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A Case Study of Communities of Practice in Schools

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A Case Study of Communities of Practice in Schools

By

STEPHANIE KNIPP

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

Seattle Pacific University
April 2019
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May 27, 2019
Dedication

This study is dedicated to my husband, Jon, to my daughters, Natasha and Naomi, and to the rest of my family at home and at school. You piqued my curiosity and inspired my research.

“The openness of our hearts and minds can be measured by how wide we draw the circle of what we call family” (Mother Teresa).
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Table of Contents

List of Tables .................................................................................................................. iv
List of Appendices ........................................................................................................... v

Abstract ............................................................................................................................ 1

Chapter 1: Introduction ..................................................................................................... 2
  Purpose of the Study ......................................................................................................... 3
  Key Definitions .................................................................................................................. 4
  Research Questions .......................................................................................................... 5
  Organization of the Study ............................................................................................... 6

Chapter 2: Literature Review ........................................................................................... 7
  Theoretical Constructs ...................................................................................................... 7
    Situated Learning Theory ............................................................................................... 7
    Social Capital Theory ................................................................................................... 11
  Empirical Research ......................................................................................................... 12
    Exploring a New Teacher Cohort .................................................................................. 13
    Mentoring and Social Capital for Twenty-First Century Communities of Practice ......................................................................................................................................................... 13
    Peripheral Participation as Professional Development ............................................... 14
    Reassessment of Key Concepts in Workplace Learning .............................................. 15
    Planting the Seed of Teacher Identity ........................................................................... 17
    Learning Climate, Leader Support, and Leader Interaction ....................................... 18

Chapter 3: Research Methodology .................................................................................. 22
  Chapter Overview ............................................................................................................ 22
Research Questions ................................................................. 22
Research Design ........................................................................ 22
Setting and Participants ............................................................ 23
Sampling Process ...................................................................... 24
Measures .................................................................................. 24
Validity and Reliability .............................................................. 25
Role of the Researcher ............................................................... 27
Data Collection .......................................................................... 29
Data Analysis ............................................................................ 30
Limitations ................................................................................ 32
Chapter 4: Results ..................................................................... 33
Belonging .................................................................................... 37
  Community ................................................................................ 37
  Family ....................................................................................... 39
Practice ...................................................................................... 40
  Engagement .............................................................................. 40
  Trust ......................................................................................... 42
  Structure .................................................................................. 44
  Informal Opportunities ............................................................ 45
Meaning ...................................................................................... 47
  Purpose ..................................................................................... 47
  Why We Exist .......................................................................... 47
  Leadership ............................................................................... 49
Identity .......................................................................................................................... 51
Uniqueness ..................................................................................................................... 52
Role ................................................................................................................................. 53
Newcomers ..................................................................................................................... 57
Small School ................................................................................................................... 59
Teacher Social Capital ................................................................................................. 60
Affected Practice ........................................................................................................... 60
School Leadership Support .......................................................................................... 61
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion ........................................................................ 65
Discussion ...................................................................................................................... 65
Community of Practice Teacher Descriptions ......................................................... 66
Generating Teacher Social Capital ............................................................................ 70
Implications for Practice ............................................................................................. 71
Opportunity ................................................................................................................... 72
Motivation ...................................................................................................................... 72
Ability ............................................................................................................................. 73
Teacher Retention ........................................................................................................ 74
Limitations ..................................................................................................................... 74
Areas for Further Research ......................................................................................... 75
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 76
The Researcher’s Learning ........................................................................................... 77
References ..................................................................................................................... 79
Appendices ................................................................................................................... 85
List of Tables

Table 1. Participants’ Characteristics ................................................................. 34
Table 2. Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes with Representative Quotes......... 35
List of Appendices

Appendix A. Email Invitation to Participants and Informed Consent ..................... 85
Appendix B. Interview Questions ....................................................................... 88
Appendix C. Interview Transcripts ..................................................................... 89
Abstract

This research is an examination of a community of practice, how it generates teacher social capital, and the implications for school leadership. Grounded in situated learning theory and social capital theory, this case study of teachers in a small school analyzes how communities of practice can generate teacher social capital, and how school leaders can help foster its growth. Situated learning theory is creating meaning from the real activities of daily living, and its implications for educational research and application are extensive. Developed by anthropologist Jean Lave and computer scientist Etienne Wenger in the 1990s, situated learning theory is grounded in John Dewey’s pragmatism and Lev Vygotsky’s social development theory. Situated learning theory is associated with social capital, legitimate peripheral participation, and communities of practice, and has fueled research and organizational and educational innovation for almost 30 years.

Keywords: Situated learning, social capital, communities of learning, legitimate peripheral participation, social learning model
Chapter One

Introduction

The supply of teachers in the 21st century is not keeping pace with demand both locally and globally (White & Smith, 2005). In the United States, more than $8 billion is spent annually on replacement costs due to high teacher turnover (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). This is not only an issue in the United States but is a broader international matter as well. There is concern among many nations based on a teacher shortage survey of 25 countries (e.g. Netherlands, Russia, Germany, and Sweden) regarding teacher recruitment and turnover, and some countries are faring better than others (White & Smith, 2005). Teacher shortage has been identified by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a global problem affecting countries all over the world. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2013), 3.3 million teaching positions are needed to achieve universal primary education by 2030. At lower secondary levels, the corresponding numbers are 5.1 million by 2030. Attracting, recruiting, and retaining sufficient numbers of teachers is problematic (UNESCO, 2013).

Additionally, it has been more difficult for schools to find fully qualified teachers in some fields than in others, such as mathematics, science, and special education (Cowan, Goldhaber, Hayes, & Theobald, 2016; Podgursky, Ehlert, Lindsay, & Wan, 2016). Researchers have also noted difficulty in finding fully qualified teachers in schools serving larger proportions of students in poverty (Engel, Jacob, & Curran, 2014), and according to a Learning Policy Institute report, too many teachers are leaving the
workforce, potentially resulting in a future shortage (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016).

However, the initiatives of policymakers are often misguided in their focus on recruitment and retention efforts rather than a reconceptualization of professional learning through communities of practice (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). According to Sutcher, Darling-Hammond and Carver-Thomas (2016), retaining teachers would actually make a greater difference in balancing supply and demand than any other intervention. Considering that teachers who voluntarily leave the classroom list some areas of job dissatisfaction as very important or extremely important in their decision to leave the profession (Sutcher et al., 2016), fostering the social engagement of teachers can sustain mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998) and create a community where teachers will want to stay and grow in their practice. While increasing the teaching workforce may address the need for more teachers, the lens of situated learning theory may bring perspective to the social network of relationships in schools to help retain teachers through building social capital (Vorhaus, 2014).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine and describe how communities of practice, grounded in situated learning theory, generate teacher social capital. Through a qualitative approach, the researcher aimed to identify themes that may support school districts and building administrators as they grow the social capital of their teachers through communities of practice. Presented in this study are emerging themes from interviews with teachers regarding their perceptions of communities of practice and their impact on teacher social capital.
Key Definitions

Terminology associated with situated learning theory is connected and overlapping. The overarching concept of social learning system is that organizations are comprised of them and belonging to them occurs through social competence and personal experience (Wenger, 2000). Competence is historically and socially defined, and it is by “knowing” that competence is displayed within the community (Wenger, 2000). A community of practice falls within the broader conceptual framework of a social learning system, and is particularly concerned with the support of self-organizing groups of practitioners in their development and use of knowledge (Blackmore, 2010). Communities of practice, then, are essentially how people interact with each other, and thereby establish and grow their relationships with each other (Wenger, 1998).

