that conflict with equity initiatives. Therefore, with the support of school leaders and district curriculum specialists, teachers are responsible for acting upon political *conocimiento* and taking risks to assist their students in “playing” and “changing” the game. Gutiérrez (2013) states:

For me, political *conocimiento* assumes clarity and a stance on teaching that maintains solidarity with and commitment to one’s students. Among other things, political *conocimiento* involves: understanding how oppression in schooling operates not only at the individual level but also the systemic level; deconstructing the deficit discourses about historically underserved and/or marginalized students; negotiating the world of high-stakes testing and standardization; connecting with and explaining one’s discipline to community members and district officials; and buffering oneself, reinventing, or subverting the system to be an advocate for one’s students (p. 11).

The PAR intended for school principals and curriculum specialists to understand their political *conocimiento* and assist teachers in recognizing political *conocimiento* in their classrooms, thus improving their classroom instruction through equitable practices. As Rigby and Tredway (2015) share, “Without a firm self-examination of his or her role in historically inequitable structures, a school leader is not able to authentically engage with his or her school community (regardless of the level of sameness or difference in the principal’s and school community’s identities)” (p. 332).

Psychological Framework of the Focus of Practice

Bias and stereotypes have perpetuated instances of homogenous advanced course classrooms. Often unrecognized, this impacts a teacher’s interactions with students and vice

versa. With the possibility of strained interactions in the classroom, teachers tend to avoid re-engaging the disengaged, leading to a vicious cycle. The student altogether avoids engagement and underperforms in classes, completing the bare minimum of coursework in the content area. Outside of parents, teachers have a substantial impact on students' academic choices. Teachers' biases and advanced learning identification processes often prevent students from participating in more rigorous coursework (Hayes, 2007). And, when the traditionally underrepresented students do participate, they often feel unsupported.

I argue that teachers feel ill-equipped to support all students in advanced courses. Lubienski and Lubienski (2006) and Wright (2011) assert that a deficit mindset exists among teachers when considering the learning practices of students who have traditionally been underrepresented in advanced classes.

Participatory Action Research Design

As I examined the focus of practice, I collaborated through Participatory Action Research (PAR), otherwise known as Action Research (AR). My collaboration was with school principals and district curriculum specialists, specifically in secondary schools. As hunter et al. (2013) assert, "At its broadest, AR is a research approach that works with a community on a common topic of interest, that is, engaging the community in finding answers and applying those answers to the point of concern" (p. 17). As part of the PAR, school principals and district curriculum specialists implemented an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable classroom instruction. As the lead researcher, I provided opportunities throughout the process for all participants, principals, and curriculum specialists to be reflective and active. "Action research is inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them. It is a reflective process..." (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 3).

To build upon the rapport between the CPR and to discuss the need for the then-proposed PAR project, the CPR held a Community Learning Exchange (CLE) in the fall of 2020 to analyze the assets and challenges facing the FOP. The PAR project included additional mini-CLEs, which I may reference as Building Community sessions, to allow the CPR to engage in three cycles of inquiry during the project. One of the significant action steps for the CPR was to create a network of school leaders that employed professional learning opportunities for teachers. These strategies will aid in improving teachers' practices, thus supporting equitable instruction.

As part of the PAR, principals and district curriculum specialists collaboratively organized monitoring protocols to provide feedback, supporting equitable instruction in the secondary core classroom. This provided a path for teachers to increase their competence and confidence in instructing all students. Culturally Responsive Teaching is about building the learning capacity of the individual student (Hammond & Jackson, 2015). The focus of practice is connected to political and psychological equity factors. The PAR sought to mitigate these factors by supporting equitable classroom practices. Structures were created to support the collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists. At the same time, stakeholders promoted the increased engagement and performance of students in their classes.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Through research and implementation of professional learning opportunities, this participatory action research (PAR) project aimed to determine ways a team of principals and district curriculum specialists built an innovative, collaborative team to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms for whole school improvement.

The overarching research question: What strategies do principals and district curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?

- How do principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?
- How does a collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists work with secondary core teachers through observation protocols?
- To what extent is my professional growth, as a district leader, supported by participating in Participatory Action Research?

These research questions guided the participatory action research (PAR) and informed a theory of action.

Theory of Action

Observation and review of data sources show that addressing instructional practices is a priority in minimizing the equity gap in classrooms. The PAR project's theory of action was that IF an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists provide professional learning opportunities and utilize monitoring protocols focusing on whole-school improvement, THEN equitable instruction in core secondary classrooms will be supported, thus improved.

Proposed Project Activities

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) project explored the study at two secondary school sites, one middle school and one high school, within an urban district that serves over 23,000 students. Both schools are located within a town in eastern North Carolina. The middle school served almost 900 students, whereas the high school served over 1,600. To conduct the study at these school sites, the researchers utilized the qualitative research process for its inductive approach.

The unit of analysis was the school principals and curriculum specialists. The CPR formally included two secondary school principals and two secondary district curricula

specialists. As the PAR progressed, other school leaders were included to provide additional expertise. As Community Learning Exchanges (CLE), or Building Community sessions, were conducted, other school community members, were included for their experiences and feedback.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the project included three cycles. The PAR Pre-cycle consisted of routine Co-Practitioner Researchers' (CPR) meetings. The focus of those meetings was to build rapport among the principals and district curriculum specialists and the collaborative team co-creating professional development and monitoring protocols. The collaborative team became well acquainted with the tools to assess, monitor, and provide coaching feedback on such practices. Also, during the pre-cycle, CPR meetings were held to analyze the assets and challenges of the focus of practice.

Summary

After observing the ongoing process of school leaders and curriculum specialists supporting teachers in silos, I recognized a need to develop a collaborative framework to support instructional initiatives. As a result, the FoP was identified as strategies principals and district curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms. Through Participatory Action Research (PAR), a network of principals and district curriculum specialists worked collaboratively through three cycles of activities to include professional development, Community Learning Exchanges, and implementation of strategies in school leader and teacher practices. Although the PAR was conducted at two secondary sites, the results have impacts on local context, educational practice, various policies, and other areas of research. More importantly, the PAR focused on equity to reduce the educational achievement gap, resulting in increased achievement for all students.

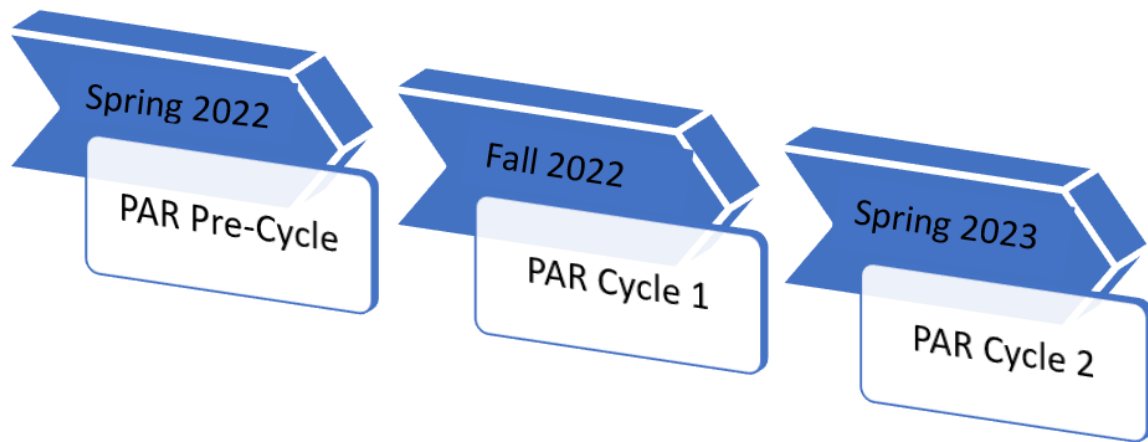


Figure 4. Participatory Action Research timeline.

The dissertation includes six additional chapters focusing on the aspects of the FoP and PAR. Chapter 2 is a literature review of materials related to the role of educational leaders and the impact of self-efficacy and collective efficacy on student achievement and attainment. The methodology associated with the PAR is discussed in Chapter 3. Chapters 4 through 6 describe the context and PAR cycles. A summary and discussion of the PAR conclude the dissertation in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This Participatory Action Research sought to examine strategies principals and district curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms. For this study, my primary focus of school leaders was the school principal. The curriculum specialists were focused on the core content areas. The roles for both are continuously evolving and the literature promotes more collaborative work between the two.

Important to success in their practice is efficacy and more specifically collective efficacy. The sources of efficacy and its cyclical nature were examined with an emphasis on student achievement. In Chapter 2, I explore the literature related to the role of school leaders and curriculum specialists and efficacy.

The Role of the School Leader & Curriculum Specialists

The role of school leaders, specifically the role of the principal, has evolved since the inception of traditional, public schools. Principals hold many managerial tasks, but a transition towards more instructional then to transformational leadership has taken hold. The continuously evolving role of the principal has also made the role more complex while navigating managerial, instructional, and political tasks (Fullan, 2014). In the 1980s, a sharp turn towards instructional leadership began due to the curricular reforms occurring in the two decades beforehand; much of the leadership prior having been a top-down approach (Fullan, 2014). In the 1990s, educators and policymakers alike realized that a top-down approach was not the best means to meeting school needs. A realization occurred that those in the best position to make decisions for the schools were those closest to the issue (Guajardo et al., 2016; Herr & Anderson, 2014). A call for more school-based management ensued. Ambrosie and Haley (1991) asserted that site-based management should make the role of district curriculum content experts expendable. They

argued that district curriculum specialists, being a function of centralized services, contradicts site-based management. Specifically, Ambrosie and Haley (1991) noted, “ Principals and teachers must take the lead in the development, implementation, and assessment of curriculum and instruction provided at the building level” (p. 76). They continue by asserting that school-based leadership should initiate curriculum change efforts. Noted by Ambrosie and Haley (1991) were the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development’s (1989) four expectations for the changing role of the principal under site-based management:

1. The principal is expected to be a resource provider.
2. The principal is expected to be an instructional resource.
3. The principal is expected to be a communicator.
4. The principal is expected to set a tone by visible.

I agree with the stated expectations, however, I further contend that developed relationships and collaboration between district and school leadership provide for greater impact on student achievement. For purposes of school improvement and student achievement, principals must stay abreast of best pedagogical practices and are instrumental in implementation alongside other educators, both internal and external.

Spillane (2013) proposed that educational leaders adopt a diagnostic mindset to improve teaching, thus student performance. Spillane (2013) discussed that prepackaged programs and reforms may serve their purpose in school improvement if they address a school’s particular needs, are appropriately put to practice, and are designed or redesigned in conjunction with the school’s infrastructure. This requires a school leader to effectively diagnose school needs and design programming to address those needs. Spillane (2013) argues this should be done in a distributive manner, stating, “In thinking about the practice of leading and managing instruction,

we must get beyond individual actions – equating practice with the actions of the school principal or some other formal leader and acknowledging that practice takes shape in social interactions” (p. 40). Leithwood et al. (1990) expressed, “the enhancement of individual and collective problem-solving capacities of organizational members; such capacities are exercised in their identification of goals to be achieved and practices to be used in their achievement” (p. 7).

This study asserts that there are benefits to collective problem-solving that can be had between a school principal and curriculum specialists in reference to student achievement. The role of the curriculum specialist has not been studied as extensively as the role of the principal, partly due to its recent introduction to school districts with shifts in instructional practice. Additionally, the role of curriculum or instructional specialists differs in various district settings. In some districts, the specialists are assigned to a single school whereas in other districts they may be assigned to multiple schools. In addition, the assigned areas of focus may be a single content area or combined content areas. In the context of this observed district, curriculum specialists serve all schools within a particular grade span in their content area. Of note, each school within the district also has one to two instructional coaches based at their school sites. For this study, I focus on the 6-8 and 9-12 core content area curriculum specialists. Although the two curriculum specialists serving as co-practitioner researchers specialized in math, insights were gained from district curriculum specialists in the areas of English-language arts, science, and social studies. Many job descriptions for instructional coaches and curriculum specialists exist that detail various expectations. Most often the descriptions are similar; however, in the observed district there is a distinction in their responsibilities as noted in the job posting excerpts in Figure 5.

K-12 INSTRUCTIONAL COACH JOB DESCRIPTION

Purpose: The Instructional Coach, having both content and instructional expertise, will work as a colleague with classroom teachers to support student learning and teacher practice. The Instructional Coach will focus on individual and group professional learning that will expand and refine the understanding about research-based effective instruction for teachers. In order to meet this purpose, the Instructional Coach will provide personalized, 1:1 support based on the goals and identified needs of individual teachers.

General Responsibilities:

- 1) Demonstrate willingness to assume leadership positions.
- 2) Provide organized, individual and/or group learning opportunities for teachers as needed.
- 3) Provide support in analyzing student assessment data.
- 4) Assist teachers with designing instructional decisions based on assessment data when requested.
- 5) Assist teachers with specific classroom activities when requested.
- 6) Provide support for classroom motivation and management strategies.
- 7) Assist teachers in creating materials that are in alignment with curriculum.
- 8) Provide teachers resources related to instruction and curriculum.
- 9) Provide assistance in researching instructional and/or curriculum issues.
- 10) Model effective, differentiated instruction when requested.
- 11) Provide encouragement and emotional support to teachers.
- 12) Encourage ongoing professional growth for all teachers.
- 13) Manage time and schedule flexibility to maximizes teacher schedules and learning.
- 14) Work positively toward meeting identified district and building improvement goals.
- 15) Assist with development of district curriculum, instruction and assessments.
- 16) Develop and maintain a confidential, collegial relationship with teachers.
- 17) Possess an understanding of when to contact administrators regarding issues of safety/ethics involving students in classroom observed.
- 18) Perform duties as assigned by the Principal and the Director of Curriculum and Instruction.
- 19) Participate fully in professional development for coaches, including peer observations, professional research and reading, and inquiry sessions.
- 20) Assist teachers in aligning their teaching with appropriate standards, curriculum and assessments.
- 21) Work collaboratively and collegially with other Instructional Coaches, curriculum specialists and district specialists.

SCHOOLS

Secondary (Content Area)Curriculum Specialist

Job Overview: Provide (Content Area) Curriculum leadership for assigned secondary schools through curriculum development, professional development, and instructional support.

- Responsibilities:**
- Collaborate with the Director of Secondary Education regarding secondary (Content Area) curricula
 - Interpret and inform of North Carolina Curriculum changes to ensure instructional alignment
 - Monitor implementation of Secondary NC/PCS (Content Area) curricula and expectations
 - Analyze and use assessment data to identify professional development needs
 - Provide organized, individual and/or group learning opportunities for instructional leaders and teachers as needed
 - Recommend professional growth opportunities for (Content Area) teachers
 - Provide support to school instructional leaders and teachers
 - Assist with the selection of effective instructional methods and strategies, materials, and equipment (including technology resources)
 - Collaborate with other curriculum specialists to provide an integrated program
 - Perform other related work as required

Figure 5. Job description excerpts: School-based instructional coach & district curriculum specialist.

While the expectations parallel in endeavors to bolster instruction and curriculum support, there is a distinction in the observed district. The task of closely supporting classroom teachers with instruction is delegated to the school-based instructional coach, while the broader responsibility for curriculum support is assumed by the district curriculum specialist. I reiterate that school improvement efforts require principals to collaborate with colleagues within their buildings, such as the instructional coach, and external colleagues, such as the district curriculum specialists.

Research differentiating the roles of school-based coaches and district curriculum specialists is limited. However, in a mixed-method study conducted in Flanders, Belgium, researchers surveyed 63 teachers and 14 coaches, both internal and external, participating in teacher development teams (Compen & Schelfhout, 2020). In the study conducted by Compen and Schelfhout, the researchers collected data to determine the differences in the roles of internal and external coaches along with the impacts on teacher learning and school outcomes. I align the internal coaches to the observed district's school-based instructional coaches and the external coaches to the district's curriculum specialists. A summary of their findings suggests the following:

- Coaching activities for both external and internal coaches had positive impacts on teachers.
- A shared leadership behavior was noted in external coaches with a more vertical approach by internal coaches.
- External coaches primarily provided expertise on the new curriculum for content-based coaching, while internal coaches engaged more in the co-development of material.

- External coaches referred to adapting their support to the team's needs with their broader range of competencies and deeper expertise.
- Internal coaches support the trajectory initiated by the external coach for improved school outcomes.
- Self-efficacy increased with participating in teacher development teams supported by coaches.

Overall, coaching plays a crucial role in the team learning process with coaching activities influencing teachers' perceptions of team effectiveness and material quality. To be successful in those instructional and curricular endeavors with teachers, it is important to have mutual communication and a support system suggested in the findings.

Typically, school leaders and district curriculum specialists have worked in isolation. Even in the research, there is limited analysis of the benefits of a collaborative team of school leaders and district curriculum specialists. Honig et al. (2017), through the exploration of six districts, assert that district office personnel access the research about reforms that will benefit the schools; however, understanding and effectively putting the research into practice is lacking. The few examined cases of collaborative work between school leaders and district curriculum specialists are promising, showing improved learning and teaching in schools (Honig et al., 2017). As such, the changing roles of educators and the instructional and curricular demands call for the work to be more collaborative. An additional advantage is the increased self and collective efficacy also proposed by Compen and Schelfhout (2020).

The Role of Efficacy

While educators at the secondary level typically have a solid grasp of the content knowledge in their respective subject areas, there is more to successful instruction than being a

subject area expert. Efficacy plays a huge role in student engagement and achievement as it impacts how educators use their knowledge and skills. Studies indicate that professional learning aids in building self and collective efficacy, resulting in positive outcomes for students (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Khan, 2012; Puckett, 2017).

Understanding Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy finds its roots in Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which evolved from Social Learning Theory. Bandura's theories suggest that imitated behaviors that are rewarded continue to be performed. Self-efficacy is belief in one's capability to perform; the higher one's self-efficacy the more likely one is to perform at high levels. Hence, educator self-efficacy is a construct that has major impacts on educator behaviors that impact the classroom and can simply be defined as an educator's belief in their capability to impact student learning. The literature was clear not to misconstrue efficacy as esteem. Tschannen-Moran et al. (2008) indicated self-esteem is an evaluation of one's self-characteristics. However, an educator's efficacy affects student self-esteem, as will be discussed later.

Bandura asserts that there are four sources of efficacy: experience, modeling, verbal persuasion, and physiological factors (see Figure 6). These sources play a role by impacting one's self-efficacy beliefs, thus behavior. Bandura (1977a) indicated that the most influential of the sources was mastery experience. Self-efficacy improves because of increased confidence and knowledge from mastering more and more tasks. Banked mastery experiences allow an individual to view occasional setbacks as a challenge rather than a threat (Puckett, 2017).

Modeling or vicarious experience is also a powerful source of self-efficacy. When an individual views another individual succeeding at a task, that increases their confidence in their ability to be successful at the same task. The increase in self-efficacy via vicarious experience is

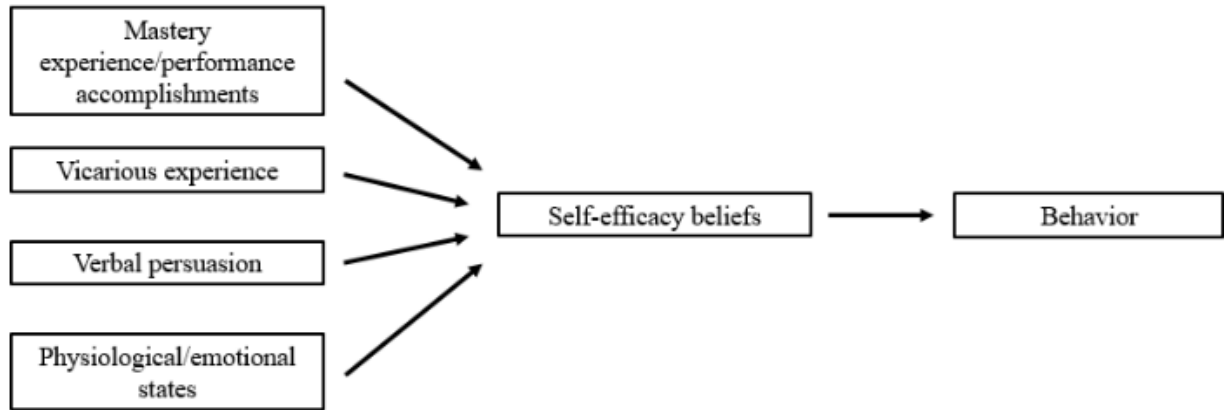


Figure 6. Four sources of self-efficacy.

more pronounced when the individual sees the “model” as someone similar to himself. Another source of efficacy is verbal or social persuasion (Bandura, 1977b, 1991, 1995; Puckett, 2017). When an individual receives positive encouragement or feedback about a task, their self-efficacy increases. In such cases, they are more likely to repeat the task.

Lastly, the final source as shared by Bandura (1977b, 1991, 1995) is psychological factors or states. Positive reactions to tasks promote repetition of the task by the individual. For example, having a feeling of euphoria while doing an oral presentation will increase one’s self-efficacy in presenting to others.

The positive factors that contribute to increased self-efficacy were discussed. However, the opposite effect occurs when an individual is confronted with negative mastery, vicarious, social, or psychological experiences or factors. In such cases, this could cause waning in one’s self-efficacy.

Stohlmann et al. (2012) conducted a year-long partnership with a mid-western middle school focusing on the implementation of an integrated STEM model. Educator efficacy was noted in their findings. As Stohlmann et al. (2012) stated, “Teacher efficacy is extremely important for successful teaching” (p. 30). However, as simply stated by Stohlmann et al., efficacy impacts behaviors that result in successful educational practices. Higher efficacy results in being collaboratively involved in their organization with positive relationships with colleagues. As such, educators are more willing to accept, attempt, and adopt new instructional practices as they view change and challenges as opportunities for growth.

Understanding Collective Efficacy

Groups with collective efficacy tend to exhibit a growth mindset. A growth mindset is evident in schools with high expectations for all students and the mitigation of barriers that

students may face. Educator groups with high collective efficacy feel empowered and exert the appropriate control they have in their school settings to limit adverse situations. As DeWitt (2022) shares, collective efficacy can impact a whole school building.

Collective efficacy refers to a group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to attain its goals and accomplish desired tasks (Bandura, 1991). Although the research on collective efficacy is more recent, the four sources of self-efficacy are the same drivers for collective efficacy. If educators feel efficacious in their own right and expertise, then they bring that confidence to the group, thus increasing collective efficacy (DeWitt, 2022). Also of importance when considering group efficacy is understanding that the power or decision-making does not live with one individual. In schools, it is important that school leaders restructure the hierarchy to elevate the status of other educator leaders, recognizing that school leadership is distributed among formal and informal leaders (DeWitt 2022; Goddard et al., 2015; Spillane, 2013). So, while self-efficacy is important to collective efficacy, research suggests that district investments in instructional leadership have a greater impact on collective efficacy than on self-efficacy. More importantly is that collective efficacy in schools has a substantial impact on student achievement in reading and math (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Impact of Professional Development on Efficacy

Stohlmann et al. (2012) share, "Content knowledge and quality pedagogy play a large part in feelings of efficacy (p. 30)." Therefore, it is imperative that quality professional development opportunities are available and accessible for educators to grow in their knowledge and pedagogy to increase efficacy.

Quality professional development opportunities build educator confidence in facilitating instruction in the classroom. As we specifically examine the secondary core classroom, teachers

in those classrooms must have access to professional development that will engage the student. Doerr et al. (2010) contend that four specific characteristics should be built upon when focusing on professional development: usable knowledge, ability to analyze and respond to student thinking, productive habits of mind, and dispositions for instructional improvement and professional networks. However, while focusing on learning opportunities, Marzano (2003) suggests providing professional development that highlights student-centered classrooms and high-order questioning.

In any case of professional development, the resources to support learning must be in place for teachers. As Doerr et al. (2010) suggested, professional networks are one way to continue learning. However, teachers also need the time to practice and implement. Teachers must also be afforded the resources. Another key component is principals frequently monitoring and providing feedback on instruction. Goddard et al.'s (2015) work affirmed that the instructional leadership of a principal was a significant predictor of collective efficacy showing the cyclical nature of efficacy. Goddard et al.'s (2015) findings are based on the analysis of teacher respondents from a sample of 93 rural schools in a midwestern state.

