

Creating Authentic Collaboration for Teachers
Through Network Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

Network learning communities (NLCs) exist all over the world. Their purpose is to bring teachers together from across schools to work together with the intention of improving teaching. They are focused around the concept of collaboration. This allows teachers of a common grade or subject area to meet with each other on a regular basis to share teaching strategies, to create new knowledge, and to explore current data.

Historically, many teachers worked in isolation in their classrooms. Today, more than ever, collaboration is necessary. Through the concept of collaboration, teachers are exposed to different techniques, improved practices, and stronger relationships with colleagues. Distributed leadership is an integral part of NLCs. This creates an atmosphere of trust and respect. When this culture of collegiality is created, teachers feel more open to share and to understand there is a purpose to gathering together.

The focus of this research was to find the ways in which NLCs influence teacher collaboration. This was a mixed methods study that used a sequential explanatory design. A survey was done initially that included 44 respondents which was followed by nine semi-structured interviews. Key findings in this study were that a strong purpose with a clearly defined focus was critical. It was also recommended that there should be choice given to participants. Establishing distributed leadership created a trusting environment. This type of environment worked to develop strong relationships in the group. It was also deemed necessary that a sense of connectedness be maintained in between meetings. This would deepen the level of collaboration within the NLC meetings and create conditions for authentic collaboration among teachers.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“Time spent in collaboration with colleagues is considered essential to success in most professions” (DuFour, 2011, p. 58). Many teachers in the 21st century want to collaborate with their colleagues (Perez, 2015, para. 1). With the everyday pressures put on teachers, more than ever collaborating is vital. Throughout the world, groups of teachers gather in networks or learning groups to discuss teaching strategies, curricular outcomes, and data—all with the intent of improving student achievement (Earl, Katz, Elgie, Ben Jaafar, & Foster, 2006). This collaborative work is happening locally, provincially, nationally, and internationally. This trend is a change from past practice. Historically, teachers worked in isolation and made decisions alone (Miller & Burden, 2007). They did not seek input from other teachers, but rather worked independently, not collaboratively.

Network learning communities (NLCs) are focused around the concept of collaboration with the intent of improving teaching and, therefore, improving student achievement (Earl et al., 2006). Within the networks, teachers work together, or collaborate, to learn from each other, to create new knowledge, and to support each other (Katz, Dack, & Earl, 2009). The concept of networks allows teachers from different schools to meet with one another with the goal of improving their teaching. The teachers meet in grade-alike groupings so there is a commonality amongst the teachers. This process allows them to share information pertinent to their teaching assignment. The basis of a network is about collaborating. The concept of collaborating is an essential one

in organizations. Bringing that concept into a network situation involving many schools is hypothesized to help to improve the quality of collaboration across the school division.

Background to the Problem

In the past, teachers worked in isolation in their own classrooms. It was a solitary act (Gideon, 2002). Collaboration amongst teachers has been around for many years, however, many teachers continue to work alone. “Former models of school improvement that have emphasized teacher collaboration have not clearly characterized the type of leadership required to boost collaboration” (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012, p. 207). Forms of collaboration began in the 1960s with the team teaching movement. Later, in the 1980s, professional learning communities were created (Riveros et al., 2012). Teacher collaboration is encouraged and has been shown to be useful in bringing together ideas, strategies, and concepts. Not only is this process of collaborating becoming the norm in schools today, but in many organizations (Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015). Structuring time for this collaboration matters. “We now know that collaboration will not happen automatically, just because it is a good idea. It must be purposeful, planned, and structured into the regular workday of teachers and administrators” (Gideon, 2002, p. 30).

The concept of network learning communities is a fairly new one that has been growing in popularity (Sammons, Mujtaba, Earl, & Gu, 2007). Although many differences exist in the purpose and structure of a NLC, they all involve clusters of schools working together (Sammons et al., 2007). This is different than the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs), where teachers of a variety of grades work together and collaborate, usually within the same school. Through the process of NLCs,

teachers from different schools are given opportunities to work with each other based on teaching assignments or similar grades.

“Schools are constantly being inundated with ideas and mandates” (Earl et al., 2006, p. 12). NLCs have the ability to create new knowledge, to form new relationships, and to build trust as well as a supportive culture that teachers may not have elsewhere. Without the opportunity to gather in this type of group, teachers would potentially continue to work in isolation. Working together creates awareness of the needs of students while sharing the expertise of many. “[Y]ou cannot improve student learning without improving teacher learning . . . teachers learn best by sharing ideas and collaborative planning” (Sammons et al., 2007, p. 214).

The Problem

Networks are a relatively new concept within school divisions. Not many schools are a part of a network learning community and it is unknown if NLCs influence teacher collaboration. There is not enough research available about the advantages of networks or their processes to yet determine if they provide meaningful collaboration to teachers. It is also unknown how teachers feel about networks. Do they feel that NLCs help them or does it feel like one more thing being added on to their workload?

Background Information

This study focused on one specific network learning community to explore the ways in which the process works to influence teacher collaboration. The network involved in the study existed from 2010-2015 and involved 12 schools.

Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools has 44 schools in its division. Within this division, the schools are divided into four networks. The southeast sector has a total of 12 kindergarten to Grade 8 schools—10 of which are in Saskatoon and two that are located in Humboldt, an hour outside of Saskatoon. In 2010, the superintendent decided he wanted to start collaborative learning groups within the network. He had previously been a superintendent in the southwest sector where they had similar groups created. He selected several teachers to be leaders in each grade level and envisioned them working with the teachers in grade-alike groupings to help them collaborate on teaching practices. After discussing many possible topics with the steering committee, the committee felt that a focus on writing was of the utmost importance to teachers at the time. Creating this learning community provided an opportunity to bring teachers together for working and planning purposes. The steering committee consisted of the superintendent, the principals, and the teacher leaders. Professional development and planning time were given to the steering committee, totalling three half-days per year for the first three years. Along with these planning times, three sessions were held per year where the leaders met for a half-day with all of the other teachers who taught the same grade. The leaders planned a three-hour session with activities that included a variety of professional development activities and discussions. They dissected the English language arts curriculum, created *I can* statements, shared teaching ideas, and created rubrics and exemplars. It was through this work that many teachers felt they gained more strategies for teaching writing.

After three years of collaborating on writing, the steering committee felt the teachers in their groups wanted a change. It was time to move on. They discussed more

possible topics but felt inquiry-based learning was the next topic they needed to broach. None of the teacher leaders felt they were experts in this area and some felt their time as a leader should be over. New leaders came in and started on the next part of the journey as a network. At the same time, the schools in Humboldt felt that traveling to Saskatoon each time was not ideal. Members of the steering committee who were from Humboldt attended the training sessions, but they held their own grade-alike groupings in Humboldt. Because everyone was new to inquiry, the steering committee attended professional development sessions to gain knowledge. They had six, half-day training sessions per year. They travelled to Calgary to visit inquiry schools and shared this new information with their grade-alike teachers. Over the next two years, they worked through the concept of inquiry and helped teachers to feel more comfortable with it.

In the 2015-2016 school year, the role of the leader changed again. They created job-embedded support around inquiry where the teacher leaders became inquiry experts in the school. Each leader was given time to work with teachers to help plan inquiry units and to team teach inquiry lessons. The concept of grade-alike meetings ceased and teachers no longer had the opportunity to collaborate in grade-alike groups at various times throughout the year.

Purpose

The NLC concept includes a focus on opportunities for teachers to get together in grade-alike groups. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which the process of the network learning communities influences teacher collaboration.

Research Question

The question framing this research is: “In what ways does a network learning community influence teacher collaboration?”

Significance

Understanding NLCs will lead to an understanding of how they benefit teachers through collaboration. In networks, collaboration is broader; it occurs beyond the boundaries of the school, not just within them. NLCs exist in many places throughout the world. As network learning communities are rising in popularity, this study can potentially help school divisions to understand whether the experience of teachers within an NLC has been beneficial and whether or not it has led to positive experiences of collaboration with their colleagues. This study can also add to research in theory development of NLCs. Teachers’ perceptions of NLCs could also be influenced by this research.

Definitions

Network learning communities (NLC): teachers from groups of schools who work together in similar grade groupings during school time to learn from each other, to share knowledge and strategies, and to work towards a common purpose. Their focus and/or theory of action is related to improving learning for students (Katz, Earl, & Ben Jaafar, 2009; Meyers, Paul, Kirkland, & Dana, 2009).

Professional learning communities (PLC): based on the definition by Pancake and Moller (2002), the following definition will be used for this study: groups of teachers from the same school and of a similar grade who meet regularly with the intention of overall improvement for the school, the teacher, and the students.

Distributed leadership: informal leaders using their expertise to help colleagues in a trusting, supportive atmosphere while focusing on teaching and learning. Through collaboration, they work together to create and to learn with the goal of improving their teaching (Jones, Harvey, Lefoe, & Ryland, 2013; Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009).

Teacher collaboration: teachers who work together to share knowledge, learn new strategies, ideas, and activities, which then help to reduce their workload while improving their teaching with the hope of improving student outcomes (Perez, 2015; Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Superintendent: a central office administrator in a school district in Saskatchewan who is in charge of a group of schools.

Authentic collaboration: people coming together from different schools for a specific purpose. They work together to achieve common goals in a trusting and supportive environment. They are motivated to create and share knowledge in the hopes of learning from each other. They are willing to take risks.

Researcher's Position

I was a part of a network learning community for five years. Through this experience, I was exposed to meaningful collaboration, team building, sharing of ideas, strategies, and units with teachers of a similar grade. I felt the NLC gave teachers a place to go when they had questions about writing or inquiry-based learning—two important goals within the school division of which I am a part. Writing and inquiry-based learning were the foci of our NLC. I think this research is important because the five-year project I was involved in introduced teachers to the importance of network learning communities and larger group collaboration, while incorporating distributed leadership into its

structure. Since I was teaching in a small school, I did not have the opportunity to collaborate with any teachers of the same grade within the boundaries of my school. Collaborating across schools was important for me as a fairly new teacher who was teaching a new grade. This was my first experience with true collaboration. Because of this, I am passionate about the concept of networks. I may see the positives over the negatives of NLCs. However, I will remain open to the findings. It is through research that we will gain knowledge and learn more about NLCs and their link to collaboration, whether or not NLCs influenced teachers' ability to collaborate with others through the experience they had in the network.

Assumptions of the Study

This study will show whether network learning communities work to provide more meaningful collaboration amongst teachers. Assumptions would be that participants will be able to recall accurately, will be able to reflect upon their experiences in the NLC, and will be honest. The experiences of each person will be treated the same, whether they were a teacher, teacher leader or administrator.

Delimitations

This study will not focus on high school networks. Only elementary schools (Grades K-8) that are a part of one specific network, the southeast network, will be surveyed. Only classroom teachers and release teachers will be included in the survey. Therefore, learning assistance teachers, English as an additional language teachers, teacher-librarians, and support staff will not be included. The impact of NLCs on students will not be addressed. This study will only focus on the specific years of 2010-2015.

Limitations

This is a retrospective study. Now in the sixth year of this project, the model the network is using has changed. No longer are teachers meeting in grade-alike groupings. This new model may affect the teachers' responses. The lack of collaborative learning groups this year could have teachers romanticizing them; teachers may remember their experience in a different way. The questions will focus on the NLC grade-alike meetings that occurred from 2010-2015. The focus will only be on one school division and only one network within that school division. Because of these parameters, the study is limited to this context. Additionally, there is a possibility there could be experimenter effects because many of the teachers have worked with me. There could be possible influences of a preestablished relationship with participants. A threat to external validity is possible. If teachers were not chosen to be leaders within the network, they may be unmotivated to fill in the questionnaire. There is a chance there could be weak internal validity because of this. There may also be evaluation apprehension as teachers are anxious about putting their thoughts and responses in a survey.

Organization of the Thesis

The first chapter is an introduction in to the study, outlining the rationale and explaining what will be researched. The problem, purpose, research questions, definitions, limitations and delimitations are presented here.

Chapter Two is a review of the current literature and focuses on the topics of collaboration, network learning communities, professional learning communities, and distributed leadership.

Chapter Three describes the research methodology that will be used and explains why a mixed methods study was chosen. In this chapter, the researcher explains that a survey and semistructured interviews will be used in the study. The procedures, data analysis, and validity are explained.

Chapter Four presents the findings from the data collected. It summarizes the results of the study while comparing and contrasting.

Chapter Five provides a summary and describes possibilities for further studies. Recommendations are also a part of this chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This literature review explains the concept of distributed leadership and shows how it is a necessary component of NLCs. Collaboration is defined and explored, along with the history of collaboration and why it is essential in schools today. Network learning communities are defined to show what their purpose is, as well as the rationale for having networks set up in school districts. Examples of successful NLCs in different parts of the world are provided. Professional learning communities are discussed to show how they are linked back to NLCs. Lastly, the relationship between the NLCs and collaboration is highlighted.

Leadership Within Networks

Formal and informal types of leadership are necessary within network learning communities. “Formal leadership in NLCs matters from the very beginning. It is the administrators (both school and district leaders) who together provide the formal leadership of the network” (Katz et al., 2009, p. 52). Formal leaders work to include others in the processes of informal leadership and to distribute it amongst teachers. “Effective formal leaders in networks share leadership by enabling others in the school to become informal leaders in the school and in the network” (p. 57). Many teachers within networks take on the role of informal leaders, which almost always involves instructional leadership. Through distributed leadership, these teachers do a variety of work, including providing support, resources, and information to other teachers in the network.

Types of Leadership in Schools

Teacher leadership, shared leadership, and distributed leadership are often used in literature about education. While similar, there are slight differences amongst the three terms. Literature refers to shared leadership and distributed leadership interchangeably, however, for the purpose of this study, I will use the term *distributed leadership* when discussing leadership within a NLC because there is a “consistent picture about the relationship between distributed leadership and organizational outcomes” (Harris, 2014, p. 15). If the goal in networks is to improve outcomes, then distributed leadership within organizations helps to accomplish that goal.

Teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is a commonly used but misunderstood term that can have a variety of meanings. In its basic form, it is explained as “classroom teachers who share their expertise in myriad forms” (Nappi, 2014, p. 2). It can be explained as “extending leadership practices to include teachers in the decision-making process” (Yost, Vogel, & Liang, 2009, p. 410). Yost et al. also stated this type of leadership positively influences other teachers’ instruction. It impacts their practices. Through a variety of roles, teachers can become leaders. Sometimes this is a more formal position; other times it is just a role taken on by that individual (Nappi, 2014). Because teachers often take on leadership roles within teaching, the term *teacher leader* is, for the most part, undefined (Nappi, 2014).

Shared leadership. Shared leadership is another concept related to teacher leadership. However, this term is often used in conjunction with distributed leadership. “School and student success are virtually impossible without the use of distributed or shared leadership” (Nappi, 2014, p. 5). Shared leadership on its own is explained as

shared decision-making with school improvement as a focus (Harris, 2014). Kocolowski (2010) defined shared leadership “as a relational, collaborative leadership process or phenomenon involving teams or groups that mutually influence one another and collectively share duties and responsibilities otherwise relegated to a single, central leader” (p. 24). In a shared leadership approach, communication needs to be clear, a positive climate between colleagues is required, and group members need to understand their specific roles. Having a shared leadership approach is beneficial because it allows more people work together to solve problems, to create change, and to take charge of certain tasks.

Distributed leadership. Jones et al. (2013) explained distributed leadership as a collaboration of work between individuals where there is trust and respect. It relies on an open culture in an organization. Reflective practice is a key component and distributed leadership is most effective when all people engage. Leithwood et al. (2009) described distributed leadership as a division of labour in organizations and the enhancement of opportunities for members. For the purpose of this study, distributed leadership will be defined as informal leaders using their expertise to help colleagues in a trusting, supportive atmosphere while focusing on teaching and learning. Through collaboration, they work together to create and to learn with the goal of improving their teaching.

Distributed leadership cannot “be used as a ‘catch all’ term to describe any form of devolved, shared or dispersed leadership practice” (Harris & Spillane, 2008, p. 32). “A distributed model of leadership focuses upon the interactions, rather than the actions, of those in formal and informal leadership roles” (p. 31). A question to keep in mind is whether this distribution contributes to improvement of the school. Although the term

distributed leadership has not been around for a long time, there is evidence that it helps to improve outcomes in organizations (Harris, 2008).

Why Distribute Leadership?

“In today’s climate of rapid change and increasingly high expectations, effective leadership is needed more than ever” (Harris, 2008, p. 1). Harris (2008) described distributed leadership as “the social glue” within an organization (p. 4). When administrators distribute the leadership amongst others on their team, they are more connected as a staff. There is more “internal social cohesion” (p. 22). This also maximizes the use of the staff by acknowledging their capabilities and showcasing them. “A distributed perspective acknowledges that the work of leading and managing schools involves multiple individuals” (Spillane & Diamond, 2007, p. 7). When teachers are faced with more and more changes involving top-down decision making, they sometimes feel like new ideas are forced upon them. With all of the demands on today’s teachers, even the most enthusiastic member of a staff is often unable to devote sufficient time to innovation and change. The concept of change then becomes a problem.

Distributed Leadership and Networks

According to Harris and Spillane (2008), there are three main reasons why distributive leadership works: normative power, representational power, and empirical power. First, “distributive leadership has normative power . . . the model of the singular, heroic leader is at last being replaced with leadership that is focused upon teams rather than individuals” (p. 31). Distributive leadership also has representational power where “it represents the alternative approaches to leadership that have arisen because of increased external demands and pressures on schools” (p. 31). Through representational

power, teachers can ask the questions they may not feel comfortable asking their administrators. When there is one leader in a school and 20 or 30 teachers who need support, it is unrealistic to assume they will all get what they need. “New models of schooling are emerging based on collaboration, networking and multi-agency working These new and more complex forms of schooling require new and more responsive leadership approaches” (p. 32). Last, distributed leadership has empirical power. “There is increasing research evidence that distributed leadership makes a positive difference to organisational outcomes and student learning” (p. 32).

Distributed leadership enables teachers to learn more from each other’s experiences. “It is the quality of their relationships and interactions that matter” (Harris 2014, p. 33). To have the authentic ability to collaborate, to meet, and to plan is important in the sustainability of leading change (Harris, 2014).

Schools have changed significantly in the last few decades. The role of an administrator is a much more challenging job than it used to be and it is nearly impossible to have a single person lead successfully through all of the changes that are happening in education today. As Kocolowski (2010) stated, “Ostensibly, it is becoming more difficult for any single individual to possess all of the skills and abilities required to competently lead organizations today” (p. 22). The concept of distributed leadership within a school helps to solve this problem. When leaders practice distributed leadership, they recognize they must use their best assets—their own teachers who have knowledge and expertise (Kennedy, Deuel, Nelson, & Slavit, 2011). This helps to develop and to strengthen the learning groups to which teachers belong.