Legitimate peripheral participation is the process by which those within a community of practice form the basis of learning and progress toward more advanced participation within the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Newcomers are exposed to the values of the community of practice through initial engagement along with the associated entry-level tasks and responsibility. As the newcomers’ experience increases, they move past the periphery into the next trajectory by linking their past experiences with future possibilities of membership (Wenger, 1998). Wenger suggested that exposure to different trajectories is the greatest shaper of possibilities for newcomers (Wenger, 1998). These trajectories, then, affect social capital—including the relationships, resources of networks, norms or shared values to which individuals have access as community members. In turn, they have the potential for positive effects in a civil society (Cumming-Potvin & MacCallum, 2010).
Situated learning theory in education research using Etienne Wenger’s communities of practice framework has implications for building social capital in schools. *Social capital*, or the idea that relationships are a valuable asset (Smith, 2009), is the investment in human resources which include networks, norms or shared values, and can be built through community participation within larger organizations (Cumming-Potvin & MacCallum, 2010). In context, social capital includes qualitative features that include relations between individuals and within communities (Vorhaus, 2014). As organizations such as school districts consider the social capital of teachers, they are met with the ever-increasing challenge of retaining teachers in the profession. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning as noted by Cumming-Potvin and MacCallum (2010), “has emerged in the field of Education as a helpful entry point for researchers to understand the social and situational aspects of learning, in particular through the concept of community of practice” (p. 310).

**Research Questions**

The research questions in this study were designed to examine how communities of practice generate teacher social capital. More specifically, the researcher explored how teachers describe their community of practice through the lens of legitimate peripheral participation, how teachers connect their trajectory to social capital, and the implications for school leaders to grow social capital through communities of practice.

The first research question was as follows: How do teachers describe their community of practice? The second research question was as follows: How do communities of practice generate teacher social capital? The third question was as
follows: What are the implications for school leaders to grow teacher social capital through communities of practice?

**Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the problem, the purpose, key definitions, and the research questions. Chapter Two includes the constructs of situated learning theory and social capital theory as well as a review of the literature. Chapter Three addresses the method of case study and the rationale for its use to address the research questions as well as its limitations. Chapter Four outlines the study findings and identifies the emergent themes from focus group interviews. Chapter Five analyzes these themes and attempts to answer the research questions based on the collected data.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Theoretical Constructs

In Chapter Two, the theoretical constructs and empirical research regarding situated learning and social capital are examined in the context of qualitative and quantitative studies. Through this chapter, the researcher provides a conceptual framework for this study.

Situated learning theory. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger developed Situated Learning Theory in the 1990s and published *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* in 1991. Essentially, *situated learning* is a matter of creating meaning from the real activities of daily living (Stein, 1998), and is centered on the relationship between individuals and communities through engagement with their practice. For example, butchers working in a meat market, quilters making blankets together, or teachers collaborating in a school may come together in practice. This relational learning is usually unintentional rather than deliberate (Lave, 2009). Through the support provided by the community, knowledge is interpreted and distributed, but only through participation in the practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Following the work of Dewey’s philosophy of pragmatism (Dewey, 1902) and Vygotsky’s social development theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Lave (2009) advocated that active participation in a group, for example, is both a kind of action and belonging in which learning naturally takes place. As novices in a group move from the peripheral to its center, they become more active and engaged within the culture and eventually assume the role of expert. This idea is what Lave and Wenger (1991) called authentic and
the process of *legitimate peripheral participation*. While the ethnographic studies cited by Lave and Wenger did not specifically include classroom teachers, the mention of newcomers could potentially transfer to novice teachers (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011).

Jean Lave, an American social anthropologist, became an advocate of *practice learning*, which is defined as participation in everyday life that may be thought of as a process of changing understanding in practice and resulting in learning (Lave, 2009). Lave wrote when looking closely at everyday activity, it is clear that learning is pervasive but often not recognized in ongoing activity (Lave, 2009).

Swiss native Etienne Wenger is a former researcher for the Institute for Research on Learning in Palo Alto, California, and previously studied computer science and wrote his dissertation on artificial intelligence. He is now a social learning theorist, researcher, author and consultant (Wenger, 2009; Wenger, 2010). Following the publication of *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Wenger popularized the term, *communities of practice*, in his 1998 book, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*.

The premise behind the term, communities of practice, is the notion they are situated in all aspects of life and people are generally involved in several of them – whether that is at work, school, home, or in civic and leisure interests (Smith, 2009). Moreover, a community of practice involves more than technical knowledge or skill associated with undertaking a task. It is co-participating and is a social practice. Wenger traced the roots of community of practice to the social nature of human learning (Wenger, 2000).
Grounding their work in an anthropological approach, Lave and Wenger collected and interpreted empirical evidence on apprentices’ learning and facilitated a conceptual shift from the traditional view of “the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world, and from the concept of cognitive process to the more-encompassing view of social practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 43). Their ethnographic research on craft apprenticeship in traditional societies, including the Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia, the Yucatec midwives, and American meat-cutters, indicated that conceiving of apprenticeship simply in terms of ‘learning by doing’ in isolation provided an unsatisfactory account of the ordered way in which apprentices learned their craft. In addition, it did not do justice to what the authors were coming to perceive as the complex relational character of situated learning. Rather, members are involved in a set of relationships over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and communities develop around what is important to them (Wenger, 1998).

While the concept of community of practice is not derived from the tradition of systems theory, it aligns well with the perspective of systems (Wenger, 2010). For example, a community of practice itself can be viewed as a simple social system, and when combined with other interrelated communities of practice, it becomes complex (Blackmore, 2010). This social construct, when coupled with Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), asserted that learning is socially and linguistically mediated, and “is shaped by linguistic context, cultural norms, and social circumstances” (McClam & Diefenbacher, 2015, p. 132), and can be considered a social learning system (Wenger, 2010).
Communities of practice can also be seen as self-organizing systems or networks and have many of the benefits and characteristics that can be defined as social capital—the idea that relationships are a valuable asset (Smith, 2009). Vorhaus built on this notion that social capital provides access to institutional resources, but also extends to the levels of trust and related resources found in social networks. This context includes the qualitative features of relationships between individuals and within communities (Vorhaus, 2014).

A framework for understanding social learning systems creates structure grounded in theory. Wenger’s social learning framework provides a theoretical lens and explains how context influences human social endeavors and generates practice, meaning, and identity through legitimate peripheral participation (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). He further explained this concept through the communities of practice social learning model (Wenger, 1998). The model consists of four components that are interconnected: community is the group formed through mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Through practice, those explicit and implied shared enterprises are sustained through mutual engagement in action. As a result, meaning-making occurs which results in the transformation that leads to identity, or the experience and process of becoming (Wenger, 1998). Together, Lave and Wenger set the stage for significant innovation through communities of practice within organizations, and more recently, in schools (Smith, 2009).

The literature on communities of practice has surged over the past decade, but the history of social learning systems and situational learning theory reaches back to the 1990s, indicating the current flurry of interest is truly a resurgence (Blackmore, 2010).
According to Blackmore, company reorganization, increased globalization, and subsequent mobility of people from job to job has contributed to the need to redefine professional communities and provide support for the more complex social, professional and personal needs of people (Blackmore, 2010).

**Social capital theory.** French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, is credited with the development of social capital theory (Dika & Singh, 2002). Bourdieu (1985), defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group” (p. 248). In Bourdieu’s conceptualization, the amount of social capital available to a member is contingent on two elements: (1) the social relationship—the member’s connection to the group, and (2) the quantity and quality of the resources possessed by the group.

Coleman (1988) further developed Bourdieu’s theory stating that social capital facilitates productive activity through relationships. Social capital is not separate, but inherent in these relationships between and among individuals through three forms: (1) obligations and expectations which depend on trustworthiness of the social environment; (2) the flow of information within the social structure; and (3) the norms accompanied by sanctions that serve to promote stronger bonds within the community (Coleman, 1988, S119). Social capital is distinct from other forms of capital in that it serves the public good. The members who generate social capital ordinarily capture only a small part of its benefits.