Impact of Efficacy on Students

Ultimately, the goal of a collaborative, efficacious team of school leaders and curriculum specialists is to positively impact students and their achievement. As shared by Goddard et al. (2015), several documented studies indicate that collective efficacy is predictive of student achievement in schools and that collective development of curriculum and instruction resulted in improved student outcomes. Many studies have detailed the strong correlation between teacher efficacy and student achievement (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Wing, 2020). Specifically speaking on

student effects, the review of literature by Bryson (2019) noted that increased educator efficacy positively influences not only student achievement but also the following:

1. Student efficacy
2. Student respect and confidence in educators
3. Student-educator relationships
4. Student motivation

Again, this illustrates the cyclical nature of efficacy. Goddard et al. (2015) stated “The more robust the sense of collective efficacy characterizing the schools in our sample, the greater their levels of student achievement, even after controlling for school and student background characteristics and prior levels of student achievement” (p. 525).

Summary

School leaders play a significant role in the instructional practices implemented by classroom teachers. The support of curriculum specialists has aided in cultivating those practices as well. However, all too often, school leaders and curriculum specialists work in isolation from one another. The literature promotes collaborative work between these school leaders and curriculum specialists in building self-efficacy and collective efficacy for the benefit of teachers, students, and schools. Further research on bridging the work of school leaders and curriculum specialists is warranted as this has been a limited area of study. The Focus of Practice (FoP) for this study examines the strategies principals and district curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the research design for the Participatory Action Research (PAR).

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

To understand the Focus of Practice, I engaged in a qualitative research project. More specifically, utilizing a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, I examined strategies principals and curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms. Observation and research prove that principals and curriculum specialists often work in isolation when supporting core instruction in secondary classrooms. In addition, professional development provided by leaders usually leaves teachers with information on strategies yet often lacks the necessary teacher support to implement the strategies successfully. Timperley (2011) asserts, it is vital for educational leadership, hence principals and curriculum specialists, to work collaboratively to build the capacity of themselves and the teachers.

The context of this study rests within two secondary school sites, one middle school and one high school. The schools serve approximately 840 and 1,615 students, respectively. They are within the same urban school district that serves over 23,000 students in eastern North Carolina. Throughout this study, to avoid identifying participants, the schools will be referred to as Ashcroft Middle and Sheffield High.

The principals of each school and the curriculum specialists have generally worked in silos while supporting teachers. Eric Sheniger, author of *Uncommon learning: Creating schools that work for kids*, shared in a 2016 blog post, “The silo effect creates a mirage that everything is great. It also restricts the thinking of the collective to implement innovative ideas that can transform teaching, learning, and leadership” (para. 3). Through observation and review of data sources, it is evident that there is a need to implement an innovative, collaborative practice among principals and curriculum specialists to support equitable practices in the secondary core classroom. The theory of action is, if an innovative, collaborative team of principals and district

curriculum specialists implement professional development opportunities and utilize observation protocols to monitor processes and strategies, then we will improve equitable instruction in core secondary classrooms.

This chapter presents the qualitative research design methodologies and project design detailing the participatory action research (PAR) revolving around the research questions. The details regarding the participants and the reason for their selection are provided. The conclusion of this chapter will attend to the methods of data collection, analysis through cycles of inquiry, and the limitations of the study.

Qualitative Research Process

I utilized the qualitative research process for this study. The impetus for most qualitative research is a result of experience and observed occurrences, which leads the researchers to seek generalizations and concepts to support a theory change (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, from professional experience, further supported by literature, silos in education limit potential growth while working in tandem accelerates positive outcomes. While conducting this research, the qualitative, inductive process allows the primary researchers to serve as a key instrument for collecting multiple data sources within the natural setting of schools. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest, meaning-making occurs through the analysis and reflection of data sources. The design was somewhat fluid and allowed for emergent data to support a shift in the process. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) design was utilized with the intent to work with principals and district curriculum specialists, who do not routinely collaborate on instructional practices in secondary core classrooms. The qualitative research approach was best suited for my work.

Participatory Action Research

In Participatory Action Research (PAR), the roles of the participants and practitioners are interchanging and interdependent. As hunter et al. (2013) state, “With its open, dialogic and interactive approach that emphasizes reciprocity, trust, and collective action, PAR breaks down the traditional barrier between the researcher and the researched” (p. 26). The PAR can bring diverse expertise to the research and allow for learning among all members. Determining the individuals to serve as Co-Practitioners Researchers (CPR) in this PAR project was highly important. Hunter et al. (2013) acknowledge, “These relationships respond to place-based problems through processes of collective learning and community capacity building” (p. 26).

For those reasons of collective learning and capacity building, Participatory Action Research was selected as the study method for my research. Improvement sciences, community learning exchanges (CLE), and praxis will allow the Co-Practitioner Researchers to forge relationships for collective learning and capacity building.

Community Learning Exchange (CLE)

CLEs are an effective means of collaborating and gathering data during this study to implement further action. “When people participate in CLE’s, they explore how they can cross boundaries in efforts to collectively construct solutions for organizational and community challenges that unfetter and mobilize the assets, strengths, and dreams of community members” (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 30). The CLE axioms, as detailed in Chapter 1, were the starting point for the collaborative work.

Throughout the study, I used the CLE axioms to guide the collaborative work of the mini CLEs that I reference as Building Community sessions. The underpinnings of the CLE axioms proved beneficial for co-learning and praxis during the study.

Role of Praxis

The direction of my PAR was to engage in praxis, reflection, plus action. Hunter et al. (2013) specifically described traditional research as extractive, indicating knowledge flows away from the community. On the other hand, action research works with the community and applies knowledge gained to the point of concern. This is explicitly connected to Friere's (1970) concept that action research was a form of social action. Herr and Anderson (2014) also connected to the work of Friere when referencing the process of co-learning through participation and working alongside the oppressed or, in this PAR, those closely situated to the work. Dialogue is a key component to working alongside others. Friere (1970) focused on the necessity of dialogue and specifically said self-sufficiency is incompatible with dialogue. Friere (1970) also indicated that true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialogue engages in critical thinking and reflection. Again, referring to genuine collaboration in action was needed; one is not working to extract knowledge for personal benefit with action research, rather we are working, through PAR, with the community to bring knowledge and growth.

Research Questions

Through research and implementation of professional development opportunities, this participatory action research (PAR) project aims to determine ways a team of principals and district curriculum specialists builds an innovative, collaborative team to support equitable instruction in core secondary classrooms.

The overarching research question, *What strategies do principals and district curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?*, was further supported by the following sub-questions:

- How do principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?
- How does a collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists work with secondary core teachers through observation protocols?
- To what extent is my professional growth, as a district leader, supported by participating in Participatory Action Research?

These research questions guided the participatory action research (PAR) and informed a theory of action. The theory of action for this PAR is: *IF an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists provide professional learning opportunities and utilize observation protocols focusing on whole-school improvement, then equitable instruction in core secondary classrooms will be supported, thus improved.*

Action Research Cycles

The Participatory Action Research included iterative Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles. This process afforded our team a focused learning journey, as described by Bryk et al. (2015). Our goal was to utilize our data to move from insights at the school level to a positive change effect district-wide. As Bryk et al. (2015) said, “The overall goal is to develop the necessary know-how for a reform idea ultimately to spread faster and more efficiently” (p. 8).

The project included three cycles (see Table 2). The PAR Pre-cycle included monthly CPR meetings. The focus of those meetings was to build rapport among the principals and curriculum specialists, in addition to the collaborative team co-creating professional development to support equitable practices. The professional development focus was on monitoring protocols and processes. The collaborative team’s focus was to become well acquainted with the tools to assess, monitor, and provide coaching feedback.

Table 2

PAR Cycle Timeline of Activities

Cycle	Time	Activities
PAR Pre-Cycle	Spring 2022	• Co-Practitioner Researchers' Meetings Rapport Building • Co-Practitioner's Interviews
PAR Cycle 1	Fall 2022	• Co-Practitioner Researchers' Meetings • Mini Community Learning Exchanges – Building Community • Co-Creation of Professional Learning Opportunities • Implementation of Monitoring Protocols
PAR Cycle 2	Spring 2023	• Co-Practitioner Researchers' Meetings • Continuation of Monitoring Protocols • Mini Community Learning Exchange; Building Community

The Pre-PAR Cycle focused on research question 1 – *How do principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?* In PAR Cycle 1, the professional development opportunities were delivered to principals, district curriculum coaches, and school-based instructional coaches focused on monitoring tools, focusing on research question 2 – *How does a collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists work with secondary core teachers through observation protocols?* Other mini CLE's were conducted to assess the professional learning content before beginning PAR Cycle 2. PAR Cycle 2 mirrored PAR Cycle 1 but was adjusted based on data gathered. Data gathering in PAR Cycle 2 focused on research question 3 – *To what extent is my professional growth, as a district leader, supported by participating in Participatory Action Research?*

Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

The qualitative research approach allowed me, as the lead practitioner, to collaborate with other practitioners, principals, and district curriculum specialists. Each practitioner brought personal value to the study as they were operating in their natural setting. As indicated by Creswell and Creswell (2018), this is a major characteristic of qualitative research, the up-close gathering of information in context. Throughout the iterative cycles, I collected data, interpreted the data through open-coding, and utilized information gained to validate the accuracy of such. The work of the CPR was to inform change beneficial to their particular setting and the broader community.

Participants

The CPR formally included two principals, two district curriculum specialists, and me. I also served as the lead researcher. The participant sampling consisted of staff members from a

local school district in eastern North Carolina. I sought principal participants who had a working knowledge of the tenets of Project I4. As the PAR study progressed, other district specialists, teachers, and other principals were invited to participate in the mini CLEs to provide additional voices and expertise. All participants signed a consent form (see Appendix D). Note, all participants apart from the CPR will remain anonymous.

The unit of analysis was the principals and district curriculum specialists. The selection of the principals was determined by their potential influence in the secondary core classrooms and their efforts to implement equitable classroom practices. The district curriculum specialists were selected due to their expertise in secondary classroom curricula and sphere of influence with principals and secondary core teachers.

The project's purpose and the research questions are detailed with the theory of action regarding the PAR project. To build upon the current rapport between the CPR and discuss the need for the research, I conducted individual interviews with the CPR and held monthly meetings to initiate the project. The project included mini CLEs to allow the CPR to reflect on actions taken during the project. One of the major action steps for the CPR was for the network of principals and district curriculum specialists to employ strategies, including implementing professional development opportunities and using classroom observation/monitoring protocols with secondary core teachers. These strategies aided in building the capacity of principals and district curriculum specialists to support secondary core instruction.

Data Collection

As detailed in Table 3, I collected data for analysis in correlation with the research questions. Opportunities for data collection included notes from both CPR meetings and CLEs. The CPRs shared reflective memos and participated in interviews.

Table 3

Research Questions and Correlating Data Sources

Research Questions	Data	Triangulation
How does a team of principals and math curriculum specialists design and implement professional development opportunities to support equitable instruction in mathematics?	CPR Documents Interviews Reflective Memos (CPR)	Reflective memos (self) CLE Artifacts
To what extent do principals and math curriculum specialists develop their capacity to use classroom observation tools and coaching practices with secondary math teachers?	CPR Documents Coaching Notes Reflective Memos (CPR) Interviews	Reflective memos (self) Member Checks
To what extent is my professional growth, as a district leader, supported by participating in Participatory Action Research?	Reflective Memos (Self)	

Co-Practitioner Researchers' Meeting Documents

Monthly meetings were held among the CPR. A core focus of the CPR meetings was to build rapport among the members and plan for upcoming events such as the Community Learning Exchanges. In building rapport, protocols such as personal narratives were embedded in meetings. These documents, along with agendas, meeting notes, and reflections were collected for further analysis.

Interviews

Important to the research was gathering the opinions of the co-practitioner researchers; interviews allowed for an opportunity to elicit some of the participant views, which were also coded by the lead researcher, to provide further context for the data. Interviews were held throughout the project, both individually and as a group. The purpose of the individual interviews (see Appendix E) was to continue rapport building about the individual members and the lead researcher as well as promote freedom of expression without the influence of others. Group interviews (see Appendix F) promoted rapport among all CPR. Responses from members also provoked additional reactions among the co-researchers. Interviews were transcribed for coding solely by the lead researcher.

Reflective Memos

Reflective memos are an important method of documenting experiences and the ideas and feelings evoked by such. It is essential to providing understanding and often further action. As Friere (1970) shares, "The discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism but must include serious reflection: only then will it be praxis" (p. 39). Opportunities for reflective memoing were provided throughout the project. The lead researcher utilized these memos to code data to support understanding of processes. The CPR

members were asked to complete reflective memos to be coded by the lead researcher. All memos followed an open response format with several guiding questions (see Appendix G) following Kolb's (1984) experiential learning process (see Figure 7).

Coaching Notes

The PAR project included professional development for select school staff. Staff participating in the professional development remained anonymous, and therefore consent was not needed. It was the responsibility of the co-practitioner researchers, principals, and curriculum specialists to monitor processes following professional development and provide coaching feedback. The data collected from observations were not utilized for the study but for coaching conversations. However, the CPRs kept reflective memos and notes regarding their coaching conversations to discuss at CPR meetings. In turn, reflective memos and notes were coded by the lead researcher for additional data points and to evaluate the effectiveness of professional development.

Community Learning Exchange Artifacts

Community Learning Exchanges (CLE) involved a broader group beyond the CPR to inform the PAR. As Militello and Guajardo (2013) contend, the individual and the organization are not mutually exclusive in their development and efficiency. As they shared, the missing link is striking the balance that can produce organizational learning. The PAR cycles that included a mini CLE, known to participants as Building Community sessions, were facilitated by the CPR. The mini CLE provided an opportunity to collect artifacts as a community. Artifacts included Chart paper, graphics, and notes collected through various protocols. Protocols coordinated by the CPR Included storytelling, personal narratives, think-matching, and roundtables. As with other data collected, CLE artifacts were analyzed and coded by the lead researcher.

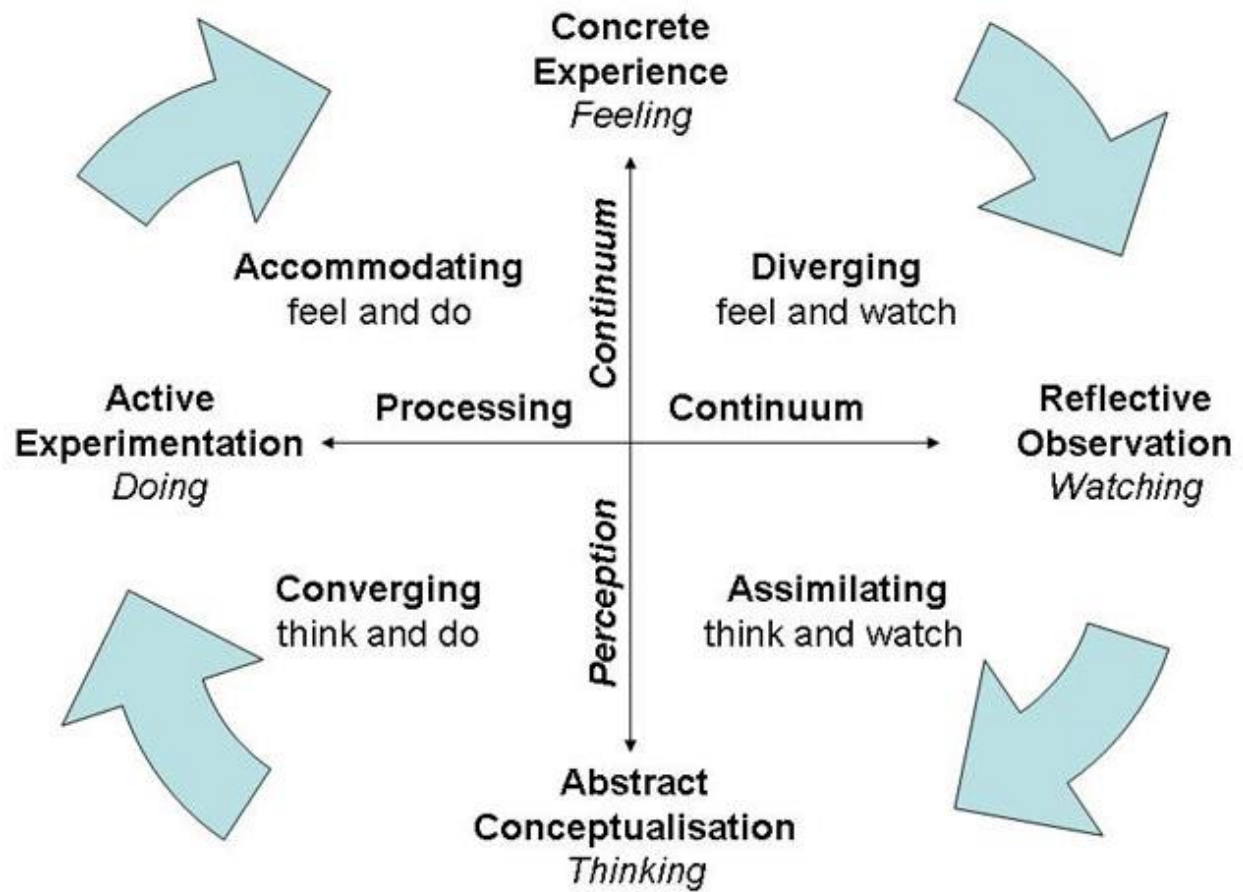


Figure 7. Kolb's Experiential Learning Process.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using a five-step process as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018):

- Step 1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis
- Step 2. Read or look at all the data
- Step 3. Start coding all the data
- Step 4. Generate a description and themes
- Step 5. Representing the description and themes

As mentioned, coding data was a key element of the process. Coding data allowed the researcher to analyze the patterns and determine categories. The process also allowed the researcher to identify unique instances that may be beneficial in providing insight in further analysis, as indicated by Saldaña (2016). Saldaña (2016) continues by sharing that the researcher needs to recognize instances when unique data does and does not hold importance to the research. The precision of coding is important. Therefore, as the lead researcher and sole coder, I used multiple coding cycles to generate categories, reconciling that process with member checks. Member checking resulted from ongoing dialogue among the CPR to validate the findings.

Study Limitations

As the primary researcher for this participatory action research project, I considered the positionality that my role within the district presents in the CPR group. I serve in a supervisory capacity for the other CPRs. Therefore, important to the research was having other CPRs that had interest and found value in the study. Relational trust within the group was imperative; measures to establish and maintain such were in place throughout the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, the curriculum specialists and principals serving as CPRs were

provided informed consent without coercion by me or a sense of obligation to me due to my position. During the study, CPRs were able to choose to remove themselves from further participation without repercussions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Furthermore, my direct supervisor approved a formal request to conduct the research, allowing the study within our school district (see Appendix C). In January 2021, I completed the Institutional Review Board Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (IRB CITI) for Social/Behavioral Research to ensure that the human participants are protected as subjects of the study (see Appendix B).

Initiating the study as the lead researcher, I came to the study with my ideas and biases. In the supervisory role in which I serve the other co-practitioner researchers (CPR), I reemphasized the need to monitor and restrict my exertion of positional power throughout the study. By using collaborative processes, I aimed to reduce my personal biases and those of other CPRs.

Internal Validity

Ensuring internal validity was necessary for the lead researcher to draw accurate inferences from collected data throughout the study. Specifically, in this PAR, I wanted to identify how a team of principals and district curriculum specialists builds an innovative, collaborative team to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms.

The CPR group included two principals and two district curriculum specialists, one from each secondary grade span, to ensure consistency in positions at the middle and high school levels. Over the course of the three PAR cycles, opportunities to collect data through multiple sources allowed for triangulation of findings. Continued collaboration for purposes of varied

perspectives and increased dialogue also aided the validity. As I collected data, I used member checks to identify the actual value of the data, as indicated by Creswell and Creswell (2018).

External Validity

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), threats to external validity occur when researchers incorrectly generalize data from one individual, group, or setting to another. This PAR was conducted with a small sample in a particular eastern North Carolina school district under the scope of East Carolina University and its Project I4 programming. Although the methodology could be repeated in another context, the claims and implications are particular to this study.

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

The CPR, with the exception of the lead researcher, was also the unit of analysis. It included two principals and two district curriculum specialists. The CPR members were provided written consent to formally participate in the study (see Appendix D). Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participating schools and CPRs. Additional district and school staff were asked to participate in CLEs for their expertise and feedback. These additional participants also provided written consent (see Appendix D).

Also important to the study was maintaining trust with all participants. Transparency with processes was key during all phases of the study. Therefore, many aspects of the study were conducted collaboratively, as previously detailed. However, data collected and coded was for the sole use of the lead researcher. CPR members were apprised of the decision-making processes throughout the study and had complete knowledge of who has rights to the data and its usage (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Serving as a director in the district, I recognized the positionality I

presented as a researcher and a supervisor. I was cognizant not to make invalid conclusions and maintain ethical understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the research design detailing the methodology for participatory action research in answering the overarching research question: *What strategies do principals and district curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?* The chapter continued by explaining the methods of data collection, analysis through cycles of inquiry, and the potential limitations of the study. In Chapter 4, I delve into the context of the research and the engagement of the co-practitioner researchers (CPR). Chapters 5 and 6 will attend to the participatory action research cycles, with Chapter 7 focused on the claims, assertions, and implications garnered from the study.

CHAPTER 4: PRE-PAR CYCLE

The underlying premise for this participatory action research (PAR) project was to consider strategies that principals and district curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms. The project sought to establish a network of school leaders and curriculum specialists to better support classroom instruction.

This chapter provides the context of our study including the place and the people; detailing the structure and demographics of the school district and particular schools. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) Pre-cycle section details the activities, data collection processes, and coding method. Coding revealed categories that will be discussed. To conclude the chapter, I share my reflection on the process and planning as I progress to PAR Cycle One.

PAR Context

The PAR context provides a snapshot of the place and people of the respective study. In particular, the place is the respective educational institutions where I, along with the co-practitioner researchers (CPR), have an impact through our day-to-day work interactions. The people include the CPRs that are situated close to the issue. For this study, the CPR includes secondary principals and curriculum specialists in an eastern North Carolina city as further described.

Context (Place)

The location of this study was two secondary school sites, one middle school and one high school, within an urban district that serves over 23,000 students. As noted in Chapter 3, the schools will be referred to as Ashcroft Middle School and Sheffield High School to avoid identifying participants. Ashcroft Middle serves approximately 840 students, while Sheffield High serves 1,615 students. Both schools are expected to see increased membership with housing

growth in this eastern North Carolina town. The town neighbors an urban city that boasts one of the larger state universities and a growing medical community. According to the United States Census Bureau, the town's demographics are approximately 59.24% White, 38.36% African American, 0.35% American Indian, 0.81% Asian, 0.10% Pacific Islander, 0.40% from other races, and 0.73% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any race were 1.02% of the population. In comparison, the two school sites' demographics are documented in Table 4.

The Focus of Practice (FoP) attends to secondary core academic areas of mathematics, English, science, and social studies. The student performance on state-tested courses for Ashcroft and Sheffield schools follows. The numbers in Tables 5 and 6 represent the percentage of students that obtained proficiency by the North Carolina Department of Instruction's standard for the End of Grade and End of Course assessments designated. Data does not exist for the 2020 school year due to the disruption to testing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The large decline in the percentage of students proficient from 2019 to 2021 can be partly attributed to the instructional gaps that occurred during the pandemic. Widespread virtual and hybrid learning resulted in many students not having daily access to a face-to-face math instructor. This data is included as this student considers how the secondary core classroom may be impacted by the collaborative work between district curriculum specialists and principals. Although this study does not directly focus on student achievement, the ultimate goal is for student success in the core classroom.

Charles Public School district boasts seven traditional middle schools and eight high schools. A benefit to this study is that Ashcroft Middle School is a feeder school for Sheffield High School. The relationship between the two principals coupled with their openness to work with district curriculum specialists proved beneficial when focusing on the research question:

Table 4

Ashcroft Middle and Sheffield High Racial/Ethnic Breakdown

Ethnicity	Ashcroft Middle School	Sheffield High School
White	34.9%	24.7%
African-American	52.1%	62.9%
American Indian	.2%	.2%
Hispanic	4.5%	5.4%
Asian	1.7%	1.5%
Pacific Islander	0%	0%
Two or More Races	6.6%	5.2%

Table 5

Ashcroft Middle End of Grade Results

Course/Grade	2019	2020	2021
Math 6 th Grade	60.9	NA	40.9
Math 7 th Grade	61.5	NA	39.9
Math 8 th Grade	59.5	NA	28.9
Reading 6 th Grade	61.9	NA	49.1
Reading 7 th Grade	56.7	NA	51.8
Reading 8 th Grade	61.2	NA	47.3
Science 8th Grade	89.0	NA	68.3

Table 6

Sheffield High End of Course Results

Course	2019	2020	2021
Math 1	25.4	NA	17.6
Math 3	36.8	NA	30.3
English 2	53.6	NA	49.3
Biology	46.5	NA	40.4

What strategies do principals and district curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?