By acknowledging and using teachers' knowledge and expertise, and by giving teachers different forms of leadership positions and control of their learning groups, their knowledge and expertise will grow and deepen. Teachers will begin to take the wheel and drive their own learning. (p. 24)

Distributed leadership also helps drive school improvement goals and create change that is needed.

There are no super principals, and the amount of work that it takes to sustain improvement efforts in our schools is the primary reason that distributing leadership is imperative—so that schools do not continue to receive the same results or lose momentum when faced with change. (Gill & Hendee, 2010, p. 18)

Possible Negative Aspects of Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership can have many different definitions, leading to confusion at times (Harris & Spillane, 2008). When administrative duties are given to teachers, fellow teachers are often confused with their role—whether they had a classroom teacher role or an administrative role (Lindahl, 2008). However, when the organizational culture of the schools is healthy, then there is more likely to be success. “The research evidence underlines that without the active and full support of formal leaders in schools, then distributed leadership is unlikely to flourish or be sustained” (Harris, 2014, p. 55). School administrators need to ensure their staff is willing to accept change so that they can move towards a distributed leadership approach within their school.

Distributed leadership is not a quick fix to problems that may be occurring in a building. Hargreaves, Boyle, and Harris (2014) explained you must not race to the top when initiating change. “[T]hose who adopt this fast-track strategy find that they expend

all their resources too quickly, and wear people out before attaining their goal” (p. 9).

Similarly, Harris (2014) said, “It is not a magic bullet for success” (p. 60). Schools cannot use distributed leadership simply to make fast and sudden change. It is the slow process that creates and sustains change. Organizations that are built on gradual and sustainable growth are far more likely to succeed (Hargreaves et al., 2014). In any type of organization, leadership can work against the group, too. In the case of distributed leadership, facilitation is important to ensure leadership is genuinely distributed and that the work of the group does not fall into the groupthink mentality, which is ineffective (Harris, 2014, p. 119).

Any type of leadership role is difficult. It is also becoming less appealing to be a leader. “The most effective schools and school systems invest in *developing leaders*” (Harris, 2008, p. 4). Providing opportunities for teachers to lead early on helps them to learn as they journey through their careers. To create our leaders of tomorrow, we need to distribute leadership and to invest in building leaders today.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a necessity today and has become the norm in many organizations (Vangrieken et al., 2015). In the teaching profession, collaboration is essential. “[T]eachers need to be proficient collaborators in order to successfully perform their job” (p. 18). Not only does collaboration improve teaching, there is evidence that shows it also has a positive impact on students’ performance (Perez, 2015). “Increased effective collaboration exposes teachers to improved practices, which leads to stronger pedagogy. The more effective a teacher is, the more a student will benefit” (para. 11). Collaboration also plays a large role in turning students into collaborators and in teaching

them how to work as a team (Vangrieken et al., 2015). “For professional development of teachers to be successful, training programs need to be intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice, focused on specific subject content, and needed to foster strong working relationships among teachers” (Chong & Kong, 2012, p. 263). These ingredients are necessary for collaborative success amongst teachers.

Collaboration among teachers, Walker (2016) stated, is almost impossible when teachers are overworked or overwhelmed. When teachers are asked to share work and they are stressed and exhausted, the sense of collaborating just becomes more work to them. Teachers who are overworked often feel the need to skip lunch and to keep working in order to keep up. Fostering a sense of collaboration is possible, but overwhelmed teachers sometimes feel it is easier to simply work alone.

Definition

Teacher collaboration is defined by Perez (2015) as “teams of teachers who work interdependently to achieve common goals—goals linked to the purpose of learning for all—for which members are held mutually accountable” (para. 3). It is also defined by Vangrieken et al. (2015) as “joint interaction in the group in all activities that are needed to perform a shared task” (p. 23). The definition that will be used for the purpose of this study is: teachers who work together to share knowledge, learn new strategies, ideas, and activities which then help to reduce their workload, while improving their teaching with the goal of improving student outcomes.

There are many other terms that can be used interchangeably with collaboration. Although they may have slightly different meanings, they are often used to describe a form of collaboration. Some of the words are: cooperative learning, collective learning,

learning communities, or team learning (Dooly, 2008). The commonality amongst these words is they all include the process of working together to learn.

History of Collaboration

Collaboration amongst teachers has not always occurred. Only in recent years have teachers begun to work more closely with each other.

In traditional settings, teachers seldom visit one another's classrooms, and conversations among teachers are more likely to be about the Coke machine than the curriculum. These practices result in highly individualistic environments where collaboration is espoused but is unlikely to be made a reality. (Gideon, 2002, p. 30)

Teaching has been more of a solitary act in the past, where teachers work alone in their classrooms and plan lessons independently. "Former models of school improvement that have emphasized teacher collaboration have not clearly characterized the type of leadership required to boost collaboration" (Riveros et al., 2012, p. 207). Past types of collaboration have not addressed teachers' need to have meaningful, supportive relationships, which are essential to teaching.

Different Forms of Collaboration

Katz et al. (2009) explained four different types of collaboration. This explanation is based on Little's (1990) taxonomy, which looked at the different levels of collaboration.

1. Storytelling and scanning for ideas—is based on story sharing and personal experience. It is casual and individualistic.
2. Aid and assistance—is when colleagues help each other or offer advice.

Requests are made and help is provided based on the request.

3. Sharing—is an open exchange between teachers. Ideas are shared but this does not extend to discussion around curriculum, learning, or instruction.
4. Joint work—has a motivation amongst teachers to participate based on the need for others' contributions. There is relational trust and risk taking.

(as cited in Katz & Earl, 2010, p. 36)

Joint work is critical in collaboration. It challenges thinking and creates change in practice, which can have an impact on student learning (Katz et al., 2009). If a safe forum, such as an NLC group, is created, joint work can be quite powerful. Ideas are shared and discussions occur that are likely to lead to change or action within the school. In joint work, participants need to “suspend judgement, challenge their assumptions and intentionally seek out new information, in the quest for ideas and practices that work” (Earl et al., 2006, p. 11). As difficult as it may be to do this, it is a necessity in true collaboration.

Collaboration in Other Countries

In many of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in Europe and Asia, teachers spend fewer hours actually teaching students than their North American counterparts. The remainder of their day is spent collaborating with other teachers (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Andree, 2010). Countries such as Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, and Belgium provide time for collaboration amongst teachers.

Finland. Finland has become a much-talked-about country, especially in the area of education. Finnish students have had excellent scores on international test results, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2011). Finland

has very high standards for teachers entering the profession and it is a country that has much respect for its teachers. Teachers in Finland spend less time teaching than many other teachers in other parts of the world (Sahlberg, 2015). Instead, time is spent every day reflecting, planning, and learning with other teachers (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 64).

Sahlberg (2015) explained a teacher is similar to a football player—he or she is important on his or her own, “but the collegial culture and teachers’ professional judgement in the school are even more important for the quality of the school” (p. 136). The Finnish model has collaboration incorporated into its day. It assumes “educating people is a collaborative process and that cooperation, networking and sharing ideas among schools will eventually raise the quality of education” (p. 149). This process helps to create a culture of cooperation amongst the students and the teachers (Sahlberg, 2015). Teachers meet for a full afternoon each week to plan, to develop curricula, and to share resources (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010).

Walker (2016), an American teacher who moved to Finland to teach, stated “I found a school structure that fostered rich collaboration among teachers” (p. 176). He explained how they would plan and teach lessons together and work together to support students. He compared the degree of collaboration to his former school and commented on how different they were. Even during nonmandated times for collaboration, teachers in Finland found small breaks in the day to continue collaborating with colleagues about a variety of things—resources, supports, curriculum, or even how to improve recess (p. 177).

Singapore. Singapore is considered to be one of the top education systems in the world. Ng (2016) stated this success is due to “its continuous efforts to build on the

professional capital of its teachers and school leaders” (p. 157). Teachers in Singapore are given 20 hours per week to work with colleagues, to visit other classrooms, and to collaborate with each other (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). “Singapore encourages a teachers-for-teachers approach where teachers from different schools who teach a common subject come together to strengthen their collaboration across schools” (Ng, 2016, p. 154). The Singapore Ministry of Education also puts on a festival for learning, called ExCEL, where teachers gather to partake in collaborative discussions with other teachers (Ng, 2016).

Collaboration and Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities are defined by Pancake and Moller (2002) as professional school groupings that work together to learn collectively while developing shared values, distributed leadership, collaborative norms, a sense of enquiry, and organization. For the purpose of this study, the following definition will be used: professional learning communities are groups of teachers from the same school and of a similar grade who meet regularly with the intention of achieving overall improvement for the school, the teacher, and the students.

The concept of PLCs assumes there is improvement needed at the school level (Riveros et al., 2012). “One of the objectives in the professional learning communities is to promote the involvement of teachers, *qua* individuals, in collaborative groups that will bring about better professional knowledge and therefore, school improvement” (p. 209). When school improvement is focused on collaborating through PLCs, there is deeper reflection about action and practices that occur in schools. PLCs “are a means for school improvement” (p. 211).

Benefits of Collaboration

Collaboration potentially can benefit the school, the teachers, and the students. Although most benefits are teacher-related, the school and students do see benefits from collaboration (Vangrieken et al., 2015, p. 27). There are many known advantages to collaboration amongst teachers. In their study, Vangrieken et al. (2015) reported, “[t]eachers were reported to be more motivated, to experience decreased workload, a positive impact on teacher morale, greater efficiency, increased communication, improved technological skills, [and] reduced personal isolation” (p. 27). Most literature supports positive outcomes from teacher collaboration. Vangrieken et al. (2015) also indicated in their study that there was improved student understanding which increased the student learning. Perez (2015) also agreed in this improvement, stating junior high schools in Ohio had 20% increases in math due to extensive teacher collaboration (para. 11). In regards to teachers, Vangrieken et al. (2015) stated when their practice improved, the student learning and performance also showed growth. “Increased effective collaboration exposes teachers to improved practices which leads to stronger pedagogy” (Perez, 2015, para. 11). At the school level, there was a more positive school climate, more attention to student needs, and a more professional culture around intellectual inquiry. Perez (2015) also noted when a collaborative culture in a school has been created, it “will result in reducing teacher attrition, improving student learning, and creating the type of school that everyone searches for when they decide to become an educator” (para. 12). This type of collaborative culture benefits the teachers, the school, and the students.

Collaboration between schools has a positive impact. There is “an enormous potential for fostering system-wide improvements” (Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman, & West, 2011, p. 133). When collaborative activities are relatively easy to implement, there is a direct impact on achievement. The simple act of sharing resources is invaluable to teachers and an important part of collaboration (p. 135).

Possible Negative Aspects of Collaboration

Collaboration amongst teachers cannot be forced. It is not always appreciated or successful (Vangrieken et al., 2015). “Teacher collaboration is not a panacea that solves all problems” (p. 29). Within collaboration, there may be conflict, a push to conforming may occur, groupthink mentality is possible, and there could be loss of autonomy. Tension and competitiveness are also possibilities when collaboration occurs (Vangrieken et al., 2015). In order to achieve success, all members need to contribute adequate amounts of effort. “Simply putting teachers in a room together will not necessarily produce generative conversations” (Levine & Marcus, 2007, p. 134). If it is not quality collaboration, power struggles and frustration can occur (Perez, 2015). Groups that work together need to have shared commitments and common goals. They need to build trust so there is support within the group. Without a sense of trust, collaboration will not be successful. While collaboration requires trust, it also builds trust (Katz et al., 2009). Trusting relationships are an important component for working and for reflecting with others (Earl et al., 2006). Without trust, true collaboration will not occur.

Network Learning Communities

Definition

Network learning communities (NLCs) are defined by Katz et al. (2009) as “a group of schools working together in intentional ways to enhance the quality of professional learning and to strengthen capacity for continuous improvement” (p. 9). Their purpose is to help teachers feel less isolated while working individually within their classrooms (Meyers et al., 2009). In networks, teachers in schools work together to provide meaningful collaboration amongst their teachers. For the purpose of this study, the following definition will be used: network learning communities (NLCs) are teachers from groups of schools who work together in similar grade groupings during school time to learn from each other, to share knowledge and strategies, and to work towards a common purpose. Their focus and/or theory of action is related to improving learning for students.

Network learning communities are based on the assumption that educators who work together create new knowledge and spread it to others. This interaction influences practices and changes what and how educators teach (Katz & Earl, 2010). Network learning communities work to create leaders within the school setting and to have collaboration time set aside to work together. The type of professional development that results from these types of network communities is clear and focused. Teachers seek out the best ways to improve student learning. The focus in these networks can change over time. However, “it is selected because there is evidence that it is an urgent student (and therefore teacher) learning need” (Katz, Dack, & Earl, 2009, p. 37). Schools and

networks are aware of the needs of the students and therefore can work together to make the changes needed.

Key Features

Networks occur all over the world in different school districts. Not all look the same but, as Katz et al. (2009) stated, the one thing they all have in common is that a clear purpose is necessary. “A common focus is the glue that binds schools in a NLC together as they work to deepen their understanding and change their practices in an area of need” (Katz et al., 2009, p. 34). Katz et al. (2009) listed seven points for a successful network learning community: purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, inquiry, leadership, accountability, and building capacity and support.

1. Purpose and focus—there must be a clear purpose and focus within the network. Whatever the focus within the network is, it must be about learning. The focus of the network has a direct impact on student learning and works to improve teaching practices. Teachers look at the purpose and “unlearn, or make changes to existing practices and structures” (Earl et al., 2006, p. 25). The focus of the network should be appropriate for the needs of each of the schools involved.
2. Relationships are key, as they are the connection between people and learning in an NLC. These relationships build and strengthen over time and are built upon trust. Having strong relationships enables teachers to exceed what they can accomplish alone (Katz et al., 2009). Shared responsibility is encouraged so teachers work together and communicate with each other. This shared approach helps to build the trust that is an important factor in networks.

Having differences does not stop them from learning; rather, it allows teachers to see different points of view. It is through trust and relationships that differences become valuable in networks “[T]he network provides the mechanisms to support the relationships” (Earl et al., 2006, p. 26).

3. Collaboration “is intensive interaction that engages educators in opening up their beliefs and practices to investigation and debate” (Earl et al., 2006, p. 26). Working together builds a sense of commitment. It is through working with others that an evaluation of practices occurs. Because collaboration is such a powerful mechanism, it can change ideas and practices (Katz et al., 2009, p. 13). As stated in the previous paragraph, conflict is a part of collaboration, however, “it is essential for the development of high joint benefit” (p. 13).
4. Inquiry—analysis of the process is critical in ensuring there is meaning within the networks. Throughout the meetings there is an understanding of where you have been and where you want to go. The bigger question of “How will you get there?” is also important to think about. Thinking, rethinking, and then making adjustments helps to focus on a sense of learning in the network. “Knowledge creation . . . requires that individuals consider explicit knowledge and share, question, and possibly adapt their respective tacit knowledge in order to create new collective explicit knowledge” (Katz et al., 2009, p. 13). Developing an inquiry habit of mind helps teachers to see, to reflect, to learn, and ultimately to better understand.

5. Leadership—there are two types of leadership within networks: formal and informal. The formal leader takes on a directive role within the network, creating the work of the network and encouraging teachers while also providing support. Informal leaders in networks take on a more distributed role and can involve many people depending upon their areas of expertise. They are there to support, to encourage, and to share knowledge. It is through the use of distributed leadership within networks that instructional improvement and change occur (Earl et al., 2006).
6. Accountability—there are two types of accountability in networks: external and internal. External accountability creates a sense of transparency with the public to show how well the network is working. “Strong external accountability systems can also contribute to the achievement of a widely shared sense of purpose” (Katz et al., 2009, p. 14). Internal accountability suggests what needs to be changed by identifying priorities. It is through this accountability that schools become engaged in analyzing their practices (Earl et al., 2006).
7. Building capacity and support is defined by Harris (2001) as “being concerned with creating the conditions, opportunities, and experiences for collaboration and mutual understanding” (Earl et al., 2006, p. 15). Schools can make improvements by taking control of the changes that are necessary. This provides the opportunity for new learning while planning for the future. Existing beliefs are scrutinized while new ideas are examined to see where change can occur.

Figure 2.1 shows how the key features are connected to each other. This creates professional knowledge, which can then be distributed and shared among schools. As a result, student learning and engagement can be impacted and improved.

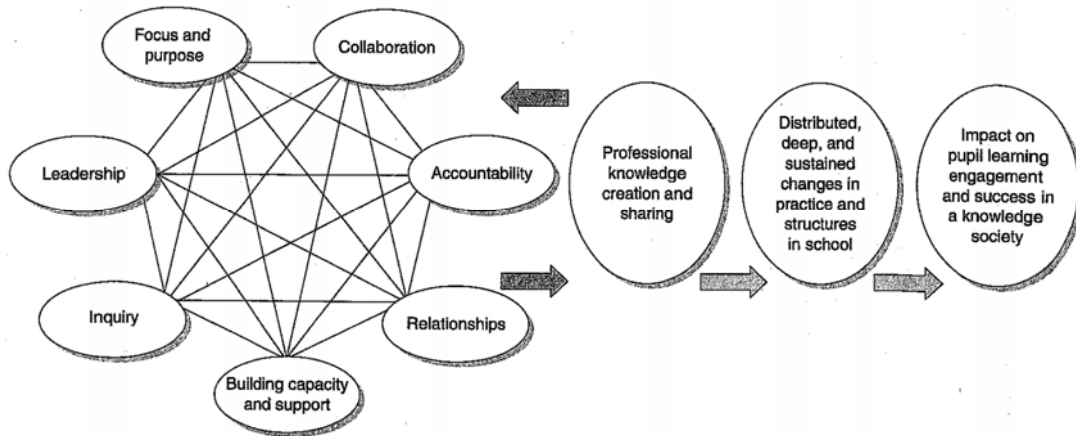


Figure 2.1. Key features of NLCs. This diagram shows how the key features are connected. With these seven features, professional knowledge is created which impacts students learning. Adapted from “Building and Connecting Learning Communities: The Power of Networks for School Improvement,” by S. Katz, L. M. Earl, and S. Ben Jaafar, 2009. Copyright 2009 by Steven Katz et al.