Combining the ideas from Bourdieu (1985) and Coleman (1988), Lin (2001) defined social capital as the “resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed
and/or mobilized in purposive actions” (p. 29). Lin’s definition captured key elements including the creation of value from relationships, available resources, the social network, and actions that mobilize resources. Lin’s social capital definition is foundational to this study and is further developed by Minckler (2014). She defined teacher social capital as “the resources available to teachers by their social network membership to produce outcomes that are beneficial to teachers, their students, and ultimately to the school community” (p. 658). Teacher relationships, then, become a form of capital that is valuable to the school. These relationships have value to the individual when his or her associations accomplish two major goals: (1) helping the individual accomplish things he or she cannot do alone; and (2) satisfying the individual’s belonging needs. Minckler’s (2014) research also asserted that high levels of teacher social capital should result in positive outcomes of student achievement, teacher quality and teacher job satisfaction. The outcomes of teacher social capital, however, were outside the scope of this study. Instead, this research focused on the development of teacher social capital through communities of practice.

**Empirical Research**

This section included an overview of six studies that are grounded in the theoretical constructs of situated learning and social capital theory. A review of these studies constituted a survey and interpretation of theoretical books, articles and empirical research findings to prepare for undertaking further research on the subject (Vogt & Johnson, 2016). Through this literature review, the researcher became oriented within the theoretical constructs of situated learning and social capital.
Exploring a new teacher cohort. A 2011 qualitative study by Cuddapah and Clayton of beginning teachers used Wenger’s social learning framework to examine how a professional development cohort can be a valuable resource and support for new teachers. Key findings and theoretical insights gained from the one year of observation of 22 cohort participants included the importance of the four components of Wenger’s model. Data was measured through the analysis of documented anecdotal field notes from 16 two-hour sessions. The transcribed observations were analyzed through key framework codes and collected within a table of these Wenger codes. Findings included the centrality of the community component, and the implications of a community of practice comprised of solely novice members as most notable (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). While Cuddapah and Clayton asserted that novice cohorts can complement mentoring and induction programs, the periphery for legitimate participation in the community is altered. Integrated cultures, however, with teachers from a range of experience levels can provide support for teachers new to the profession (Johnson, 2007).

In a longitudinal project study by Johnson (2007), initial evidence suggested that new teachers working in these community of practice settings remained in their schools, and in public schools, teaching in higher proportions than did their counterparts in veteran-oriented or novice-oriented professional cultures. After four years, however, the 50 teachers studied made career choices that were consistent with national patterns: approximately one-third left teaching, one-third moved to new schools and positions in education, and one-third remained in their original school (Johnson, 2007).

Mentoring and social capital for 21st century communities of practice. Cumming-Potvin and MacCallum in a 2010 case study of intergenerational practice to
build social capital in Western Australia leveraged situated learning theory and the concept of communities of practice in an education setting. They examined the benefits and limitations of intergenerational practice and mentorship of students through a school volunteer program. Community volunteers, mainly adults over 50 years old, were paired with students and offered academic and life skills support for a ten-week period. The authors used several qualitative methods including consultations with participants via focus groups, semi-structured interviews, observations, and four case studies.

Their findings, through the analysis of comments by participants and observations, noted the potential for intergenerational practice to build social capital for mentees and mentors (Cumming-Potvin & MacCallum, 2010). While core activities involved older mentors providing support to younger, less experienced mentees, high school students assisted older people to gain technical knowledge and skills through a series of six computer-based lessons. Cumming-Potvin and MacCallum’s findings also suggested that the relationships formed between mentors and mentees have potential for mutual benefit and development. The mentoring sessions, for example, “promoted computer skills in older mentees while creating a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem for young mentors” (Cumming-Potvin & MacCallum, 2010, p. 315). Lave and Wenger (1991) identified this shift in identity between newcomers and old-timers within communities of practice as “a richly diverse field of essential actors, rather than a teacher/learner dyad” (p. 56).

Peripheral participation as professional development. An article examining professional development situated in meaningful practice as a means to retain educators (Morrell, 2003), cited teacher attrition and burnout as serious problems facing schools
(Darling-Hammond, 2000). According to Morrell, “Legitimate peripheral participation implies that teachers need spaces to be humble about their practice and ask naïve questions without feeling threatened or inadequate” (p. 98). Development, for veteran teachers, too, should include spaces for legitimate peripheral participation and should be intellectual and humanizing (Morrell, 2003). Morrell’s article described peripheral participation of teacher fellows during a summer research seminar. He drew upon several qualitative data sources including teacher feedback and observation, and focused on four participation structures found to be most salient to professional development within the study: public teaching episodes, co-planning and debriefing sessions, multiple extended observations of professional practice, and a teacher research seminar (Morrell, 2003). The teachers who participated in these professional development structures self-reported through surveys and interviews that they benefited from witnessing and enacting successful practice, and their learning was maximized when it was a situated activity and teachers were allowed to work with each other to solve real problems related to their practice (Morrell, 2003). Morrell, however, did not include the survey tool or the supporting data analysis.

**Reassessment of key concepts in workplace learning.** Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson and Unwin (2005) provided a critical perspective of Lave and Wenger’s concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” as a means of understanding workplace learning. Lave and Wenger focused on the situated learning process by which new entrants to an activity or workplace gain the skills, knowledge and habits necessary to becoming “full participants.” Fuller et al. (2005) noted that “while the study and explanation of apprenticeship learning was an important stimulus, their [Lave and
Wenger] theoretical aim to provide a comprehensive theory of learning as social practice was broader and more ambitious” (p. 51).

Fuller et al. (2005) stated that the broadness of this theory in Lave and Wenger’s book lead to its opacity. For example, Lave and Wenger stated in Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation, “learning is not merely situated in practice—as if it were some independently verifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35). Fuller et al. (2005) critiqued the ambiguity in this idea, and further provided a critical analysis of the dimensions of ‘communities of practice’ and ‘legitimate peripheral participation.’ Fuller et al. examined how evidence from studies were illustrative of the ways in which Lave and Wenger’s approach has been helpful in explaining diverse case-study data, but also areas where it has fallen short.

Fuller et al. (2005) provided a rationale for why Lave and Wenger’s book continued to provide an important source of theoretical insight while acknowledging its limitations of application to contemporary workplaces in advanced industrial societies. For example, Fuller et al. noted legitimate peripheral participation was helpful in understanding the processes of learning entailed in becoming full members. Lave and Wenger (1991) asserted the process of learning was, “a place in which one moves toward more-intensive participation” (p. 36). However, Fuller et al. pointed out that additional dimensions needed to be added to Lave and Wenger’s original account, noting their research has demonstrated that experienced workers are also learning through their engagement with novices. Part of the process of legitimate peripheral participation for many novices is to help other workers to learn, and this learning is multi-directional.
According to Fuller et al. (2005), “this insight is of significance as it helps undermine the view of communities of practice as one-directional learning” (p. 48). It also challenged Wenger’s (1998) view of legitimate peripheral participation by placing greater emphasis on change through cultural reproduction, and contests the notion that learning occurs from the outside periphery to the center (Fuller et al., 2005). Where things work well, bringing in newcomers is a valuable strategy in enhancing the on-going learning in a community of practice. Fuller et al. cited examples of apprentices passing on their new skills and knowledge to older workers as part of everyday workplace activity. Consequently, the ‘novice’ becomes the ‘expert’ for periods of time (Fuller et al., 2005).

**Planting the seed of teacher identity.** Harlow and Cobb addressed in their 2014 case study the importance of teacher identity and its impact on teacher retention, among other benefits (Harlow & Cobb, 2014). It is through interactions with others that identity is formed, influenced and reshaped through continuous interactions within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). *Teacher identity* can be described as a self-attributed notion that is constructed through teaching experiences that affirm what it means to be a teacher (Harlow & Cobb, 2014). Harlow and Cobb examined the impact of a redeveloped program on pre-service teachers in their first year of teacher education. The program aimed to prepare pre-service teachers with a more realistic and authentic understanding of what it means to be a teacher, and thereby develop a strong sense of teacher identity. Pre-service teachers were paired with associate teachers in classrooms once a week while completing teacher preparation coursework at the same time. The program redesign came about as a result of advocacy for greater flexibility and responsiveness to the realities of teaching by providing authentic, integrated teacher education through collaborative
partnerships with local schools (Harlow & Cobb, 2014). This community of practice brought about “active participation and reflection on the roles and responsibilities of teaching alongside an understanding of the implicit codes of practice embedded in teaching” (Harlow & Cobb, 2014, p. 71) and supported the understanding of what it means to be a teacher (Wenger, 1998).