Ashcroft Middle and Sheffield High were selected foremost for their school leadership. Both principals have experience with the protocols and strategies from Project i4 as they were participants in the program's inaugural cohort. Both possessed a willingness to incorporate practices in the classroom that promote equitable instruction. I believe that the principals' attributes along with those of the specialists contributed greatly to the PAR. Those attributes are detailed in the following section.

Context (People)

Essential to the study are the people who served as Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPR). In considering whom to invite to participate in the study, I wanted foremost to collaborate with others willing to co-learn and co-create. I sought those who specialized in secondary core instruction at the district level as well as school leaders seeking to incorporate equitable practices in the core classrooms within their schools. These individuals will be referenced using pseudonyms to avoid identification.

Our middle school math specialist, Ms. Sullivan, began her career in education as a high school math teacher with licensure for 9th-12th grade. An opportunity became available within a year and Ms. Sullivan transitioned to middle school. She fell in love with teaching middle school students mathematics and updated her certification for 6th-12th grade. After continuing at other secondary schools for several years within the district, Ms. Sullivan was offered an opportunity to serve the district in a new role by supporting math teachers in all middle schools. Ms. Sullivan took advantage of the opportunity to become a math curriculum specialist for teachers in 2016. She has been in this position for six years, with a short time spent serving middle and high

school. Ms. Sullivan has had a knack for math for as long as she can remember but easily identifies where students struggle with understanding math concepts as she shared during her interview conducted on April 14, 2022. This has aided her success in supporting classroom teachers.

With the same aptitude for math as Ms. Sullivan, Dr. Paul serves our district's high schools as the math specialist. Her education career began with teaching mathematics in secondary schools for six years. During that time, she taught a variety of grades from 6th through 12th grade before accepting a position at the community college. She continued to teach mathematics at the community college for five years. Dr. Paul returned to the secondary setting as a mathematics specialist in 2020. Her tenure is unique due to her transition at the peak of the COVID pandemic. This limited her face-to-face interaction with the teachers she serves. During 2022, Dr. Paul provided heavy support in professional learning communities (PLCs) to build rapport with teachers of mathematics (E. Paul, personal communication, April 14, 2022).

The middle school principal serving as a CPR, Mr. Nance, was also a former math teacher entering education as a lateral-entry teacher with a degree in math, not education. Mr. Nance taught mathematics in both middle and high schools before becoming an assistant principal. He shared that his responsibilities were given to him as “buses, building, and bad boys” (M. Nance, personal communication, April 29, 2022). Over his years as an AP, he recognized the benefits of having an open-door policy which he took into his first principalship at a middle school. For a growth opportunity, Mr. Nance returned to being an assistant principal in a new district at a large high school. In two years, he became the principal of one of the district's larger middle schools where he continues to serve.

Unlike the former CPRs, Mr. Jensen, our high school principal, does not have a background in mathematics. During his interview on April 12, 2022, he shared his struggles with mathematics as a student that he previously detailed in a math journey line. His experiences as a student have given him a unique understanding. He is open to sharing his story with his students and staff alike. Mr. Jensen has been in education for over 21 years, 10 being in the classroom as a social studies teacher. Also serving as a Dropout Prevention Counselor and Instructional Coach, Mr. Jensen has stayed abreast of strategies to engage the learner. He has continued to seek such strategies in his roles as an AP at a large, urban high school and into his principalships at a large middle school, and most currently at one of the district's largest high schools.

The CPRs were selected because of their positionality within the school district and particularly for the diversity they offered, not only in terms of experience but in overall curricular and teaching strategies that are universal in effective pedagogy. Their expertise and experience provided useful insights as we navigated through this study to understand the research and assess the data. The next section describes the activities utilized during PAR Pre-Cycle and the coding method.

PAR Pre-cycle Process

The PAR Pre-cycle occurred during the spring semester of 2022. The PAR aimed to determine ways a team of principals and district curriculum specialists builds an innovative, collaborative team to support equitable instruction. At the semester start, I sought to finalize those that would serve as co-practitioner researchers (CPR) to ensure membership that included representatives of principals and curriculum specialists. I met with each CPR to share study justifications, goals, and the need for their expertise and gained their consent for participation (see Appendix D). Being new in my position as Director of Secondary Education, at the time,

along with bringing people together from across the district, it was intentional to move at a slow pace. This was imperative to build a relationship with each CPR before jumping too quickly into the focus of the study. I felt it necessary to know each CPR before bringing them together as a working group.

To establish trust and comfort among the Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPR), I intentionally designed activities that focused on building relationships. Building rapport with each member was essential to the successful function of the team of CPR and the success of this study. As the lead researcher, my role and position changed with some of the CPR, whereas now I have a supervisory role. I was aware of my role and position and gave much care and attention not to misuse or abuse the positionality. Other members have traditionally not worked with one another to collect data for the benefit of change. It was imperative that all researchers were actively involved in the forthcoming meetings and CLEs, therefore, much of the time during this PAR Pre-Cycle focused on one-on-one, semi-structured interviews and conversations. As the lead researcher, I coded notes, analyzed the data, and synthesized the data into two emergent categories.

Activities

I engaged in activities to answer the research questions while also building rapport with each CPR. Activities included individual meetings and one-on-one, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix E). This provided not only an opportunity to share about the research study but gather pertinent information about each CPR while building a personal relationship. I met with each person at least three times in addition to district and departmental meetings, where I was also able to build rapport and a trusting relationship with the entire group on content related to the study, but not the study directly.

One-on-One Semi-Structured Conversations and Interviews

The One-on-One semi-structured conversations and interviews were intentional to understand each CPR as an individual and to discover their professional goals and their interrelationship with the study. More importantly, these meetings allowed us to build rapport and trust. The conversations were often casual, both impromptu and planned, allowing for genuine dialogue. The interviews (see Appendix E) were more structured with formalities, providing an opportunity for the interviewee to expand on their thoughts and ideas. I met with each member at least three times no longer than thirty minutes as documented in Table 7.

The first meeting started with the formality of reviewing the intent of the study, interest in having them serve as a co-practitioner researcher (CPR), and the mutual benefits of such. The informed consent (see Appendix D) about the study was reviewed, with a detailed discussion about the potential risks and benefits of participating with other co-practitioner researchers, teachers, and me. I reassured them that their participation was optional with no implications on their job performance. I also provided an opportunity for questions, answers, and feedback. Each participant agreed and signed the consent.

The periodic conversations held with the CPR were either in person or by phone. When conducting the one-on-one interviews, I used an online approach through a Zoom portal, as indicated in Table 7. Before starting the one-on-one semi-structured interviews, I received verbal agreement to audio record the conversation for transcription purposes and use of data for my study only. I met with two principals and two math curriculum specialists. The questions aimed to garner additional information about their personal educational path and experiences. I also wanted to know about the current state of the collaboration among their colleagues, specifically

Table 7

Activities: PAR Pre-Cycle

Activity	WEEK 1 (21-25 FEB)	WEEK 2 (28-4 MAR)	WEEK 3 (7-11 MAR)	WEEK 4 (14-18 MAR)	WEEK 5 (21-25 MAR)	WEEK 6 (28-1 APR)	WEEK 7 (4-8 APR)	WEEK 8 (11-15 APR)	WEEK 9 (18-22 APR)	WEEK 10 (25-29 APR)	WEEK 11 (2-6 MAY)	WEEK 12 (9-13 MAY)	WEEK 13 (16-20 MAY)
District Mtg with Principals (n=22)			•	<i>Spring Break</i>			•				•		
Departmental Mtg with Curr Specialists (n=6)			•	<i>Spring Break</i>			•				•		
Individual with CPR (Informal) (n=4)	•	•	•	<i>Spring Break</i>	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•
Ind Interviews with CPR (Formal) (n=4)				<i>Spring Break</i>				•		•			
Reflective Memos (n=4)	•			<i>Spring Break</i>	•					•			•

other administrators and district curriculum specialists. I used the questions below and asked follow-up questions when I needed further clarification or to deepen my understanding:

1. Please share your experiences as an educator.
2. In what capacity have your experiences allowed you to collaborate with other school leaders?
3. In what capacity have your experiences allowed you to collaborate with district specialists?
4. What would you note as the outcome or benefits of that collaboration?
5. What elements helped foster the collaboration?
6. In what ways could such collaboration be improved?
7. Have you had an opportunity to focus on equitable practices in the classroom? If so, what strategies were your focus? What were the outcomes?
8. Are there other equitable classroom practices that you would like to focus on with teachers?

District and Departmental Meetings

In my role as Director of Secondary Education, I meet routinely with various groups of people. I meet with the secondary principals and the secondary curriculum specialists once a month. Given the newness of my role during this time, I instinctively and intentionally used these spaces to promote conversation between specialists, principals, and other school professionals for the benefit of our students. I facilitated conversations directed at encouraging genuine collaboration. While I did not collect formal data specifically for the study, I created agendas, facilitated content, and listened to the various voices in the room. I used these spaces to

reflect on current practices, best practices, and the gap between the two. The reflections made the relationship between what was occurring in our meetings and the study evident.

Reflective Memos

My PAR Pre-Cycle focused on building relationships between me and the CPR members while acclimating to my new district role. I used the reflective memo protocol of Kolb (see Appendix G) to capture the evolution of my thinking and the connections between the information gathered and the research questions. The memos provided me the opportunity to think critically and deeply about the CPRs, their participation in the study, and consider the upcoming structures needed for a successful PAR Cycle One and Two.

Coding

Once I had the transcriptions from the one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, my content, notes, agendas from the district/department meetings, and my reflective memos, I organized a system to begin coding and analyzing my data. I utilized inductive coding or, as Saldaña (2016) describes, in vivo coding. This coding is appropriate for this qualitative research study being conducted to understand the direct ideas that the CPRs are conveying. I further reviewed the ideas shared to assign codes based on the understood meanings. The data was assessed in a table format to determine reoccurring codes and outliers. The highly reoccurring codes showed evidence of emerging categories.

Emergent Categories

Categories began to emerge from the collection of data. Although multiple categories began to arise from the codes, two became very prominent when seeking to understand the factors needed for principals and math curriculum specialists to work alongside one another to

support equitable instruction in secondary classrooms. I expand upon each of these categories: (1) growth in collaboration and (2) relationship fostering, shown in Figure 8.

Growth in Collaboration

The majority of data provided by the interviews indicated the emerging category of growth in collaboration. Growth in collaboration was frequently emphasized, in various ways, by the respondents during interviews. One CPR responded, “You just grow from sharing ideas and working with people. It’s twofold for me, it’s supporting the district, but also supporting our school” (C. Jensen, personal communication, April 12, 2022). Interview responses suggested that collaboration produced growth not only for the collective but for the individuals involved as well. The CPRs shared various forms of growth in collaboration, the two that stood out while coding include: Collaboration within Role and Collaboration with Other Educational Professionals.

Collaboration within Role

Collaboration within the role was noted by both the principals and the specialists. In this case, the interviewees were referring to the times they had an opportunity to work with others that share the same role and responsibilities. For the principals, collaboration within the role most often was about working with other principals within the same grade span; This collaboration was found to be beneficial. Principals noted they oftentimes focused on managerial aspects of their job with less focus on the instructional practices that impact student achievement. This was ever more the case during the 20-21 and 21-22 school years as principals navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on educational processes. Mr. Nance noted in his interview that his professional learning community with other middle school principals helped him navigate the space during the height of the pandemic (personal communication, April 29, 2022).

CATEGORY	CODE	Pre-Cycle				Category Total
		Interview MN	Interview EP	Interview MS	Interview CJ	
Collaboration	Articulation		1			
Collaboration	Collaborate with senior leadership on community engagement activities (legislatures)				1	
Collaboration	Collaborate with specialists when need support				1	
Collaboration	Collaboration	3	4		3	
Collaboration	Collaboration for managerial needs				8	
Collaboration	Collaboration with principals for resources			1		
Collaboration	Collaboration within grade span more productive			1		
Collaboration	Collaboration within role			1		
Collaboration	Consultation			1		
Collaboration	Cross-curricular Collaboration		1			
Collaboration	Disconnect with other grade span material			1		
Collaboration	Disconnect with other grade span specialists (lower grades)				1	
Collaboration	Frequency of collaboration	2		1		
Collaboration	Growth from sharing ideas and collaborating				1	
Collaboration	Integration of small groups w/meetings			1		
Collaboration	Leadership	1				
Collaboration	Learning is a social experience	1				
Collaboration	Little collaboration with APs			1		
Collaboration	Management	2	1			
Collaboration	Meet via principal meetings				1	
Collaboration	Mutually beneficial				2	
Collaboration	Opportunity has allowed more collaboration with other specialists			1		
Collaboration	Opportunity to present to principals and ICs			1		
Collaboration	Other PLCs followed suit					
Collaboration	PLC	5	2		3	
Collaboration	Relationship foster collaboration	2	1			
Collaboration	Sharing strategies and ideas				2	
Collaboration	Show success stories			1		
Collaboration	Trends Across District		1			
Collaboration	Vertical Articulation/Alignment	1	1	1	1	
						66
Relationship fostering	Availability		1			
Relationship fostering	Be cognizant			1		
Relationship fostering	Building Relationship		1			
Relationship fostering	Conversation	6				
Relationship fostering	Down to earth	1				
Relationship fostering	Easy to work with				2	
Relationship fostering	Get Others opinions	1				
Relationship fostering	Having positive relationships because of persona				1	
Relationship fostering	Knowing your place	1				
Relationship fostering	Longevity	1				
Relationship fostering	Not holder of all knowledge	2				
Relationship fostering	Open door policy	1				
Relationship fostering	Open Mind	5	3			
Relationship fostering	Perspective		5			
Relationship fostering	Presence		1			
Relationship fostering	Resourceful	1				
Relationship fostering	Respect	2				
Relationship fostering	Strength	1				
Relationship fostering	Support		1			
Relationship fostering	Trust built from beginning, Trust needed to foster collaboration			3		
Relationship fostering	UnderstandingUnderstanding the grade s Understanding the grade span, Grade spa	2		2		
						45

Figure 8. MJ codebook – pre-cycle excerpt.

High school principal Mr. Jensen shared similar stories about the transitions with COVID (personal communication, April 12, 2022). He also mentioned collaboration that occurred with other managerial topics such as funding sources and scheduling.

The responsibilities of curriculum specialists heavily involve supporting teachers with instructional practices in the classroom. Therefore, collaboration within their role appeared differently with much more focus on curriculum and content. One specialist noted on April 14, 2022, that it was much easier to work with other specialists within the same grade span and bounce ideas off one another. However, the specialists found great value in working with specialists in differing grade spans and content areas (M. Sullivan & E. Paul, personal communications, April 14, 2022). One stated in reference to learning new strategies and protocols, “I’ve learned a tremendous amount. I have learned, and still learn, a tremendous amount” (M. Sullivan, personal communication, April 14, 2022). Another specialist shared the same with working with others within their grade span even when the content area was different (E. Paul, personal communication, April 14, 2022). Dr. Paul specifically noted working with the high school English specialist on the College and Career Ready Graduate legislation for classroom implementation.

Collaboration with Other Educational Professionals

At the heart of this study is the collaboration with other educational professionals outside of one’s role. This type of collaboration seeks to maximize the benefits for students and teachers. When interviewees, CPRs, were asked about working with others outside their role, it was promising to hear that principals saw value in such collaboration. Additionally, the principals were eager for more opportunities to collaborate with others outside of their roles. One principal shared in their April 2022 interview that working with the specialists allowed them to get a feel

for what was happening across the district. He discussed hearing from the specialists about the best practices that would give his teachers a better understanding of what was required of the content standards to provide students with quality instruction (M. Nance, personal communication, April 29, 2022). The specialists also talked about their experiences working with other educational professionals. Specifically, the collaboration with school principals varied as some principals intentionally would seek out specialists to collaborate with while at some school sites other leaders, such as instructional coaches, would be the ones to coordinate such collaboration (M. Sullivan & E. Paul, personal communications, April 14, 2022).

Overall, responses indicated that the CPR found value in the various forms of collaboration, with one CPR indicating that learning is a social experience that can be a result of collaboration (M. Nance, personal communication, April 29, 2022). The key to successful collaboration, which was noted by several CPRs, is the frequency of the collaboration. In the April 29, 2022 interview with M. Nance, he indicated that the frequency of the collaboration is so valuable; that being able to have those conversations with the specialists at the district level is priceless. Mr. Nance went on to discuss the relationships that were integral between the specialists and his teachers.

Relationship Fostering

Relationship fostering was frequently emphasized as an effective means for collaboration to occur in support of classrooms, thus students. In interviewing the co-practitioner researchers (CPR), they noted many factors that help to foster and promote the development of relationships between those whom they collaborate with. Factors that rose as being the most crucial, based on the respondents included having an open mind to others' perspectives, being willing to hold conversations, and being trustworthy.

Open-Mindedness

One interview question was directly asked about what factors aid in fostering collaboration and relationships. Based on interviews, it was noted that having an open mind was key. From their terms, the CPR saw open-mindedness as the ability to recognize one's perspective while also being open to the perspectives of others. One principal said you must be "willing to entertain other ideas, because there are other ideas out there" (M. Nance, personal communication, April 29, 2022). He went on to share that education is bigger than all of us and that no one is the holder of all knowledge. Dr. Paul indicated that having an open mind included distinguishing what is actually happening or not happening in reference to education, not just assuming that processes are as they "should be" (E. Paul, personal communication, April 14, 2022).

Conversation

A willingness to participate in conversations was another common contributor to the category of relationship fostering in the eyes of the CPRs. One CPR shared on April 29, 2022, that relationship building must be a continuous process as education evolves. The CPR continued in his interview by sharing that he has a core group of educators that he routinely corresponds with about education articles to stay abreast of best practices. This space allows principals to communicate about educational practices, philosophies, and values to support their staff for the benefit of students. Mr. Nance indicated this has been an extremely helpful process in navigating the space during the pandemic. He indicated "This really, really helps your teachers to navigate this space, because the past three years have been like no other with this COVID stuff, as we trying to figure it out" (M. Nance, personal communication, April 29, 2022).

Trustworthiness

Based on interviews, curriculum specialists and principals alike noted being trustworthy as another means of relationship fostering. One specialist specifically indicated that a relationship blossomed from the trust, noting there was nothing that they would not collaborate with that other individual on. The CPR members shared that it is necessary to build trust from the beginning.

Reflection and Planning

Reflection on Leadership

One of my research questions focuses on what extent my professional growth, as a district leader, is supported by participating in Participatory Action Research. Although I sought to answer this question as I progressed through the rest of the research, I naturally reflected heavily throughout the Pre-Cycle, giving me insight about myself as a leader, educator, and researcher. It appeared to me that much of what is emerging about collaborative work between curriculum specialists and principals to employ equitable practices in the classroom is the foundation to build upon within our district. Through informal conversations, formal meetings, and interviews, the co-practitioner researchers have begun to explore how such an innovative practice of collaboration between them would benefit our classrooms. Additionally, identifying the means to that end. As such, I recognized that I instinctively and intentionally attempted to employ those means to reinforce the foundation for such work. The work that all CPRs employed for this study is not producing a byproduct of our roles and responsibilities. It is our role and responsibility to create and sustain a practice of collaboration to employ equitable instruction in our classrooms. Action research as a collective provides me with tools to use to address other educational issues as they arise. I grow more confident in my ability to gather and reflect on data

from various perspectives and make confident decisions to support improvement in educational outcomes.

Planning for PAR Cycle One

As I planned for Participatory Action Research (PAR) Cycle One, I developed a schedule of activities after reflecting on the Pre-Cycle and goals of the study. Cycle One was held in the Fall of 2022 with activities to collect data occurring from August to October as indicated in Table 8. Cycle One primarily continued the focus on the sub-question: *How do principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?* The CPR began to investigate the sub-question: *How does a collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists work with secondary core teachers through observation protocols?*

Conclusion

I was ambitious with the activities planned when I began the Pre-cycle in the spring of 2022. I quickly realized that I must “move slow, to go fast”. In doing so, I provided myself and the other CPRs an opportunity to build relationships, recognize our strengths, and understand the issues we would collectively address. The Pre-cycle revealed what I needed to continue in upcoming cycles and the changes that I needed to make for success. Transitioning to Cycle One, I continued to incorporate protocols in my activities that developed the relationship I have with the other co-practitioners (CPR) and their relationships with each other. Changes in designing activities for Cycle One included utilizing protocols that allow for data to be collected in a more timely and efficient manner, such as collecting artifacts during meetings that did not require transcription before coding. Additionally, I was more intentional in memo reflections. Reflective memos were used as one of the means for member checking to validate the qualitative data.

Table 8

PAR Cycle One Timeline of Activities

Date	Research Questions	Protocol	Triangulation
August 2022	How do principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?	Mini CLE: Building Community - One Word	Reflective memos
September 2022	How do principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?	Mini CLE: Building Community - Collective Commitments	Reflective memos
October 2022	How do principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms? How does a collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists work with secondary core teachers through observation protocols?	Goal-Setting 1-1	

CHAPTER 5: PAR CYCLE ONE

This participatory action research (PAR) project explores how principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable practices in core secondary classrooms through professional development and observation protocols. The co-practitioner researchers (CPR) based their study on a network of school leaders and curriculum specialists developed to better support classroom pedagogy.

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) Cycle One section discusses the process, including the activities, data collection, and coding methods. As the lead researcher, I added data to the existing categories through the coding process, revealing new categories. I reviewed the emergent themes related to those categories. To conclude the chapter, I share my reflection on the process and planning as I progress to PAR Cycle Two.

PAR Cycle One Process

The PAR Cycle One occurred during the fall semester of 2022 with a continued focus on ways a team of principals and curriculum specialists build an innovative, collaborative team to support equitable instruction in secondary core content areas. Based on the assessment and reflection of the PAR Pre-cycle, I adjusted my processes in collecting data to include the established practices already used for consulting with principals, curriculum specialists, and other instructional leaders. This included monthly meetings with each group with a Building Community activity, serving as a mini-CLE, that focused on improving classroom instruction and learning through collaboration. Additionally, the semester's start was the beginning of a new school year when district leaders reviewed the release of recent assessment data. A review of assessment data showed an increase in schools considered recurring low-performing by North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI) standards. A recurring low-performing school is a

school that receives a school performance grade of D or F and a school growth score of met or not met expected growth' as defined by general statute (NCDPI, 2023). Under the direction of the district's senior leadership, district curriculum leaders designed a model of support for schools that developed a collaborative space for school instructional leaders and district curriculum leaders. Utilizing these meeting spaces, I designed and co-designed opportunities to collect data to support the PAR.

PAR Cycle One delved into more collaborative work among the CPR group and other participants as I had established processes through my role as lead researcher and in my supervisory position within the district. I recognized my positionality early in my new role and wanted to ensure comfort and trust within our group dynamic. Much of the PAR Pre-Cycle focused on such. However, I recognized this was a continual process to maintain comfort and trust. Substantial work through transparent processes and communication has created a clear level of comfort and trust among participants. In doing so, members and other participants have actively collaborated for the benefit of effective change in our classrooms. Their participation provided data sources to support the work of the PAR. As the lead researcher, I coded the newly collected notes and analyzed and synthesized the overall data revealing two emergent themes.

Activities

As in the PAR Pre-Cycle, I engaged in activities that focused on the research questions while also maintaining rapport with each CPR and other participants. Activities included individual principal meetings and meetings for the following groups: principals, district curriculum specialists, and school-based instructional coaches, including a Building Community component. Also, School Support meetings, which were district scheduled based on the low-performing status, were held. School Support meetings included all three groups with additional

district and school-level instructional leaders. I met with the principal, district curriculum specialist, and school-based instructional coach groups at least four times each during PAR Cycle One. The School Support Team participants met four times during the time span. Table 9 presents the dates and times of each meeting where I either facilitated, presented, or shared content.