Rationale for NLCs

Schools that are a part of networks plan specific days during which teachers gather together to learn from each other. “Professional networks increasingly are being promoted as mechanisms to intentionally create the level of deep learning necessary for practitioners that can lever the kinds of changes that make a difference for students” (Katz et al., 2009, p. 2). Within these networks there are both formal and informal leaders who help to ensure the meetings are purposeful and successful. Formal leaders work to plan the process and to ensure there is success. Informal leaders lead the sessions, plan the activities, and introduce new concepts to their collaborative learning group. It is common for teachers to feel uncomfortable at first. “New ways of learning don’t come

easily” (p. 106). However, NLCs work to push teachers out of their comfort zones so they push themselves harder to learn collaboratively in the best interests of their students.

Networks provide conversations where areas of concern are identified and new ideas are formulated.

NLCs push educators to take the lead in their own continuous learning—to establish their own goals, create practical images of the learning, get support from peers, learn together, practice in their classrooms, engage in regular feedback and self-evaluation, and persevere when the learning gets tough. (Katz et al., 2009, p. 106)

The concept of collaboration exists in all types of organizations. With higher expectations and increased workloads, it is important that teachers look to each other for support and for guidance. This work shapes the learning communities and networks and embeds it in a social context that allows large groups of teachers to become confident and prepared for new teaching content and approaches that may be different from past practice (p. 106).

Theory of Action

Borgman-Arboleda and Poncelet (n.d.) suggested a theory of action is a plan that maps out what is essential in order to reach a long-term goal. This helps to create a plan around what the network or organization hopes to achieve. Throughout the process of working towards the network’s long-term goal, there are smaller short-term goals and outcomes that are monitored and evaluated (Borgman-Arboleda & Poncelet, n.d.). When a theory of action is used in school networks, there is an obvious relationship between what occurs in the NLC and the goal of improved learning for students (Katz et al., 2009). For example, a school or network team thinks about what their main concern is

and discusses a way to create a plan, which improves that problem. Once a network has been established, those involved determine what the theory of action will be. This process helps to keep the teachers within the network focused on its one main purpose. The plan needs to be clearly thought out and linked together so that it isn't a simple statement of a goal. It should express how the goal will be achieved. Network leaders must continuously check in to ensure they are on the path to getting to the desired outcome. If at any time the network has been taken off path, a strategy is required to refocus. These strategies do change over time and should not be set in stone. However, it is imperative that the steps are clearly laid out to reflect the direction in which the network is headed.

The theory of action suggests that individuals are the connectors of schools to networks (and networks to schools) and that these relationships provide the link for uploading and downloading ideas, activities and interactions that can influence the way people think and act in schools. (Earl et al., 2006, p. 56)

Collaborative Inquiry

Collaborative inquiry focuses on learning, but also questions the teaching and learning that is occurring. It creates inquiry within the teacher so that when teachers see their less successful lessons, they question them and work towards improvement. They learn from the experience and it improves their teaching.

[C]onditions for improving learning and teaching are strengthened when teachers collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict, and engage actively in supporting one another's professional growth. (Katz et al., 2009, p. 69)

Collaborative inquiry is not simply the sharing of stories or talking about daily lessons. It is questioning the teaching and learning from each lesson so that there is growth with each experience.

Examples of NLCs Worldwide

Teachers Network Leadership Institute. Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI) in the United States is a group of teachers from different schools in a similar area. The concept of TNLI is to create a group of teachers who want to make a difference, but policy implementation and expectations are so great that they have become frustrated (Meyers et al., 2009). “The goal of TNLI is to connect education policy with actual classroom practice to improve student achievement” (p. 2). The groups range from 10 to 50 members and they meet monthly to work together (Meyers et al., 2009). However, it is not easy to join this network, but rather a competitive process. According to Meyers, the work done in these networks is similar to other networks. They connect with other teachers, develop new skills, and create new ideas. TNLI has 14 different locations of networks across the United States.

The National Writing Project. Another type of network is the long-running National Writing Project that was established in California.

Begun in 1974 at the University of California at Berkeley and funded primarily by federal grants, the National Writing Project has spawned regional learning communities and more than 165 local sites that help teachers improve how they teach writing and foster student learning. (Lieberman & Wood, 2002, p. 40)

This network is based on school-university partnerships. The process begins with a five-week institute that takes place during the summer months. Teachers collaborate on shared

lessons, activities, and strategies all related to writing (Lieberman & Wood, 2002). This group then continues their growth by networking through the year with follow-up sessions. Like other networks, there is informal leadership involved in the networks. Along with networking sessions, they use collaborative inquiry to challenge their thinking (Lieberman & Wood, 2002).

Teachers Network—Singapore. The Teachers Network in Singapore began in 1998 and works as a catalyst for teachers where they gather to collaborate, to share, to learn, and to reflect (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011). Within this network, there are “learning circles, teacher-led workshops, conferences, and a well-being program” (p. 37). Learning circles have between four and 10 teachers who work to identify and to solve problems jointly with a facilitator. Eight sessions are set up and occur a couple times each month. Facilitators within this network are expected to “encourage the teachers to act as co-learners and critical friends so they feel safe to take the risks of sharing their successes and problems” (p. 37). This sense of collaboration creates collegiality amongst the group. One unique feature of this NLC is that they are constantly seeking feedback from teachers for improvement of the network.

Networked Learning Communities Programme—England. In England, the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) initiated the Networked Learning Communities Programme in 2002. It was a forward-thinking program (Earl et al., 2006). With 137 networks involved, it was the largest network of schools in the world (Jackson & Temperley, 2006). Over 1,500 schools were involved in this four-year program. “It was charged with generating evidence about how and under what conditions networks can make a contribution to raising student achievement” (p. 4).

Networks in the UK were paired with a local authority partner and/or a higher education institution (Goddard, 2005). External partners were helpful as far as funding and support. Using higher education partners was also helpful in providing expertise and planning projects (Goddard, 2005). According to their four-year study of NLCs, “by aligning networked learning processes for adults and pupils, and having leadership that promotes and supports that learning, there is evidence that networks succeed in their twin objectives of fostering learning community and raising pupil achievement” (Jackson & Temperley, 2006, p. 22). The involvement in NLCs also strengthens community relationships. It provides opportunities for collaboration and builds partnerships within the community (Jopling & Spender, 2006). In the UK, even if the results of achievement stayed the same,

the claim could be made that a way of working that gives control back to the profession, that fosters professional learning, that stimulates innovation, that energises and enthuses teachers and that balances central accountability with peer responsibility would be the way to go. (Jackson & Temperley, 2006, p. 22)

Researchers from Aporia Consulting studied the Networked Learning Communities Programme from its inception and over the course of four years. They developed a three-phase report on the impact of NLCs.

The Aporia Report—Creating Effective Networks

Earl et al. (2006) found that networks of schools are most effective if enhancing pupil learning is the goal. Schools need to create conditions for teacher engagement in joint work

that challenges thinking and practices and collaborative enquiry that constantly pushes them to routinely examine and alter what they do in a spiral of continuous rethinking, refinement and transformation that results in fundamental changes in the way that they think and act in school in order to provide the best for the pupils they serve. (p. 15)

Engaging teachers in networks can be difficult. When teachers engage in networks, “they should be prepared to bring their energy and their willingness to learn to the collaborative activities in the network and in the school, in anticipation of powerful returns on their investment” (Earl et al., 2006, p. 75). While in theory, networks can make a big difference in teachers learning from each other within the scope of collaboration, you cannot force teachers to bring ideas, to work together, or to learn. This potential barrier is why leadership within a network matters. It is important to ensure there are strong leaders who can work to encourage teachers to be more involved. “This does not imply simply assigning new tasks to teachers and calling them leaders. Instead, it involves the actual enactment of leadership tasks within their own roles as teachers” (p. 75). Moving beyond collaboration to challenging thinking and practice is crucial. Creating networks that are places where adults are comfortable with challenges, with diverse perspectives, with exploring new ideas, and with frustration is needed (Earl et al., 2006). A true purpose and a sense of strong leadership, along with challenging work and true engagement are also needed for a network to succeed. If any of these are not present, the strength of the network decreases and it does not function as well as it could. Networks of schools are meant to be places of learning, not just places for delivering mechanisms (Earl et al., 2006). If they are used to simply pass on the policies, it is not

network learning. Teacher leaders within networks “are key players in establishing and sustaining the connections and in the interchange of ideas across schools within networks” (p. 73). With their motivation and energy, teachers tend to feel more comfortable and excited to learn. However, if the proper training is not set up for the teacher leaders and if principals are not supportive in the group sessions, networks will not likely be influential (Earl et al., 2006).

Connecting PLCs to NLCs Through Collaboration

There is a positive connection between NLCs and PLCs. The NLCs are linked back to each school so that within their PLCs, teachers continue to have similar discussions and can therefore develop further within their own school. “[S]chools learn to collaborate more effectively internally by collaborating externally. The benefits are recursive” (Jackson & Temperley, 2006, p. 11). PLCs also work to strengthen the NLCs as they bring new ideas to the network meetings. It is a “two-way flow” (Katz et al., 2009, p. 12). Successful NLCs are likely to be ones that support PLCs in schools so that there is a strong local locus of change for teachers, enhanced by the multitude of ideas and the support that comes from the network (Earl et al., 2006). Bringing this information back to the school level works to reinforce the ideas and, therefore, change is more likely to occur. It also encourages the teachers at the school level to talk amongst themselves to see how they can make the changes work in their building.

In order for teachers to be able to work closely together, there needs to be a sense of trust amongst them. They should be able to question when necessary and to challenge the status quo. However, they also have to be willing to work together. Working in networks means teachers need to challenge their own thinking and practice. Doing so

means they “suspend judgement, challenge their assumptions and intentionally seek out new information, in the quest for understanding” (Earl et al., 2006, p. 62). Collaboration in these networks is about getting together and working jointly on creating ways to improve teaching. “These networks were, therefore, intended to establish a means by which teachers from different schools could work together, enabling a flow of knowledge between schools which were a part of the same network” (Townsend, 2015, p. 725). Having a network means there is now a forum to address the questions that teachers regularly have. It also is a place where teachers can connect to other teachers. The issues that teachers have with policy implementation, technology, and curriculum change will always be there. Having these groups is not only about support; it is about looking to the future to see the great ideas teachers develop through the process of collaboration.

Church's Model to Represent Collaboration in Networks

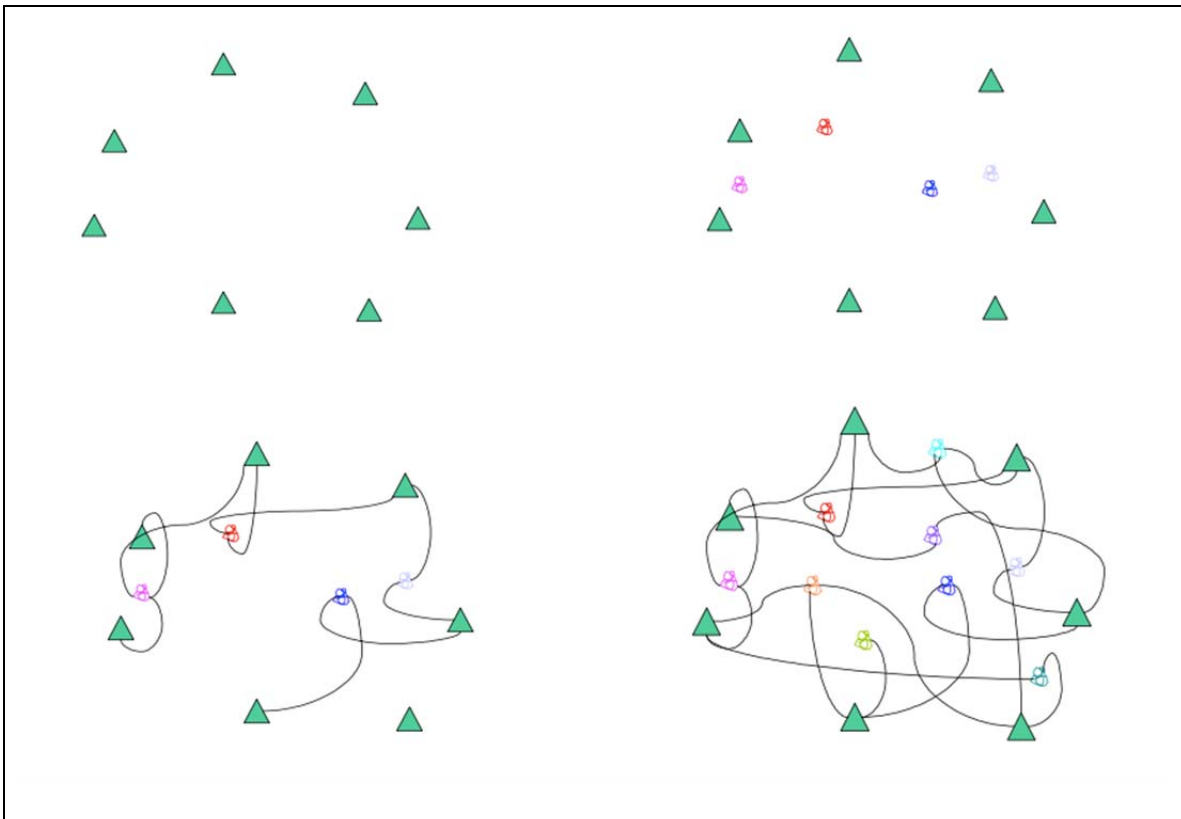


Figure 2.2. Threads, knots, and nets. The triangles represent the members. The threads are the relationships, communication, and trust between the members. The knots represent the work the members do together. Adapted from “Participation, Relationships and Dynamic Change: New Thinking on Evaluating the Work of International Networks,” by M. Church et al, 2003. Copyright 2003 by Madeline Church et al.

Church et al. (2002) created a model (see Figure 2.2) to explain how relationships within a network should work. “The threads give the network its life” (p. 16). This is done through communication, shared information, and process. The knots are where the participants get together and share ideas based on a common purpose. “The knots of activity make the most of member contributions, commitment and skills. They provide benefit and energy and inspiration” (p. 16). These common activities create the atmosphere of trust and community. They improve the relationships in the network. The

joint activities and relationships create a net, where “participants create, contribute to and benefit from” the collaborative work (p. 16). Newcomers can join without the structure losing its purpose. They all work together, “watching out for broken threads, knotting together appropriate activities, putting out new threads to new participants, extending the net. Working the net. Net workers” (p. 16).

Summary

Church’s diagram of the threads and knots ties collaboration to network learning communities. It is through collaboration that networks take shape. “Collaboration is the ‘work’ of networks” (Katz et al., 2009, p. 44). A necessary feature of NLCs is having informal leadership to create a culture of collegiality. Distributed leadership in networks works to do just that. By creating this collegiality, teachers feel more open to share their successes and problems with their colleagues (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011). True collaboration occurs when there is a sense of trust and respect while ensuring there is a purpose to the learning that is occurring. A successful network learning community must have four main components: it has regularly scheduled times for gathering in groups with other teachers of a similar teaching assignment, it will have distributed leadership as a foundation for leading the sessions, it will ensure there is a trusting environment to create collaboration, and it will be linked to the PLCs at the school level.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Currently, there is very little research available on network learning communities. To date, there are no studies that examine whether or not NLCs influence teacher collaboration. According to Chapman and Fullan (2007), more research is needed in this area: “[I]f we are to continue the move towards a networked learning system further research in this area remains a necessity rather than a luxury” (p. 211). This study could add to the current research that exists today regarding the effectiveness of network learning communities and the role that collaboration plays in them.

This study seeks to determine in what ways NLCs influence teacher collaboration. This study also establishes if teachers begin to feel more confident in their teaching when they collaborate with teachers of a similar grade. If evidence supports that teachers do feel that network learning communities influence collaboration, then this will be an important contribution in the education field.

Philosophical Assumption

Pragmatism is the philosophical assumption in this study. By establishing a purpose for mixing quantitative and qualitative methods together, a better understanding of the consequences will be understood. Pragmatism “opens the door to multiple methods, different worldviews, and different assumptions, as well as different forms of data collection and analysis in the mixed methods study” (Creswell, 2003, p. 12). Because pragmatic views are oriented towards what works, this approach will help to uncover how NLCs work in the current situation. Pragmatism focuses on linking together the two paradigms—quantitative and qualitative.

Pragmatism is a practical approach that allows the researcher to be practice-focused on what people are currently doing in regards to NLCs. This approach enables me to use both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the questions. Pragmatism is also not committed to any one theory. I am not pursuing one theoretical approach in this research. By doing this, I will have the choice of which methods and techniques work for me and for the study itself (Creswell, 2003). I intend to find out what is working in the teaching practice in regards to NLCs and collaboration within them. Through this research, I will see what is working and focus on how this adds to the research in this field. This will allow me to find good practices that are sustainable and effective practices that should continue. By using a mixed methods approach, I am able to establish a “rationale for the reasons why quantitative and qualitative data need to be mixed in the first place (p. 12). Pragmatism is “problem centered” (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 22) which allows me to focus on the problem within my research. It is also “practice oriented” (p. 22). This helps me to determine what is working and what is not working within NLCs and focus on the practice at hand. Crotty (1998), as cited in Creswell and Clark (2007), noted having multiple stances on research includes both biased and unbiased perspectives. As Cherryholmes (1992) stated, “[p]ragmatic research is driven by anticipated consequences” (p. 13). This information is important to me as a researcher. As Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) explained, “[p]ragmatists decide what they want to study based on what is important within their personal value systems” (p. 90). Because I have been a part of a network learning community for many years, I feel it is important to research this experience and understand it. The semistructured interviews that will take place will show an understanding of the practice that is occurring within the NLC.

Research Design

A mixed methods design will be used in this study. Creswell and Clark (2007) defined mixed methods in the following way:

Mixed methods research is a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis of data and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches in many phases in the research process. As a method, it focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone. (p. 5)

According to Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006), “(o)ne of the exciting results of much mixed research is that in a single study practical questions can be addressed, different perspectives can be examined, and if well documented, practitioners can obtain some sense of what might be useful in their local situations” (pp. 48-49). A mixed methods study is comprehensive and yields more thorough results because it has characteristics of both quantitative and qualitative research. “[T]he goal of this third type of research is to utilize the strengths of two or more approaches by combining them in one study” (p. 53). Strictly using a survey (or quantitative data) would provide some information, however, incorporating qualitative data into the research by doing semistructured interviews delves deeper to find out more. Through mixed methods, a researcher is able to go deeper into understanding not only how a person feels, but why

they feel that way. In this study, it is necessary to understand how teachers feel about the networks of which they are a part, but it is also important to understand why they feel the way they do about collaboration. It is critical to measure the teachers' perceptions of the network learning community as well as the opportunity for collaboration. This measurement can be conducted through the use of a survey as well as using semistructured interviews with a number of people involved. Both exploring and explaining are incorporated into this research.