Using a mixed methods approach, data was collected and compiled in the form of two case studies to account for the experience and implementation of the program. Likert-scale survey items collected from 80 pre-service teachers enabled the researchers to identify emerging patterns and codify the data into themes. These themes were contrasted and compared with statistical information, and through the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data including interviews and focus groups, the researchers established a more practical understanding of the development of teacher identity within a reframed community of practice (Harlow & Cobb, 2014).

Harlow and Cobb’s findings were discussed within the framework of Wenger’s social learning theory including community, practice, meaning-making and identity (Wenger, 1998). The study results appeared to support earlier research suggesting that a collaborative structure allows for an authentic teaching experience, and teaching the course content situated within the school context in partnership with school and university staff is beneficial. While an early sense of teacher identity was evident, further research is needed to examine the development of teacher identity and the long-term benefits of an integrated experience (Harlow & Cobb, 2014).

**Learning climate, leader support, and leader interaction.** Involvement and engagement of members is critical to the effectiveness of a community of practice
Baker-Eveleth, Chung, Eveleth, & O'Neill, 2011). Baker-Eveleth et al. (2011) reported the results of a study identifying three factors that impacted the development of a community of practice: learning climate, leader support, and leader interaction. According to Wenger, individuals reported high levels of meaning, involvement, identification, and belongingness to a community when they acted “as resources to each other exchanging information, making sense of situations, sharing new tricks and new ideas, as well as keeping each other company and spicing up each other’s working days” (Wenger, 1998, p. 47).

Learning, then, can be described in this social context as active, participatory, and a collective process of constructing and sharing knowledge (Baker-Eveleth et al., 2011). The researchers hypothesized that leaders would play a critical role in the extent to which members of a community of practice identify with the community, develop a sense of meaning, exhibit a high degree of involvement in the community, and develop a strong feeling of belonging in the community.

To investigate the role of social learning on the development of a community of practice, Baker-Eveleth et al. (2011) surveyed 94 business students in two cohort groups following a yearlong integrated business curriculum. In addition to traditional classroom instruction, students received additional hours spent with faculty team members interacting with cohort groups, student-team mentoring meetings, presentation practice sessions, evening examinations, one-on-one advising and tutoring, and project debrief sessions. These social conditions provided a unique opportunity for the faculty to facilitate social learning practices and to observe the development of a community of practice (Baker-Eveleth et al., 2011).
In the Baker-Eveleth et al. (2011) study, the correlations between the three social-learning aspects of the program, learning climate, leader support and leader interaction, and the four characteristics of a community of practice, identification, belongingness, meaning and involvement, were positive and significant. Moreover, through hierarchical multiple regression analysis, a fixed order of entry for variables was used to control for the effects of covariates, or to test the effects of certain predictors independent of the influence of others. Known predictors should be entered first in their importance in predicting the outcome (Field, 2009). In this study, the relationships between belongingness and leader support and leader interaction were significant and positive (i.e., $\beta = 0.43, p \leq 0.01, \beta = 0.24, p \leq 0.05$, respectively), offering some support for the expectation that social-learning practices play a positive role in developing a community of practice (Baker-Eveleth et al., 2011). The relationships between identification and learning climate and leader support were also significant and positive (i.e., $\beta = 0.15, p \leq 0.10, \beta = 0.36, p \leq 0.01$, respectively), offering some support for the researchers’ hypotheses. Likewise, the relationship between involvement and leader interaction was significant and positive (i.e., $\beta = 0.48, p \leq 0.01$), offering some support for the expectation that social-learning practices or behaviors play a positive role in developing a community of practice. Lastly, the relationship between meaning and leader interaction was significant and positive (i.e., $\beta = 0.47, p \leq 0.01$).

Baker-Eveleth et al. (2011) noted that while it is accepted that communities of practice facilitate knowledge sharing, less is known about the factors that promote the development of them. They found that leader support has a positive effect on identification and belongingness, climate has a positive effect on identification, and
leader interaction has a positive impact on belongingness, involvement and meaning. The authors concluded from the results of the study that supportiveness through climate and leader support plays a critical role in the formation of attachments with the community (i.e. identification and belongingness) and that interaction with the leader plays a central role to the extent that members take action as a result of their membership or see the value of taking action in the future (Baker-Eveleth et al., 2011).

These six studies provided a foundation for the research to follow within the theoretical constructs of situated learning and social capital theory. The author reviewed qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research as well as theoretical articles to support the study and the research design. Through this examination, the researcher became grounded in the literature associated with the theoretical constructs of situated learning and social capital.
Chapter Three

Research Methodology

Chapter Overview

In Chapter Three, an overview is provided of the methodology used to address the three research questions regarding communities of practice and teacher social capital. Included in this chapter are the research design, setting, participant and sampling procedures, measures addressing validity and reliability, and the data collection and analysis processes. Also included are the limitations of the research design and study.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were designed to examine how communities of practice generate teacher social capital. More specifically, the researcher examined how teachers described their community of practice through the lens of legitimate peripheral participation, how teachers connected their trajectory to social capital, and the implications for school leaders to grow social capital through communities of practice. The research questions were as follows:

- Research Question 1: How do teachers describe their community of practice?
- Research Question 2: How do communities of practice generate teacher social capital?
- Research Question 3: What are the implications for school leaders to grow teacher social capital through communities of practice?

Research Design

The researcher selected a qualitative case study as the research design to address the three research questions. Qualitative research can be described as an inquiry process
of understanding in a natural setting where “the researcher is an instrument of data collection and gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and described a process that is expressive and persuasive in language” (Creswell, 1998, p. 14). This meaning and process can be organized through qualitative research and takes place within a real-life, contemporary context or setting (Yin, 2009). Yin also suggested the design of the study should be representative or typical and describe common situations. Communities of practice are commonplace in organizations and describe how people interact with each other to establish and grow their relationships (Wenger, 1998). For this reason, a single case study design was selected, although there are numerous types of case study designs that can be used depending on the purpose and number of groups analyzed (Creswell, 2007). In this case, the purpose of the case study design using interviews was to explore how communities of practice generate teacher social. As in qualitative research, there were no dependent or independent variables.

**Setting and Participants**

The setting for this study was a small school serving students at the elementary, middle and high school levels. When compared to the student enrollment of other districts in the state, the district is one of the largest, and is among the top 20 most diverse school districts in the United States.

The participants in this study included teacher volunteers and met the minimum recommended sample size of 4 - 5 participants for case study research (Creswell, 2007). Participants were identified within this study by pseudonyms, and they represented a cross-section of 35 staff based on gender, age, position, and years of experience.
**Sampling Process**

Creswell (2007) stated that data collection involved a wide array of procedures as the researcher builds an in-depth picture of the case. Yin (2009) identified six sources of evidence collection: document analysis, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. For this qualitative case study, the researcher utilized interviews as the form of data collection to enable members of the community of practice to individually and collectively respond to direct questions. Other evidence sources fell outside the scope of this study. This study focused on teacher descriptions of their community of practice and the development of social capital. However, further studies could include additional qualitative evidence collected over time to examine the temporal nature of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

**Measures**

A data collection measure was selected for this study was the interview analysis. Two types of interview structures were selected: the semi-structured, one-on-one with each participant, followed by a focus-group interview. Interviews are an important source of information and gather data about past events that cannot be replicated (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to investigate communities of practices through the lens of situated learning theory and to explore how communities of practice generated teacher social capital. Research participants were interviewed at least one time for approximately 20 minutes. Semi-structured questions were designed to gather facts as well as opinions from key respondents (Yin, 2009). Based on the literature review and findings from other studies within the topic of communities of practice, the
researcher developed interview questions and audio-recorded the responses using an open source application (Tapmedia, 2017) to conduct an effective interview (Merriam, 2009).