School Support Meeting

The School Support Meetings were structured meetings to allow school principals, school-based instructional coaches, and district curriculum specialists an opportunity to collaborate for the benefit of the classroom. Curriculum specialists, under the direction of district leadership, provided the schools with a data spreadsheet to collect student performance results on common formative assessments. School leadership shared the data with curriculum specialists prior to each school support meeting for review and analysis. During the meetings, curriculum specialists had an opportunity to provide individualized support for each school. Early in the process, curriculum specialists recognized the need to support schools with the development of common formative assessments (CFA) to ensure grade and content-appropriate assessments. Curriculum specialists and select core area teachers developed CFAs which were mandatory for schools participating in School Support. Other schools within the district had optional use. As the process continued throughout the semester, principals saw how School Support was a structure to develop instructional leadership. As a result, principals requested that other administrative leaders in their building attend. Throughout the semester, comfort and trust grew among participants. Initially, school principals expected sessions to be a “got you” focusing on corrective actions. They quickly realized it was a collaborative space of support, inquiry, and innovation.

Table 9

Activities: PAR Pre-Cycle

Activity	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK	WEEK
	1 (1-5 AUG)	2 (29-2 SEPT)	3 (5-9 SEPT)	4 (12-16 SEPT)	5 (19-23 SEPT)	6 (26-30 SEPT)	7 (3-7 OCT)	8 (10-14 OCT)	9 (17-21 OCT)	10 (24-28 OCT)	11 (31-4 NOV)	12 (7-11 NOV)	13 (14-18 NOV)
District Meeting with Principals (n=22)		•			•		•				•		
Departmental Meeting with Curriculum Specialists (n=6)	•		•			•				•			
District Meeting with School-Based Instructional Specialists (n=4)	•			•						•			•
School Support Meeting (n=18+)				•			•			•			•
Individual Conversations with CPR (n=3)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

The first School Support meeting started with the formality of reviewing the purpose, participants, structure, and expectations. The participants were assured that this was a space of collaboration with the support of district leadership, which included me, for the secondary schools. Subsequent meetings heavily focused on student assessment data and sharing of instructional practices by core content area. Secondary curriculum specialists often included simulations to model practices for principals and instructional coaches to share with teachers.

School Support meetings were structured to include a short informational session that focused on non-academic factors that impacted student achievement, such as attendance of students and staff. Then schools rotated in small groups to see each core area curriculum specialist for individualized support. Each session ended with a debrief for all participants to provide suggestions and feedback. Working directly with the secondary curriculum specialists, we intentionally grouped schools together for rotations based on their most recent CFA results and observational data collected during school visits. This proved to be beneficial for efficient and effective conversations during rotations.

District and Departmental Meetings

As Director of Secondary Education, I met monthly with the secondary principals and the secondary curriculum specialists. As previously shared, I instinctively and intentionally used these meeting spaces to promote conversation between specialists, principals, and other school professionals to benefit our students. Often the content of the School Support meetings was relayed to other schools for use as the content included best practices for all schools, including those meeting and exceeding accountability expectations.

As in the Pre-cycle, I created agendas, facilitated content, and listened to the various voices in the room. One component I continued was the use of the Building Community

segment. During this cycle, I intentionally aligned the Building Community activity with the research study. I presented participants with various activities that allowed them to create artifacts related to the study. I coded the artifacts for analysis.

Reflective Memos

While the Pre-Cycle focused on me building relationships with my co-practitioner researchers while learning my space in a new district role, Cycle One focused on building relationships among other participants. I continued to use the reflective memo protocol of Kolb (see Appendix G) to capture my thoughts and make sense of the information received. The Memoing process for me was a personal and reflective debrief session.

Coding

I continued to utilize inductive coding or in vivo coding, as described by Saldaña (2016). Data used specifically in Cycle One included content, notes, and agendas from the School Support and district/department meetings and my reflective memos. I assigned codes based on the understood meanings in the same process as the Pre-Cycle. Utilizing the established table format, I could easily identify the reoccurring codes. Codes that heavily reoccurred from the Pre-Cycle provided evidence of the two emergent categories of (1) Growth in Collaboration and (2) Relationship Fostering that developed into emergent themes.

Emergent Themes

Further data collection and coding in Cycle One resulted in two emerging themes supported by the previously identified categories. The repeated codes and new codes brought more clarity to the emerging themes. The emerging themes include (1) Building Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities and (2) Fostering Meaningful Relationships as identified in the codebook excerpt in Figure 9 with the visual display of the emerging themes in Figure 10.

EMERGING THEMES	CATEGORY	CODE	Cycle One					Additional Findings - Reflective Memoing	Total (includes Pre-Cycle)
			Building Community - One Word	Building Community - Collective Commitment	Goal Setting 1-1	Goal Setting 1-1	Notes		
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Collaboration		1					
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Collaboration			3				
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Collaboration						1	
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Assistance						1	
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Balance			2				
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Capabilities or (lack thereof)						1	
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Collective in response						1	
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Everyone's Worth		1					
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Follow Through		1					
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Sharing Innovation		1					
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Inquiry	1						
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Preparedness		1					
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Productive Struggle		2					
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Solution Focused		1					
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Togetherness (4)		5					
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Unity		1					
Building Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	We're One		1					25(91)
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Open-Minded			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Relationship		1					
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Resourcefulness			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Resources						1	
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Respectful			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Trustworthy			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Accountability						2	
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Accountable			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Attention to reduce negativity			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Authenticity			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Compromise						1	
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Confidential			2				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Consensus Building			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Empathetic Expectations						1	
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Grace			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Guidance					1		
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Honest			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Humbly Accepting			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Inclusion			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Integrity			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Listening to Understand(2)			2				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Prioritize Support					1		
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Replenishing			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Safe			3				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Scaffolding						1	
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Service			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Sharing			3				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Socialization(2) Students/ Colleagues		2					
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Transparency			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Understanding			1				
Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Vulnerability			1				39(84)

Figure 9. MJ codebook – Cycle One excerpt.

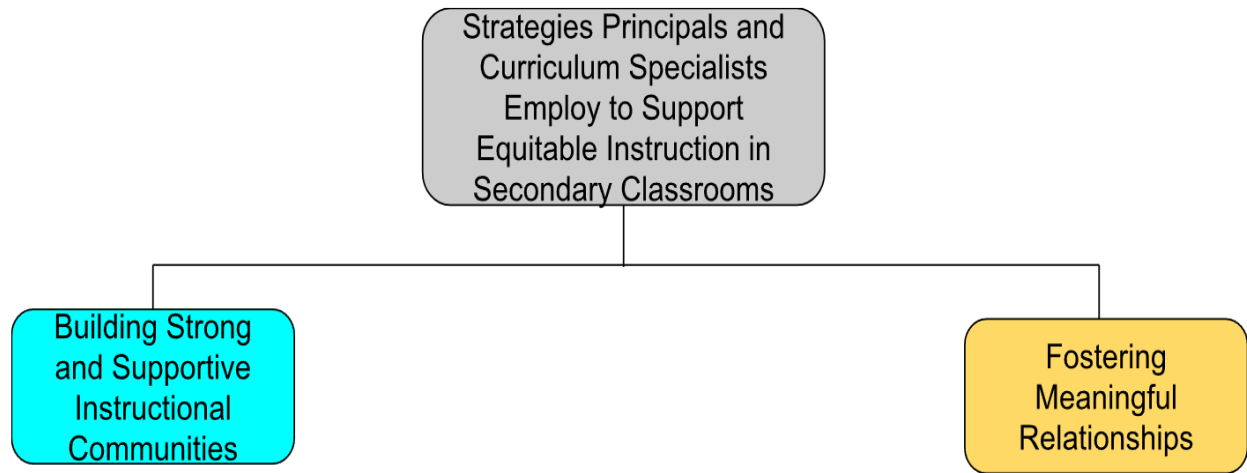


Figure 10. Two emerging themes.

Building Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities

Data collected through Cycle One activities indicated the emerging theme of building strong and supportive instructional communities. This theme emerged from the previous emerging category of growth in collaboration. In August, our district held its annual Summer Leadership meeting. During a session that I facilitated, principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches were grouped by their school's grade span. During this session's Building Community activity, I asked the group of secondary educators to consider the One Word they selected in a previous activity and with that One Word in mind discuss how they planned to collaborate with district curriculum leaders for whole school improvement. The concept of togetherness surfaced amongst multiple groups.

On September 15, 2022, I held another Building Community activity with just the curriculum specialists and school-based instructional coaches; the group had to determine their collective commitments based on the understanding of their role, district mission and vision, and school goals. I led a series of tasks that resulted in the team identifying their role, values, commitments, and norms that would guide them for the 22-23 school year as they supported their school administrators and instructional staff. The culmination of each group of secondary instructional coaches' discussions are displayed in Figure 11.

Responses during this activity in both secondary settings suggested an understanding of collectively building capacity to foster growth and success for well-rounded learners. The group had a sharp vision of their need to build capacity within the immediate community of their role and with other instructional leaders. This is illustrated in Figure 12.

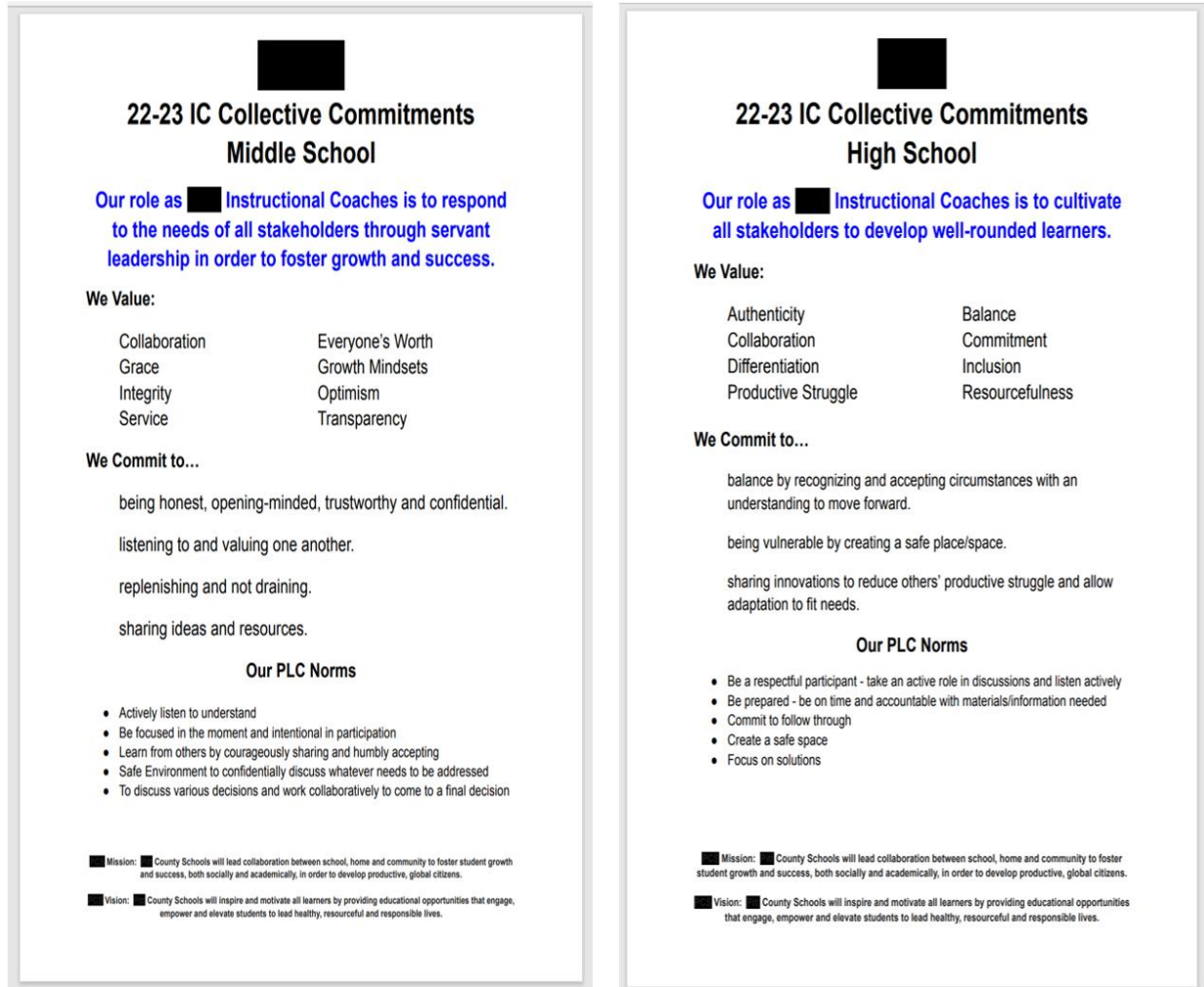


Figure 11. Middle & high school instructional coach collective commitments posters.

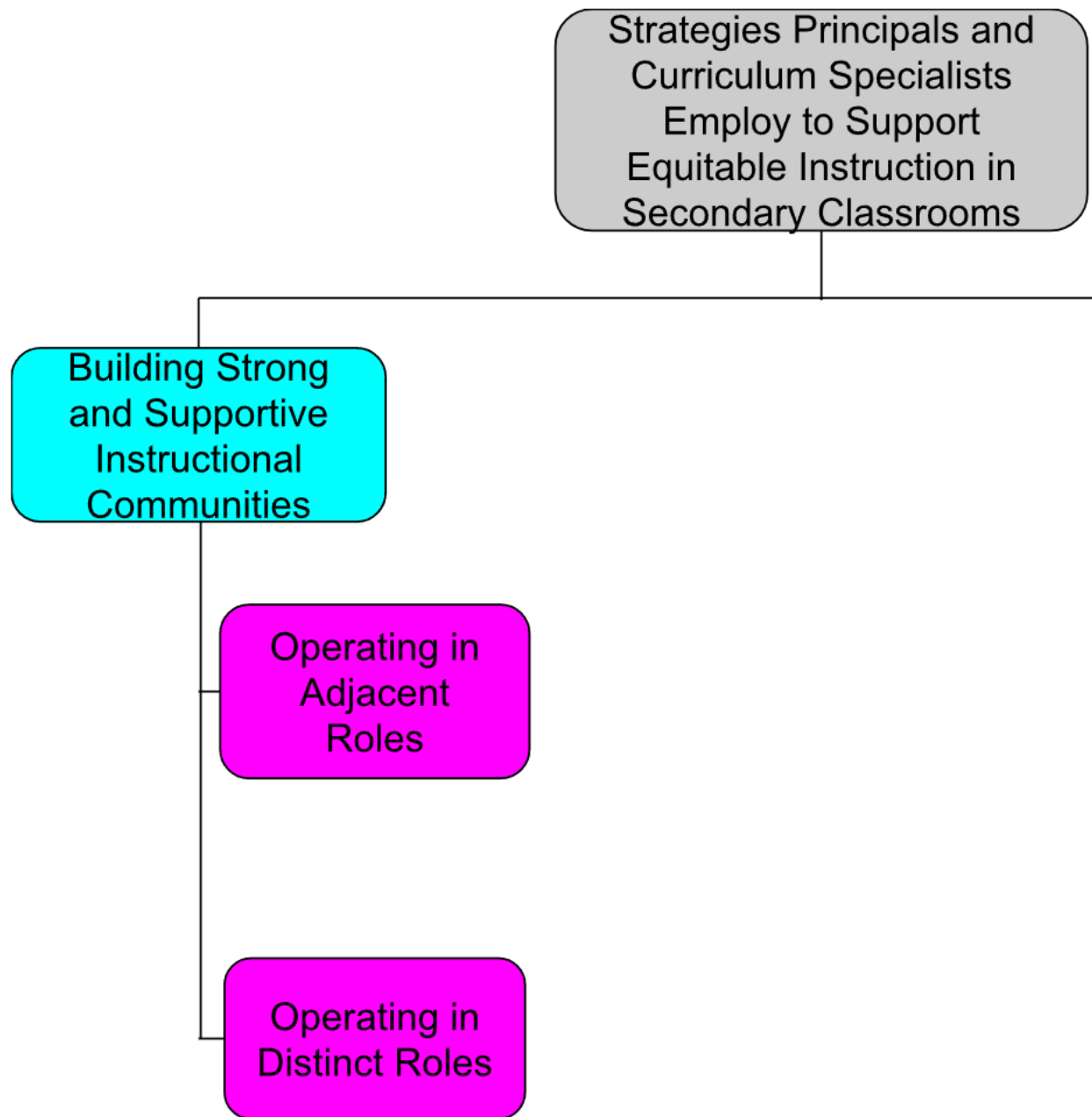


Figure 12. Building strong and supportive instructional communities.

Operating in Adjacent Roles

It became evident through the work in Cycle One that the intermediary between school administrators and district curriculum specialists is the school-based instructional coaches. This was highlighted in the September 2022 Building Community Activity and the subsequent School Support Meetings. The skills and dispositions necessary in the role of district curriculum specialists and school-based instructional coaches are very similar. As previously noted, curriculum specialists are heavily involved in supporting teachers with classroom instructional practices, most often with the assistance of school-based instructional coaches. The primary focus of both roles is aligning curriculum, instruction, and learning.

When meeting with the curriculum specialists and instructional coaches they both indicated the value of many factors, although they called particular attention to collaboration, sharing, and resourcefulness. During the September 2022 Building Community session with the high school group, the coaches concurred on the fact that they must share innovations in a manner that reduces the productive struggle of other coaches. This same sentiment was echoed by the middle school instructional coaches, indicating their commitment to sharing ideas in resources. During a one-on-one goal-setting meeting in October 2022, a specialist noted the benefits of such work, “The benefits include closing the gap for students, increasing proficiency, and building teacher capacity.” By operating closely with one another, the roles of district curriculum specialists and instructional coaches can boost the educational outcomes for schools and students through individual and collective efficacy.

Operating in Distinct Roles

Although educational outcomes can be bolstered by maximizing adjacent roles, this study emphasizes the importance of collaborating with other educational professionals outside of one’s

role. Specifically, the CPRs are investigating how principals and curriculum specialists can employ an innovative practice to support equitable instruction in secondary classrooms. This type of collaboration can lead to greater success for teachers, thus students. The distinct roles of the principal and curriculum specialists play an integral role in the success of a school. The principal, as the building leader, is charged with ensuring that standards and expectations are met. Oftentimes, this is seen in the “managing” of a building. However, principals set the expectations for academics and ensure there is adherence through observations, feedback, and coaching.

Curriculum specialists at the district level, as well as school-based instructional coaches, are often enlisted by principals to support the academics in the classroom. This is the case as their role is responsible for navigating curricular demands to develop content and course materials appropriate for all learners. However, implementation fidelity is left to the building leader, the principal.

When meeting with a joint group of school administrators, district curriculum specialists, and school-based instructional coaches in August 2022, similar ideas of operating in distinct roles were clear. The group reiterated the need for togetherness, expressing such by indicating “we’re one” and “there is unity of purpose...we’re building community through unity”. The group also discussed the need for consistency in planning, applying, and monitoring.

Fostering Meaningful Relationships

As in the Pre-Cycle, Cycle One data showed an emphasis on the relationship between the roles of principals, district curriculum specialists, and instructional coaches. Noted factors in the Pre-Cycle included having an open mind to others’ perspectives, being willing to hold conversations, and being trustworthy. Coding in Cycle One revealed factors that corresponded to

those in the Pre-Cycle. Those factors contributing to fostering meaningful relationships included listening to understand, sharing, and confidentiality as displayed in Figure 13.

Listening to Understand

Meaningful relationships can be fostered among colleagues when active listening is evident. During the September 2022 Building Community session, participants indicated such as one of the essential norms for their group in both secondary settings as noted previously in Figure 10. Active listening demonstrates that individuals are being heard and their opinions are valued. Furthermore, it leads to more productive dialogue to produce solutions and better outcomes.

Sharing

As important as active listening to foster relationships, it is important to engage in meaningful dialogue by being willing to share ideas and resources. The middle school instructional coaches concurred on the norm to courageously share and humbly accept while working collaboratively to make decisions in the interest of teachers and students. This norm helps to create a foundation for constructive conversations for the benefit of whole school improvement.

Confidentiality

Active listening and sharing will only go as far as the level of confidentiality that is held among colleagues. Similarly, principals, curriculum specialists, and instructional coaches expressed the need for a safe environment to discuss instructional matters that need to be addressed. A safe, confidential environment is essential to fostering a meaningful relationship that allows for collaborative work among principals and curriculum specialists for the benefit of secondary classrooms.

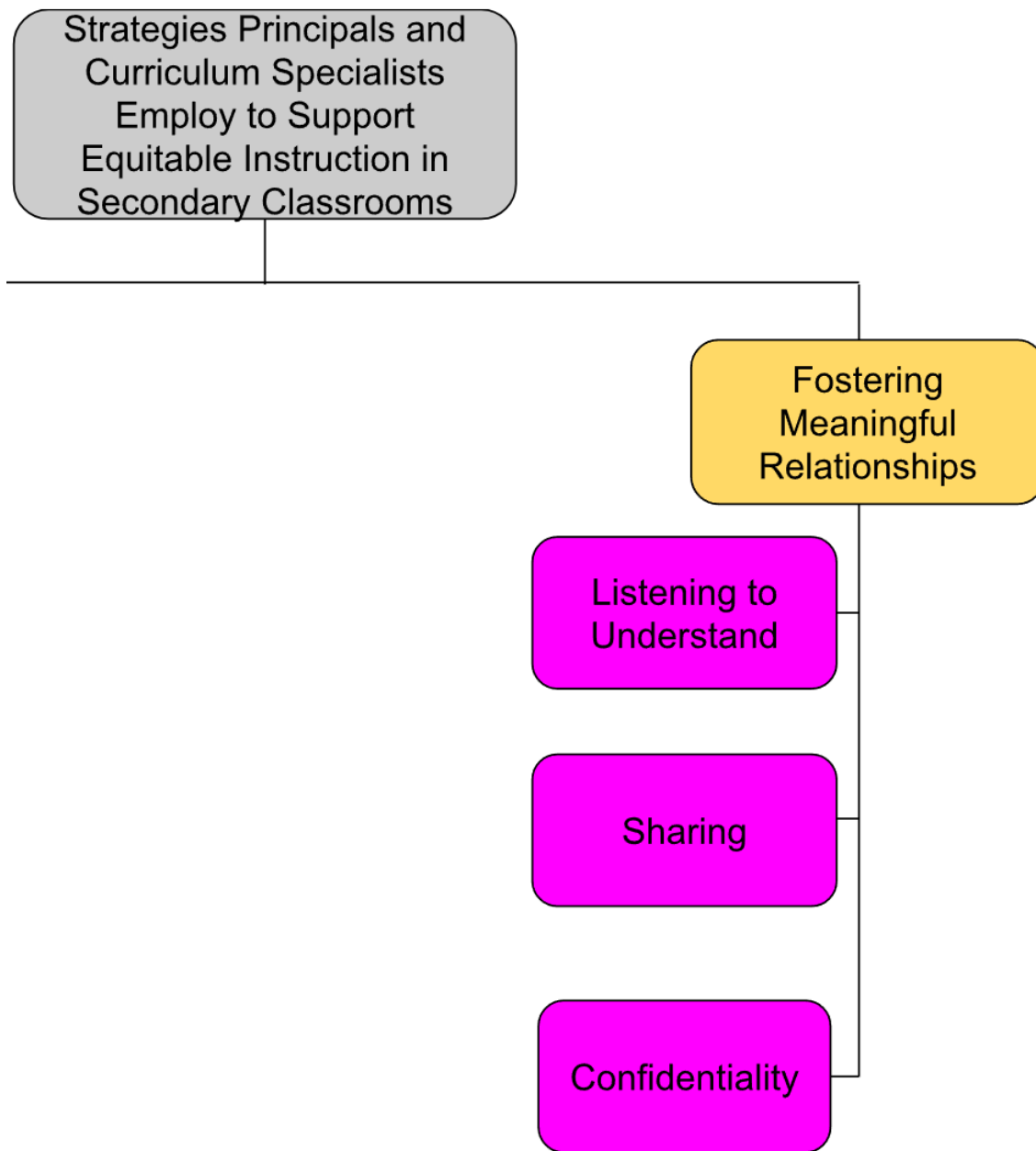


Figure 13. Two emerging themes.

Reflection and Planning

Reflection on Leadership

As I progressed through this Participatory Action Research (PAR), I discovered more about my approach and strengths for leading this work and the work as an educational leader. My research question prompted me to reflect on the extent to which the work of the PAR aligns with my professional growth and development as a district leader. Although I was no longer in the realm of “new to the position,” there had been some change in those that I lead. I recognize that with those changes my consistency in leadership is integral for maintaining stability in uncertainty. Additionally, it focuses on the need to build capacity among others for individual and collective efficacy.