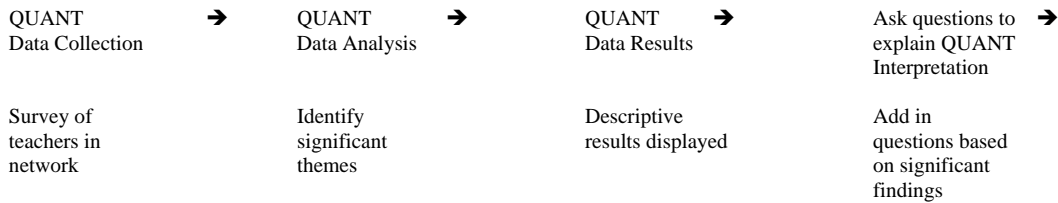
The survey gives an overall picture of the experience in network learning communities while the interview gives more insight into reasons and motivation. Additionally, by using only qualitative research, my own interpretation of the interviews, rather than what the interviewees are actually saying, could possibly be challenged. Validity and credibility are improved if both sides are measured (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The type of mixed methods that will be used is a sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2015). Although it takes more time, a two-phase type of design is best suited for this study as it first uses a quantitative survey and is followed by semistructured interviews (qualitative). Qualitative results will be used to build upon quantitative results. These results will assist in explaining the survey findings (Creswell, 2003). The qualitative data will help to understand any results that arise from the quantitative survey that may be surprising. This data may also assist in gaining insight into any outliers.

Creswell's (2015) sequential explanatory design explains how data are collected and results determined. It is through this design process that quantitative results will help

to determine necessary qualitative research. Figure 3.1 is adapted from Creswell’s design for the purpose of this study.

PHASE ONE



PHASE TWO

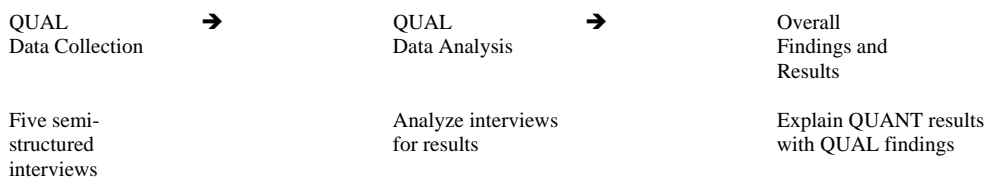


Figure 3.1. The two phase design. This diagram shows how the study has been designed and what will be done in each phase of the sequential explanatory design. Copyright 2016 by Christy Blazieko.

Advantages and Challenges

There are many advantages to the sequential explanatory design. “The strength of this design lies in the fact that the two phases build upon each other so that there are distinct, easily recognized states of conducting the design” (Creswell, 2015, p. 38). Other benefits include the fact that it is straightforward, it provides more evidence than studying solely quantitative or qualitative data, and it allows researchers to use multiple paradigms. Additionally, it is practical in the sense that many different methods can be used (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

Challenges for mixed methods studies include length of time, knowledge of both quantitative and qualitative methods, and deciding which factors require further follow up

(Creswell, 2015). The purpose of mixing the methods must be made clear and if it is not, it could cause confusion throughout the study (Bazeley, 2004). Weighting the components can also be a challenge in mixed methods.

Methods

To complete this study, first a quantitative survey was administered to the teaching staff who have been a part of the southeast network for two or more years since 2010. An online survey through FluidSurveys was used to ensure anonymity. Subsequently, a qualitative study was conducted to build upon and to support the survey results. This process allowed strands to emerge from inferences in the first phase—the questionnaire. From the results, the semistructured interview questions were designed. Nine semistructured interviews were conducted for more in-depth responses specific to the network. By using a mixed methods design, I was able to incorporate data from both a survey and interviews to confirm inferences. Inferences is defined by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) as

. . . an umbrella term to refer to a final outcome of a study. The outcome may consist of a conclusion about, an understanding of, or an explanation for an event. . . . We use the term “inference” as a mixed methods term because it may take a variety of meanings ranging between a purely quantitative connotation to a purely qualitative connotation. (p. 35)

Inferences, then, refer to the conclusions made from what is studied, rather than the results of the study (Cameron, 2009). Once these procedures were completed, the data were analyzed. There were multiple inferences developed through this process that confirmed or complemented each other (Cameron, 2009).

Procedure and Data Collection

In order to proceed with this study, after preparing an initial survey protocol, I prepared an ethics review for both the University of Saskatchewan and Greater Saskatchewan Catholic Schools to seek approval. Once the study was approved, I sent an information letter to the superintendent, followed by a letter to principals, explaining the study I was performing. Upon their approval, I conducted a pilot study. The pilot study was conducted before the questionnaire was finalized. Five teachers who were not part of the network for a minimum of two years completed the questionnaire prior to it being distributed. This pilot ensured the questions were straightforward and easy to understand. Based on the results of the pilot study, I revised the protocol. Following the pilot study, I sent the online survey to the superintendent to forward to his principals. Upon their approval, principals then distributed it to teachers to complete. Both stages indicated the voluntary nature of the study. Principals and the superintendent did not have the ability to see who participated. There was no tracking of this. By distributing the survey in this manner, the teachers knew that the survey was endorsed by the school division's network superintendent. This endorsement may have helped to increase response rates.

Selection of Participants

The participants involved in this study were teachers who are currently a part of the southeast sector and were a part of the network learning community between 2010-2015 for at least two years. Principals who had been in the network for a minimum of two years during the same time period were also invited to participate in the survey. Teacher-librarians, EAL teachers, and learning assistance teachers did not participate. On the survey, there was consent for the participants to check off to ensure they gave permission

for their survey results to be used in this study. The survey asked participants to state their classroom's grade, their length of time teaching, and gender. Teachers of multigrade classrooms were asked to state the grade in which they had the most students.

Once the surveys were completed, I analyzed the data to generate descriptive statistics based on the data. Initial analysis helped me construct semistructured interview questions. The interviews were semistructured with the purpose of expanding any information that had been identified on the survey. For the interviews, I asked for participants to submit their email addresses on the survey if they were interested in participating in an interview. I set up interviews with nine participants at a mutually agreeable time and place. After I informed them of their rights as interview participants, they signed the consent form and I conducted the interviews. Each interview lasted between 20 to 60 minutes. I audio recorded the interviews and transcribed them myself.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed first. Surveys were conducted using FluidSurveys. This tool provided me with descriptive statistics generated from the survey results such as frequencies and cross-tabulations. FluidSurveys is password protected and therefore was a good choice to use for surveying such a large group of people. The data were saved on a thumb drive and kept in a locked cabinet when not being used by me. I was able to use this data to analyze and to decide what key points I needed to include in my questions for the interview. This information supported the construction of the interview protocol. Patterns or surprising results helped me generate further questions for the interviews. Once the interviews were complete, I coded the data. This involved breaking down each part of the interview into small segments of words and phrases and

labeling each (Creswell & Clark, 2007). I manually colour coded the segments according to commonalities. Initially, I used the key features of an NLC that have been suggested by the literature. These include: purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, inquiry, leadership, accountability, and building capacity and support. By sorting and coding the terms, I saw what themes were most common. Subthemes were discovered through this process. I looked for patterns and descriptive frequency counts of the themes and analyzed how often the specific terms were brought up. Coding “enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or ‘families’ because they share some characteristic” (Saldana, 2009, p. 8). Coding the terms developed new themes. This coding, along with my intuition, determined which data were similar (Saldana, 2009). This then linked the data to other key terms so that each cycle of coding produced more meaning and more themes that provided answers to my research questions (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

Risks were minimal in this study. Data were collected through the website FluidSurveys and there was no direct contact between the researcher and the participants. Confidentiality of participants was ensured as this was an anonymous and voluntary questionnaire with no names or personal information required on the form. The data were aggregated on FluidSurveys. Interview participants were required to sign a consent form before the interview. Additionally, I used the process of member checking whereby participants had an opportunity to read over the transcripts of their interviews and make any deletions or revisions they deemed were necessary before they signed a transcription

release form. For the qualitative study, interviewees are identified using a pseudonym and no identifying information is described so they are anonymous.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the criteria for trustworthiness that indicate the quality of the study. They are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined credibility as whether the inquirer is “credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities” (p. 296). This includes enhancing prolonged engagement and using member checks (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Member checks were completed in this study to ensure accuracy. Transferability is most applicable in this study. It “includes the transferability of inferences from a particular *sending* context (the research setting) to a particular *receiving* context (other similar settings)” (p. 26). Population transferability is the degree to which the applications of the study apply to other people (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This study will be applicable to other districts and networks because although the set-up of NLCs may be different, the process would be similar. If teachers in one network feel their experiences in a NLC influenced collaboration and that they learned new teaching methodology that was beneficial because of the process, then it is likely teachers in another district who were part of a network learning community would also find benefit. There would likely be similarities that could be associated with other networks, so this research could assist them.

Dependability and confirmability show that results are data-driven and inferences make sense. By keeping a journal of information, biases were noted and used to help with analysis. Notes were kept throughout this process to ensure accuracy. Once the first stage

of the research was completed, stage two questions were altered and new questions added based on data from the survey.

Summary

Using a mixed methods approach for this study gathered deep information from the teachers involved in this network. It showed whether or not the NLCs have influenced teacher collaboration. Not only did it record their feelings about the network, but it also delved further into their thoughts through the semistructured interviews to seek more information about it. The interviews expanded and strengthened the results of the survey. This is important, as it provided more accurate information about experiences in the network. It showed whether or not relationships were developed, if new teaching strategies were introduced, and it answered the question of whether network learning communities do influence teacher collaboration. The use of FluidSurveys enabled the researcher to keep the study anonymous as well as to analyze the data across the grades to see if there are any differences between the grades.

CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

As stated earlier, the purpose of this mixed methods study is to determine the ways in which network learning communities influence teacher collaboration. After receiving permission from the Behavioural Ethics Research Board at the University of Saskatchewan, I was granted permission from Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools to conduct the research. A letter of introduction was sent to the superintendent (see Appendix A). As well, a letter of introduction (see Appendix B) was sent from the superintendent to the principals and teachers at the 12 schools that are a part of his network.

Chapter Two explains several important features of successful NLCs. The seven key features that Katz et al. (2009) discussed were used as a base for creating questions for both the survey and the interview. The concepts of collaboration and distributed leadership were interwoven into the questions. The key features were used to organize and present the data. This chapter will describe the data collection that occurred. The data will then be presented using both the survey results and the interviews. It will be organized around the framework of these seven key features.

Data Collection

Survey

A 25-question online survey was created using FluidSurveys (see Appendix A). The questions were based on the Likert scale with the following being the options for choice:

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

The end of the survey allowed for comments to be made if participants had anything more they wanted to share. The final question permitted them to leave their email address if they were interested in participating in an interview to follow up after the surveys were completed. Last, they were asked to consent to the survey being used for research.

Pilot survey. Before the survey was sent out to teachers, a pilot study of the survey was conducted where five individuals who did not meet the qualifications to participate in the survey completed it. Feedback regarding the survey was positive. The only comment for change that occurred was whether or not the gender question should be included in the survey. The commenter asked if it was necessary. I felt it was necessary to see if there were differing opinions between male and female respondents and their views on collaboration within networks. I also wanted to see the percentages of participation between males and females in the survey.

Survey information. The survey was open for three weeks at the beginning of May 2016. It is unknown how many teachers who are currently a part of the southeast network were a part of the network learning community for a minimum of two years. Because of transfers that occur each year, new hires, and leaves, the number of teachers and principals who met the qualifications is unknown. They were requested to participate in the survey only if they met the qualifications. Forty-seven teachers replied to the survey; three did not give consent to their surveys being used for research so they were immediately deleted. This deletion left 44 useable surveys.

Out of the 44 responses, 59% were female and 41% were male. Thirty-one percent said they had the opportunity to be a teacher leader within the network at some

point, while 69% did not. This demographic was important to know as I wanted to ensure it was not mostly teacher leaders responding to the survey. Having mostly teacher leaders respond would give me the understanding that teachers who did not have a leadership role may not have had the desire to participate and that would raise concern with me as to why they chose to not participate.

Six principals responded to the survey, which is 50% of the schools involved. Again, with transfers occurring, this statistic shows that most principals who qualified to participate did so. Fifty-seven percent of respondents had been a part of the network for over five years, which means they participated in the grade-alike groupings for all of the years the network was operating. Thirty-two percent of the respondents had been teaching for over 20 years. This group of respondents was the largest group based on years of teaching.

Semistructured Interviews

The interview was created using the same key features as a base for questions (see Appendix D). After seeing the survey results, questions were slightly altered to ensure specific areas were covered. Once the questions were completed, a pilot of the interview was done.

Pilot interview. One pilot interview was conducted to ensure the questions that were being asked were easy to understand and clear to the interviewee. Some questions were reworded because they seemed to be too lengthy to follow. A recommendation was to have the semistructured interview questions placed in front of the interviewees so they could refer back to them if they wanted to reread the question at any point throughout the interview. This recommendation was followed and proved to be helpful to the

participants. Many commented on their appreciation for having the questions in front of them to glance at when needed.

Interviewees. Eight participants provided their email addresses to me via the survey to state they would be interested in participating in an interview. One person contacted me after submitting the survey to say she would be willing to do an interview. All nine of the interviews were conducted within a five-day period at the end of May 2016. I assigned a pseudonym to each of the interviewees. There is limited information given about each participant due to the small sample size and to maintain their anonymity. Because there were a small number of teacher leaders, they could be identifiable if their gender, grade, school or length of time teaching was stated. Likewise, as there were only 12 principals in this network, they may not be anonymous if their gender, length of time as a principal or size of school was mentioned. It was important to keep them anonymous so I chose to give very limited information about the interviewees. Out of the nine interviewees, Barry and Dennis were principals; Steve, Kate, and Mark were teacher leaders; and Janice, Carmen, Lana, and Ben were teachers. Two of the interviewees, Lana and Mark, were from Humboldt, which is a town approximately one hour outside of Saskatoon. There are two schools located in Humboldt that are a part of the southeast sector. There was a wide range of grades covered from the selected group of interviewees. Initially, I had planned on conducting five interviews. However, seeing the number of people interested in participating in the interview process changed my mind and this larger group of interviewees allowed for a more diverse response.

Interviews. I used the app iTalk to record all nine of the interviews. Each participant signed a consent form before beginning the interviews (see Appendix E).

During the interviews, I maintained a neutral detachment when I referred to questions and allowed the interviewee to finish their thoughts before I moved on. After the interviews were conducted, I transcribed the interviews and sent them back to the interviewees. They were given the opportunity to make any changes to their transcripts if requested. Upon approving the transcript, each participant then signed a consent form for transcription release (see Appendix F), which authorized me to use their interviews for my research. The assigned pseudonyms will be used throughout this paper to ensure the privacy of the interviewees.

Presentation of Data

The data presentation has been divided up into quantitative and qualitative sections due to the nature of this study. As described in Chapter Three, this was a sequential explanatory mixed methods study. The survey was done first, followed by the interviews, with the emphasis placed on the qualitative data.

Phase One—Quantitative Data

The survey had a total of 44 respondents. Table 4.1 shows the questions that were asked in the survey and the percentages of responses for each question. Comments that were made within the study are shown in the qualitative section of the data presentation in each of the appropriate themes. After analyzing the responses, questions for the interviews were then altered based on information from the survey.

Table 4.1 *Summary of Survey Results*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NLC influenced collaboration among my colleagues.	27%	48%	21%	5%	0%
I was able to collaborate with colleagues I do not work with.	23%	59%	9%	9%	0%
I have been exposed to new practices.	27%	52%	11%	9%	0%
I have changed some of my teaching and assessment practices.	10%	52%	26%	12%	0%
I now use practices common with my colleagues.	7%	51%	30%	12%	0
I did not feel supported to try new ideas.	0%	5%	9%	65%	21%
I do not feel it is beneficial for teachers to collaborate.	2%	7%	5%	41%	46%
I have gained new knowledge and skills.	19%	56%	19%	5%	2%
I have improved teaching practices.	14%	58%	14%	14%	0%
The focus was clearly defined.	23%	61%	9%	7%	0%
The focus did not have a direct impact on student learning.	0%	7%	30%	48%	16%
I have engaged in more reflective practice.	19%	47%	21%	12%	2%
I have developed an inquiry habit of mind.	16%	46%	23%	16%	0%
I have built relationships with other teachers.	30%	43%	21%	7%	0%
A shared approach built trust and relationships.	14%	54%	26%	5%	2%
The leadership was distributed.	16%	52%	25%	7%	0%
The teacher leaders encouraged and supported.	21%	64%	14%	2%	0%
I have further developed leadership skills.	18%	25%	32%	21%	5%
I reflected on the outcomes of the NLC to establish future	11%	50%	14%	21%	5%

priorities.					
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Note. Survey questions have been slightly condensed to better fit the table.

In the survey, 84% of teachers felt that the purpose was clearly defined. Only 7% of the participants agreed with the statement, “The focus and purpose did not have a direct impact on student learning.” Seventy-three percent of teachers who responded to the survey felt they had the ability to build relationships through this process. Sixty-eight percent felt a shared approach to learning worked to build trust and relationships within the group. Seventy-five percent of participants felt the NLC influenced collaboration amongst their colleagues. Eighty-two percent agreed that through this process, they were able to collaborate with colleagues they do not work with and 80% agreed they have been exposed to new practices. Only 9% of teachers agreed with the statement, “I do not feel that it is beneficial for teachers of like grades to collaborate together.” The results of the survey indicated 66% of participants felt they have engaged in more reflective practice to improve their teaching. Sixty-two percent of participants felt they have developed an inquiry habit of mind through this process. The survey results also indicated that 68% of participants felt the leadership within the NLC was distributed. Eighty-five percent felt the teacher leaders encouraged and supported the grade-alike groups. Sixty-one percent of participants felt they had an opportunity to reflect upon the outcomes in order to establish future priorities. This was a surprising result but showed that members did not feel they had much of a say in the choice of topic that was the focus of the NLC. The survey also indicated that 62% of participants felt they have changed some of their teaching and assessment practices through this process. This was also a surprise as one of the purposes of an NLC is for teachers to learn from each other through collaboration and, as a result, change some teaching practices. Seventy-five percent of participants felt

they gained new knowledge and skills. While this number is fairly high, it would be anticipated that all members would gain some new knowledge through collaboration with colleagues.

These result led me to alter some interview questions, specifically around describing the collaboration that occurred and how it influenced teaching. Another area of questioning that was included in the interview was in how the needs of teachers were considered in establishing future priorities. With only 61% of survey participants agreeing with that statement, I chose to include questions about that in the interviews.