**Validity and Reliability**

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are concerns that can be approached through careful attention to a study’s conceptualization and the way in which the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and by the way in which the findings are presented (Merriam, 2009). Both are important considerations in any research study. Maxwell (2005) argued the researcher cannot truly capture reality, and therefore, validity is a goal rather than a product. Validity cannot be proven or taken for granted, since “it is relative, and must be assessed in relationship to the purposes and circumstances of the research rather than being a context-independent property of methods or conclusions” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 105). Creswell (2007) defined validity as an attempt to address the accuracy of the findings.

Pilot testing was used to address validity within this study. Prior to interviewing participants, a pilot test was used to refine the interview questions. Test case respondents were given the interview questions and were selected based on convenience, access, and geographic proximity (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). The anecdotal feedback from the pilot test respondents provided the researcher the opportunity to revise the questions to enhance clarity.

Merriam (2009) also identified several strategies that would increase the validity of findings including triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement in data collection, and reflexivity. The first validity strategy of triangulation consists of multiple sources of evidence to confirm emergent findings (Merriam, 2009). For this reason, the
researcher collected interview data in a one-on-one setting as well as a focus-group setting and triangulated these data with current literature as an information resource. Maxwell (2005) wrote, “triangulation is collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods” (p. 112). The second strategy to increase validity is member checks. By taking the preliminary data analysis back to the participants, member checking enables the researcher to solicit feedback on the emergent findings (Merriam, 2009). Adequate engagement is a third strategy to strengthen validity and involves spending adequate time collecting data until the data is saturated. In this case, the researcher provided adequate engagement by collecting data until there was repetition of data and data that supported the various perspectives of participants. The fourth strategy, reflexivity, ensures validity through the recognition of how the researcher influences the conduct and conclusions of the study based on personal values and expectations (Merriam, 2009). To provide clarification on interpretation of the data, the researcher explained biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research in a following section.

Reliability within a study is defined as the consistency and repeatability of the research (Yin, 2009), and the extent to which the research findings can be replicated (Merriam, 2009). However, Merriam stated that the complexity of human interpretation could make replication problematic in qualitative research. To mitigate this problem, the researcher provided equitable conditions and information regarding the study including a purpose statement, the interview questions, interview protocol, and the scheduled date, time and location for the interview. Additionally, a uniform structure for the interview
was provided by asking the questions in the same order and within the same timeframe for each participant.

**Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher is critical within a study. In qualitative research, this role is situationally determined by the impact of the writing on the researcher, the participants, and on the reader. The reflexivity of the researcher is a key rhetorical issue in a qualitative study, according to Creswell (2007).

> How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research. All writing is positioned within a stance. All researchers shape the writing that emerges, and qualitative researchers need to accept this interpretation and be open about it in their writings. (Creswell, 2007, p. 179)

The integrity of the researcher is also key to this role, and Merriam (2009) stated that researchers needed to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research study. Such clarification allows the reader to understand how a researcher might have arrived at a particular interpretation of the data. Maxwell (2005) also addressed this idea by explaining the reason for making perspective, biases, and assumptions clear to the reader “is not to eliminate variance between researchers in values and expectations they bring to a study, but establish an understanding of how a particular researcher’s values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusion of a study” (p. 108).

This researcher was employed by the local school district and was the principal and only administrator at the school in which this study was conducted. Moreover, the
researcher was the supervisor of all staff within the school and had held this position for six years at the time of the study. The personal biases and perspectives associated with this role were recognized by the researcher. To ensure that assumptions and biases were mitigated in the analysis and outcomes, the selection of case study methodology was appropriately transparent, and strategies to ensure validity and reliability were closely adhered to throughout the study. The following paragraphs within this section attempt to explain the stance of the researcher within this qualitative study.

The researcher’s interest in situated learning theory and teacher social capital emerged during her first year serving in the school within this study. As a key initiative, the district had just implemented Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) requiring regularly scheduled meeting dates and times, standardized agenda formats, and meeting minutes recorded on a contractually negotiated template that was submitted to supervisors for review.

As a principal new to this school, the researcher described the staff as gracious as she followed district imperatives to implement PLCs. What she learned through the patience of teachers, was the existence of a strong community of practice already in place. The researcher determined through a review of the literature, that a PLC was not a community of practice. This community was organic, self-supporting, and didn’t need to follow a handbook to support the professional growth and development of teachers.

At that same time, the researcher noted a decline in the number of qualified applicants for teaching positions in her district, especially in math, science and special education. This shrinking candidate pool was felt at the local, state and national level. As a result, teacher development pipelines were springing up around Washington state and in
other parts of the country to address the perceived teacher shortage. The researcher also
determined that teacher attrition rates were low at her school, student achievement was
high, climate survey data was favorable, and teachers anecdotally reported a love for
teaching, care for their students, and rapport with their teacher community.

It occurred to the researcher that teachers in her school were investing in their
professional relationships with each other and creating value in their social network. In an
act defining her perspective, bias and assumptions, she shelved her district how-to-run
PLC texts and began researching the intersection of situated learning theory and social
capital.

**Data Collection**

Following the pilot testing of interview questions, all staff were invited to be
participants, and participation was completely voluntary. Recognizing the positional
power as principal and supervisor, the researcher briefly explained the nature of the
optional study at the end of a staff meeting, and invited staff to contact her within the
following week if they were interested in participating. Five staff contacted the researcher
with an interest in participating. All staff who voiced an interest in participating were
included. The researcher then scheduled appointments for the interviews outside of
workday hours. Using an interview protocol, prior to the scheduled time, the participants
were provided instructions including the purpose for the interview, specific terminology
to be used, the Institutional Review Board Informed Consent document (see Appendix A)
as well as the interview questions. The researcher reviewed the informed consent
document with participants and clarified they could discontinue their participation at any
time. All participants read and signed the informed consent form. The interview began
only after the participant was ready to proceed. The interview itself is defined as a data collection method in which an interviewer asks an interviewee questions (Vogt & Johnson, 2016), and the questions are used as a guide when interviewing respondents.

The researcher asked the same questions of each participant and in the same order and posed follow-up questions as necessary to provide clarity and development of ideas. Each interview was also recorded with the permission of the participants. Following the completion of individual interviews, the researcher provided transcripts to the participants for their review and feedback.

Following a similar protocol, the researcher invited the same participants to a thirty-minute follow-up group interview to tease out supporting or new information and ensure all participants were able to address the questions and respond to each other’s comments. This interview was also recorded and transcribed, and subsequently provided to the participants for review and feedback. The researcher completed a coding and theming process to determine trends and patterns among the participants.

**Data Analysis**

Creswell (2007) described the process of data analysis in qualitative research as preparing and organizing the data, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding, and finally representing the data. This process necessitates the use of a strategy to treat evidence fairly, produce compelling conclusions, and rule out alternative interpretations (Yin, 2009). The researcher used Creswell’s (2007) data analysis spiral process to organize and interpret the data. The steps are as follows:

1. Organize and prepare the data.
2. Read through all the data.
3. Describe, classify, and interpret the data using codes.

4. Use a coding process to develop themes.

5. Interpret the data.

6. Present the data.

To organize the data, the researcher used the Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) Miner Lite (Qualitative Data Analysis Miner Lite, 2016) computer software program to create an inventory for transcripts and read through the data in its entirety. The researcher then processed each transcript and its corresponding notes and coded the responses. Coding is the act of reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments (Creswell, 2007). After coding each of the responses, the researcher developed themes based on Wenger’s social learning theory (2009) and the emerging commonalities. These themes formed common ideas connecting several, aggregated codes (Creswell, 2007). For the purpose of addressing issues of reliability, the transcripts were independently reviewed by another qualitative researcher to establish interrater reliability and in turn, provided the stability of responses (Creswell, 2007). Vogt & Johnson (2016) said interrater reliability required agreement and consistency among raters and was the extent to which multiple raters would judge responses in the same way.