Planning for PAR Cycle Two

In planning for Participatory Action Research (PAR) Cycle Two, I developed a schedule of activities after reflecting on both the preceding cycles, research questions, and goals of the study. Cycle Two was conducted in the Spring of 2023. I hosted activities to collect data occurring from January to April as indicated in Table 10. Cycle Two primarily continued to focus on the sub-question: *How does a collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists work with secondary teachers through observation protocols?* As the lead practitioner, I focused on the sub-question: *To what extent is my professional growth as a district leader supported by participating in Participatory Action Research?*

Conclusion

I realized upon completion of the Pre-Cycle that I need to slow down and time recognize the strengths of the CPR and understand the needs to be addressed, as much as I understood to take the time to build and foster relationships. In Cycle One, I used protocols that enabled me to

Table 10

PAR Cycle Two Timeline of Activities

Date	Research Questions	Protocol	Triangulation
February 2023	How do principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support academic discourse and authentic tasks in the secondary classroom?	Mini CLE: Building Community	Reflective memos
March 2023	How does a collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists work with secondary teachers through observation protocols?	Mini CLE: Building Community Monitoring Visits	Reflective memos
April 2023	To what extent is my professional growth as a district leader supported by participating in Participatory Action Research?	Reflective Memo Survey Monitoring Visits	

collect data more efficiently, as well as incorporate reflective memoing that proved to be a useful data source. In Cycle Two, I continued to use the established Building Community and School Support sessions to collect data and concluded with a Community Learning Exchange. Reflective memoing continued to be employed as one of the tools for member checking to ensure the validity of the qualitative data collected.

CHAPTER 6: PAR CYCLE TWO & STUDY FINDINGS

PAR Cycle Two occurred in the spring semester of 2023. During this cycle, the focus remained on the overarching research question: *What strategies do principals and curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?* This study's core focus examined how the collective work of school-based administrators and district curriculum specialists better supports classroom instruction. Although more and more districts have enlisted the services of curriculum specialists, there has been little evidence of collaborative work between a school's principal and such specialists. Spillane (2013) shared the importance of collaborative, distributed leadership:

In thinking about the practice of leading and managing instruction, we must get beyond individual actions - equating practice with the actions of the school principal or some other formal leader and acknowledging that practice takes shape in social interactions (p. 40).

Throughout each cycle of the research, my goal was to build a bridge that allowed principals and curriculum specialists to work collectively and collaboratively for the benefit of improved classroom instruction. As I sought to answer the overarching question, I maintained focus on the following sub-questions as well:

- How do principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?
- How does a collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists work with secondary core teachers through observation protocols?
- To what extent is my professional growth as a district leader supported by participating in Participatory Action Research?

In this chapter, I begin by describing the process of Cycle Two, which includes activities conducted to collect evidence. Additionally, I share the findings from analyzing the data from all three PAR cycles. I end with a conclusion based on such findings.

PAR Cycles Revisited

The participatory action research (PAR) study took place over 18 months, consisting of three cycles. As listed in Table 11, I conducted interviews, collected reflective memos, utilized existing and new meeting structures, facilitated professional learning opportunities, and conducted monitoring visits to construct an innovative, collaborative practice between principals and curriculum specialists to benefit equitable instruction in classrooms.

The PAR Pre-cycle occurred between February and May of 2022. During this cycle, the focus was to ensure co-practitioner researchers had clarity on the study's goals and expectations of their role. Being only six months into my role as Director of Secondary Education, building relationships with and amongst the CPR, other principals, and other district specialists was imperative. I intentionally designed activities that focused on building relationships during this cycle as it was essential to the success of this study. Much of the time during this PAR Pre-Cycle focused on one-on-one, semi-structured interviews and conversations. As the lead researcher, I coded notes, analyzed the data, and synthesized the data into two emergent categories, as detailed in Chapter 4.

PAR Cycle One occurred from August to November of 2022 with a continued focus on building an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms. During this cycle, I held monthly meetings with various educational leaders with a Building Community activity that focused on improving classroom instruction and learning through collaboration. Additionally, under the direction of the

Table 11

PAR Cycle Activities

Cycle	Dates	Activities & Number of Instances
PAR Pre-Cycle	February – May 2022	District Meeting with Principals (n=3) Departmental Meeting with Curriculum Specialists(n=3) Individual Conversations with CPR (Informal) (n=11+) Individual Interviews with CPR (Formal) (n=2) Reflective Memos (n=4)
PAR Cycle 1	August – November 2022	District Meeting with Principals (n=4) Departmental Meeting with Curriculum Specialists (n=4) District Meeting with School-Based Instructional Specialists (n=4) School Support Meeting (n=4) Individual Conversations with CPR (n=11+)
PAR Cycle 2	January – May 2023	District Meeting with Principals (n=4) Departmental Meeting with Curriculum Specialists (n=4) District Meeting with School-Based Instructional Coaches (n=4) School Support Meeting (n=4) Individual Conversations with CPR (n=13+) Monitoring Visits (n=15)

district's senior leadership, district curriculum leaders designed a model of support for schools, which included a collaborative space for school instructional leaders and district curriculum leaders. These meeting spaces provided opportunities for additional data collection to support the PAR. Data from the Pre-cycle and Cycle One were analyzed and synthesized to reveal two emergent themes: (1) Building Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities and (2) Fostering Meaningful Relationships, which provided the direction for Cycle Two.

PAR Cycle Two Process

PAR Cycle Two occurred from January 2023 to May 2023. During this cycle, the co-practitioner research group (CPR) remained the same; however, their participation levels changed due to internal and external factors. The changes presented an opportunity for the CPRs, including myself as the lead researcher, to shift thinking and provide and enlist different perspectives. Specifically, we incorporated more voices in the research. Beginning in Cycle One, school-based instructional coaches were included in discussions. This process grew in Cycle Two as I continued collecting data using established practices that were familiar to school-based instructional coaches, as well as principals and district curriculum specialists. Although the CPR group did not meet formally as a whole, individual meetings continued, coupled with meetings with other educational leaders to collect data.

PAR Cycle Two explored the collaborative work among principals, district curriculum specialists, and school-based instructional coaches. During this cycle, I continued using a familiar Cycle One protocol, Building Community. The Building Community activities functioned as a mini Community Learning Exchange as it involved bringing together individuals or groups from diverse backgrounds to share knowledge, skills, and experiences to foster mutual learning and community development. In this context, the activity serves as a platform for

exchanging insights, building relationships, and collectively enhancing the capacity of the educational community. The Building Community activities are a process of learning, collaboration, and collective growth, aligning with the principles of a CLE. Specifically, the Building Community component was utilized in the district meetings with the educational leaders with a vertical alignment component towards the end of the cycle. School Support meetings continued with a post-survey conducted by the facilitator. New activities included professional learning opportunities and school monitoring visits of observation processes. The Cycle Two activities are reflected in Table 12. Next, I summarize each data collection strategy.

District and Departmental Meetings

I met monthly with the secondary principals, secondary district curriculum specialists, and school-based instructional coaches as a routine responsibility. Although this was an expectation of my role, the components of the practice were intentional. Each district and departmental meeting included a Building Community protocol connected to the research questions. The Building Community components, utilized six times during Cycle Two, provided the participants an opportunity to reflect on their character, strengths, and areas of growth and the interconnectedness with how they work with the teachers they support. An opportunity was also provided for principals and their instructional coaches to calibrate with one another for effective teacher support. During these sessions, participants assessed their leadership styles and the impacts on those they lead. Also, the participants reviewed their school goals and identified teachers needing support. With an understanding of their leadership styles, the principals and instructional coaches discussed how to calibrate their support of teachers. Additionally, a vertical alignment session for district curriculum specialists and school-based instructional coaches was held at the end of the cycle. During this session, participants continued to discuss collective

Table 12

Activities: PAR Cycle Two

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
District Mtg with Princ (n=22)		•				•	<i>Spring Break</i>			•				•
Dept Mtg with Curr Spec (n=6)		•				•	<i>Spring Break</i>			•				•
District Mtg with Instr Coaches (n=4)	•			•			<i>Spring Break</i>		•				•	
School Support Mtg (n=18+)				•			<i>Spring Break</i>		•			•		
Ind Conv with CPR (n=3)	•	•	•	•	•	•	<i>Spring Break</i>	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Monitoring Visits (n=15)							<i>Spring Break</i>	•	•			•	•	•

efforts to support teachers to meet school instructional goals. Figure 14 displays responses from an activity held in the March 2023 Building Community session. Instructional Coaches (IC) reflected on presented questions in preparation for the end of year and considerations for the next school year. The questions set was later presented to the School Support participants that included ICs, district specialists, and principals.

I created agendas, facilitated content, and listened to the various voices in the room during these Cycle Two activities as I did in the former cycles. I captured data during the activities based on the artifacts created by participants and utilized personal reflective memos to analyze the ideas voiced during the discussions.

School Support Meeting

School Support meetings continued in the same structure initiated in Cycle One. Meetings began with a short informational session. During Cycle Two, the informational session was conducted by the curriculum specialists. Unlike in Cycle One, these sessions were grade span specific. Curriculum specialists presented to their grade span only. After the informational session, schools rotated in small groups to see each core area curriculum specialist for individualized support. I, along with the curriculum specialists, specifically paired schools during the rotations to meet their needs based on our assessment of school performance and the support needed. This grouping format proved beneficial in Cycle One as the specialists voiced that their efficiency increased.

The last School Support meeting allowed schools to work within their school groups to reflect and create an instructional plan for the close of school and develop anticipated instructional goals for the 2023-24 school year. The School Support facilitator consulted with me to develop questions for the school reflection. I previously used the question sets in the March

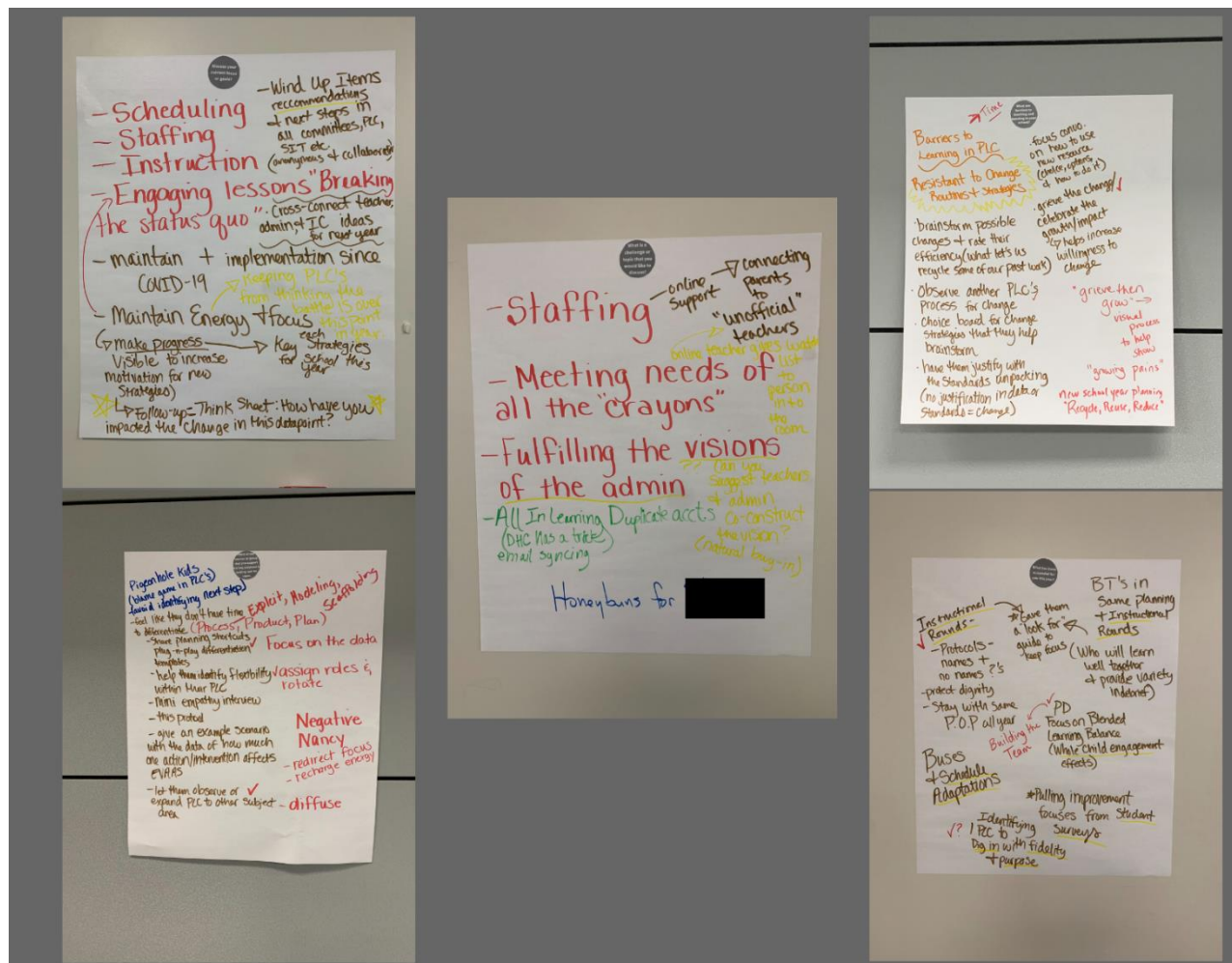


Figure 14. IC Building Community March 2023 Session Responses.

instructional coach's meeting. The following questions were provided to guide the school's reflection:

Assess strengths and areas of concerns

1. What has been successful this year?
2. What has been a challenge this year?
3. What are some barriers to teaching and learning in this subject area?

Identify concerns your leadership team can focus on

1. What is an area that you can impact?

Develop your plan

1. What steps can be put in place to support in areas you are concerned about?
2. What will be your first step?
3. How will you implement your plan?
4. What supports will you put in place?
5. What supports are needed?

During and upon completion of the group planning time, schools could ask the curriculum directors and specialists questions for guidance and support of their plans. The final School Support meeting ended with a brief survey to gather participant feedback. This data was coded for analysis.

Professional Learning and Monitoring Visits

Professional learning opportunities were provided to support the work occurring in the district, departmental, and School Support meetings. Our district strives to provide professional learning opportunities that support our focus areas while providing engaging and relevant experiences for educators. Providing professional learning is essential for the continuous growth

of our educators in our effort to help students. The professional learning opportunities aligned with our district's goals and initiatives, ensuring educators had the common knowledge and skills to meet our students' changing and individual needs. Educators are encouraged to actively participate, share, and reflect through collaborative and interactive learning opportunities. “Essentially, professional learning is a growth in practice model that values active engagement, teacher voice, creation and collaboration, inquiry, and reflection” (Mattson, 2014, para. 2).

I co-designed and co-facilitated two professional learning opportunities to support teachers and impact student learning for whole school improvement. The first opportunity focused on properly facilitating Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Our district utilizes the Dufour model for PLCs. The Dufour model describes PLCs as “Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.” (Dufour et al., 2010, p. 33)

In our annual PLC Facilitators training with teachers and instructional coaches, we focus on the terms *collaboratively*, *ongoing processes*, and *collective inquiry and action research*. We explored the principles and strategies for establishing and sustaining successful PLCs through our interactive learning sessions. I and the other presenters emphasized constructing a culture of trust and collaboration, effective planning, and utilizing data-driven decision-making processes to drive instructional practice. During the session, the participants were led through a series of activities that began with a self-rating of their understanding of PLCs and identifying as a group the structure of PLCs versus that of department/grade level meetings as seen in Figure 15. The bulk of the training had participants engage in the four questions of a PLC and a discussion of how those questions should be addressed in a PLC.

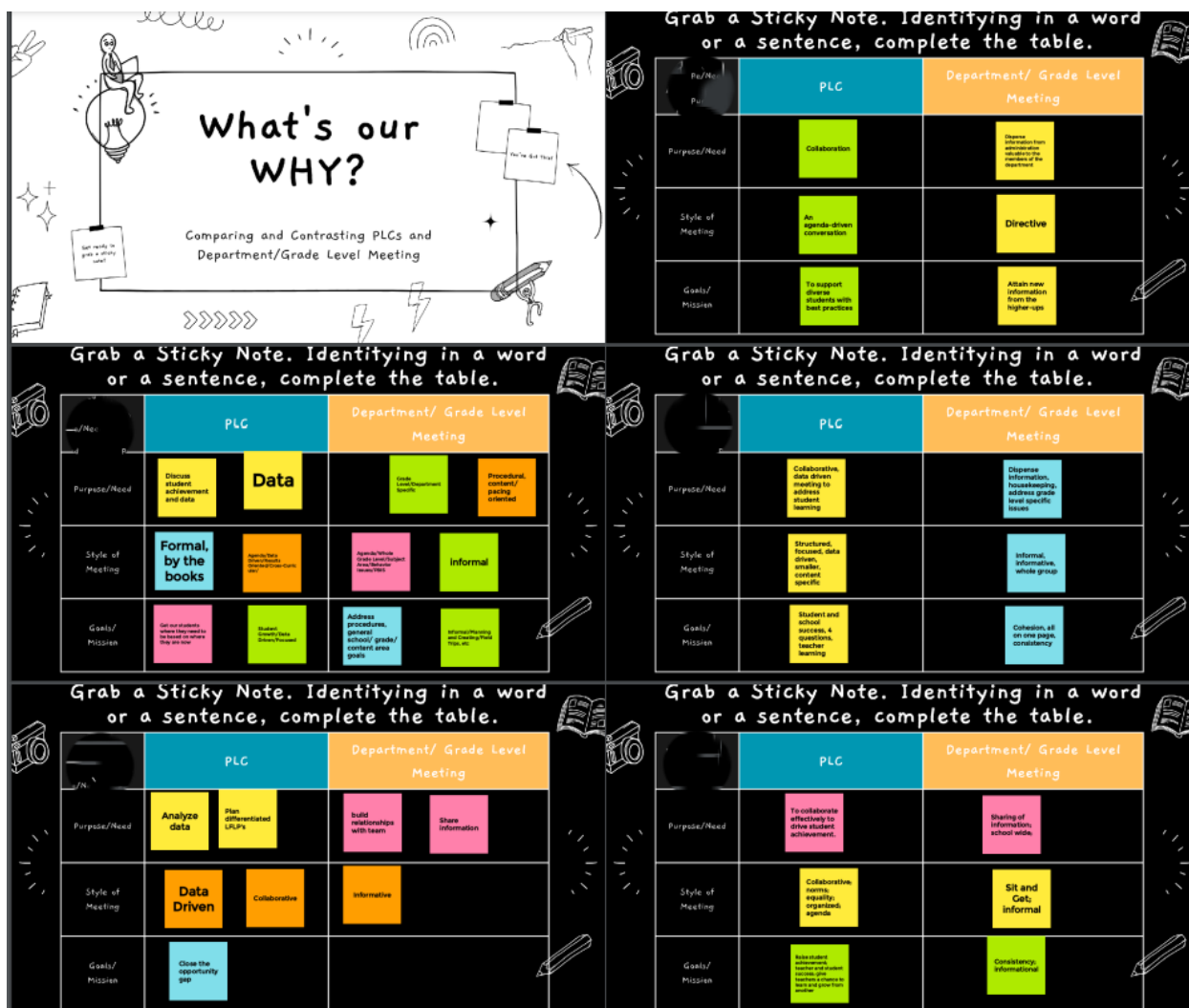


Figure 15. PLC PD: Excerpt of responses.

The second opportunity centered around effective Instructional Rounds (IRs). Our district uses the Harvard Medical School Rounds model to allow teacher reflection on practices for whole school improvement:

Instructional rounds are a disciplined way for educators to work together to improve instruction. The practice combines three common elements of improvement: classroom observation, an improvement strategy, and a network of educators. Many educators currently use one or more of these elements, often with some success. (City et al., 2011, p.1)

During this professional learning experience, educators had an opportunity to reflect on and extend their school's current Instructional Rounds practices. The session held during Cycle Two was the third segment on Instructional Rounds. During this session, participants were guided through a series of activities that included a reflection and assessment of their school's IR implementation, guided discussion with educational peers about IRs, and an opportunity to design their school's next steps in the IR process as seen in Figure 17. Through this series of activities, participants identified strengths in this instructional process, provided feedback, gained insight, and collaboratively developed strategies for an improved IR process.

Both professional learning opportunities provided educators with valuable tools to support equitable classroom instruction. The collaborative nature of these sessions allowed participants to learn from each other's experiences, share best practices, and build and construct strong instructional communities. I captured data via the artifacts created during the professional learning activities as seen in Figures 15, 16, and 17; the monitoring visits that occurred after the sessions also provided valuable information to both participants and me as the lead researcher.

SCHOOL NAME: Instructional Rounds Reflection

	Problem of Practice (PoP) 1. What <u>evidences</u> were utilized to identify your <u>PoP(s)</u>? 2. Did your <u>PoP(s)</u> change and if so, why? 3. Did your school utilize a schoolwide <u>PoP</u> or by grade level/content area? 4. How did your <u>PoP(s)</u> connect to School Improvement?
	Observation Process 1. How did you ensure that IRs focused on the instructional core? 2. Identify some barriers encountered in the observation process? 3. How did your teachers respond to this observation process?
	Debrief Process 1. What strategies were implemented to debrief after the observation? 2. What AHAs and opportunities for growth did you gain from this process?

Select a rating for your school's overall IR implementation.

Not Implementing	Emerging/Developing	Operationalizing	Optimizing
------------------	---------------------	------------------	------------

	Next Steps 1. <u>Thinking ahead</u>, what <u>plans</u> do you have for IRs in 23-24? (<u>consider</u> Problems of Practice, Observation Scheduling, Networks, Cross-School IRs)
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DROP in [IR Folder](#)

Steps:

Select File > Move > Shared with Me Drive > ****IR Knockout Round Reflection (April 2023) > Move Here

Figure 16. Instructional rounds reflection.

I conducted fifteen monitoring visits from March 2023 through May 2023. Principals were provided with a schedule to sign up for me to visit their schools to either observe their Professional Learning Communities, Instructional Rounds, or classroom walkthroughs. Classroom walkthroughs, in contrast to Instructional Rounds, are more frequent snapshots of happenings in a classroom often conducted by administrators to inform specific instructional practices. The monitoring visits served as a means to gather firsthand observations and insights, enriching the research process and providing valuable feedback to the participants and me as the lead researcher. During these visits, I could monitor how each school implemented PLCs and IRs. I observed Professional Learning Communities in action, where educators were engaged in dialogue and shared resources while collectively addressing the four Dufour PLC questions. PLC participants were not just the subject area teachers. Teachers collaborated with the schools' instructional coach(es), principal, and district curriculum specialists in attendance. The Instructional Rounds provided a unique opportunity to see effective teaching practices in different classrooms and witness the positive impact on student engagement and learning for whole school improvement. Additionally, classroom walkthroughs allowed for a closer look at instructional strategies and provided valuable feedback for further improvement. The monitoring visits allowed for data collection and served as a means of ongoing support and encouragement for participants, reinforcing my commitment to support them through continuous professional growth and improved student outcomes.

Reflective Memos

The Pre-Cycle and Cycle One emphasized building relationships to provide a foundation for collaborative work. Cycle Two continued to explore relationships and collaboration with a focus shifting to using the foundational work to support classroom instruction. To effectively

capture and comprehend the information I received, I continued utilizing Kolb's reflective memo protocol (see Appendix G) to capture my thoughts and those of other participants, including my co-practitioner researchers. The memos provided a deeper level of understanding and analysis of the data. By engaging in this reflective practice, I made meaningful connections, gained insights, and derived valuable conclusions from the information.

PAR Cycle Two Data Analysis

I utilized the same systematic approach to code and analyze the data throughout each cycle of the Participatory Action Research. I employed inductive coding, specifically *in vivo* coding, as described by Saldaña (2016). This coding approach was appropriate for capturing the participants' thoughts and concepts. I examined the shared ideas and assigned codes based on their understood meanings. I organized the data in a table format, as seen in the PAR Cycle 2 Codebook excerpt found in Appendix I, allowing me to identify recurring patterns as well as any outliers.

Coding to Categories

During the Pre-Cycle data analysis process, specific codes arose that contributed to the formation of the categories of 1) growth in collaboration and (2) relationship constructing. These codes were derived from the qualitative data collected from the Pre-Cycle activities that included the following:

1. Facilitated monthly district meetings with principals. ($n=22$)
2. Facilitated monthly departmental meetings with curriculum specialists ($n=6$)
3. Held informal individual conversations with CPR ($n=4$) throughout Spring 2022.
4. Conducted four formal interviews with CPR ($n=4$)
5. Provided the opportunity for reflective memoing by the CPR ($n=4$) at the close of Spring 2022.