Phase Two—Qualitative Data

The data were analyzed using the seven key features identified by Katz et al. (2009) that are essential in creating successful network learning communities. The key features that will be referred to throughout this section are: (a) purpose and focus, (b) relationships, (c) collaboration, (d) inquiry, (e) leadership, (f) accountability, and (g) building capacity and support. These key features were the codes that began the analysis of the data.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I began what Saldana (2009) referred to as “pre-coding” where I initially highlighted phrases and quotes that stood out to me. I then began cycle one of coding where I took a detailed reading approach and read through the interviews. I used a variety of colours that corresponded with each of my key themes. I assigned one colour to each theme and read through each transcript seven times, each time focusing on one specific theme. Several comments that were made applied to more than one theme, so many quotes were underlined with several colours. For example, the

statement “Our real focus and belief was we can get a lot more done, we trust each other, so let’s go to where we are passionate and interested, and then share” could be a part of the leadership, purpose and focus, relationships, or collaboration themes. Once the manually coding was completed, each highlighted quote was put into tables within its specific theme. Key words were then located within each quotation to make counts of subthemes and to see if new themes were emerging. Saldana (2009) suggested “keeping a record of your emergent codes in a separate file as a codebook—a compilation of the codes, their content descriptions, and a brief data example for reference” (pp. 24-25). This categorization was employed throughout the coding process to ensure any possible new themes had documentation to explain frequency of occurrence.

Purpose and Focus

As Katz et al. (2009) stated, “Having a fundamental and clear organizational purpose is critical to the success of PLCs and NLCs” (p. 12). If it is a learning focus, it will have more of an impact. One comment from the survey said, “The goals of the NLC were positive . . . however . . . the goals lacked specific steps that were beneficial for every teacher.”

Many interviewees suggested a clearly defined purpose is important for the success of an NLC. Dennis commented on having big picture planning as well as a common vision. Mark agreed you need to have common goals. Steve added that the purpose needs to be effective and must be tied to student learning. He said “it shows improvements a lot more clearly when you have a very direct focus” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Ben felt a long-range plan was needed for the NLC to be successful. With a long-range plan, he felt the group could follow along more easily and

new members would know where you have been, where you are, and where you are going.

Kate, who was a teacher leader, explained that when the NLC started, the steering committee, which was the group of principals and teacher leaders, was shown an inverted pyramid. This pyramid was the foundation for the southeast sector’s NLC. Figure 4.1, shown below, is the inverted triangle to which Kate was referring.

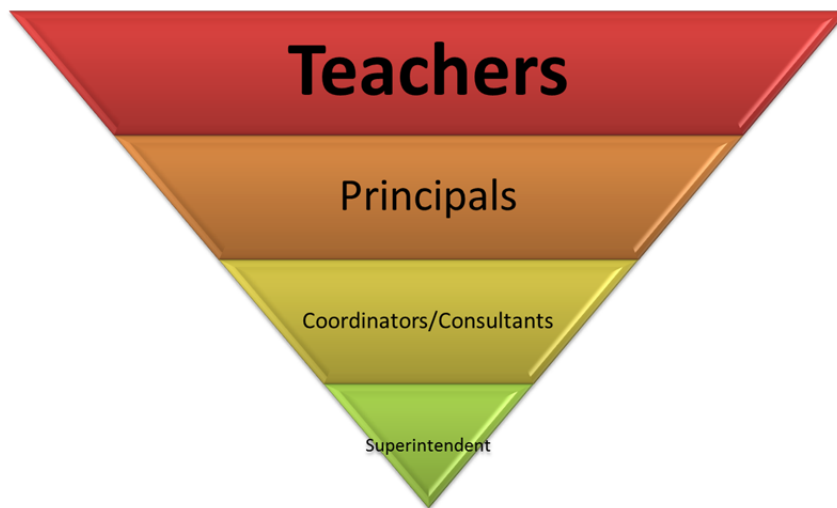


Figure 4.1. Flipping the traditional structure (2014) shows the inverted triangle approach that was taken during the Southeast Sector NLC. Permission granted from Darryl Bazylak.

She recalled when she was introduced to the concept of the NLC, it was with the understanding that NLCs need to be teacher-driven and not top-down change. When establishing a focus, this framework is a critical step. The focus needs to be something that teachers need to and want to work on in order to get them to buy in and be invested in the process. As Lana said, “For some people the focus may not have been an area they needed to work on because every teacher has their own strengths” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Lana went on to say, “something you really want to

improve on is going to take more than one school year” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Changing the focus within an NLC cannot happen too quickly. There needs to be time to develop, to learn, and to improve in the area before moving on to the next focus. Carmen explained how her group used the overarching purpose to get focused. “We were given an overall idea of what to work on and the Grade 2 group got very focused very quickly” (personal communication, May 26, 2016).

Mark felt that data should determine the goals:

There should be data given explaining why we are doing this. There needs to be proof given. Teachers don’t always know why we are doing what we are doing. Then they have a negative attitude so you are beat before they walk in the door. (personal communication, May 26, 2016)

Providing some data to help make sense of the focus is a necessity, he felt. Katz et al. (2009) suggested the learning focus must be applicable to all involved. It needs to be right for all schools, understood by all members, and shared among schools.

Lana felt it would be helpful to ask teachers where they felt a focus should be: “Let teachers choose the path instead of picking a focus. I would think there would be a lot of similarities if they asked teachers. It would be nice to have some choice and then you are more invested” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Mark also agreed that providing choice in this area would help, as he did not always feel the goals were clear. This concept of choice came up frequently when talking about the purpose and focus of an NLC and developed into an emerging subtheme. It will be discussed and explained in greater detail later on in the chapter.

Relationships

“Relationships are the ‘connective tissue’ of NLCs and provide the social capital that allows people to work together over time and exceed what any of them could accomplish alone” (Katz et al., 2009, p. 12). Having a trusting and supporting environment within the NLC is crucial to its success. However, developing that sense of trust takes time and can be a challenge for the teacher leaders. One comment from the survey said, “Teachers in my group were very unfriendly to those they didn’t know.” Building that sense of trust is critical to maintaining a cohesive group.

All of the interviewees felt trust and support were needed within an NLC. Carmen said, “Our teacher leaders got to know us really well. They didn’t act like they were above us” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). This approach helped to build trust within the group. Kate stated, “you gain the trust of a group if they know you have experienced what they have experienced” (personal communication, May 25, 2016). Dennis, a principal, commented similarly saying, “teacher leaders are in the trenches every day and so they knew what was important for teachers” (personal communication, May 25, 2016). He explained they worked to build a rapport with the teachers and while it was a big task to motivate teachers, they worked hard at it:

Every teacher leader is more than likely an amazing teacher. And when you are an amazing teacher, you put in a lot of time and effort. So when you are doing this, you are also putting in extra time and effort. (personal communication, May 25, 2016)

He concluded by saying the teacher leaders worked effortlessly to engage teachers and to create a comfortable, trusting environment. Janice felt a tremendous amount of support

and encouragement from her group. “Everyone was willing to share and they encouraged you to try things” (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

Steve, who was a teacher leader, also created that sense of trust in his group. He said, “If people aren’t comfortable, they aren’t going to participate. Trust and support were built into our climate” (personal communication, May 27, 2016). He felt it was important to create that climate and to maintain a positive vibe within the group. He went on to say, “if the NLC didn’t have a good chemistry, it was a complete and utter waste of time” (personal communication, May 27, 2016). Dennis also touched on this when he said, “You naturally develop friendships with other people, especially because it happened over several years” (personal communication, May 25, 2016). Ben commented on the social aspect. He enjoyed the informal collaboration and getting to know other teachers: “The social aspect is important” (personal communication, May 24, 2016). Barry felt that while informal time was not structured, it did happen and he said it was the best way to get to know other teachers. He remarked on how he witnessed two teachers meet through this process who were like-minded and ended up working together outside of the network on several projects. He felt the NLC really opens the door to many different possibilities. Barry also noted that while some teachers were hesitant, they still shared. They were not afraid to say if they had not tried something and he explained this admission shows there was trust within the group.

While Katz et al. (2009) proposed that conflict is both inevitable and valuable, there was not much conflict within the NLC. When asked about this, Steve said they used positive peer pressure. “If you have the climate where it’s not ok to be a jerk, then people won’t be jerks. The members self-policed” (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

Dennis explained it was the job of the principal to deal with any conflicts. They did not want to put that pressure on teacher leaders and felt it was their responsibility. The issue of attendance came up and principals took this on and dealt with it so the teacher leaders could focus on leading the sessions, rather than dealing with the issues.

Mark and Lana, both teachers in Humboldt, did not feel they made strong connections to their group. “I don’t know if we really built a relationship,” Lana said (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Mark agreed. He said, “100% of our staff is not touching base with those people from their groups anymore” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). He added there appeared to be some disconnect between Saskatoon and Humboldt, which resulted in less trust for those teachers. Traveling to Saskatoon for the meetings he felt was the reason for the relationships to not be as strong between Saskatoon and Humboldt teachers. While it would not work to build the relationships between the teachers, he wondered if using Skype to connect during the meetings would help, rather than have teachers drive in for the sessions.

There was a negative feeling as soon as we all got in our vehicles and left. They were not ready to learn and take advantage of the situation. When we met as a group of Humboldt teachers, the attitude was better but the collaboration was not as beneficial because we aren’t as diverse of a community. (personal communication, May 26, 2016)

Bridging the gap between Humboldt and Saskatoon would create connections and was felt to be important. However, attending each of the sessions, especially in the winter, was of concern to participants.

Collaboration

The sole purpose of NLCs is to encourage collaboration. This process enhances practice, spreads new knowledge, and addresses problems within teaching. One participant from the survey made the comment, “I think NLC meetings are beneficial when you come from a small school with no opportunity to meet with grade-alike teachers.” Another comment from the survey read, “I believe face-to-face time collaborating with grade-alike teachers is the best PD we can be involved in.”

All of the interviewees agreed the purpose of the NLC was to collaborate. Kate talked about how teachers work all day in a classroom by themselves and so they are never exposed to other teaching. She explained it as an island mentality: “We are all on our islands and no one knows what anyone else is teaching because we spend all day in our own classrooms by ourselves” (personal communication, May 25, 2016). She noted that once you are introduced to collaboration and you experience it on a regular basis, it drives you to try new things and makes a huge difference. You begin to have an open classroom. Steve made a similar comment. When asked how collaboration has influenced his teaching, he said:

Collaboration opened my door. Before I was comfortable with what I was doing, I kept my door closed. I was always a risk-taker in the classroom so I never really wanted other people to see me fail. With realizing that failing is just part of what we do, it didn’t really matter to me who was in, who saw a great lesson, or who saw a really crappy lesson. (personal communication, May 27, 2016)

He described how he enabled his group to be comfortable with collaboration at their very first meeting. He said he simply told them about an “epic fail.” After that, the atmosphere was open and authentic sharing occurred.

Carmen talked about how she was in a bilingual program prior to joining the NLC. She said she was used to creating all of her own materials and never had the opportunity to share with anyone because there were so few teachers in that program. Finding materials in another language was very rare and she spent countless hours creating everything herself. Being a part of the network was difficult for her at first because she was not used to the sharing that occurred. She added she has learned to be more willing to use other people’s work. “When we shared, it allowed me to see that there’s other stuff out there and I don’t have to think of it on my own” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Being in a small school now with no other teachers who teach the same grade as she does, Carmen finds the collaboration especially valuable. She explained how their school PLC team meets, but it is a total of 4 teachers spanning kindergarten to Grade 3/4. She feels it is difficult to collaborate with so many different grade levels. Barry made an interesting comment about what he noticed from the collaboration:

While I don’t have any evidence to say that it improved outcomes for students, I know teachers felt better about teaching because of the ideas they got from the groups and trying different things, while realizing there are many ways to achieve the results. (personal communication, May 26, 2016)

Mark’s comment was similar. “To be able to talk to other professionals is where I saw one of the biggest advantages—learning new strategies that other people have found

successful in their teaching” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Kate, Dennis, and Steve all used the word *authentic* when describing the collaboration that went on in their groups.

Dennis explained the simple act of sharing resources is quite powerful. “Giving teachers permission to share what’s working and letting them have the opportunity to talk with teachers to get their input. It’s so important to have a way for teachers to collaborate with each other outside of their own school” (personal communication, May 25, 2016).

Lana made similar comments, adding that getting ideas about how to help struggling students and how to accommodate different needs is what was beneficial for her. “We were given lots of time to talk and focus on those goals and we found that most of us had similar challenges no matter what school we were at or whether we doing a combined grade or not” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Janice also felt that hearing how teachers adjusted specific lessons to make accommodations for students helped her the most. Ben made the comment, “we all borrow and steal from one another so it’s nice to see what other people are doing” (personal communication, May 24, 2016). He agreed that getting support with challenges was helpful and collaborating with other teachers validates that you are heading in the right direction. The informal collaboration was also brought up as being a large influence on his teaching.

Inquiry

Changing ways of teaching is what inquiry is about. Teachers reflect upon their practice to see where they are and where they want to go, and then make adjustments accordingly. Katz et al. (2009) explained that while explicit knowledge can be easily shared, tacit knowledge cannot be verbalized. Inquiry involves sharing your explicit

knowledge while using your tacit knowledge to change and to make it work for you. You question, you reflect, and you look for alternatives.

Carmen felt passionate about developing an inquiry habit of mind through this process, “It stretched you either way, depending on what your experience was . . . what if those things [technology] aren’t available or working?” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). She continued to explain how the plan you are creating needs different methods in it. Carmen elaborated:

That exposure automatically helps you to grow and change. Because of these groups, people were more willing to listen to that and try things. Some of the suggestions made teaching easier. One woman in our group who had been teaching for 28 years didn’t want to be in our group and wasn’t excited to do things differently. But when she tried and it made it easier for her, she told us that it’s not so bad trying new thing after 28 years of teaching. And that really opened our eyes. If we aren’t exposed to that, then you are constantly doing it on your own. I think all of us changed. I’d be shocked if someone went through all of this and didn’t change. (personal communication, May 26, 2016)

Janice, who has been teaching for 30 years, made a similar comment: “I’ve been teaching a long time, but you can always learn new things. The teacher leaders were excited about it so it gets you excited too” (personal communication, May 27, 2016). Seeing teachers with such experience draw from this is important to note. She understood the significance of learning new strategies and always working to improve her teaching.

Kate learned she could take two different ways of teaching and develop them into a third way of teaching that they could try and discuss. She felt this process really drove

her to reflect and to try new things. “There is always a natural reflection that happens through discussion. You are always thinking about how you can improve your teaching, how you can improve student learning in your class” (personal communication, May 25, 2016). She felt when you can share these examples, then you are going to have that natural reflection. She explained how you also get feedback from your colleagues which enables you to reflect more deeply.

Lana felt there was much time to reflect upon teaching and to see what was working. “They often asked us how we would change things that weren’t working. They encouraged us to reflect a lot” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Personal reflection sheets were mentioned many times by the interviewees. They explained how at the end of each session, they were given time to reflect upon their teaching and their sessions. “It gave us more opportunity to reflect about where we wanted to go,” Lana explained (personal communication, May 26, 2016).

As teacher leaders, both Steve and Kate commented on exposing teachers to as many new things as possible. This experience allowed them to choose which direction would work for them. Steve said, “We showed them that there’s always something we can improve on” (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

Carmen felt that while the process made her question a few things within her own teaching, it also opened her eyes to how much is out there and how differently she could do things. As a group, they questioned, “Do we all teach it the same way? Do we need to teach it the same way? Are we supposed to teach it the same way?” This questioning is exactly what having an inquiry habit of mind is all about. When you delve into deep

collaboration, the result is an examination of different ways of teaching to get a better understanding, and then making it work for you.

Leadership

Both formal and informal leaders are needed for the success of an NLC. Formal leaders have the purpose of establishing, encouraging, and motivating the group. They create the conditions to empower teachers while relying upon others to share expertise. The informal leaders share their expertise, lead the sessions, and share new knowledge.

Two of the survey participants made comments about the leadership in their grade-alike groups. While the intention is to have a distributed leadership structure, the two comments don't reflect that their group was set up that way. "Our learning committee was very directed by our principal so I did not feel I had any say in what we were exploring." Another comment read, "When I tried to lead by making a decision with the other leader in our school, we were informed that it needed to be cleared by our principal first."

Both of the principals who were interviewed felt that while both levels of leadership are necessary, it was a big task to be a teacher leader within the NLC. Barry explained, "The structure we have of the shared leadership is really good and works well. It's amazing how people step up without any remuneration of any kind, not expecting anything in return" (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Dennis had similar comments:

When you see the amount of work and enthusiasm and effort that teacher leaders put in . . . it's extra work and extra pressure for the teacher leaders. Every teacher leader is more than likely an amazing teacher. And when you are an amazing

teacher, you put in a lot of time and effort. So when you are doing that, you are also putting in that extra time and effort to be a teacher leader. It was a big task to be able to motivate other teachers. (personal communication, May 25, 2016).

He went on to explain the teacher leaders ran with everything and created that sense of authentic collaboration within that group. As principals, he felt they would always go back to the teacher leaders to find out what was needed and what was important to the group. Because teacher leaders were equals within the group, he felt there was more buy-in and they knew what the teachers wanted.

The value that the teacher leaders had really took over and it ran itself. Principals could take a step back and help out with the managerial things while the actual professional development and the leadership came from the teacher leaders. It grew into having our teacher leaders be the key to the success of it. Sometimes we, as administrators, think we know what is the best thing to do. But until you have that opportunity to talk with teachers and get their input, that's the value that the teacher leaders brought. (personal communication, May 25, 2016)

As a teacher leader, Kate felt the inverted triangle (see Figure 4.1) explained it all—how it needs to be teacher-led and teacher-driven to succeed. She felt it was her job to get the ball rolling. She said the steering committee meetings were essential, “Our steering committee meetings were my most valuable professional development throughout that process. They provided me with an opportunity to know what my leadership style was and to learn other people's leadership styles” (personal communication, May 25, 2016).

Steve agreed that as a teacher leader, you need to provide energy and you have to buy into the process. He felt a shared leadership focus that was structured, but casual, led to the success of their NLC. Being a teacher leader also brought out leadership qualities for him. “It brought out qualities that I had when I was in high school—leadership qualities that were dormant. It definitely lit a fire” (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

Carmen appreciated the teacher leaders really got to know them and always asked us what they wanted and needed. “Our teacher leaders asked our opinions and talked to us. They got to know us really well. They didn’t act like they were above us. They didn’t have that leader persona” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). Mark felt empowering the teachers to choose created more buy-in. “If you don’t allow choice, then there is some push back” (personal communication, May 26, 2016).