Interpretation involves making sense of the data. Creswell (2007) asserted that in the process of interpretation, researchers would step back and form larger meanings of what is happening in a given situation. This process involves moving from a concrete description of observable data to a more abstract level using concepts to describe phenomena (Merriam, 2009). Finally, the researcher presented the data in this dissertation study.
Limitations

A case study poses limitations. A single analysis does not necessarily result in generalizability, although measures were taken to increase the reliability of the study such as utilizing an independent coder while interpreting data to increase interrater reliability. Likewise, critical and reflexive analyses were utilized throughout the study, but as an embedded researcher, her stance, including assumptions and bias, cannot be completely dispelled. The researcher’s position as supervisor was also a limitation. To address these issues of validity, participation was optional and open to all staff, and participants had the opportunity to review and approve their responses. Lastly, the small number of participants, indicative of a case study, could be considered a limitation.
Chapter Four

Results

This study is an examination of how communities of practice generate teacher social capital. More specifically, the researcher explores how teachers describe their community of practice through the lens of legitimate peripheral participation, how teachers connect their trajectory to social capital, and the implications for school leaders to grow social capital through communities of practice. Each participant was interviewed twice in the month of February, first, in an individual interview and again in a focus group interview. As summarized in Table 1, all participants were from the same school, but their experience level spanned from third grade to twelfth grade as well as content-specific areas including elementary, counseling, English language arts and physics. Participants also ranged in their number of overall years of teaching experience from six to twenty-two years, and their employment at the school spanned one to fifteen years. Three participants were male and two participants were female. While participation was voluntary, the participants happened to provide a cross-section of teacher representation, including gender, an age span from 34 – 65 years, grade level, years of experience, and years at this particular school that included and described multiple perspectives about this case (Creswell, 2007).
Table 1

Participants’ Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nichelle</th>
<th>Preston</th>
<th>Deborah</th>
<th>Neale</th>
<th>Tony</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years at this school</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Secondary Elementary Elementary Secondary Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The responses of the participants described their community of practice, perspectives on their experience and relationships with others in the community, and their development and use of knowledge (Blackmore, 2010). Four themes aligned with Wenger’s social learning model (Wenger, 1998) and emerged from these interviews. These include a) belonging, b) practice, c) meaning, and d) identity. These themes are summarized in Table 2 below. Additionally, through the focus group interview, the researcher teased out further participant insight on social capital and its implications for school leadership.
Table 2

*Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes with Representative Quotes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>“There’s a real sense of community among teachers and staff, and . . . I haven’t been at a school that has had the most cohesion. I just feel welcome from the front office and the teachers and . . . the secondary level” (Preston, ll. 19-21).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>“We’re a small school. We tend to have a little bit of a family feeling. I think that we recognize in a small school that you have to bring more to the table than just your expertise as a teacher” (Tony, ll. 172-174).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>“Every once in a while, we get frustrated, but really, we're trying to help each other work things out. So, we value each other, and again that's because we are a small enough group to get to know each other” (Nichelle, ll. 210-212).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>“We truly have to trust each other. I think there is that trust in the school where if I do my job and prepare students for you, I can trust you're going to do your job and help them succeed beyond that” (Neale, ll. 16-18).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>“You've built it into our schedule. I have an hour where my job is to hook up with other teachers and students. So, I’ve been able to collaborate” (Nichelle, ll. 76-77).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>“We do so much informal work at our lunches and that when we do formal work, it's not as awkward” (Tony, ll. 112-113).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td>“[Our purpose] is shaped by [being] student-centered. They are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>our priorities, and barriers only mean problem-solving”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Deborah, ll. 79-80).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why We Exist</strong></td>
<td>“We tend to be people who care about people. We want the</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>world to be a better place, and I guess we can't change</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>everyone's life so let's start with this—as many kids as we can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>get in our rooms. It's a lot harder to change an adult life then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>set a kid up to find the right place for themselves” (Neale, ll.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>64-67).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
<td>“That message from the top that this is something you value,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and if you value it, you've made place for it. You know, it's</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>easy to give lip service, oh, we want to collaborate, we want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to, you know, we want this community. We have these values,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>but if it's not, if there's not a place made for that, then it's</td>
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<td></td>
<td>really hard, and after a while it doesn't feel genuine” (Nichelle</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ll. 79-83).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Uniqueness</strong></td>
<td>“People find it motivating to do things our way. Because we</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>have a unique staff and a unique student population, and its</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>motivating to stick together and continue to do what we know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>works with our staff and our students” (Deborah, ll. 161-163).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role</strong></td>
<td>“The type of people that we are, and that has a lot to do with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the type of school we are. We know going in, what's expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of us” (Tony, ll. 16-17).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Newcomers</strong></td>
<td>“Asking questions about me and on taking an interest in me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where do I come from, and just feeling like teachers are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interested in me, and maybe I have something to offer. I am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>just valued. . . I've always felt at our school that my opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>matter, and I am an equal member of collaboration” (Preston, ll.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28-32).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small School</strong></td>
<td>“In our school, we’re so small, we can’t have failure . . . So,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>we work super hard on making sure students are successful”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Deborah, ll. 92-94).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Belonging

All five participants described a sense of belonging at the school. They included descriptions of attachment and acceptance with their community, and three participants used familial descriptors for their relationships and personal connections with their colleagues. The theme of belonging, then, was described through the sub-themes of community and family.

Community. Every participant described the sense of community with their colleagues and students, and several compared the community with their past community experiences. Deborah described community as follows:

The sense of community at our school is extremely strong. I’ve worked at five different buildings in this school district, and our school is by far the strongest community, and when you asked me that question, I’m thinking about—where is that coming from? What is it made of? I think one of the things is we are so small, we don't have a person to handle every issue or situation that comes up so because of that we have to cross purposes . . . and that involves interacting with a lot of different people, so I think that helps people to feel connected and important to each other. (Deborah, ll. 10-16)

Nichelle stated her level of attachment to this school exceeded her experience in other buildings:

I feel very attached to the school, and I've never felt as attached to a school and a staff. I mean, where else [would] I dress up like the yellow brick road, or an Elvis record, or Ghostbusters? I never participated in those kinds of activities, school
spirit things in my other schools, so just that is for me is telling, you know, that I feel safe enough. I feel welcomed. (Nichelle, ll. 13-16)

Preston compared his previous experience to the grade span of the school including three levels—elementary, middle and high school, all on one campus. “It's a stronger sense of community than when they’re on separate campuses because I’m able to see . . . there's a shared commitment to the same students” (Preston, ll. 60-62). “I haven't been at a school that has had the most cohesion . . . The sense of community is very high as far as feeling like members needs are met. I've never had a need that I felt like I couldn't ask someone and have it be[en] dealt with” (Preston, ll. 19-20, 21-23).

Participants noted that community extended beyond teachers and was shared with students and their families as well. Deborah described building relationships with students as a strength of the staff:

The staff has as a whole is relational with students and families. We have the benefit of we’re so small, that year after year after year, elementary and secondary, we tend to have the same kids and families, so maybe it’s easier to build relations. But I think maybe it’s something our staff, because of the setting they’re in, is something they’re very strong at. They assume that they can build that relationship. We tease and say that if you just love on them enough, they’ll come around. (Deborah, ll. 131-136)

Tony described the impact of the community culture benefiting staff and students:

“The culture works on the teachers with collegiality. I see that work with the kids, too. Plus, they're more collegial with me” (Tony, ll. 242-243). Neal described that expectations for students are also shared by staff and benefitted the school culture:
We have that pride in school PRIDE [persevering, respectful, inclusive, dependable, and engaged], and having really clear, solid, foundational words where students know what we expect and that we're all striving to be better people in these five ways, it helps with the culture. (Neale, ll. 61-63)

**Family.** Some of the participants used the analogy of family to describe their relationships with colleagues. Tony explained that the small school environment created the feeling of family. “Because were a small school, we tend to have a little bit of a family feeling. I think that we recognize in a small school that you have to bring more to the table than just your expertise as a teacher” (Tony, ll. 172-174). Nichelle described how staff supported each other in their professional and personal lives:

> We have a really strong sense of community, and we know what each other is going through in family life as well as school life, and we're pretty supportive of each other and try to, you know, take up the slack when somebody's having a hard time, and that's I think that is a genuine thing that's come from this place.