A codebook was developed based on the codes derived from the activities. I analyzed the codes, revealing the emerging categories as seen in Figure 7 in Chapter 4.

Categories to Emergent Themes

In Cycle One, I continued with similar activities that were conducted in the Pre-Cycle with the addition of the School Support meetings that were initiated to assist our schools that received the state designation as low-performing. I continued to utilize inductive coding or in vivo coding, as described by Saldaña (2016). Data used specifically in Cycle One included content, notes, and agendas from the School Support, my district/department meetings, and my reflective memos. I assigned codes based on the understood meanings in the same process as the Pre-Cycle. Utilizing the established table format, I could easily identify the reoccurring codes. Common patterns emerged, providing significance to the data. Emerging themes were revealed from the categories that included (1) Building Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities and (2) Constructing Meaningful Relationships as identified in the codebook excerpt in Chapter 5's Figure 8 with the visual display of the emerging themes in Figure 9.

Emergent Themes to Themes

I synthesized the qualitative data from the Pre-Cycle through Cycle Two to identify themes. This process involved recognizing connections and commonalities while being aware of new, emerging patterns. The patterns remained consistent in the Pre-Cycle and Cycle One, providing me confidence in the emerging themes. In Cycle Two, a new finding became evident as a significant code increase supported the theme of Creating a pathway for continuous learning. Additionally, I reevaluated the extraneous data to determine if it was appropriate to add themes. During this process, I identified 61 additional codes related to themes, as shown in Figure 18. The data analysis allowed me to comprehensively visualize the findings discussed next.

Figure 17. MJ codebook – extraneous data reevaluation excerpts.

Findings

After the Participatory Action Research (PAR), principals and district curriculum specialists recognized that their collaborative work had a greater impact on classroom instructional practices. As the lead researcher, I identified that certain criteria needed to be in place to promote collaboration between the principals and district curriculum specialists. Additionally, in our setting that included school-based instructional coaches (ICs), the ICs played a crucial role as the intermediary to support teachers.

During each of the three cycles of inquiry, conducted over 18 months, the focus remained on the overarching research question: What strategies do principals and curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms? At the conclusion of the three cycles of inquiry, the data supported three findings as shown in Figure 19. Strategies that support the collaborative work of principals and curriculum for the benefit of secondary classroom instruction include 1) Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting, 2) Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities, and 3) Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning as seen in Figure 20. Following, I share those findings in detail with the supporting categories, frequency distribution, and their interconnectedness to each other.

The three findings were derived from the data collected throughout the three Participatory Action Research (PAR) Cycles. As previously described, data was collected through various activities that included the Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPR) and other educational professionals. During the PAR Pre-Cycle codes were derived from the interviews with the CPR members. In the PAR Cycle One, additional codes were primarily collected via goal-setting sessions during individual meetings and mini CLEs, known to our participants as Building Community sessions. Codes continued to be collected via Building Community sessions in

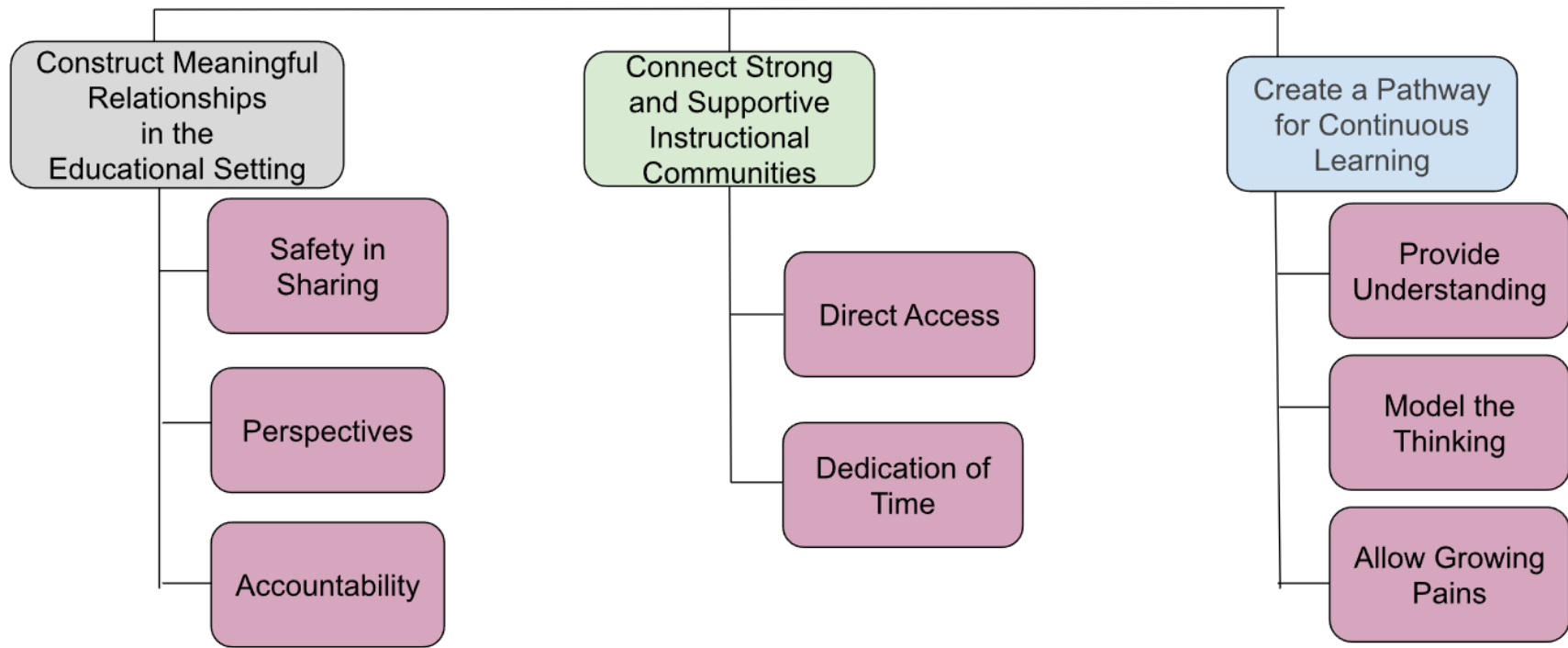


Figure 18. Three findings.

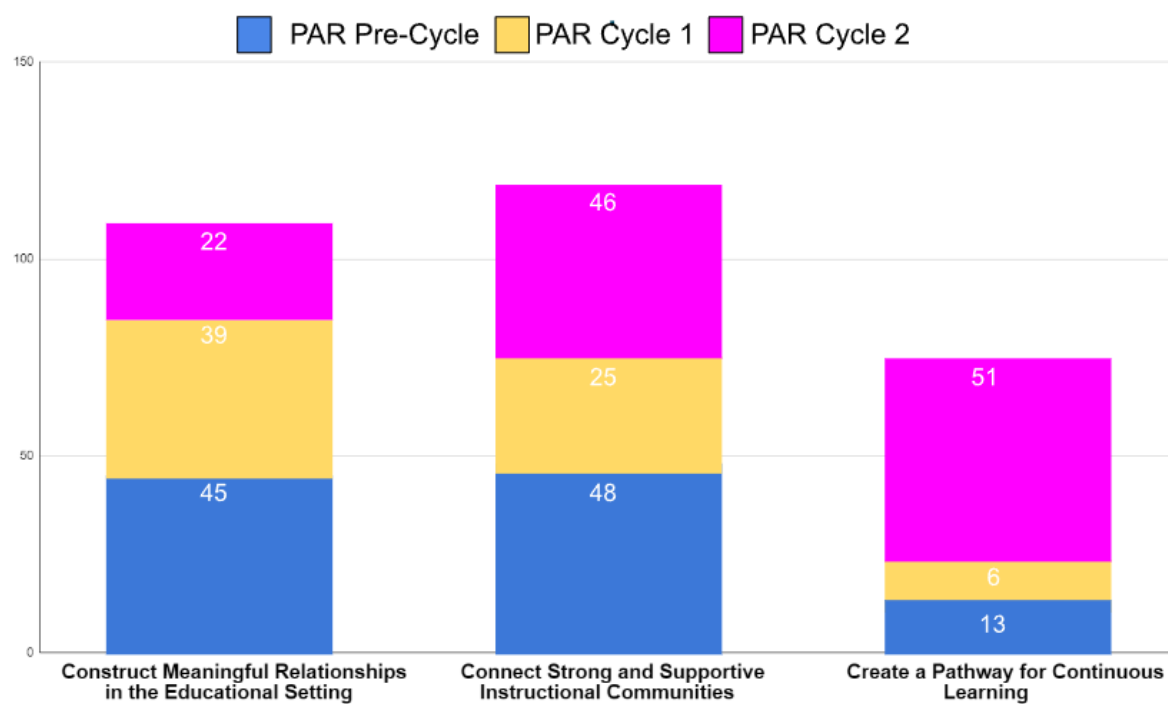
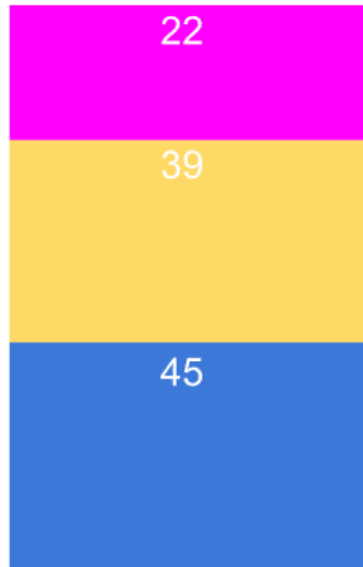


Figure 19. Frequency of codes based on findings.

PAR Cycle Two in addition to routine meetings that yielded data from other professional learning activities and surveys. The identified findings, as seen in Figure 20, were revealed as patterns emerged and new insights were discovered throughout the iterative process.

Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting

The term construct is defined as a form (an idea or theory) that brings together various conceptual elements, typically over a period of time (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the case of this study, we sought to construct a collaborative work environment between principals and district curriculum specialists in the educational setting for equitable classroom instructional practices. Both principals and district curriculum specialists work with teachers directly and through the intermediary of the school-based instructional coach. However, principal and curriculum specialists' interactions with teachers have traditionally been separate. One district curriculum specialist shared, “Although there are a few exceptions, there are principals that are not as involved; they have bigger fish to fry than worrying about curriculum” (M. Sullivan, personal communication, April 14, 2022). The data revealed that constructing meaningful relationships was necessary to construct a bridge for collaborative work between principals and district curriculum specialists as they work with teachers on their instructional practices. Another curriculum district specialist, MK, indicated in their June 2023 reflective memo, “Because we had such high (teacher) turnover, ‘one and done’s’ made it very hard for the trust to be built; it spills over into what support looks like.” Figure 21 shows the frequency distribution that constructing meaningful relationships was indicated in each cycle for 106 codes. Furthermore, the data indicated three concepts essential to constructing meaningful relationships: safety in sharing, perspective exchange, and reliability through accountability.



Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting

 PAR Pre-Cycle  PAR Cycle 1  PAR Cycle 2

Figure 20. CMRES finding frequency per PAR cycle.

Safety in sharing allowed a space for individuals to share ideas without fear of ideas being dismissed or retribution for giving their viewpoint. The act of giving one's perspectives while actively listening to others played a vital role in relationship-building. Throughout the PAR cycle activities, participants highlighted the significance of engaging in open and constructive dialogue, where individuals were encouraged to offer their insights and perspectives on various topics. The exchange and acceptance of perspectives not only deepened mutual understanding but also promoted self-efficacy and the collective efficacy of the group. Additionally, accountability emerged as a fundamental element in constructing meaningful relationships. Participants recognized the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions and holding to their commitments to accomplishing the shared goals and honoring the group's values. This helped to build a sense of reliability and dependability, thus strengthening relationships. Table 13 presents the findings' supporting categories, followed by a description of each.

Safety in Sharing

Safety in sharing emerged as an aspect of constructing meaningful relationships within the research findings. Interviews conducted during the Pre-Cycle revealed having an open mind was key to providing a space for sharing. Co-practitioner researcher (CPR) M. Nance saw open-mindedness as the ability to recognize one's perspective while also being open to the perspectives of others. He shared that education is bigger than all of us and that no one holds all knowledge (personal communication, April 29, 2022). In PAR Cycle One Building Community activities, the participants emphasized the importance of creating a safe and inclusive space where individuals felt comfortable expressing their thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. During the September 15 meeting, one participant shared that "being vulnerable can happen when a safe

Table 13

Construct Meaningful Relationships Across Three PAR Cycles

Finding	Category	Frequency
Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting	Safety in Sharing	47
	Exchanging Perspectives	40
	Accountability	19

space has been created.” As a group, participants agreed that they valued authenticity that could be given in a non-threatening environment. Participants described how feeling safe in sharing enabled them to express their ideas and contribute to discussions freely. Based on the pre-cycle interviews, curriculum specialists and principals alike noted being trustworthy as a means to feel safe. One specialist, M. Sullivan, specifically indicated that a relationship blossomed from trust, noting there was nothing that they would not collaborate with that other individual on. The CPR members shared that building trust from the beginning is necessary.

Ultimately, the concept of feeling safe in sharing highlighted the role of creating an inclusive and non-judgmental space where individuals feel empowered to share their thoughts and contribute to the collective learning and growth of the community. In reviewing my reflective memo from October 2022, I noted that principals, specialists, and instructional coaches alike, agreed that they must feel safe in a given environment to share. This was reiterated among all groups, but most noted when working with the middle school participants. I acknowledge that this is likely the result of more staff transitions in middle school than in high school. High school principals and instructional coaches had more opportunities to experience “safety” in the collaborative spaces. As Bandura (1977b, 1991, 1995; Puckett, 2017) asserted, when an individual receives positive encouragement or feedback, their self-efficacy increases. They are more likely to repeat the task, and in this case, they are more likely to continue to share. The data reiterated this as participants indicated their willingness to continue to share and collaborate as previously noted by M. Sullivan. Additionally, during the September 2022 Building Community session, respondents indicated the space served as a place of “replenishment” because honesty, trustworthiness, and confidentiality were provided.

Exchanging Perspectives

Being willing to share is integral and should be reciprocated by being willing to also listen as others share. Giving and listening to perspectives emerged as an element in constructing meaningful relationships within the data. Participants emphasized the value of actively engaging in the exchange of viewpoints. Giving perspectives involves sharing one's insights, experiences, and knowledge with others. Throughout the PAR cycles, the various participants highlighted the significance of being open-minded, respecting different opinions, and valuing the diverse perspectives that everyone brings to the table. One specialist noted on April 14, 2022, that it was much easier to work with other specialists within the same grade span and bounce ideas off one another. However, the specialists found great value in working with specialists in differing grade spans and content areas (M. Sullivan and E. Paul, personal communications, April 14, 2022). One stated in reference to learning new strategies and protocols, "I've learned a tremendous amount. I have learned, and still learn, a tremendous amount (M. Sullivan, personal communication, April 14, 2022). Another specialist shared the same with working with others within their grade span even when the content area was different (E. Paul, personal communication, April 14, 2022). Dr. Paul specifically noted working with the high school English specialist on the College and Career Ready Graduate legislation for classroom implementation.

One principal said you must be "willing to entertain other ideas because there are other ideas out there" (M. Nance, personal communication, April 29, 2022). He went on to share that education is bigger than all of us and that no one is the holder of all knowledge. Thus, listening to perspectives was equally emphasized as being willing to give one's perspectives and ideas. Participants in the September 15 Building Community activity shared the importance of actively

listening to understand. They described listening to understand as not only active listening by giving one's full attention but also seeking clarification when needed. As a result, secondary instructional coaches agreed to add that to the collective commitments as part of their role for the 2022-2023 school year.

Accountability

The third factor in constructing meaningful relationships was being accountable. Principals and curriculum specialists shared that being accountable meant being prepared and committing to follow through. Throughout the three PAR cycles, participants emphasized the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions. Participants recognized that their actions and behaviors, or lack thereof, had an impact on overall dynamics and outcomes. Participants described how being accountable demonstrated commitment, thus constructing trust and respect among colleagues. Based on interviews conducted during the Pre-cycle, curriculum specialists and principals alike noted being trustworthy as another means of relationship fostering. One specialist specifically indicated that a relationship blossomed from the trust that was built, noting there was nothing that they would not collaborate with that other individual on. The CPR members shared that building trust from the beginning is necessary, which aided in relying on one another.

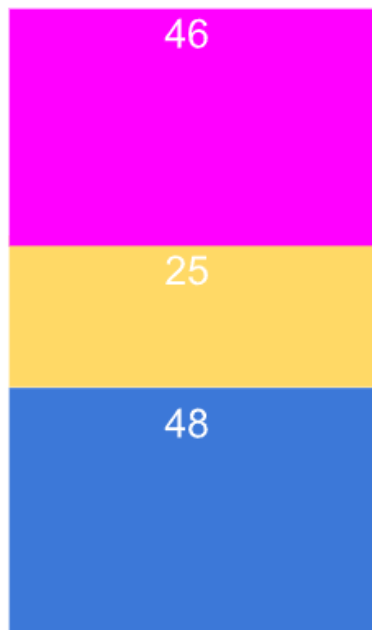
During the December 9, 2022, School Support meeting, a participant expressed that we have to be accountable; we can still show concern but continue to have expectations to meet our (and the district's) expectations. This was later reiterated during the March 24, 2023, joint meeting with principals and instructional coaches. During a charting exercise, one participant indicated the need to serve as accountability partners for one another by being encouragers, willing team members, and a troubleshooter.

Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities

The second strategy principals and curriculum specialists employ to support equitable classroom practices is building strong and supportive instructional communities. Figure 22 shows the frequency distribution that building strong and supportive instructional communities was identified in each cycle with 119 corresponding codes. For this participatory action research, an instructional community is defined as a group of educators across roles that focus on aspects of teaching and learning.

Dedication of time was another key component to strong instructional communities. Participants recognized the importance of allocating dedicated time for collaboration, professional dialogue, and building relationships with colleagues, which relates to the first finding. In the April 29, 2022, interview with M. Nance, he indicated that the frequency of the collaboration is so valuable; having those conversations with the specialists at the district level is priceless. This dedicated time allowed for deeper conversations, reflection on instructional practices, and collaborative problem-solving specific to a school or groups of schools with similar areas of focus. Participants acknowledged that investing time in these activities not only enhanced their own professional growth but also contributed to the collective expertise and effectiveness of the instructional community.

Direct access to colleagues and time dedication emerged as components in building strong and supportive instructional communities as noted with their frequency noted in Table 14. Principals and curriculum specialists expressed that having direct access to their educational colleagues was beneficial. However, principals specifically emphasized the value of having direct access to curriculum specialists to share expertise, seek guidance, and collaborate on instructional matters. Direct access involved having open lines of communication that allowed



Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities

 PAR Pre-Cycle  PAR Cycle 1  PAR Cycle 2

Figure 21. CSSIC finding frequency per PAR cycle.

Table 14

Connect Strong and Supportive Communities Across Three PAR Cycles

Finding	Category	Frequency
Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Direct Access	76
	Dedication of Time	43

for timely interactions. The supportive network ultimately strengthened their instructional practices.

Direct Access

Direct access to colleagues emerged as important for convenient communication channels between educators. Educators could establish a supportive network within their instructional community by having open communication lines. Our district has formal meeting opportunities for principals, curriculum specialists, and school-based instructional coaches to collaborate. However, it was expressed that having direct access to informal discussions was just as important to facilitate opportunities for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and immediate problem-solving. The principals shared their experiences working with specialists during the Pre-Cycle CPR interviews. It was promising to hear that principals saw value in such collaboration.

Additionally, the principals were eager for more opportunities to collaborate with the specialists. One principal shared in their April 2022 interview that working with the specialists allowed them to get a feel for what was happening across the district. He discussed hearing from the specialists about the best practices that would give his teachers a better understanding of the content standards required to provide students with quality instruction (M. Nance, personal communication, April 29, 2022).

The specialists also talked about their experiences working with the principals. Specifically, the collaboration with school principals varied as some principals intentionally would seek out specialists to collaborate with. In contrast, at some school sites, other leaders, such as instructional coaches, would be the ones to coordinate such collaboration (M. Sullivan and E. Paul, personal communications, April 14, 2022). Additionally, one specialist indicated in their June 2023 Reflective Memo that “alignment between the district curriculum specialist,

principal, and instructional coach created teacher support that was high, long-term, and long-range.” Curriculum specialists expressed that principals became so comfortable contacting them for assistance that they realized it was necessary to communicate their areas of expertise or when other resources needed to be sought. The secondary curriculum team saw this as a good problem as the principals knew that the specialists were there for support. In November 2022, the secondary curriculum specialists collectively crafted an email to some of the principals, reminding them that they were available to support their content-specific needs and would provide guidance to other resources if that were more appropriate.

Dedication of Time

The dedication of time was also important to building a strong and supportive instructional community. Principals participating in School Support shared that they felt the district valued setting aside dedicated time for their school teams to work directly with the curriculum specialists. This dedicated time allowed the educators to discuss their school’s data and collaborate on instructional strategies to impact such data. In the post-survey administered at the April 17, 2023, School Support meeting, one respondent indicated the following about the allotted time, “it kept me on front lines of pacing, curriculum, PLCs.”

Participants also emphasized that dedicating time for collaboration constructed a sense of support not just from district staff but also from their fellow principal colleagues and their school staff. Another respondent indicated in the School Support post-survey that they “appreciated the time for cross-school collaboration.” Participants noted that investing time in collaborative endeavors not only enhanced their professional growth but also contributed to the collective expertise and effectiveness of the instructional community.

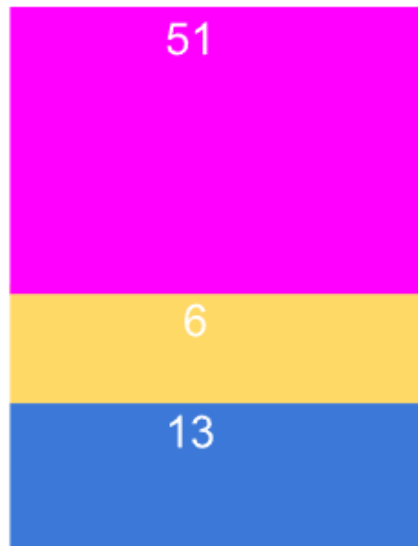
Overall, responses indicated that the CPR found value in the various forms of collaboration, with one CPR indicating that learning is a social experience that can result from collaboration (M. Nance, personal communication, April 29, 2022). The key to successful collaboration, which several CPRs noted, is the frequency of the collaboration.

Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning

Creating a Path for Continuous Learning emerged from the research findings in Cycle Two. Creating a Path for Continuous Learning was noted in both the Pre-Cycle and Cycle One; however, the data to support it could have been more significant. However, in further analysis of the data, there was greater gain over time in this finding than in others. Specifically, the number of related codes in Cycle Two was almost triple the combined Pre-Cycle and Cycle One codes related to continuous learning as seen in Figure 23. I attribute this to the fact that meaningful relationships and supportive instructional communities needed to be in place before providing continuous learning opportunities, just as the foundation and substructure must exist before the superstructure of a bridge. The data, as noted in Table 15, revealed that a path for continuous learning included providing educators with an understanding of best practices in curriculum and instruction, modeling the thinking, and allowing for growing pains

Provide Understanding

Understanding highlighted the importance of ensuring educators understand expectations, from administrators to teachers to instructional support staff. Understanding the curriculum, teaching, and learning expectations is important in this PAR context. Administrators are crucial in communicating and clarifying these expectations to teachers to ensure alignment with state and district accountability standards and objectives. One of the responsibilities of our district curriculum specialists is to ensure that principals, as the school's instructional leaders, can



Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning

 PAR Pre-Cycle  PAR Cycle 1  PAR Cycle 2

Figure 22. CPCL frequency per PAR cycle.

Table 15

Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning Across Three PAR Cycles

Finding	Category	Frequency
Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning	Provide Understanding	36
	Model the Thinking	19
	Allow Growing Pains	15

communicate and clarify these expectations with their teaching staff. When teachers clearly understand expectations, they can more effectively plan and deliver instruction, reflect on and modify their teaching strategies to meet all students' needs, and accurately assess learning outcomes. During the September 2022 Building Community session with the high school group, the coaches concurred that they must share innovations in a manner that reduces the productive struggle of other coaches. This same sentiment was echoed by the middle school instructional coaches, indicating their commitment to sharing ideas and resources. During a one-on-one goal-setting meeting in October 2022, a specialist noted the benefits of such work, “The benefits include closing the gap for students, increasing proficiency, and building teacher capacity.” By operating closely with one another, the roles of district curriculum specialists and instructional coaches can boost the educational outcomes for schools and students through individual and collective efficacy.