Ben felt the teacher leaders had a huge job planning and running the sessions, gathering feedback, and encouraging the group to run smoothly. Lana said her leaders encouraged discussion and questioning. Carmen explained how in their group, they farmed out smaller jobs to the teachers so there wasn’t so much pressure on the main people. Simple things like bringing snacks or doing prayer were divvied up so that the teacher leaders had a few less things to worry about. Carmen also appreciated the communication from her teacher leaders between meetings. “Our leaders would email us and remind us ahead of time what we would be doing at the meeting and what we should bring. There was always that communication” (personal communication, May 26, 2016).

Barry concluded by saying the leader at the top (or bottom of the inverted triangle) needs to be a strong and flexible leader. Because we had this, all of the leaders,

formal and informal, were able to move and to change as needed or as requested by the teacher leaders and teachers within the group.

Accountability

The accountability factor in networks came up less frequently than the other key factors did. External accountability, which is being open and transparent to the public, was not mentioned. Internal accountability allows for using evidence to identify priorities for change and to establish improvement plans (Katz et al., 2009).

Ben felt strongly there must be a connection to the school's professional learning community (PLC) and to the learning improvement plan (LIP) within each school. This helps to maintain the focus of the NLC and to keep it a high priority. Some interviewees said they ensured the connection was there between the NLC and the PLC, while others said it was difficult to maintain that connection the entire time when there are so many other priorities at the school level. Dennis said his school always had a direct correlation between their NLC and their PLC because "if you put too much on the plate, you don't do anything well. We have it built in within what we are doing at the school level so that we can ensure that continuity happens from A to B" (personal communication, May 25, 2016). He went on to say that it just makes sense to have the NLC linked to the PLC. This provides a clearer sense of direction for each of the schools so when they come to the NLC meetings, they know the priorities at their own schools.

Teacher leaders worked to create this accountability by asking the teachers of their groups for feedback to make sure they were always headed in the right direction. Steve explained, "After every session we talked about what went well, what didn't, and

what was needed for our next session. We looked at the feedback as reflecting on the NLC and improving the NLC” (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

Lana and Kate both felt there needed to be more teacher accountability. Lana made the comment, “A lot of it is what the teachers put into it. Some will be given the resources and put them in a cupboard and never look at them. Others who want to improve in an area are going to continue that research on their own” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). She felt that while new ideas were presented, there was not accountability—anything saying that they had to do this.

Kate made a similar comment:

Some teachers would go to meetings and nod at everything and “yes, I’m doing that. Of course I’m doing that.” But you don’t really know if they are. If you added on more teacher accountability, they would take things more seriously because it’s sacred time to have that NLC and sometimes it’s taken for granted. And it’s taken for granted because the importance of it isn’t discussed anywhere. (personal communication, May 25, 2016)

She suggested having some type of online discussion in between meetings so teachers could not only stay connected, but have some accountability for seeing where their priorities were and in what direction the group wanted to go. Discussion at the end of each session for 15 minutes was not enough. Barry felt there needed to be more structure and more expectation in this area. Mark felt if there were more data involved to help make the decisions about the main focus, teachers would feel more accountable and understand how the future goals were being established.

Building Capacity and Support

This key factor involves creating the conditions necessary so everyone can collaborate and can learn together. When groups are building capacity, they are fostering the opportunity for change and pushing themselves to change. “When networks are focused on learning, they intentionally seek out and/or create activities, people, and opportunities to push themselves beyond the status quo” (Katz et al., 2009, p. 15).

Kate felt that as a teacher leader she was able to open the door to new ideas for her group. “When you are a network learning community, you are opened up to a variety of different ways of teaching the concepts that you teach every day because you don’t see anyone else teach” (personal communication, May 25, 2016). She explained she would share a variety of new things with her group and expose them to as many things as possible; then it was really them choosing where to go from there. Steve’s comment was similar. “We showed them new methods or new technologies and made it a more comfortable thing to do. It was very informal and laid back. If people are not comfortable, they aren’t going to participate” (personal communication, May 27, 2016). He went on to say “People can smell hypocrisy pretty quickly. I pushed myself. We role modeled collaboration and a positive attitude, and showed them there is always something that we can improve upon. Life-long learning was the overarching umbrella for us” (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

As a principal, Barry stated what creates an atmosphere for learning is teacher leaders who are professional, who believe in collaboration, and who are open to sharing and leading others. “You want to create that culture of continuous learning” (personal communication, May 26, 2016).

Dennis explained how you always need to provide that opportunity for new learning to teachers:

The train is moving. If we wait for everybody to get on the train, they're never going to. You either have to get on the train, the train can leave you, or you can stand on the tracks and get run over. But we are going with the train. Once you get moving with it, people might not always be there where you want them to be, but at least you have everybody moving in the same direction. (personal communication, May 25, 2016)

Dennis went on to say that you still have to respect teacher time through this process. If you have grade-alike meetings when things are busy, teachers won't be as invested. It doesn't matter how much you try to motivate them. Carmen and Janice had similar comments. When progress reports and testing are coming up, teachers are not as invested so the timing of the meetings is important to consider. When talking about the timing of some meetings, Carmen said, "It was almost impossible to keep focused on what we were doing for the meeting and getting our everyday lives in order and keeping up with everything. There were a couple times where it just felt like, why now?" (personal communication, May 26, 2016).

As well, several interviewees mentioned NLCs should not be a make-work project or an add-on for the teachers of the group. Teachers have so much on their plates that if they have to create something new while thinking about testing and report cards, they will not be as willing or as accepting.

As a teacher, Carmen enjoyed that sense of validation, knowing she was doing it right. "It's a big thing for us because we are in our rooms and we don't see what anyone

else is doing” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). That exposure to new ideas and suggestions was invaluable. She remarked upon how she never would have thought of some of the ideas she heard. It helped her to grow and to change.

Mark and Ben added that when you create time for informal conversations, you get people talking about what interests them. That sharing creates a sense of trust in the group and then you feel the support from the group. Janice agreed it motivated her to try new things when she was presented with new ideas. She felt it was encouraging to have that push to try new things. Steve agreed by saying, “If people see the good things you are doing and how you are doing it, they are going to want to emulate that” (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

As Kate summarized,

At the end of the day, every teacher wants their classroom to be a classroom where students are learning and students feel cared for and if you create that atmosphere, and increase collaboration amongst teachers, that will be a result.

Always. (personal communication, May 25, 2016)

Emerging Subthemes

There were two subthemes that emerged in the survey comments as well as in the interviews. Many commented about how important it was for teachers to have a choice in several different aspects of the NLC, but primarily in its purpose or focus. The other subtheme that emerged was maintaining a sense of connectedness to the group in between the meetings. While these two subthemes were highlighted numerous times, they each fit into one of the seven previous themes mentioned and will be discussed in that manner.

Choice

As mentioned earlier in the Purpose and Focus section of this chapter, choice was a theme that came up repeatedly, both throughout the survey comments and in many interviews. While some interviewees felt the main focus needs to be clearly defined, they also felt there should be some choice in what that focus is. Survey participants made the following comments: “I feel we did not have any say in what we were exploring.” “I think we should have been given more opportunity to have input into the topics of discussion; not be told what we would be collaborating about.” “It would have been better if we were able to pick what WE wanted to discuss for each meeting.”

Throughout the interviews, the topic of choice came up numerous times. Lana felt it would be beneficial to survey teachers prior to starting the NLC.

It would be beneficial prior to starting the NLC to ask the teachers what areas they need to work on and what would be the best support for them. I think there would be lots of similarities. It would be nice to have some choice and then you are more invested. (personal communication, May 26, 2016)

She continued to say that if it was more geared to what teachers personally need, then it would be more effective:

I often say it would be nice to have maybe three options and choose which area you need to work on and join that group because when we did it, some of the things they went through, I felt I was already doing and I didn't really need help but I needed help and resources in other areas. (personal communication, May 26, 2016)

Mark agreed and thought if you don't allow some choice, then there will be push back. "Choice is 100% the more important factor. The people of the group need to decide the goals, what the needs are, and where they want to improve" (personal communication, May 26, 2016). He felt people know where their weaknesses are and it would be helpful to allow them to focus on an area where they feel they need to improve.

Steve felt NLCs should be focused on what is of passionate interest to teachers. He agreed the focus needs to come from the members.

There was not a lot of choice of movement. There wasn't a lot of choice in topic. It was "this is what we are doing." Now how can we customize that to fit the needs of our teachers? If you had different topics, and teachers could use data to analyze what they needed to work on in relation to school learning improvement plans—classroom reading levels, math scores, and teacher interest—if teachers were given the option to join different groups or even become a part of multiple groups, with a guideline that they must be active in at least one NLC group.

(personal communication, May 27, 2016)

Steve then explained how virtual learning networks work. "Virtual learning networks have core people, peripheral people, and outside people. What brings people in from the peripheral to the core is passionate interest" (personal communication, May 27, 2016). He felt if NLCs were structured in a similar way, you would get more peripheral and outside people involved in the core. He concluded by saying that it needed to be looser and would be more effective if choice was allowed.

Carmen felt she had some choice within her group. "When we were told what the guideline was and allowed to choose, it was much better than when we were told what we

were going to do. Letting us decide our way made a huge difference” (personal communication, May 26, 2016).

Connectedness to the Group

The other emergent subtheme was maintaining a connectedness to the group in between meetings. In the survey comments, one person said, “I did not feel any connection to the people I saw so occasionally in the NLC.” Lana made a similar comment. “I don’t think we saw each other enough to build a personal relationship with each other. I don’t know if we really built a relationship” (personal communication, May 26, 2016).

Steve found his group stayed connected in between the meetings and he credits that to what enabled the group to buy-in and work so well together.

We just started off with some Pinterest groups, a Facebook group, and we used Twitter. It was basically me trying to incorporate the groups’ strengths and what they were used to, and it was just a mish-mash of everything and some people were honestly just comfortable with email. So anything we put on there we tried to include them that way. (personal communication, May 27, 2016)

Because there was so much distance between some of the schools in his group, technology was the logical answer. “However, there’s no perfect platform or one size fits all. It’s finding something that works for the group and that people are comfortable with” (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

Mark and Ben also commented on using technology to stay in contact with the group in between meetings. Mark felt there must be some way to attend meetings without having to drive an hour to attend them. Ben’s perception was there was so much pressure

to have something created for each meeting. He suggested if there was an online forum where he could upload a project when he had one, it would alleviate some stress.

Although Kate's group did have some connectedness between meetings through group emails, she felt there needed to be more fluidity. She had buy-in from her group and had people suggesting to meet to continue discussions on a Saturday. "When they want to commit to giving up their free time, it's because they know the value of it and they have seen the positive effects of it in their classroom" (personal communication, May 25, 2016). She went on to say this would increase connectedness. While there were emails back and forth, she felt it was mostly the same few people.

Even if there was a forum where we could have those discussions online, that would be ideal because there are always things that come up and maybe some people are too introverted or too embarrassed to ask, or whatever, but if you have a board where you could post that, it would be really beneficial. (personal communication, May 25, 2016)

Carmen said her group used the SharePoint site OneStop to post lessons and units. This helped to keep her group connected. Because not all were comfortable with using OneStop, they kept an email list to communicate back and forth. As well, the leaders would email reminders to the group. This communication helped especially when teachers from Humboldt could not attend. "We made sure to email them everything. They didn't miss anything other than our discussions that way. Next time they did come, they at least knew what we talked about. So that made a difference for them" (personal communication, May 26, 2016).

Janice commented her group emailed each other in between meetings to get copies of units people wanted to share with each other. She also said her leaders encouraged the group to email them if they wanted more information about the topics they were discussing.

Steve felt if you had a digital connection, you could meet as infrequently as twice a year. However, without that, you would need to meet more often to keep a strong connection within your group. The topic of frequency of meetings was brought up in all of the interviews to see whether or not participants felt the meetings were scheduled too often, not often enough, or just right. There were a variety of answers. As Steve said, above, you have to be able to connect with your group throughout the year to build a relationship. He suggested meeting five times per year to keep the fluidity of the group going.

Lana felt the same way. “You can keep on top of things and keep it fresh in your mind and keep focused on it when you are reminded of it more” (personal communication, May 26, 2016). She said it would be ideal to be able to meet once a month.

Mark and Ben both felt four times a year would be ideal to meet while Carmen thought three times a year would suffice. Kate suggested meeting six times a year—at the beginning and ending of each school term.

Dennis suggested that while it is important to meet regularly as an NLC, you also need to protect the time in the school for PLCs, teacher planning, and completing progress reports. When you take that in-school time away from teachers, they are not as invested because they have so many other commitments. However, you need to ensure

the ball keeps bouncing all year. “By not having regular meetings, or not following along, we end up scrambling and it’s not authentic. It is a make-work project. It has to be valuable” (personal communication, May 25, 2016). Barry thought the meetings needed to be much more frequent. There are different ways of setting that up—whether they do peer observations, pair up with a couple of teachers outside of the school, or have something embedded during the workday.

Summary

Analysis of the survey results combined with the interviews showed the importance of each of the seven themes that are the basis for a successful network learning community, according to Katz et al. (2009). While more emphasis was placed on purpose and focus, leadership, collaboration, and relationships throughout the interviews, all themes deemed necessary for an NLC’s success were mentioned. Choice and connectedness, the two emerging subthemes, were seen as very important to the interviewees. Choice became an important part of the purpose and focus theme while maintaining connectedness became a part of the relationship theme. These subthemes would add to the success of an NLC.

Chapter Five will explore these two emerging subthemes while considering the seven initial themes and the current literature on network learning communities to identify how to create a successful network learning community.

CHAPTER FIVE

Introduction

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine the ways in which network learning communities influence teacher collaboration. As explained in Chapter One, network learning communities are created with the intention of having teachers collaborate. These communities give teachers the opportunity to learn from each other, to get support, and to share new knowledge (Katz et al., 2009). When groups of teachers gather together and have a common grade or subject area, they are then able to share valuable information that is applicable to their everyday teaching. The process of collaboration is not only becoming common practice in schools, but in many organizations today (Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Past teaching practice had teachers working in isolation in their classrooms. Today, many teachers still mostly work in isolation. They do not often have the opportunity to observe others teach as they are consumed with their own teaching in their own classrooms. This research showed meaningful collaboration does not just happen by putting a group of people into a room. Purposeful planning goes into creating the conditions necessary for authentic collaboration. As Gideon (2002) stated, “It must be purposeful, planned, and structured” (p. 30).

The concept of NLCs is a new one that has grown over the past few years. Simon Breakspear recently called NLCs “the new reform” (personal communication, April 25, 2016). Carol Campbell similarly explained teachers need to share their knowledge through networks (personal communication, April 26, 2016). Chapter Two described several different types of NLCs that occur all over the world. While they are not all set up

the same way, they all involve teachers in schools working together to collaborate (Sammons et al., 2007). Because NLCs are a newer concept, there is not yet any research that was uncovered showing how NLCs influence teacher collaboration. This research will address the gap in the current literature relating to how NLCs influence teacher collaboration.

Method of Research

As Chapman and Fullan (2007) stated, “[I]f we are to continue to move towards a networked learning system further research in this area remains a necessity rather than a luxury” (p. 211). This study was conducted using a pragmatic, mixed methods approach. By not choosing one theoretical approach, I was able to decide what methods and techniques worked for me and for the study (Creswell, 2003).

A sequential explanatory design was used. Initially, an anonymous online survey was distributed to classroom and release teachers, as well as principals in the southeast sector. Following that, nine semistructured interviews were conducted to obtain more in-depth results. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, I was able to incorporate both methods into my study. The emphasis was placed on the qualitative data.

Once the survey was closed and the interviews were completed, I transcribed the interviews and began analysis using the seven key features of a network. Saldana (2009) explained the process of coding “enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or ‘families’ because they share some characteristic—the beginning of a pattern” (p. 8). Interviews were read through seven times initially, each time using a different code for analysis. This process also allowed the researcher to find emerging themes and record counts for significance.

After conducting this research, I have learned there was much to be gained in this study through semistructured interviews. The interviews allowed me, as a researcher, to delve in a new direction based on answers being given. If I were to redo this study, I would likely have chosen to do strictly qualitative research as the survey did not provide as much information as I had anticipated. I began this research making the assumption that all involved in the NLC would participate in the survey. I realized as a researcher that it is quite common to get a small percentage of participants to engage in surveys. Through the process of interviewing, a researcher is able to gain more insight. I became comfortable adjusting questions based on the interviewee and what they wanted to discuss.

Discussion

This section will focus on answering the research question: “In what ways do network learning communities influence teacher collaboration?” Three of the key themes that were recognized in Chapter Four will be discussed to show how they relate to the theme of collaboration. This discussion will show how the themes of purpose and focus, leadership, and relationships work to influence collaboration among teachers. The two subthemes that emerged—choice and maintaining connectedness—will be explained within the context of these elements to show their significance. While the four elements are all necessary for an effective NLC, it is the three themes that work to create the fourth theme of collaboration.

Little’s (1990) taxonomy, which was described in Chapter Two, is revisited to show the different levels of collaboration in the hopes of understanding authentic collaboration.

1. Storytelling and scanning for ideas—is based on story sharing and personal experience. It is casual and individualistic.
2. Aid and assistance—is when colleagues help each other or offer advice. Requests are made and help is provided based on the request.
3. Sharing—is an open exchange between teachers. Ideas are shared but this does not extend to discussion around curriculum, learning, or instruction.
4. Joint work—has a motivation amongst teachers to participate based on the need for others' contributions. There is relational trust and risk taking.

(as cited in Katz & Earl, 2010, p. 36)

The different levels of collaboration that exist show that authentic collaboration is the deepest level of collaborating. For the purpose of this study, authentic collaboration is defined as people coming together from different schools for a specific purpose. They work together to achieve common goals in a trusting and supportive environment. They are motivated to create and to share knowledge in the hopes of learning from each other. They are willing to take risks.

Purpose and Focus

All participants suggested that having a clear purpose and focus are critical for successful collaboration. Without a clear purpose, members felt the NLC does not have a strong direction. Some participants mentioned that if there was not a clear purpose, the sessions could end up being scrambled, turn into venting sessions, or simply be idle chitchat. While they felt the purpose needs to be clearly defined, it also needs to be applicable to all involved. Kate commented that the focus needs to be something that teachers need to and want to work on in order to get them to buy in and be invested in the

process. Many suggested it creates a sense of purpose within individuals when they feel they are asked about what is important to them. The data suggest the sense of choice is critical when establishing a purpose. While the literature stated you need a clearly defined purpose, there was no mention of allowing teachers a choice for what they feel is an area of importance for them.