(Nichelle, ll. 26-29)

Neale described the importance of supporting others in their personal of lives to benefit teachers and their students:

> We're very good at supporting each other outside, like our personal lives as well, which seems unimportant. I had a hard time in my life getting over myself to that point . . . you have to be bigger than yourself and care about people, because you can't teach if your life is falling apart. We think about with students, but not always think about it with peers. (Neale, ll. 173-177)
Like a family, Tony described the importance of protecting the relationships, even if there was conflict:

> We like this so much that we're not willing to damage it . . . when you care enough about each other, you know, it's kind of like family around the dinner table, you just know, we’ll do this later. We’re not going to solve the world, but we are going to solve this sandwich right here with everyone else. (Tony, ll. 95 – 100)

**Practice**

The participants all addressed the theme of practice in their interviews. Emerging sub-themes included *engagement* through working together, *trust* teachers have in each other and their willingness to be vulnerable, the physical and organizational *structures* of the school, and *informal opportunities* that benefit their participation within the community.

**Engagement.** Three of the five participants described their engagement by comparing their community of practice to their participation in the mandated, school district professional learning community (PLC). Participants attributed the size of the school, in part, for existing differences. Deborah described a staff-designed PLC at the school, referred to as the flag team:

> PLCs are good, but . . . people treat those as top down. I don’t think there is quite the gusto in those. But I will say, of the PLCs, I think the flag team is awesome and . . . we have a very diverse group [participating in it] . . . It allows us to get a peek from the top and collaborate with the other people . . . because in our school,
we’re so small, we can’t have failure . . . so, we work super hard on making sure students are successful. (Deborah, ll. 87-94)

Nichelle contrasted her PLC experience at other schools with this school:

[Complaining] was the norm when I worked at both middle school and high school when we had our PLCs. Most of the time was spent complaining about students, complaining about what we had to do, and that just isn't true here. And every once in a while, we get frustrated, but really, we're trying to help each other work things out. So, we value each other, and again, that's because we are [a] small enough group to get to know each other. (Nichelle, ll. 208-212)

Nichelle continued to describe the organic nature of PLCs at the school compared to the resistance to PLCs that she had previously experienced:

The teachers at both the middle school and high school resisted PLCs all the way through . . . we have to get together, but we’re doing it under duress, and we're going to do as little as possible. Where [here] we kind of have natural PLCs. They happen naturally . . . we have PLCs every day . . . that's kind of cool making connections. So, they happen, but it's a real organic thing. It's not, you have to do this. It's not manufactured. (Nichelle, ll. 165-174)

Neale also described PLC and teacher collaboration:

There are the PLCs and the times where we collaboratively get together as a staff and will work on just general teaching skills and ways to look at kids, and help kids, support them. I think one of the biggest difference makers is when we do work together, physically together, and when it comes to . . . students being
tracked by multiple teachers [the flag team] rather than just having one teacher to be connected to. (Neale, ll. 75-79)

While Preston did not use the phrase PLC in his interview, he described teacher collaboration that was indicative of a PLC meeting or other team meeting:

The elementary team has been able to collaborate across grade levels, and that’s been beneficial because we’ve able to hear about fourth grade and what’s going on in fourth grade, and I’ve been able to share what we’re doing in third grade, and I think it’s helpful to know where the students are going to next and to frame our instruction with that mindset, too. (Preston, ll. 46-49)

Trust. Four of five participants addressed trust as necessary for engagement within the community. The participant who did not address trust in his interview was in his first year at this school. The trust necessary for each teacher to effectively prepare students for the next grade level was described by Neale. “We truly have to trust each other. I think there is that trust in the school where if I do my job and prepare students for you, I can trust you're going to do your job and help them succeed beyond that” (Neale, ll. 17-18). Tony connected the environment with the ability to be honest with colleagues as well as students:

We want it to be the best possible environment. It also it gives us a chance to . . . be more open and honest about who we are. I feel much more comfortable sharing me with the students than I would at the big comprehensive. I felt like the least they knew about me, the better. (Tony, ll. 247-250)

Nichelle described trust as a key component for engagement as well as feeling valued by school leadership and her colleagues:
I think it's all about trust . . . part of its size, part of it’s the way you approach us . . . you seem to genuinely care. I think most people sense your genuine care . . . that makes you do… it's just like with students, if they don't think you care about them, they're going to do what they want to do . . . you're a good listener, and so it's a slow process of building trust. It's all about trust and confidence. You know, people want to please other people if they sense that they're valued. And if they don't sense they're valued, it's like, I'll do this for me, or why should I work so hard? I’ve been in both places . . . It goes back to trust that we trust each other, and we know each other well. (Nichelle, ll. 111-118; 181)

Nichelle described the feelings associated with engagement with colleagues, including vulnerability and uncomfortableness:

I think we also have people who are maybe not as afraid to collaborate. You know, old-school teachers: You closed your classroom door and it was your kingdom. You know, it was terrifying if anybody walked in. And I think that [is] still the norm with most big schools . . . We have to be a little more vulnerable here, and we have to be willing to be a little uncomfortable sometimes. (Nichelle, ll. 86-92)

Deborah described the connection with each other as generating trust:

Sometimes, people don’t get us, and that we're so connected within each other they are more trusting of ideas or seeking help from people within the building than outside, and that's an example of the belonging and feeling connected to each other. (Deborah, ll. 20-22)
**Structure.** Three participants commented that their engagement with their community is impacted by physical or organizational structures including master scheduling and use of time. Tony described the building layout and its limitations. He said of the teacher in the adjoining classroom:

We work really well together. Part of that is because naturally we are right next to each other so it's easy for us to communicate, which I think is important. Comparing that to classrooms, where we have to get out, go to the hallway, walk down the hallway and go in. There's just a natural barrier there. But even those classrooms, where I do have to leave and go, I always feel welcome, I never feel like I'm intruding. We show respect for each other's classrooms. (Tony, ll. 53-58)

Deborah described the structured time within the school day, engagement through co-teaching opportunities, and how the master schedule supported both:

The building teachers are excited to work together and help each other, fill each other's needs through co-teaching. Some people have time built-in, but other people, like Joe, are just doing it, type of a thing. And they have to take the time to plan for that, and I think that’s just really cool. (Deborah, ll. 29-32)

... Providing time and removing obstacles. . . . our building principal does a very good job of building in time for people to be able to cross teach [and] . . . it's one of the reasons that that happens . . . And having to go out of the way, like even giving a couple of hours for intervention so that the intervention people can go in and help to meet a need. (Deborah, ll. 33-37, 41-42).
Nichelle also described the importance of master scheduling to support engagement through collaboration and community:

You’ve built it into our schedule. I have an hour where my job is to hook up with other teachers and students. So, I’ve been able to collaborate . . . so just so having that opportunity built-in . . . it's kind of that message from the top that this is something you value, and if you value it, you've made place for it. You know, it's easy to give lip service, oh, we want to collaborate . . . we want this community. We have these values, but if it's not, if there's not a place made for that, then it's really hard, and after a while it doesn't feel genuine. (Nichelle, ll. 76-83)

Nichelle further described meeting structures that were in place that contributed to engaging as a community. She described Den Time, a 10-minute, schoolwide daily community-building meeting with students. She also referenced staff meetings and the flexibility of the agenda:

It’s again that structure . . . Den Time . . . where PRIDE and digital citizenship and . . . mindfulness and you know the intentional community-building . . . teachers actually practice all these things . . . and you give us time in our meetings to talk about that, and if something comes up, you know, we have a couple of truth tellers in our faculty, and you know, and you're open to that, even if it's not something you always like to hear, you make room for that. (Nichelle, ll. 95-106)