Additionally, when educators have a comprehensive understanding of expectations, they can collaborate with colleagues and engage in professional dialogue to enhance instructional practices and promote an equitable learning environment. Ms. Sullivan, co-practitioner researcher (CPR), indicated “We were more aware of the issues with teachers, more compelled to do more for teachers, especially non-certified, by seeing things from the principal’s viewpoint. It gave a whole new meaning about teachers knowing content than just making it fun” (personal communication, June 2023). After this conversation, I noted “that with the increase of non and alternative-licensed teachers, it is no longer good enough for secondary principals to just know best teaching strategies. It is important to collaborate with those who know the curriculum to understand curriculum expectations” (personal reflective memo, June 2023).

Model the Thinking

Modeling thinking emerged as an important component of continuous learning. Throughout the PAR Cycle, participants highlighted the significance of educators modeling effective thinking processes and problem-solving strategies at all levels. Principals in the school support meetings shared that the curriculum specialists openly demonstrated their thinking. On April 17, 2023, post-survey, a respondent noted that they could “better support teachers by modeling this kind of thinking for teachers.” Modeling thinking involves sharing the cognitive processes in instructional planning, assessment, and problem-solving. During a member check following the April school support meeting, a co-practitioner researcher indicated working directly with the specialists allowed them to see “how the bread was made,” meaning “we could see how you provide support, look at common assessments, should take tests, do data analysis...there was a different set of eyes, another perspective to then replicate” (M. Nance, personal communication, June 2023).

Participants recognized that modeling thinking not only provided concrete examples but motivated staff members to develop their critical thinking and reflective skills. By witnessing the processes of skilled educators, staff members were empowered to approach issues confidently, building their self-efficacy and collective efficacy. During my March 28, 2023, Monitoring Visit at one of the secondary schools, the instructional coach led a PLC through a meta-cognition activity introduced to her and the principal at the previous School Support meeting by a secondary curriculum specialist. The PLC members walked away with a better understanding of question development and how to make sure students understand what tasks are being asked of them.

Allow Growing Pains

During the March 31 Building Community Activity, the concept of allowing growing pains was important to the finding of creating a path for continuous learning, especially in times of change and transition. In response to the prompt: *Think of one teacher or group that you support but improvement is lacking*. The input provided included “Allow growing pains.” “Grieve the change, celebrate the growth and impact,” and “Grieve, then grow.” Leaders constructed a culture of reflection and resilience by allowing staff members to experience and learn from the challenges they encountered. This approach encouraged staff members to identify areas for growth and engage in self-reflection. Allowing growing pains emphasizes the importance of providing support, encouragement, and understanding as colleagues navigate the inevitable change and challenges in the educational setting.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer the question: What strategies do principals and curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms? Over the course of 18 months, three Participatory Action Research cycles included carefully selected activities that were familiar to the participants; however, encouraged participants to take a deeper dive into instructional leadership actions. More specifically, the CPR and other participants looked at how their collective actions impacted instructional practices and thus ways to improve. The data collected during the inquiry cycles resulted in the identification of three findings. In this chapter, I provided details of the activities held to collect data to support the findings and the process to analyze such findings. I elaborated on the three findings and the supporting sub-findings for each. Noting that an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable

instruction in secondary core classrooms can occur when certain structures are designed as follows:

1. Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting

Data indicates that meaningful relationships are reinforced by providing the space that allows people to feel safe to share, freely exchange perspectives, and hold oneself and others accountable.

2. Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities

Sub-findings to support instructional communities are providing direct accessibility to educational partners and creating dedicated time for collaborative work.

3. Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning

Data suggests that a pathway for continuous learning is sustained by ensuring that instructional strategies are understood, metacognitive processes are modeled and there is room for growth through challenges.

In Chapter 7, I detail how the structure of the findings resembles that of a bridge. In exhibiting the bridge analogy, I deconstruct the findings to show the layered approach and the continued interplay that is needed for sustainability in supporting equitable classroom instruction. Furthermore, I discuss how the findings are related to other studies and literature. In addition, the significance and limitations of the study will be discussed, followed by implications for future research. I conclude the chapter by discussing the impacts on my leadership practice and that of others.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Education is all a matter of building bridges.
Ralph Ellison (1963)

Bridges close gaps by providing a source of connection; they span divides connecting areas once isolated from one another. One of the instances in education where this divide occurs is in the work of principals and curriculum specialists. Both seek to close educational gaps in classrooms; however, their efforts are often in isolation from one another. Both recognize that improving teaching will result in improved student performance. What has been lacking is the collaborative work between principals and curriculum specialists to build the bridge that supports equitable classroom instruction. This study provides insights into the significance of work between principals and district curriculum specialists in their collective efforts to improve classroom instruction, thus student performance.

This participatory action research (PAR) study explored how principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable practices in core secondary classrooms through professional development and observation protocols. Therefore, I based the PAR study on this theory of action: *If an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists provide professional learning opportunities and utilize observation protocols focusing on whole-school improvement, then equitable instruction in core secondary classrooms will be supported, thus improved.*

The participatory action research (PAR) study took place over 18 months, consisting of three cycles. I conducted interviews, collected reflective memos, utilized existing and new meeting structures, facilitated professional learning opportunities, and conducted monitoring visits to construct and sustain an innovative, collaborative practice between principals and curriculum specialists to benefit equitable instruction in the classroom.

These activities were conducted in a North Carolina school district that serves over 23,000 students; there are 21 secondary schools within this school district. The co-practitioner researchers (CPR) included two principals serving secondary schools and two district curriculum specialists, as I served as the lead researcher. The secondary school sites served by the two principals included one middle school and one high school, as detailed in Chapter 4. Activities, as the study progressed, included the voice and expertise of other secondary principals, district curriculum specialists, and instructional support staff. As noted in Chapter 6, the participation level of the CPR changed due to internal and external factors.

Existing structures within the district and external structures that supported the district were in place that were conducive to the study; however, there were still challenges, as depicted in Figure 1, the Fishbone diagram. As lead researcher, I sought to utilize those assets and mitigate the barriers presented by the noted challenges in the effort to construct and sustain a collaborative work structure between principals and curriculum specialists.

I identified three key findings during this study to address the overarching question - What strategies do principals and curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms? Based on the collected data, those findings are:

1. Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting
2. Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities
3. Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning

Following, I provide an overview and detail the interconnectedness of these three findings while detailing the associations to existing literature. I discuss the implications of the findings on future practice, policy, and research. Lastly, I conclude the chapter by reflecting on my leadership journey, detailing the insights gained as a result of this participatory action research.

Discussion

When examining the findings of my Participatory Action Research (PAR), I identified correlations to the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and to other literary sources. Additionally, I organized the findings in a framework that captures their interrelation. The framework parallels the three previously referenced findings to the structure of a bridge: The Foundation, The Substructure, and the Superstructure. This framework facilitates change in practice by addressing the research questions as addressed later in the chapter.

Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting – The Foundation

As I began the Participatory Action Research (PAR), I was intentional in my processes as I was entering a new position as Director of Secondary Education. I intended to move at a slow pace to build relationships with the co-practitioner researchers (CPR) as we began working collaboratively in a new manner. Building rapport with each member was essential to the successful function of the CPR team and the success of this study. At the onset of the study, my position changed whereas I served as a supervisor to members of the CPR. I was acutely aware of my positionality and gave much care and attention not to misuse or abuse such. DeWitt (2022) emphasized that “To lead improvement is to exercise influence in ways that leave the team, organization or system in a better state than before” (p. 221). As the study progressed and the CPR joined forces with other educational professionals, we realized that constructing meaningful relationships was a necessary first step in bridging the gap for collaborative, innovative work to improve classroom instruction. Although we exist in a professional environment, we all enter the workplace with various perspectives on how to approach the work, work that we are oftentimes emotionally attached to. Therefore, in building relationships in the educational setting, we must attend to those emotions and give ease to people sharing their views. DeWitt (2022) also shared

that "Emotions are the most powerful force inside the workplace - as they are in every human endeavor. They influence everything from leadership effectiveness to building and maintaining complex relationships, from innovation to customer relations" (p. 53). As noted in Chapter 6, study participants emphasized the importance of creating a safe and inclusive space where individuals felt comfortable sharing; one participant shared "being vulnerable can happen when a safe space has been created." Kemmis et al. (2013), based on the theory of Jürgen Habermas, indicated:

Agreeing to participate in a conversation in accordance with the principles of communicative action opens a particular kind of communicative space between the partners to the conversation - a space where people will take their ideas, each others, and alternative courses of action seriously, with the aim of acting for the best for everyone involved and affected (p. 35).

Commitment to establishing a collaborative, communicative space was necessary for the work of the CPR and as we engaged our educational colleagues. Porter et al. (1974) defined organizational commitment as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (p. 604). Being committed is a driving force for accountability. As indicated in Chapter 6, accountability surfaced as a fundamental element in constructing meaningful relationships as we sought to align the instructional work of school principals and curriculum specialists. Throughout the study participants acknowledged the importance of assuming accountability for their actions as they pursued the common goal of improving classroom instruction for all students. Kemmis et al. (2013) went on to say, "Because communicative action opens up this respectful and disciplined communicative space between

people, participating in communicative action builds solidarity between participants, and underwrites their understandings and decisions with validity and legitimacy” (p. 36).

Solidarity does not simply come by bringing educators to the table, it is established as they feel confident, and that confidence builds in their collective. As described in Chapter 2, efficacy was key in initiating the collaborative work in this space.

Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities – The Substructure

In this study, we found that as principals and curriculum specialists recognized their collective impact, they were able to build strong and supportive instructional communities that were sustainable. Within the study of this district, both professional learning communities (PLCs) and Community of Practices (CoPs) exist. These instructional communities, whether they be PLCs, CoPs, or Networked Improvement Communities (NICs) were sustainable because of collective efficacy. Referring to the literature in Chapter 2, collective efficacy is a group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to attain its goals and accomplish desired tasks (Bandura, 1991). Whereas collective teacher efficacy has impacts within grade levels and departments, collective leader efficacy has the potential to positively impact whole school improvement (Bandura, 2000; DeWitt, 2022; Hattie et al., 2020). It is important to note that school leaders go beyond that of the principal; in this context, it also includes curriculum specialists, instructional coaches, and other teacher leaders. Spillane (2013) argues that the distributive leadership perspective acknowledges leading and managing instruction includes more than the school's principal (p. 39). Khalifa (2020) states, “School communities in which all people are bonded by a vision to help children - and then actually commit to learning together - are necessary for school improvement” (p. 142).

In this finding, two key elements emerged which were direct access and dedication of time. These key elements complemented the literature of Bryk et al. (2015) which indicated, “Membership in a NIC means placing priority on solving a problem together, rather than pursuing a theoretical predilection, methodological orientation, or personal belief” (p.17). In an effort to have this priority, principals and curriculum specialists alike emphasized throughout the PAR the need to have direct access to one another at dedicated times, reinforcing the need to maintain their instructional community. My goal as the lead researcher was to facilitate the instructional communities at the district level so in turn the inquiry processes could be connected and replicated in the school-level PLCs and CoPs by the principal and other school-based instructional leaders. Militello et al. (2009) discuss how leaders facilitate the practice of collaborative, inquiry-based processes about teaching and learning for the improvement of student outcomes.

Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning – The Superstructure

To that end, it is important to have a pathway for continuous learning for educators at all levels. The data indicated that educators want a pathway for continuous learning providing an understanding of best practices in curriculum and instruction, a model of thinking processes, and guidance through growing pains. During the Participatory Action Research (PAR), the CPR intentionally modeled these concepts in working with other principals, curriculum specialists, and instructional coaches to encourage replication at the school level. Literature posits that is not about increasing the number of leaders, but increasing their quality and capability (DeWitt, 2022). Hammond and Jackson (2015) contend, with respect to culturally responsive school leadership, that capacity can be grown through professional learning, collaborative walkthroughs, data analysis training, mentoring, and modeling.

As the lead researcher, I provided opportunities including professional learning, monitoring walkthroughs, and modeling of data analysis, so that it became a routine act for our participating educators. In the *Peripheral Visions*, Bateson (1995) explains, “There is another sense in which learning can be coming home, for the process of learning turns the strange context into a familiar one, and finally into a habitation of mind and heart” (p. 213). This mastery only comes from practice which is emphasized in the work of Nachmanovitch (1990). Bandura (1977a) emphasizes mastery experience as the most influential of the four concepts for promoting self and collective efficacy. Even in a time of growing pains, banked mastery experiences allow an individual to view occasional setbacks as a challenge rather than a threat (Puckett, 2017).

Framework: Bridge to an Innovative, Collaborative Team

As a result of this Participatory Action Research (PAR), I constructed a framework for creating an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists to support equitable instructional practices in the core secondary classroom. Figure 24 represents the framework for such teams based on the findings. The structure of the bridge depicts the components necessary to close the gap of this isolated work. The three levels of the bridge represent the practices to support a collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists for the betterment of classroom instruction. The data appeared to emerge independently of one another; however, as the study continued it was clear that each level was necessary to support the next level.

At the foundation, educational leaders can construct meaningful relationships through practices that allow a safe space to share, support the exchange of ideas, and encourage accountability. Once those components are in place, leaders can connect strong and supportive

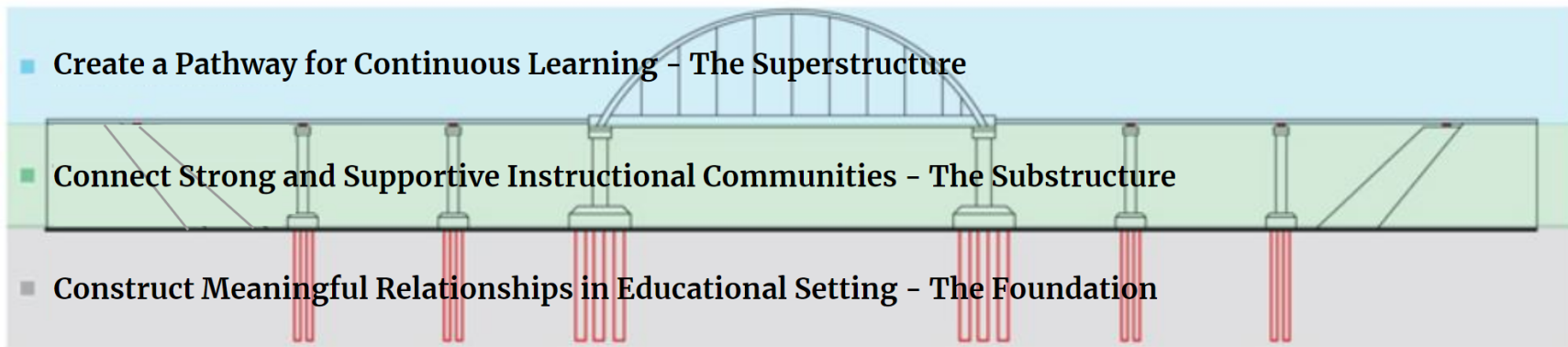


Figure 23. Bridge framework.

instructional communities by providing direct access to educational colleagues at dedicated times. Once that substructure is in place the superstructure can be supported, allowing for a pathway for continuous learning. This pathway provides educators with an understanding of best practices in curriculum and instruction, modeling of the thinking processes, and allowance for growing pains.

The layered support as depicted in the bridge allows for the dynamic exchange of perspectives, skills, and expertise between educational professionals to support equitable classroom instruction. The findings of this study provide a blueprint for leaders to bridge the gap between principals and curriculum specialists. Just as in a bridge, it is imperative to assess the supporting structures to maintain effectiveness. Analogous to a well-maintained bridge is a supported collaborative team. This framework not only offers a guide to fostering collaboration within their educational settings but also provides opportunities for future research. Future researchers, understanding the nuances of their settings and distribution of roles, could refine the model for diverse contexts. Additionally, there is potential to extend the study with other professional learning opportunities to improve classroom instruction.

Research Questions Revisited

To maintain focus throughout the entirety of the study I revisited and reevaluated the research questions. In doing so, I was able to monitor the study's progress while ensuring data alignment, but also maintain flexibility as the data was emerging. I found it also beneficial in refining my processes as the dynamics of the study changed due to various factors while preserving the study's original purpose.

The overarching research question: *What strategies do principals and district curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?* The accompanying sub-questions are identified below with the associated learning:

- How do principals and curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms?

During this study, as the lead researcher, I focused on the factors necessary to create an innovative collaborative practice to support instruction in secondary core classrooms. Through various activities, the co-practitioner researchers (CPR) as well as other participants assisted in identifying the “how” to successfully bridge the gap that traditionally exists between the principals and curriculum specialists in their efforts for better classroom instruction. As stated in a 2016 blogpost by Eric Sheniger, author of *Uncommon learning: Creating schools that work for kids*, “The silo effect creates a mirage that everything is great. It also restricts the thinking of the collective to implement innovative ideas that can transform teaching, learning, and leadership” (para. 3). Therefore, Co-Practitioner Researchers’ (CPR) meetings were held to build rapport among the principals and district curriculum specialists. As data emerged throughout the inquiry cycles, the research findings emphasized that fostering those meaningful relationships was a first step to supporting the collaborative work amongst principals and curriculum specialists. The assistance from the district level involves creating a safe space for sharing, openly exchanging viewpoints, and being mutually accountable. This atmosphere is then conducive for supporting instructional communities by permitting direct access to educational partners and establishing dedicated times for collaborative, instructional endeavors. Established meeting structures were utilized with the intentionally aligned Building Community component. The established instructional communities subsequently allow for a pathway of continuous learning by ensuring

comprehension of instructional strategies, modeling metacognitive processes, and encouraging growth through challenges.

- How does a collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists work with secondary core teachers through observation protocols?

As noted in Chapter 6, from March 2023 to May 2023, I conducted monitoring visits wherein principals scheduled time for me to visit their schools to observe either their Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Instructional Rounds (IRs), or classroom walkthroughs. During the visits, I had the opportunity to observe how each school executed PLCs, IRs, or walkthroughs. These visits were an opportunity for me to offer feedback to principals on their observation processes while providing continuous support and encouragement. This reaffirmed my and the district's commitment to ongoing guidance and support of principals, district curriculum specialists, and school-based instructional coaches, thus fostering the professional growth of teachers.

- To what extent is my professional growth, as a district leader, supported by participating in Participatory Action Research?

As the lead researcher, partaking in Participatory Action Research (PAR) significantly reinforces my professional growth as a district leader. It not only enhances my personal learning, but also equips me with the tools, knowledge, and skills to foster innovation and address challenges while leading others in our educational community. I detail my professional growth later in the chapter.

Implications

The framework offers a layered approach for district leadership to support a collaborative structure between principals and curriculum specialists in strengthening equitable instruction in core secondary classrooms. This Participatory Action Research (PAR) study bridges the gap that

currently exists in the practices of principals and district curriculum specialists as they address instructional deficiencies in classrooms. Following, I share the practice, policy, and research implications of the PAR findings.

Practice

As discussed in Chapter 1, the lack of student achievement is often attributed to student factors, not factors of teacher instruction or policy and programming instituted by district, state, or federal leadership. The Focus of Practice (FoP) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) rely on school principals and district curriculum specialists to provide support for teachers for the delivery of better instruction for students. As principals and district curriculum specialists alter their practices to recognize teaching as a social phenomenon, as described by Gutiérrez (2013) concerning math instruction, they will see a change in teachers' instructional practices and the unengaged students' learning perspectives. Such practices are not exclusive to a particular content area or our district. The practices resonate across content areas and school districts throughout the nation.

The study's findings highlight the shift from individual endeavors to collaborative efforts among principals and district curriculum specialists. Specifically, the findings illustrate how district structures can create and reinforce such collaborative efforts. In review of the research questions, I outlined the essential elements for establishing an innovative, collaborative framework to support the dynamic between principals and district curriculum specialists:

1. Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting – The Foundation
 - a. Safety in Sharing
 - b. Perspectives
 - c. Accountability

2. Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities – The Substructure

- a. Direct Access
- b. Dedication of Time

3. Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning – The Superstructure

- a. Provide Understanding
- b. Model the Thinking
- c. Allow Growing Pains

When district leadership concentrates its efforts on an environment conducive to authentic relationships and collaboration amongst principals and curriculum specialists, there will be improved instructional practices in classrooms, ultimately improving student learning outcomes in various content areas and educational settings. Important is for districts and their leaders to remove hindrances to collaborative work. In doing so, it is necessary to ensure professional learning that equips leaders with tools to navigate circumstances that would limit collaborative work. Additionally, resource support should be made available that includes providing the time and structures to promote a collective effort as discussed in the findings.

Policy

Shift in practice for school principals and district curriculum specialists has the potential to impact policy at and beyond the district level. One outcome of the study was to curb the district's standardized, one-size-fits-all educational approach in areas where schools should exercise flexibility to best meet the needs of those they serve. In other terms, areas where the district could give "loose" control, allowing autonomy within parameters, rather than "tight" control with strict mandates that were identical across schools. Spillane (2013) discusses that prepackaged programs and reforms may serve their purpose in school improvement if they

address a school's particular needs, are appropriately put to practice, and are designed or redesigned in conjunction with the school's infrastructure. This change allows principals to work with curriculum specialists on their school's specific instructional needs; affording them the autonomy to co-design programming that aligns with their school goals. As discussed in Chapter 1, our district implemented Community of Practices (CoPs) to address various problems of practices at the individual school level. In 2020, the district supported 87 CoPs. Militello et al. (2009) described the benefit of CoPs as:

Members of school communities of practice collaborate with the goal of supporting their work toward instructional improvement. As the name implies, communities of practice examine their practice. They analyze data related to the work to inform their planning and decisions; the dialogue results in learning that builds coherence and capacity for change. (p. 29)

Also highlighted in Chapter 1, equity remains as another district focus. Equity was formerly specified in the District's Imperatives and is now indicated in the District's Strategic Plan. Equity is an overarching concept of all District initiatives with the expectation that it is integrated in all practices related to curriculum, instruction, professional accountability, and professional culture. However, the impacts of local norms and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the slow movement of supportive programming and policy. Likewise, these challenges were seen at the state and national levels and measures were taken to address such. For example, in 2015, according to the North Carolina Department of Education (NCDPI) website:

the U.S. Department of Education (USED) required all State educational agencies (SEAs) to submit a new State Educator Equity Plan in accordance with the requirements of Title I

of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). In its plan, each SEA must, among other things, describe the steps it will take to ensure that “poor and minority children are not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers.”

As these challenges are addressed, equity initiatives aligned with collaborative practice lend themselves well to principals and district curriculum specialists employing strategies to support equitable instruction in secondary core classrooms. With increased capacity and efficacy, these educational leaders are willing to be reflective and confront conflicting programming and policies for improved instruction. Gutiérrez (2013) would describe these efforts as the political nature of teaching. School leaders and curriculum specialists have the unique position to provide the pedagogical opportunities that teachers need when appropriate supports are available by the district.

Research

The PAR intended to encourage collaboration between principals and district curriculum specialists in supporting equitable instruction, which has traditionally been isolated work. The original motivation for the study was based on observation as a high school principal. My observations during this tenure were that students’ underperformance, such as leveling down in course selection, was often a result of disengagement. As a principal, my efforts were to stay abreast of research to support classroom instruction. In working alongside my assistant administrators, I wanted to ensure our support of teachers in implementing equitable practices in their classrooms, resulting in better student outcomes. Transitioning into my role as Director of Secondary Education, I focused my research and efforts on the collaborative work of principals

and district curriculum specialists to the end of better student outcomes. The unit of analysis was the school principals and curriculum specialists.

In this role, I recognized that too often, efforts by principals and specialists to support classroom engagement had been done in silos. This project added to the current research on collaborative practice, efficacy, and school and district-level leadership. Honig et al. (2017) assert that district office personnel access the research about reforms that will benefit the schools; however, understanding and effectively putting the research into practice is lacking. The few examined cases of collaborative work between school leaders and curriculum specialists are promising, showing improved learning, and teaching in schools (Honig et al., 2017).