Why does there need to be a clear, compelling purpose? Teachers want to collaborate about what is relevant to them. They want their voices heard and are then more committed to the act of collaborating. When the focus is applicable to their teaching, they are more invested and the level of collaboration increases, eventually to the highest level in Little's (1990) taxonomy. This is why choice becomes a critical component of successful NLCs.

Teachers felt when they were given a choice, their level of collaboration became deeper. So how much choice should be given? Should teachers be given the option of opting in or out of the NLC? If they are told to participate, then some may have the perception they are not given choice from the start. If they are told to participate, then there should be some space for discretion and some space available for choice. Perhaps they are able to choose which NLC they will join; maybe they are given the option regarding what topics on which they want to collaborate. As Steve said,

If you had different topics, and teachers could use data to analyze what they needed to work on in relation to school learning improvement plans—classroom reading levels, math scores, and teacher interest—if teachers were given the option to join different groups or even become a part of multiple groups, with a

guideline that they must be active in at least one NLC group. (personal communication, May 27, 2016)

Giving teachers a choice of topic allows for some freedom and flexibility, and lets them take the path on which they would like to go. If an unclear path to achieve a particular goal is allowed, then they would potentially feel more empowered in setting the direction for the group. The collaboration, then, is not forced. Giving choice is what drives the collaboration. They collaborate on what matters to them and what is meaningful to them.

Within the groups, should there be choice given to allow for different groups? Allowing this flexibility would enable smaller, more focused groups in a grade-alike grouping. For example, if there is a literacy focus, there could be smaller groups within that theme for teachers who want to pinpoint specific needs for students —perhaps accuracy or comprehension groups meet to discuss strategies for improvement. Likewise, if the overarching focus is inquiry-based learning, perhaps minigroups within the grade-alike group focus on creating and sharing knowledge around different subject areas. This choice is what drives the collaboration and allows for deeper levels of collaboration.

Relationships

Relationships are another critical component of NLCs. How do relationships lead to authentic collaboration? Without a trusting and supportive environment, there will not be authentic collaboration. When leaders create that supportive culture in their group, it allows for deeper levels of collaboration. As Little's (1990) taxonomy indicated, when you are comfortable enough to ask for help, you are developing deeper levels of collaboration. The leaders help to influence the collaboration by creating a supportive

environment. This facilitated environment is more likely to happen when the leaders are equal colleagues who are not in a position of authority. When a leader is someone who is in a supervisory role, collaboration does not necessarily happen authentically. It is through leadership that the relationships within the group are developed. Additionally, those relationships facilitate deeper levels of collaboration, eventually to the deepest level of joint work. Strong relationships allow people to trust each other and to take risks. This risk taking is the highest level of collaboration according to Little (1990). Group members will not take risks in an environment where they are not comfortable.

Thomas (2011) explained collaboration needs to lack structure and is most valuable when sharing ideas is voluntary. When leaders create a trusting atmosphere, members want to share. Without this, he says, “collaboration is like the behaviour we observe in toddlers in a sandbox: they play in parallel but they don’t often play together” (para. 10). Good relationships within the group create the conditions for deep collaboration. Participants in this study felt that when there was good chemistry within the group, people were more likely to join in. Steve explained that his group was successful because trust and support were built into the group. This allowed people to feel more comfortable, which resulted in deeper collaboration.

Ensuring there is some connection between meetings also works to improve the level of collaboration. If you can stay connected with a group that you only see a few times a year, you are more willing to open up when you do see them. Maintaining contact between sessions was considered to be an important factor in increasing the level of collaboration that occurred in the meetings. It increases communication and allows for those who may not be comfortable talking much in group settings to send an email or ask

a question that they might not feel comfortable asking in front of the large group. As Kate described,

Even if there was a forum where we could have those discussions online, that would be ideal because there are always things that come up and maybe some people are too introverted or too embarrassed to ask, or whatever, but if you have a board where you could post that, it would be really beneficial. (personal communication, May 25, 2016)

Having a connection in between meetings works to increase the collaboration. This emergent subtheme became an important contributor to the theme of relationships. Steve commented that connecting with the group between meetings helps to strengthen the relationship of the group. This, in turn, increases collaboration. Dennis explained how ensuring there are regular meetings works to create authentic collaboration. “By not having regular meetings, or not following along, we end up scrambling and it’s not authentic. It is a make-work project. It has to be valuable” (personal communication, May 25, 2016).

Leadership

A distributed leadership approach is an important feature of NLCs. It is necessary to have formal leaders involved at the start. Katz et al. (2009) explained effective, formal leaders enable others to then become informal leaders. Teachers usually fill the role of the informal leader within NLCs. This informal leadership, supported by formal leadership, ensures there is more connectedness as a group, which then works to deepen the level of collaboration that occurs. While it is important to have informal leaders take charge, many involved in this study felt the formal leader (principal) was still the one in

charge of their group. Once an NLC has been established, it is important for the formal leader to step back and let the teacher leader (informal leader) take over. The informal leader is seen as an equal amongst the group members. Most participants felt the purpose of an NLC is to get the group to open up and to talk, to learn, and to share. As one interviewee pointed out, the key to the success of the NLC could be attributed to the teacher leaders taking over the facilitation and leadership of the groups. They were able to build a different type of relationship with their colleagues that formal leaders may not always be able to create in this type of setting. It is important to give the informal leaders that permission to run with the relationship, to develop it, and to see where they can take it. As the participants mentioned, when you have a colleague at an equal professional level leading, you have more buy-in and are more willing to share openly and honestly. It then enables the group to feel more comfortable, to open up, and to take risks.

According to the data, one problem that occurred was that informal leaders felt it was a massive undertaking to lead a group in this manner. Because of this, some stepped down and new leaders took over. Some participants mentioned this leadership change affected the dynamics of the group and, at times, created inconsistencies. These inconsistencies reduced the level of collaboration. When there were informal leaders involved, there needed to be some type of accountability to ensure there was consistency. Another point that emerged in the data was there should be some benefit to being a teacher leader. It was mentioned numerous times that it was a lot of work and there was no real benefit to being a teacher leader, other than developing leadership skills. That workload could have been the reason for participants choosing not to maintain their roles as leaders. Creating some type of leadership continuity for the informal leaders was

deemed important by the participants. They suggested this continuity would then allow the group to get to know each other better, there would be deeper relationships, and, as a result, more authentic collaboration would occur.

It was appreciated by the participants that the teacher leaders were equals in the group. There were comments regarding the leadership approach of the teacher leaders who did not act from a position of authority and who really got to know their group. As Harris (2008) explained, “[t]he most effective schools and school systems invest in *developing* leaders” (p. 4). One interviewee stated this experience helped him to develop as a leader. Until this time, he had qualities within himself that were dormant and he appreciated the opportunity to grow as a leader through this experience.

Purpose and focus, relationships, and leadership all lead to increased collaboration within an NLC. Ensuring there is choice in the topic drives the group to discuss what is relevant to them. Having the leaders be equals in the group and maintaining connections in between meetings work to develop stronger relationships within the group. These relationships then allow the group to feel trusted and supported, which then allows them to open up and to take risks. This joint work is the highest level of collaboration.

Figure 5.1 demonstrates how purpose and focus, leadership, and relationships all contribute to authentic collaboration. While all four elements are essential to an effective NLC, it is the elements of purpose and focus, leadership, and relationships that work to create the authentic collaboration that occurs in the group.

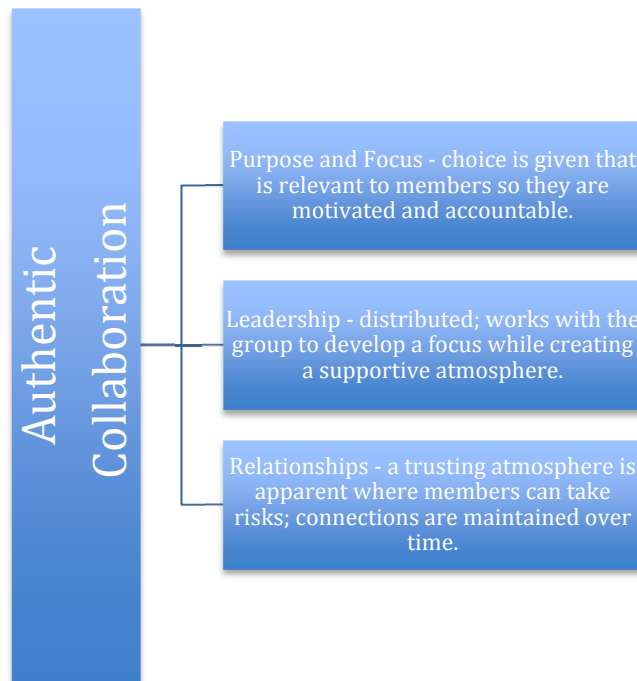


Figure 5.1 Authentic collaboration. The NLC has four main elements. Three key elements of an NLC work together to create authentic collaboration. Copyright 2016 by Christy Blazieko.

Collaboration

According to the literature reviewed, collaboration is a necessity in many organizations today (Vangrieken et al., 2015). Teaching has been a solitary act in the past and was described as an island mentality in this study. Chong and Kong (2012) explained training programs need to be intensive, ongoing, connected to practice, focused on applicable content, and foster strong working relationships. This study seems to support Chong and Kong’s statement. Many of the interviewees felt the focus needed to be applicable to their daily teaching. If the focus or purpose was not a relevant topic, there would not be buy-in and teachers would not be as interested in participating. The connection to practice falls into the same category. Comments were made that the NLC must be tied to what is being taught in the classroom.

Many felt that in order to have success in the NLC, there needed to be a strong sense of trust and good chemistry within the group. This sense of effective group dynamics is what Chong and Kong (2012) described as a “strong working relationship” (p. 263). In order to develop that type of relationship, the participants mentioned the NLC needs to develop over time and have consistency. There needs to be an open environment where people feel supported. Creating an environment like that is not easy. As some commented in the study, not all had that type of relationship in their group. Unfortunately, when there is not a strong working relationship, authentic collaboration does not always take place.

Chong and Kong (2012) also used the word *ongoing* when describing the effectiveness of collaboration (p. 263). That exact point was brought up many times throughout the interviews that were conducted. Most participants acknowledged there was not a connection to the group in between meetings and seeing the group so infrequently did not help to develop a strong relationship with the members. The fluidity of the group and the connectedness in between meetings are what helped to create stronger relationships, according to participants who had a meaningful connection in between meetings. They felt this connectedness helped to push the level of collaboration deeper. While it takes time to develop these relationships, participants strongly emphasized they are a critical ingredient to the success of an NLC.

Walker (2016) explained authentic collaboration is impossible when teachers are overworked or overwhelmed. Today, many teachers feel the extra pressures that are placed upon them. Several of the interviewees commented on the timing of the NLC meetings. They commented when the grade-alike meetings happened during busy times

like reporting periods, they were not as invested because they had other things on their minds. Other comments that were made suggested the NLCs should not be an add-on or a make-work project. If more is added to the plates of teachers, they will not buy in.

The level of collaboration was one area on which many teachers commented. Little's (1990) taxonomy looked at the different levels of collaboration (as cited in Katz & Earl, 2010). The first level involves simple storytelling where people talk and share stories. According to the participants, this interaction was the initial level of collaborating that existed in most groups when the NLC began. As time went on and relationships developed, most participants stated they experienced the second and third levels of collaborating. This type of interaction included making requests, offering advice, and exchanging ideas. Many commented throughout this study on the importance of the informal collaboration that occurred during the breaks. Some found this to be the most valuable experience they had throughout this process.

The final level, joint work, is the deepest level of collaboration. It is based on trust and risk taking and it occurs when teachers are motivated to participate. When joint work occurs, participants "suspend judgement, challenge their assumptions and intentionally seek out new information" (Earl et al., 2006, p. 11). According to the participants, not all groups reached this deep level. While it takes time to develop, they felt leadership within the NLC is important in helping the group achieve this level of collaboration. The participants suggested leaders are needed to help create the conditions necessary to allow the teachers the opportunity to share, to question, and to fail. When the leadership within the NLC is changing, the group does not maintain that same sense of trust. Participants

emphasized that consistent leadership is necessary to create this level of authentic collaboration.

Benefits of Collaboration

Vangrieken et al. (2015) stated many benefits of collaboration in their study on teacher collaboration. The first one is motivation. I would argue that not all teachers in this study felt this sense of motivation. Many did, but others felt that while there was the potential for motivation, it was dependent upon the timing of the meetings. All participants agreed teachers were not motivated to attend when they have other things on their minds. Timing of the meetings is a critical factor when working to create that motivation. A few participants suggested teachers sometimes need that time in their schools and in their classrooms. When the timing of a meeting is not ideal, participants mentioned teachers will not be as motivated to participate.

Decreased workload was another benefit mentioned. Interviewees felt collaborating with a group of teachers who teach the same grade as they did reduced their workload. This reduction of workload occurred through the sharing of resources, sharing expertise, and offering suggestions on what worked for them. Some made comments that they were required to have big projects to share during the collaboration. They felt this request increased their workload rather than decreasing it. Having rich collaboration sessions should not require teachers to spend numerous hours creating something to share. This expectation ends up creating the reverse effect and increasing their workload.

Vangrieken et al. (2015) stated a positive impact on teacher morale is another benefit. This impact, again, was dependent upon the teachers and on the groups of which they were a part. Not all teachers would agree that everyone involved had increased

morale because of the NLCs. This boost to morale depended upon the group, the chemistry within the group, and the leadership of the group. Those who were completely invested in this process and who had a positive experience with deep, authentic collaboration agreed the collaboration had a positive impact on their morale. It was mentioned that some teachers were so invested, they made plans to meet with their group members outside of the NLC. They saw the value in it and as a result, their morale was positively impacted.

Greater efficiency was another benefit described. One interviewee specifically discussed how this process helped her to be more efficient. She explained how many of the ideas that were shared were ideas she never would have thought of independently. The sharing helped her to be a better teacher, to reduce the amount of work she had to do, and introduced her to new and easier ways of teaching effectively.

Increased communication is a benefit that Vangrieken et al. (2015) described, but was not one that many participants discussed in this study. While they would have enjoyed increased communication outside of meetings, most participants felt communication was limited to the actual meetings. In between the meetings, there was no communication among most of the members. Many commented on how they wished they had a sense of connectedness in between the meetings to establish a stronger sense of communication with the group. While one group worked diligently to keep a strong sense of communication with their group in between meetings, it did not happen in all of the groups. With several months in between meetings and little communication, it was mentioned that the collaboration began at a basic level at the next meeting.

Communication increased during the meeting, but in most cases was limited to the actual meeting itself.

Vangrieken et al. (2015) listed improved technological skills as a benefit of collaboration. While this improvement may have been a benefit to some, it was not touched upon much throughout the study. Some commented on how they did learn new ways of doing things that others shared, but it was not a topic that came up frequently, therefore, not necessarily a huge benefit from the perspective of this study's participants.

The last benefit that was mentioned was reduced isolation. This reduction was mentioned by several interviewees as a definite benefit. The island mentality was brought up by two participants in this study. Many described how teachers work alone in their rooms all day and never have the opportunity to observe others teach. Creating the opportunity for collaboration reduces that isolation and allows teachers to see what others have done. Having the grade-alike meetings in teachers' classrooms also allowed for teachers to see what was on display and to gather ideas that way.

The benefits mentioned most often in this study were the sharing of ideas, the ability to see what other teachers who teach the same grade level are doing in their classrooms, and the opportunity to gain new knowledge. Many saw the opportunity to share ideas around struggling students to be of particular benefit for them. The most important benefit, which Vangrieken et al. (2015) did not put forward, is the opportunity for reflective practice through the sharing that occurs by collaboration. As Little (1990) explained in her taxonomy, it is the deeper level of collaboration that teachers need where they question their teaching, they reflect and change what they have done, and they do this reflection jointly within a group. While sharing of ideas and resources is important, it

was mentioned by a few participants that challenging your own teaching and working to continually improve is a key outcome of authentic collaboration. Muijs et al. (2011) noted how the simple act of sharing resources becomes invaluable to teachers. This sharing was mentioned by all of the interviewees. While it is not always the deepest level of collaboration, it is a very important one.

Levine and Marcus (2007) explained, “(s)imply putting teachers in a room together will not necessarily produce generative conversations” (p. 134). This study would agree with that premise, as many felt there has to be a clear purpose to the collaboration—one the group can relate to and for which the participants have a passion. Without the conditions created for a trusting environment and without the sense of purpose, participants do not become invested and authentic collaboration will not occur. Trust and purpose are two key factors that create a strong sense of collaboration within a group.

Contributions to Theory

Katz et al. (2009) suggested seven key features for the success of an NLC. However, participants in the study highlighted only four key elements within this context that they felt are critical to its success. While the seven features are all important, this research showed how a successful NLC would have them all interwoven into the four main elements.

Purpose and Relevant Focus

The main focus of an NLC extends the overarching purpose for why the network learning community is occurring. The focus must be based on data, have the goals of improving student learning, and be relevant to all involved. While there is only one focus

per group, the number of groups needs to be able to support all involved. Therefore, choice is a necessity. When there is only one group for each grade level, the focus is not necessarily applicable to everyone.

Distributed Leadership

In order to create a successful NLC, all participants felt strong leadership is required. While participants agreed that both informal and formal leadership are necessary, they emphasized formal leaders need to let the informal leaders lead the sessions and make decisions for the group based on the needs of the group. A few participants mentioned there also needs to be a way to ensure leaders continue to lead over time, to be ongoing, and to encourage this commitment so there is not a revolving door with the leaders. One participant noted this ongoing, continual leadership would help to develop a strong sense of trust in the group. It would ensure a supportive culture exists within the group and there is the opportunity for growth for all of the members. Building capacity and support, one of the initial key features, fits into this category. When there is strong leadership, this type of environment is created through the use of both formal and informal leaders.

Relationships

Participants in this study felt that by having that strong sense of leadership, trust and support grow and develop over time. This environment allows the group to gel and to develop a chemistry that is needed for open sharing and eventually leads to authentic collaboration. Relationships are built and become stronger when you spend time together and have the ability to discuss topics that are important to you. Seeing a group of people a few times a year does not work to deepen a relationship. Relationships need to be

ongoing and a sense of connectedness should be maintained in between meetings. The role of the leader, then, is to create the conditions necessary for this ongoing connection. Whether there are emails sent and an online forum, or another way of maintaining this contact, is implemented, it is crucial that the group feel connected in order to deepen the relationships within the group. Strong leaders are the key to this development.

Collaboration

Participants in this study emphasized when there is a clear purpose, a relevant focus, a strong leader, and a supportive environment, collaboration will then naturally happen. One of the key purposes of NLCs is to encourage collaboration. Participants felt teachers who find value in the NLC will want to collaborate; they will see the value in it and see how effective collaborating is. They will also begin to collaborate at a deeper level, to Little's (1990) definition of *joint work*. Within the context of collaboration is internal accountability. Participants noted teachers will want to attend; they will want to identify priorities and to see what needs to change. It was noted that through the concept of authentic collaboration, teachers become more accountable and they develop an inquiry habit of mind. Two of the key features mentioned by Katz et al. (2009)—accountability and inquiry—are present within the context of collaboration in this study. However, they were not seen as being as significant as the four main elements of purpose and focus, leadership, relationships, and collaboration.

Figure 5.2 illustrates the elements of a successful NLC. The purpose for the group has a relevant focus. Within this focus, choice is given to the participants to ensure they are engaged in the process. It has strong leadership (both formal and informal) that helps to develop the focus within the group, while at the same time supports the development

of a trusting and supporting environment. Relationships are built through this process and a connection is maintained, while the level of collaboration that occurs within the group deepens to ensure it is authentic.

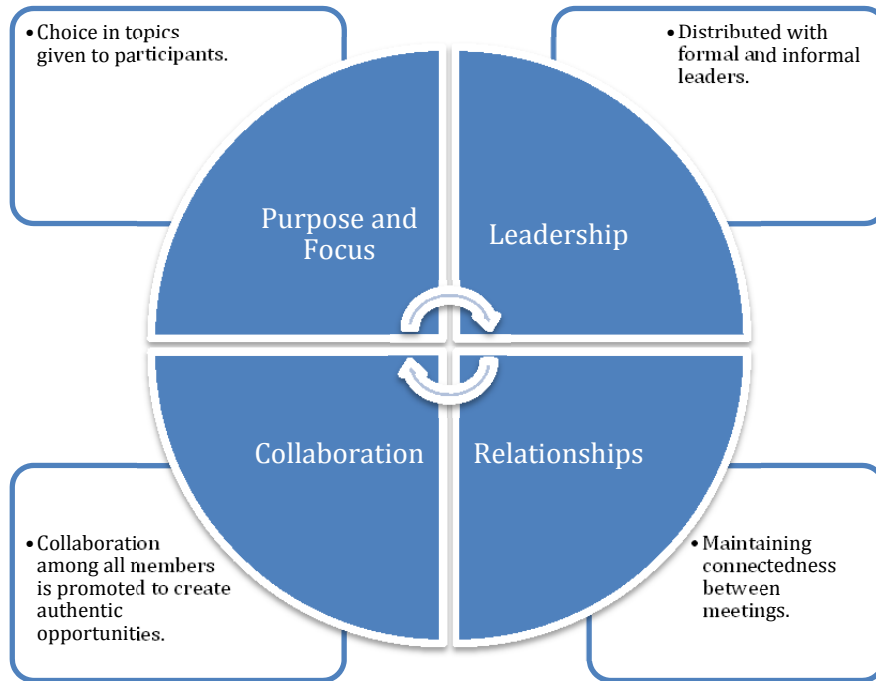


Figure 5.2 Elements of a successful network learning community. The NLC has four main elements. These elements are suggested from the data in this study as necessary for the success of an NLC. Copyright 2016 by Christy Blazieko.

This study suggests that not all seven themes are necessary for success. While all are important in one way or another, there were only four themes highlighted in this study, with two emergent subthemes. These four themes work together to create an effective NLC. The remaining themes, while they may be necessary in other NLCs, were not seen to be equally significant in this study. The theme of building capacity and

support is apparent with good leadership, and internal accountability and inquiry are present when there are deeper levels of collaboration occurring.

While all NLCs have the potential to promote collaboration, they require all of these four themes, with particular consideration given to developing choice and connectedness as ways to move the NLCs to authentic collaboration.

Implications for Practice

To have a successful NLC, this study found that ensuring the sustainability of leadership is of critical importance. This stable environment would then lead to developing stronger relationships, which would deepen collaboration. The focus of the NLC needs to be one that is relevant to teachers and based on data. Choice in a variety of groups is also important for teacher buy in and to ensure relevancy to all. If literacy is a division focus, then it would be beneficial to explain the purpose of this focus while using data to show the plan—where we are, where we want to go, and how we will get there. By having several different options available, teachers have a choice to pick the most relevant group for themselves. For the success of an NLC, participants in this study suggested creating more groups, each with its own specific focus, so teachers can choose for themselves the area in which they need to improve and where data show them their students need to improve. This approach, they felt, also gives teachers the opportunity to change groups if they find they do not feel a sense of cohesiveness within a group or as the needs of their students change. As Katz et al. (2009) stated, the focus of each group must be clearly defined and based on student learning.

Suggestions for improving connectedness among the group in between meetings could occur in different forms. Participants suggested having an online forum that is

easily accessible to all, even those who are not overly comfortable with technology. A job-embedded approach, where the teacher leaders work directly with teachers to support and plan for their specific needs, is ideal. However, it is not always possible. If the job-embedded method is not possible but some funding is available, a suggestion could be to release the teacher leader to spend time meeting with members of the group or even to team teach to provide help in an area where a teacher needs some support.

Currently, there are literacy support teachers who work for the school division that has been studied. They work to help all of the Grades K-3 teachers in the division with all aspects of literacy. Again, there is choice involved. If you want to focus on the Daily 5 program, they will support you with that approach. If you want to focus on developing inferencing, fluency, or accuracy in reading, they will also support those goals. The focus can change throughout the year and is based on the needs of your classroom. At the same time, they also offer professional development sessions throughout the year so teachers can gain more knowledge in the area of literacy. It would be ideal to do this type of professional development as a grade-alike grouping. In the past, it has been Grades K-3 teachers all together. In regards to developing a successful NLC, it would be more beneficial to have this set up as grade-alike groupings because what is applicable to a kindergarten teacher is not necessarily applicable to a Grade 3 teacher. Time is then spent covering items that are not applicable to all. Focusing on a specific grade and having these set up as grade-alike meetings would increase the amount of knowledge given and gained at each of the sessions. This situation is ideal for a network learning community. It is based on data, there is choice involved, and because it

is embedded, there is continuity throughout the year. Because the leaders are hired as literacy support teachers by the division, the leadership is maintained over time.

The inquiry specialists who were teacher leaders throughout the NLC that is being studied have the potential for another effective NLC group for those who want to focus on inquiry. Again, this group would be an option for those who feel inquiry is an area in which they need to improve. The inquiry specialists would need to be given adequate amounts of time to work with teachers to help develop units throughout the year. This work, however, must be paired with professional development sessions, both for the inquiry specialists and for the teachers. Participants in this study felt that both the job-embedded approach and grade-alike groupings were necessary for the success of an NLC. This approach establishes that sense of connectedness in between meetings that interviewees said is important.

With the notion of choice, members could focus on specific subject needs within the grade-alike group. For example, in the Grade 7 group, there could be a smaller group planning for social studies, while another group plans for science. The leaders could work with both groups but with this method, teachers are working in an area that is relevant to them. NLCs could have an even stronger positive influence on collaboration by promoting this sense of connectedness, by allowing choice regarding a particular focus, or by allowing choice of the pathway to achieve this goal.

Future Research

While the research showed how successful NLCs can be, this study showed they are all different and based upon what works for each specific NLC. While many of the networks around the world have funding or federal grants, that is not always possible,

especially in times when budgets are extremely tight. Creating NLCs without any type of financial support is a reality for many school divisions and developing a way to do this without any additional funding could be explored.

This study was based solely on how NLCs influence teacher collaboration. None of the literature pointed to teacher choice or to a connectedness maintained over time as being key factors for success. A future study could investigate further how choice and connectedness can enhance collaboration. Additionally, while this study did not look at the effects of student achievement in relation to NLCs, a future study could look at data-based NLCs to determine if they do improve student achievement.

Conclusion

The question “In what ways do NLCs influence teacher collaboration?” was the main research question of this study. After analyzing the data in this study, evidence supports four critical elements of a successful NLC: (a) purpose and focus, (b) leadership, (c) relationships, and (d) collaboration. Two subthemes—choice and connectedness—also emerged as important to the successfulness of an NLC. With careful formation of NLCs based on these critical elements, schools may enhance and further deepen collaboration. The establishment of an NLC sets up the structure for collaboration, but only by incorporating these elements will there be authentic collaboration.

The elements of purpose and focus as well as leadership work to develop relationships among teachers that allow for deeper levels of collaboration. It is through developing a strong sense of culture in each group that relationships grow. When relationships grow, collaboration changes from simple sharing to asking for assistance and eventually to risk taking. When a group does not gel and when it does not stay

connected in between meetings, there is not as much trust, nor the motivation to work towards challenging the status quo and examining teaching to see where change can take place in order to improve student achievement.

This level of collaboration also increases when there is choice involved. The level of choice for the group is dependent upon the goals of the division. If a broad, overarching focus is established, then there needs to be some sense of choice within the group. This will allow for higher levels of participation as members feel their voices are heard and feel they are working in an area that is relevant to them. The research showed the group needs to feel they are working in a relevant area. Forced collaboration is not always productive.

However an NLC is set up, this study has shown that authentic collaboration is vital to teachers. Authentic collaboration exists when there is choice given to members to collaborate in an area that is relevant to them. It happens when the leadership is distributed and when the leaders work to create a supportive and trusting environment. It also happens when members feel leaders have created a culture of learning that enables them to take risks. When teachers work the majority of their day isolated in a classroom and are not usually given the opportunity to observe others teach or to collaborate, they work harder. The result is teachers who are overworked and overwhelmed. They are, as it was mentioned, on their own little island. As some see NLCs as a new reform initiative and as a positive way to have teachers collaborate together, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools was successful in implementing them years ago. This study showed that incorporating NLCs into practice allows teachers the opportunity to learn, to share, and to

try new things. This sharing and collaboration helps teachers feel more confident about their teaching and, hopefully, allows for improved student achievement.

I feel very fortunate to have been a part of an NLC and to have been given the opportunity to explore the concept in such detail. It is through this study that I have been able to explore the many NLCs that occur all over the world and I have grown to appreciate the hard work that went in to establishing NLCs within my school division.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

May 4, 2016

Superintendent of the Southeast Sector

Dear Mr. Bazylak,

Re: Permission to survey teachers from the Southeast Sector

My name is Christy Blazieko and I am currently a part-time Masters student in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan. I am in the final stages of my program, preparing to do the research necessary for my thesis. The title of my thesis is "The Relationship Between Network Learning Communities and Teacher Collaboration." The purpose is to discover in what ways network learning communities influence teacher collaboration. The literature indicates that the purpose of NLCs is to bring teachers together to collaborate with each other.

In order to learn more about this topic, I am planning a mixed methods study. The first part of the study will consist of a survey that will be sent to all teachers in your network. If they have been a part of the network for two or more years, I would ask them to participate. My hope is to conduct this survey in April. After the survey, I will be looking for individuals to participate in an interview. I would like to interview a principal, two teacher leaders, and two classroom teachers on their involvement and experiences with the NLC they have been a part of. This will be done in May. Responses will be compiled and used in my thesis.

I am requesting permission to survey the teachers in your network. If you would like to discuss this further, please feel free to contact me at St. Peter School, on my cell phone, 306-230-5310, or by email at clb136@mail.usask.ca . I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Christy Blazieko

Appendix B

May 4, 2016

Dear Principals and Teachers of the Southeast Network,

I am a graduate student in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan and I am asking for your help in a study that I am conducting on Network Learning Communities and teacher collaboration. The purpose of this study is to see in what ways network learning communities influence teacher collaboration. There are many different network learning communities all over the world, but very little research has been done in the area.

Your participation in the survey could be helpful to our school division. It could show whether our southeast sector, and the grade-alike meetings we had for a number of years, contribute to and influence teacher collaboration.

The survey is very brief and will only take between five and ten minutes of your time. It is being done through Survey Monkey so it is completely anonymous. Your participation would be helpful, but this is not a mandatory survey. You will need to check off a consent box when doing the survey so that I may use this for my research. The survey will be open until May 19, 2016. You are able to withdraw from the survey at any point if you feel necessary.

The results of the survey will be used in my thesis. The data may also be published in a book form or presented at a conference. All data will be securely stored.

Following the survey, I will be doing several interviews. If you are open to being interviewed following the survey, please email me at clb136@mail.usask.ca. The survey and interviews have been granted approval by the Office of Research Services at the University of Saskatchewan on May 2. If you have any questions regarding the approval, please phone (306) 966-2975.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation. If you have any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me at 659-8618, 230-5310 or clb136@mail.usask.ca.

Sincerely,

Christy Blazieko

Appendix C

Survey Questionnaire

What grade do you teach? (if a multigrade classroom, please pick the grade you have most students in) _____

Length of time teaching (years) _____

Number of years as a teacher in Southeast Sector (years) _____

Gender _____

Did you have an opportunity to be a teacher leader within the Network Learning Community you were a part of? _____

Answers:

- | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
1. The Network Learning Communities I participated in between 2010-2015 influenced collaboration amongst my colleagues.
 2. Because of the grade-alike groups, I was able to collaborate with colleagues I do not work with.
 3. Through the grade-alike meetings, I have been exposed to new practices.
 4. Through the grade-alike meetings, I have changed some of my teaching and assessment practices.
 5. Because of the grade-alike meetings, I now use practices common with my colleagues.
 6. I did not feel supported in my NLC to try new ideas.
 7. I do not feel that it is beneficial for teachers of like grades to collaborate together.
 8. As a result of network participation in grade-alike meetings, I have gained new knowledge and skills.
 9. As a result of network participation in grade-alike meetings, I have improved teaching practices.
 10. The focus and purpose of the NLC was clearly defined.
 11. The focus and purpose did not have a direct impact on student learning.
 12. Through this process, I have engaged in more reflective practice to improve my teaching.
 13. Through this process, I have developed an inquiry habit of mind with regard to teaching.
 14. Through this process, I have had the ability to build relationships and connect with other teachers.
 15. A shared approach to learning worked to build trust and relationships within our grade-alike groups.
 16. I feel that the leadership within the NLC was shared or distributed.
 17. The teacher leaders encouraged and supported the grade-alike groups.
 18. As a result of my experiences in the NLC, I feel that I have further developed my own leadership skills.

19. While I was a part of the NLC, I had the opportunity to reflect on the outcomes of the NLC in order to establish future priorities.
20. Do you have any other comments you would like to share about your experiences with the Southeast Sector Network Learning Community?
21. If you would be interested in participating in an interview as a follow up to this questionnaire, please provide your email address in the box below. Your email address will be removed from responses upon receipt and not associated with responses.

By completing this survey, I consent to it being used for the purpose of research.

Appendix D

Semistructured Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a part of the southeast sector network?
2. How many years were you involved in the NLC grade-alike meetings?
3. How many years have you been teaching?
4. What grade-alike group were you a part of?
5. What do you believe is the purpose of having network learning communities?
6. Describe any benefits from meeting with your NLC grade-alike group 3 times a year?
7. What were any possible drawbacks of the NLCs?
8. What would you suggest as an adequate amount of meeting time for the NLC and why?
9. How was the leadership of the NLC structures and/or shared?
10. As a teacher leader/principal, how did you decide what would be done in each of the sessions?
11. Describe the collaboration that went on in your grade-alike group.
12. How did the NLC connect to your school's PLC?
13. How did the NLC draw on research or expertise to improve teaching?
14. How did the collaboration influence your teaching?
15. How did the teacher leaders work to engage teachers?
16. What could teacher leaders have done to further engage teachers?
17. During this experience in the NLC, did you feel trusted and supported by your group of teachers? Why or why not?
18. How did NLCs foster new relationships among teachers?
19. How was conflict dealt with in the group?
20. How were the needs of teachers considered in establishing the future priorities of the NLC?
21. How do NLCs provide the opportunity for reflective practice and life-long learning?
22. In your opinion, what are the most important factors needed for the success of an NLC?
23. How would you change the NLC that you were a part of?
24. How were teachers challenged to go beyond the status quo and use knowledge in their teaching?
25. How were teachers encouraged to reflect on where they were and where they wanted to go throughout this process?
26. How did you maintain a connectedness with the group in between meetings?
27. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix E

You are entitled to participate in a research study entitled:

Network Learning Communities and Teacher Collaboration

Researcher:

Christy Blazieko, Graduate Student, Department of Educational Administration,
University of Saskatchewan, clb136@mail.usask.ca , (306) 230-5310

Supervisors:

Paul Newton, Department of Educational Administration, (306) 966-7620
paul.newton@usask.ca

Vicki Squires, Department of Educational Administration (306) 966-7622
vicki.squires@usask.ca

Purpose and Objectives of the Research:

The purpose of this study is to see whether Network Learning Communities influence teacher collaboration. The interviews will also give specific information about the NLCs and show if collaboration was influenced, in what ways was it influenced.

Procedures:

My hope is to interview five participants. In the letter of introduction, I have requested survey participants to contact me if they are interested in being interviewed for this study. Once I have participants chosen for the interviews, I will contact them to find a time and place to conduct the interview that works for them. The interview will take between 30 and 60 minutes.

Potential Risks:

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

Potential Benefits:

There are many benefits to this study. Collaboration is beneficial to teachers and the concept of NLCs creates the opportunity for teachers to collaborate in grade-alike groups. This is also beneficial to our school division and other school divisions. If the results show that teachers do find that NLCs influence their teaching practices, that would be important for school divisions to know.

Confidentiality:

Confidentiality will be ensured. For the interviews, a pseudonym will be used and no identifying information will be described. You may withdraw from the interview at any point. Consent forms will be stored separately from the data collection. The master list of participants will be destroyed following completion of the data. After your interview, and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to

review the transcript of your interview and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.

Storage of Data:

Data will be stored on a USB stick and will be in a locked cabinet when not being used by the researcher. Long-term storage of the data will be the responsibility of Paul Newton, Supervisor.

Right to Withdraw:

The participants may refuse to answer individual questions. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no penalty to you for this. Any data you have contributed will be destroyed at your request. Your right to withdraw your interview data from the study will apply until the results have been summarized. After this, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Follow Up:

A summary of the research will be given to you at your request. Please email me at clb136@mail.usask.ca if you would like a copy of the findings.

Questions or Concerns:

The proposed research project was reviewed and approved on ethical grounds by the University's Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Research Ethics Office toll free at 1-888-966-2975 or ethics.office@usask.ca .

Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	
<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>	

Appendix F

Consent Form for Data Transcription Release

Study Title: Network Learning Communities and Teacher Collaboration

I am returning the transcripts of your audio-recorded interviews. Please review and sign the consent for data transcription release.

I _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, or delete information from them as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Christy Blazieko. I hereby authorize the release of the transcript to Christy Blazieko to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date