Future research to be considered could focus on the structuring of the curriculum specialist role within a district, as well as the delineation and collaborative work between curriculum specialists and instructional. As noted in Chapter 2, the role of the curriculum specialist has not been studied as extensively as the role of the principal. There are still many districts that do not employ such staff. Districts that have curriculum specialists differ in their structuring of the role. In some districts, the specialists are assigned to a single school whereas in other districts they may be assigned to multiple schools. In addition, the assigned areas of focus may be a single content area or combined content areas. In the context of this observed district, curriculum specialists serve all schools within a particular grade span in their content area, with the study focusing on secondary curriculum specialists.

Additionally, exploring the collaborative relationships between curriculum specialists and other educational stakeholders, such as instructional coaches could reveal dynamics that lead to increased efficacy for improved educational frameworks. While self-efficacy is important to collective efficacy, research suggests that district investments in instructional leadership have a

greater impact on collective efficacy than on self-efficacy (DeWitt, 2022; Goddard et al., 2015; Spillane, 2013). Investigating how curriculum specialists and instructional coaches collaborate across interdisciplinary boundaries and grade spans could provide a comprehensive understanding of their impact on curriculum design, instructional strategies, and thus, student achievement.

Ultimately, future research endeavors on curriculum specialists should aim to concentrate on their evolving roles, effectiveness in supporting educators, collaborative dynamics within educational ecosystems, and their contributions toward fostering equitable and inclusive learning experiences for all students.

Limitations

Several limitations were identified within this Participatory Action Research (PAR) project. Firstly, as the primary researcher, my position as a supervisory figure among the Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPRs) and other participants potentially influenced the dynamics and the participants' willingness to engage fully. Therefore, important to the research was ensuring the other CPRs had a vested interest and found value in the study. "Action research is inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them. It is a reflective process..." (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 3). While efforts were made to establish relational trust within the group, my inherent and presumed authority may have inadvertently influenced the other CPRs' full engagement. Measures were taken to mitigate this possible influence by monitoring and restricting my exertion of positional power.

Furthermore, the presence of my and the CPRs' inherent biases posed another potential limitation, inadvertently impacting the discussions and actions within our collaborative group.

The path and outcomes of the research may have been influenced despite efforts to minimize biases through collaborative processes.

At the initiation of the study, I also recognized that voluntary participation could also lead to voluntary withdrawal. Withdrawal could lead to fluctuations in the CPR group's composition. This had the potential to affect the consistency of data collection, analysis, and the overall study's reliability. Balancing the need for voluntary participation and maintaining a consistent research cohort posed challenges in ensuring a comprehensive and sustained study throughout the 18 months. Fortunately, no voluntary withdrawals occurred. However, as noted in Chapter 6, the CPRs' level of participation changed due to both internal and external factors. Some of the CPRs' interactions changed impacting their experiences and thus reflections. Advantages were also found in these shifts. It proved beneficial to enlist different perspectives by including more voices in the research. As previously noted, school-based instructional coaches were included in discussions while also incorporating activities to include more principals and curriculum specialists than those in the CPR group. Even so, the sample size was small when considering the formal CPR group that included two secondary principals and two curriculum specialists.

Leadership Development

As aforementioned, one of my research questions focuses on what extent my professional growth, as a district leader, is supported by participating in Participatory Action Research. As I sought to answer this question as I progressed through the research, I naturally reflected throughout each cycle of the research, giving me insight about myself as a leader, educator, and researcher. In the Pre-Cycle, it appeared to me that much of what emerged about collaborative work between curriculum specialists and principals to employ equitable practices in the

classroom has a foundation to build upon within our district. Through informal conversations, formal meetings, and interviews, the co-practitioner researchers began to explore how such an innovative, practice of collaboration between them would benefit our classrooms—additionally, identifying the means to that end. As such, I recognized that I had instinctively and intentionally attempted to employ those means to reinforce the foundation for such work. The work that all CPRs are doing for this study is not producing a byproduct of our roles and responsibilities. It is our role and responsibility to create and sustain a practice of collaboration to employ equitable instruction in our classrooms. Action research provided me with tools to address other educational issues as they arise. I grew more confident in my ability to gather and reflect on data from various perspectives and make confident decisions to support improvement in educational outcomes.

As I entered Cycle One of the PAR, I discovered more about my approach and strengths for leading this work and the work as an educational leader. My research question has prompted me to reflect on the extent to which the work of the PAR aligns with my professional growth and development as a district leader. Although I am no longer in the realm of “new to the position,” there has been some change in those that I lead. I recognize that with those changes my consistency in leadership is integral for maintaining stability in uncertainty. Additionally, it focuses on the need to build capacity among others for individual and collective efficacy.

In Cycle Two, I prepared for changes within my department. From the experience during the study, I understood that as I onboard new curriculum specialists, the focus cannot be primarily on the instructional tasks associated with their positions, but relationship building is imperative. Throughout the study, I reflected on how collaborative work between principals and curriculum specialists was most successful when principals recognized that the specialists were

genuinely concerned about the well-being of their school community, not that they were just doing their job as content experts.

In my leadership role, it is my responsibility to ensure that at the foundational level, an environment exists that allows fruitful relationships among educators. Once those relationships are in place, my role extends to provide a space for collaborative, instructional communities. Solid instructional communities can then support a pathway of continuous learning for improved instructional practices. As I consider opportunities for career progression, I have gained valuable lessons about being strategic in relationship building, creating a collaborative safe space, and supporting continuous learning that lends itself to various levels of leadership and school support roles.

One could argue that educational professionals do not need to move in the layered approach like the structure of a bridge. However, to optimize results, I assert that each component is necessary for the next. Additionally, just as a bridge's integrity must be maintained by routine inspection and upkeep, so does the framework for an innovative, collaborative practice among educational professionals. As engineers assess the integrity of a bridge, my role as a district leader is to assess the health of our collaborative groups. Poorly maintained bridges result in structural issues, whereas neglected relationships and instructional communities lend themselves to diminished effectiveness.

In the same vein, it is imperative as educational leaders that we self-assess and self-nuture to provide the aforementioned stability and consistency. Again, reflection is vital. During the course of this study, I heard the terminology "imposter syndrome." I came to recognize what it meant – in my terms, internalized inadequacy when external factors say otherwise. And, I also came to recognize that I certainly exhibit it at times. Clare Josa (2019), throughout Chapter 5 of

Ditching the Imposter Syndrome, identifies core behaviors of the syndrome that she terms as the four P's - perfectionism, project paralysis, people-pleasing, and procrastination. At some time or another, I have noticed these P's in my actions. However, I found that combating these behaviors first comes from self-awareness. It has benefited me to set realistic goals based on my priorities. It has also proven beneficial to open up to my support system, both professionally and personally. My family and colleagues often provide the missing perspective and the needed encouragement and guidance. While the imposter syndrome can promote feelings of lack and create a barrier to improvement, I choose to see the opportunity for growth, continual growth. Just as the institution of education evolves, the people that make up the institution must evolve as well. As I noted in Chapter 2, increased efficacy leads educators to willingly engage within their organization, resulting in greater openness to accept, attempt, and adopt new instructional practices, seeing change and challenges as opportunities for growth. Angela Ashwell, in a Candid Conversation About Imposter Syndrome webinar (2023), said "The wonderful thing about imposter syndrome is that it's a message telling you that you aren't the finished article. Who is?" In the case of self, it's about bridging the gap between self-doubt and self-confidence.

Conclusion

It is evident that educational advancement does not occur where barriers exist but in erecting bridges. By intentionally constructing bridges through the fostering of meaningful relationships and instructional communities, we, as educational leaders, pave the way for a continuous learning path for improved and equitable instructional practice. Our role extends beyond individual instructional tasks; it encompasses bridging the gap between educators for collaborative work.

Prior to the start of the study, when serving as a school principal, I envisioned classroom practices that engaged all students, motivating them to seek the challenges of rigorous coursework. As I transitioned to the role of district leader, I reevaluated my responsibilities in this endeavor. I quickly realized it was to implement a structure that was lacking, a structure that encouraged and supported collaborative work with those I directly supervised and supported. In my role, that included school principals and district curriculum specialists.

Enlisting the assistance of other educational leaders, I concentrated the Focus of Practice (FoP) on the *strategies principals and curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary, core classrooms*. By establishing a network of school leaders and district curriculum specialists, classroom instruction will be better supported. It is necessary for teachers to feel confident in their ability to instruct all students with the same level of rigor. The literature supports that teacher efficacy impacts student performance. As shared by Goddard et al. (2015), several documented studies indicate that collective efficacy is predictive of student achievement in schools; that collective development of curriculum and instruction resulted in improved student outcomes. Specifically speaking on student effects, the review of literature by Bryson (2019) noted that increased educator efficacy positively influences student achievement.

Throughout the 18-month study, my leadership evolved in tandem with the growth of collaborative efforts between principals and curriculum specialists. A joint group of school administrators, district curriculum specialists, and school-based instructional coaches met in August 2022. The group reiterated the need for togetherness, expressing with the comments “we’re one” and “there is unity of purpose...we’re building community through unity.” Embracing a systematic, collaborative approach, the benefits became apparent, as noted by a specialist during a goal-setting meeting in October 2022: “The benefits include closing the gap

for students, increasing proficiency, and building teacher capacity." We must continue to bridge the gap allowing for collaborative instructional work, ultimately benefiting our students.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



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/umcirm/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Monica Jacobson](#)
CC: [Matthew Militello](#)
Date: 2/16/2022
Re: [UMCIRB 21-001666](#)
THE BRIDGE: AN INNOVATIVE, COLLABORATIVE TEAM OF PRINCIPALS AND CURRICULUM SPECIALISTS

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 2/16/2022. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1 & 2ab.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
M. Jacobson CITI Training(0.01)	Additional Items
M. Jacobson Consent Forms(0.01)	Consent Forms
M. Jacobson District Research Procedure(0.01)	Additional Items
M. Jacobson Interview Protocols(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
M. Jacobson Observation Protocols(0.01)	Additional Items
M. Jacobson Recruitment Script Version 2(0.02)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
M. Jacobson Reflective Memo Protocol(0.01)	Additional Items
The Bridge: Ch 1-3 Updated 2/10/22(0.02)	Study Protocol or Grant Application

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

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

APPENDIX B: CITI CERTIFICATE



Completion Date 02-Jan-2021

Expiration Date 02-Jan-2024

Record ID 40160905

This is to certify that:

Monica Jacobson

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Research

(Curriculum Group)

Group 2.Social / Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel

(Course Learner Group)

1 - Basic Course

(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

East Carolina University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w67cae114-2c57-47aa-9a1f-97a4b14167ad-40160905

APPENDIX C: DISTRICT PERMISSION



November 15, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

Pitt County Schools recognizes the benefits of participating in relevant, well-designed research studies proposed by qualified individuals. Approval for conducting such studies is based primarily on the extent to which substantial benefits can be shown for Pitt County Schools and its mission of educating students. The purpose of this letter is to notify you of the **approval** to use conduct your dissertation study titled, "The Bridge: How an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists supports equitable instruction in secondary mathematics." with participants in our schools. We also give permission to utilize the following spaces within Pitt County Schools to collect data and conduct interviews for her dissertation project: educator professional development and school site visits.

The project meets all of our school/district guidelines, procedures, and safeguards for conducting research on our campus. Moreover, there is ample space for Monica Jacobson to conduct her study and her project will not interfere with any functions of Pitt County Schools. Finally, the following conditions must be met, as agreed upon by the researchers and Pitt County Schools:

- Participant data only includes information captured from the state data collection strategies.
- Participation is voluntary.
- Participants can choose to leave the study without penalty at any time.
- Any issues with participation in the study are reported to the school administration in a timely manner.
- An executive summary of your findings is shared with the school administration once the study is complete.

In addition to these conditions, the study must follow all of the East Carolina University IRB guidelines.

We are excited to support this important work.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steve M. Lassiter Jr.", is written over the printed name.

Dr. Steve M. Lassiter Jr.

Assistant Superintendent of Educational Programs and Services, Pitt County Schools

EDUCATIONAL STUDY AND RESEARCH

Please describe the proposed study involving school students or school personnel for which assistance and participation is requested. Please be as specific as possible regarding the numbers of students, parents and professional staff who may be involved in this project. A preliminary planning conference may be helpful depending on the magnitude of the project.

1. Principal Investigator(s): Monica Jacobson
2. Title of Research Study or Special Project: The Bridge: Collaborative Supporting Equitable Instruction in Secondary Math
3. Purpose:
The Focus of Practice (FoP) explores the strategies principals and math curriculum specialists employ to support equitable instruction in secondary mathematics.
4. General Methodology:
In this qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, I explore how principals and math curriculum specialists implement an innovative, collaborative practice to support secondary math teachers' use of academic discourse and authentic math.
5. School Involvement:
 - a. Number of Students Needed: 0
 - b. Selection Process of Students:
N/A
 - c. Time Required of Students: zero
6. Administrative Involvement (Principal, Central Office):
 - a. Specific Groups: Principals & Math Specialists
 - b. Tasks: Meetings, Interviews, Professional Development Participation, Observations, Coaching
 - c. Time Required of Administrators: Not to exceed 20 hours over the next two years
7. Teacher Involvement:
 - a. Specific Groups: Secondary Teachers
 - b. Tasks: Observations, Community Learning Exchange

- c. Time Required of Teachers: Not to exceed 5 hours over the next two years
8. Student Involvement:
- a. Number of Students Needed: 0
- b. Selection Process of Students: N/A
- c. Time Required of Students: N/A
9. Equipment, Facilities, or Auxiliary Services Required:
Secondary school site
10. Home or Parental Involvement:
- a. Permission Form: N/A
- b. Other: N/A
- c. Time Required of Parents: N/A
11. Evaluative Instruments To Be Used: (Please attach a copy)
N/A
12. Written Communication: (Please indicate purpose of communication below and attach sample letters and memos.)
- a. Parents: N/A
- b. Teachers: Invitation to Participate and Purpose
- c. Principals: Invitation to Participate and Purpose
- d. Other School Personnel: Invitation to Participate and Purpose
13. Timelines of Activities: (Please include all activities involved in this project. Be as specific as possible and indicate who initiates which activities).
 PAR Pre-Cycle - Fall 2021: Community Learning Exchange (Analysis of assets and challenges), Co-Practitioner Researchers' Meetings (Rapport Building, Co-creation of Professional Development)
 PAR Cycle 1 - Spring 2022: Delivery of Professional Development, Implementation of Observation Protocols, Co-Practitioner Researchers' Meeting (Cycle of Inquiry), Community Learning Exchange
 PAR Cycle 2 - Fall 2022: Co-Practitioner Researchers' Meetings, Continuation of Observation Protocols, Co-Practitioner Researchers Meeting (Cycle of Inquiry), Community Learning Exchange
14. Research Assistant(s):
N/A

15. Pitt County Schools Intern Supervisor:

16. Special Conditions or Restrictions:
N/A

17. Plan for Publication or Use of Results:
Dissertation published through East Carolina University

18. In What Ways Might the Proposed Research Be Considered Relevant to General Educational Objectives? To Pitt County Schools in Particular?
The FoP will affect school leaders, teachers, and ultimately students within our district. However, it will have significance to schools across the nation. Equitable instruction in mathematics is not an issue relevant only to math teachers at our schools but all teachers in our country.
The FoP is important to our district as we focus on equity initiatives and instructional leadership.

REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY OR SPECIAL PROJECT

I agree to furnish Pitt County Schools a copy of the results of this research study or special project.

Manica Jacobson
Signature of Person Making Request

Signature of Supervising Professor

11/17/21
Date

Date

324 Bayne Way
Address

University/College Organization

Winterville NC 28590
Address

Telephone Number

252-8164-7810
Telephone Number

E-Mail Address

jacobsonm08@students.ecu.edu
E-Mail Address

(For Office Use Only) Project Approval

Project Approved: ☒

Project Disapproved: ☐

Referred to: _____

[Signature]
Signature of Superintendent/Designee

11/17/21
Date

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM - ADULTS



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: The Bridge: How an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists supports equitable instruction in secondary mathematics.

Principal Investigator: Monica Jacobson, under the guidance of Dr. Matthew Militello
Address: East Carolina University - College of Education, 220 Ragsdale, Greenville, NC 27858
Telephone #: 252-864-7810

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

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

The purpose of this participatory action research is to consider how an innovative, collaborative practice among school leaders and district curriculum specialists support equitable classroom practices. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a district specialist, school leaders, or teacher in Pitt County Schools. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn about the collaborative practices that support equitable instruction.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 50 people to do so.

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

There are no known reasons that suggest you should not participate in the 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 in Pitt County Schools. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study will not exceed 20 hours for district specialists and school leaders and 5 hours for teachers over the next two years.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following upon agreement to participate in the study:

- Interview with the principal researcher
- Attend group meetings every four to six weeks.
- Participate in professional development opportunities regarding observation protocols.

- Complete reflective memos following meetings or observations.
- Co-design and co-lead two Community Learning Exchanges.
- Participate in a digitally recorded interview with the principal researcher.

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

We don't 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 don't 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 research.

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 interviews and group meetings 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 don't 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 Monica Jacobson at jacobsonm08@students.ecu.edu or 252-864-7810.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) 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 for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

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
---	------------------	-------------

APPENDIX E: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT - INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The Bridge: How an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists supports equitable instruction in secondary mathematics.

Individual Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedules to meet with me today. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview and will limit the time to half an hour.

My name is Monica Jacobson. I am conducting participating action research as a graduate student at East Carolina University. The interview is part of the research on school leaders and district curriculum specialists collaboratively teaming to support equitable instruction.

Disclosures:

- Your participation in the study is voluntary. It is your decision whether or not to participate and you may elect to stop participating in the interview at any time.
- The interview will be digitally recorded in order to capture a comprehensive record of our conversation. All information collected will be kept confidential. Any information collected during the session that may identify any participant will only be disclosed with your prior permission. A coding system will be used in the management and analysis of the interview data with no names or school identifiers associated with any of the recorded discussion. All recordings will be deleted immediately following transcription.
- The interview will be conducted using a semi-structured and informal format. Several questions will be asked about both the individual knowledge and skills gained and the organization practices used.
- The interview will last approximately 30 minutes.

Interview Questions

TURN RECORDER ON AND STATE THE FOLLOWING:

“This is Monica Jacobson, interviewing (*Participant Code*) on (*Date*) for The Bridge: How an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists supports equitable instruction in secondary mathematics.”

1. Please share your experiences as an educator.
2. In what capacity has your experiences allowed you to collaborate with other school leaders?

3. In what capacity has your experiences allowed you to collaborate with district specialists?
4. What would you note as the outcome or benefits of that collaboration?
5. What elements helped foster the collaboration?
6. In what ways could such collaboration be improved?
7. Have you had an opportunity to focus on equitable practices in the classroom? If so, what strategies were your focus? What were the outcomes?
8. Are there other equitable classroom practices that you would like to focus on with teachers?

APPENDIX F: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT -GROUP INTERVIEW

PROTOCOL

The Bridge: How an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists supports equitable instruction in secondary mathematics.

Group Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedules to meet with me today. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this focus group interview and will limit the time to one hour.

My name is Monica Jacobson. I am conducting participating action research as a graduate student at East Carolina University. The interview is part of the research on school leaders and district curriculum specialists collaboratively teaming to support equitable instruction.

Disclosures:

- Your participation in the study is voluntary. It is your decision whether or not to participate and you may elect to stop participating in the interview at any time.
- The interview will be digitally recorded in order to capture a comprehensive record of our conversation. All information collected will be kept confidential. Any information collected during the session that may identify any participant will only be disclosed with your prior permission. A coding system will be used in the management and analysis of the focus group data with no names or school identifiers associated with any of the recorded discussion. All recordings will be deleted immediately following transcription.
- The interview will be conducted using a semi-structured and informal format. Several questions will be asked about both the individual knowledge and skills gained and the organization practices used.
- The interview will last approximately 60 minutes.

Interview Questions

TURN RECORDER ON AND STATE THE FOLLOWING:

“This is Monica Jacobson, interviewing (*Participant Codes*) on (*Date*) for The Bridge: How an innovative, collaborative team of principals and curriculum specialists supports equitable instruction in secondary mathematics.”

- Please introduce yourself and describe your role in supporting classroom teachers within the district.
- How often have you had the opportunity to work collaboratively to design or implement supports for classroom teachers?

- What was the focus of the supports provided?
- How did you monitor the supports? What are some of the protocols you have used?
- What resources would be beneficial to promote collaborative teams of school leaders and district specialists? How about in relation to equitable classroom practices?

APPENDIX G: REFLECTIVE MEMO PROTOCOL

The Reflective Memo Protocol will be in the format of a Google Form that CPR members will complete after meetings and observations. The Kolb Cycle of Experiential Learning Process (1984) will be utilized.

Date:

Name:

Position:

School/Department:

Step One: Describe the experience.

Step Two: Reflect and share your feelings or responses to the experience.

Step Three: Explain how the experience and reflection fit into a larger concept or idea.

Step Four: Share how this experience and reflection may impact your future actions.

APPENDIX H: EMAIL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello! My name is Monica Jacobson, the Director of Secondary Education with Pitt County Schools and a doctoral student at East Carolina University. I am contacting you to participate in my research study. This study aims to determine ways a team of principals and math curriculum specialists builds an innovative, collaborative team to support equitable instruction in mathematics.

Since this is an action research project, I am seeking colleagues who are willing to volunteer to serve on my research team using established protocols. This research project will begin in the spring of 2022 and conclude in the spring of 2023. This research will involve four secondary schools, but the work is separate from your contracted duties and will not be part of any professional evaluation and you will not be compensated for your work. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and with no penalty.

Please contact me if you are interested or if you have clarifying questions. The idea is to meet monthly (we can decide on the frequency together) as a group. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your reply and speaking with you.

Monica Jacobson
Director of Secondary Education, Pitt County Schools

P [252-830-4232](tel:252-830-4232) **E** jacobsm@pitt.k12.nc.us

A [1717 W. 5th St. Greenville NC 27834](#)

APPENDIX I: CODEBOOK – PAR CYCLE 2 EXCERPT

THEME	EMERGING THEMES	CATEGORY	CODE	Cycle Two										
				Building Community - HS Focus (Prin/IC)	Building Community - Mint Condition (Prin)	Building Community - HS Focus (Prin/IC)	February IC- Rotations	Building Community - What is your character? (IC)	Building Community - Crayons (IC)	Building Community - Guided PLC (IC)	Knockout Round	Vertical Alignment(IC)	School Support Post	School Monitoring Visit
The Substructure: Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Connect Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Other PLCs followed suit							1				
The Substructure: Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Connect Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Collective Efficacy			1								
The Substructure: Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Connect Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Collective Educator Agency			1								
The Substructure: Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Connect Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Collaboration "Cross Connect staff"							2				
The Substructure: Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Connect Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Co-construct the vision							1				
The Substructure: Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Connect Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Success - Identifying who will learn well together							1				
The Substructure: Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Connect Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Kept me on front lines of pacing, curr, PLCs											4
The Substructure: Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Connect Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Direct access to content specialists											4
The Substructure: Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Connect Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Cross school collaboration											1
The Substructure: Connect Strong and Supportive Instructional Communities	Connect Strong & Supportive Instructional Communities	Collaboration	Suggestions - PLC w/other leaders											2
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Students & Staff Alike - Essential Skills			1								
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	IR					1						
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	PLC					1						
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Support, personally identify area of improvement		1									
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Build teacher with classroom mgmt		1									
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Using CFA data, using flex			1								
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Training new teachers in math, modeling for			1								
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Scheduling (can't control the personalities)		1									
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	"Grieve the change, celebrate the growth/impact", "Grieve, then grow", "Growing Pains"								3			
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Explicit Modeling & Scaffolding for Staff								1			
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Focus on the data								2			
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	"How have you impacted the change in this data point"								1			
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Success - IR								2			
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Better understand content and pacing, more knowledge											3
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Guidance towards instr. goals - "We're working with people not robots"											1
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Better support teachers, "model this kind of thinking for teachers"											2
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Suggestions - include PLC facilitators											1
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Suggestions - leadership attend school staff mtg to share											1
Superstructure: Create a Pathway for Continuous Learning		Educate staff	Suggestions - focus on proficiency not pacing											1
The Foundation: Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting	Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Building Relationships			1								
The Foundation: Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting	Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Encouragement					1						
The Foundation: Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting	Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Empowerment					1						
The Foundation: Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting	Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Success - Protect dignity								1			
The Foundation: Construct Meaningful Relationships in the Educational Setting	Fostering Meaningful Relationships	Relationship fostering	Success - Building the team								1			