**Informal opportunities.** Four of the five participants also referenced the unstructured times they engaged with colleagues, specifically noting the importance of lunchtime. Tony described the informality at lunchtime that resulted in increased collegiality during structured meetings:
There's both formal and informal, and the informal happens all the time. We talk, we share notes, we lunch together, which is nice. I probably lunch together with everyone else the least . . . sometimes I have kids in my classroom doing testing, or if it's a cold day, I just let them in there and eat. But even so, I still feel like I have a lot of time informally. I kind of make it a habit to check in with all the other teachers at least once a week to stick my head in the classroom see what they're doing, what's new, what's happening, and then also, the lunches go on a big way. And we do so much informal work at our lunches that when we do formal work, it's not as awkward. . . it’s more collegial. (Tony, ll. 104 – 113)

Deborah stated that engagement with colleagues also occurred informally:

I've actually seen it in the lunchroom. We’ll all be sitting down for lunch and someone brings something up. Even if it starts as a grumble, then someone else says, well, I did this and it worked really well, and ahh, I’ll try that, too. So, the lunchroom is a . . . and Friday get-togethers, and even though I don’t attend them myself, they talk about students at that time as well. (Deborah, ll. 104-108)

Preston described that even as a new staff member this year, he felt a part of the community in both formal and informal settings: “From the perspective of a new teacher, I'm included in collaboration and discussions, but also just feeling like in the staff room at lunches, not feeling excluded, but feeling like part of the group” (Preston, ll. 16-18).

Prior to transferring to this school, Nichelle described she ate in isolation at her first school. “I never, ever ate in the lunchroom. I sat in my classroom, and I didn't even know where it was until like June” (Nichelle, ll. 124-126). Tony described collaboration through the informal opportunities and family sub-themes. “Like family around the
dinner table, you just know . . . we’re not going to solve the world, but you know, we are going to solve this sandwich right here with everyone else” (Tony, ll. 98-100).

Meaning

The participants described meaning through four sub-themes: purpose, defined as shared beliefs and vision that create a common understanding; why we exist, the reason for the school to function; and leadership, how administrative decisions impact the school’s purpose and function.

**Purpose.** Neale spoke to the purpose of the school and the focus on learning within the community. He described a shared goal among teachers who saw learning not as something to get, but as preparation for life:

I think the culture is initially shaped by having a common goal, and I see in this school . . . we're all here to support students as humans, preparing them for life rather than just learning random things and passing tests and moving to the next level. [There] seems to be a true buy-in to what's best for students. There's a lot of flexibility with what students want to learn and how we know we meet their needs. As far as learning, as an action, [it’s] not a concrete thing they get, they walk away with. (Neale, ll. 36-43)

While Neale described the school purpose in action terms, Tony used more concrete descriptors to identify meaning through purpose:

A shared vision is probably really important . . . and I don't know if it would be easy to articulate . . . you as the principal, you kind of have your vision of what you want the school to be . . . we pick up on that either through each other, or directly from you. And then there's all the little signs, the signage, the actual
signage, the way it's written, the way its presented, [it] communicates an expectation or a feeling. I also think it comes back to us from our kids. (Tony, ll. 224-229)

Deborah described a philosophy and mindset indicative of the community purpose that did not focus on test scores as a definition of success:

That positive, like everybody-can-grow philosophy, instead of being concerned about getting dinged. With a school as small as us, it doesn’t take more than a couple [of] students scoring low to skew everything, and you have to understand that the small-school dynamic is so different and for staff not to be scared, just to look at it as one more thing we’ve got to plan around . . . It is shaped by [being] student-centered, they are our priorities, and barriers only mean problem-solving. If everyone goes forward with that attitude, we’ll be fine. (Deborah, ll. 74-80)

**Why we exist.** Participants described the needs of the population they serve as the reason for the school’s existence. As a choice school, students do not attend the school based on boundary, but by application. Deborah described the diversity at the school and her own motivation to work with students who have not experienced success elsewhere:

We have such a mixed bag of students, and they all come in at a different place, and we have a lot of students who have had issues at other places . . . but to watch them come in and join in on our culture, that is very cool. I think the small learning environment, because its small, doesn’t mean it’s any easier . . .the kids in the classroom have extra challenges. So, I think that small environment keeps a lot of our staff wanting to be there and motivated. For me, personally, being able to reach students that have not been successful in other schools, that is really big
for me. In a strange sense, it’s easy to work with the kids that everything goes well, but when you look at turning kids around who haven’t done well in any place they’ve been, that is extremely motivating. (Deborah, ll. 150-162)

Neale described the teachers as people who care about people and function together to proactively impact the lives of students to benefit them as adults:

We tend to be people who care about people. We want the world to be a better place, and I guess we can't change everyone's life so let's start with this--as many kids as we can get in our rooms, and it's a lot harder to change an adult life then set a kid up to find the right place for themselves. (Neale, ll. 158-167)

Preston described the enjoyment and creativity of the teacher community as a function of student success:

There is a steely-eyed focus . . . on student success and everything else is kind of framed around that and student engagement, and students enjoy being at school. I’ve seen a lot of creative things teachers are doing and I think that’s from their motivation, they want to get the kids to succeed. (Preston, ll. 83-86)

Leadership. Participants described they found meaning in their work when leadership was supportive, fostered relationships and provided positive feedback. Participants included the researcher, who was also their supervisor, in their descriptions as well as past leaders from other schools. Thee participants described leadership actions and perceived authenticity resulting in increased motivation among staff. Tony stated, “You as the principal, you kind of have your vision of what you want to school to be, and I think we pick up on that either through each other or directly from you” (Tony, ll. 225-226). Nichelle described the importance of relationships as a motivating factor:
My very first compliment as a teacher came from you. And this is after being a teacher for 20 some years . . . Leadership is, well it's kind of like with kids. If you're seen, and if you're acknowledged, then you want to work harder, you want to figure out how to be a good teacher . . . We’re seen, we’re valued and it's the relationships, you know, you foster relationships with staff, relationships between each other, and that you know that makes all the difference. If there's no relationship, then there's no reason to really commit and to give your best self.

(Nichelle, ll. 39-42, 217-220)

Nichelle continued to describe a previous school administrator and her negative experience:

That was very sad. She never asked us what worked well at our school, you know, so that was it. It was her, that's her style, you know. She has an agenda, and I wouldn't be still teaching if I had to stay there. (Nichelle, ll. 153-155)

Both Nichelle and Deborah described the importance of positive and supportive administrative decisions. “You as an administrator are a good listener and supportive . . . The messages from the top make a huge difference, you know, those are important things” (Nichelle, ll. 252-253).

You as a principal do a really good job of helping everybody on their staff to use their strengths . . . of making sure that different people have different chances to do things instead of always one person. You know, the usual leadership people. Also, when you're looking at how our staffing meetings go. . . or those ways we use those Wednesday trainings. If we have something that’s not quite right, like if a certain number of test scores are down, you don't come down on the people, you
look at it as like what the barriers, what we need to do, like problem solving instead of punitive. And I think that help people to keep . . . going towards that positive. (Deborah, ll. 61; 73-75)

Nichelle also described the perceived genuineness of the leader as giving meaning to the purpose of the community:

It’s the way you approach us, you know? I mean, when you seem to genuinely care. I think most people sense your genuine care . . . it's just like with students, if they don't think you care about them, they're going to do what they want to do . . . you're a good listener and so it's a slow process of building trust. It's all about trust and confidence. (Nichelle, ll. 111-116)

Nichelle continues by discussing the style of leadership:

It’s the style of the administrator. Whether or not they really want to get to know the teachers, or they see leading as, ‘I tell you what to do’ . . . the qualities of the leader really kind of set the tone. (Nichelle, ll. 163-164; 204)

Identity

Participants described their identity, as participants within the community and as a collective, through four emerging sub-themes. Participants all described the uniqueness of the school as an identifying factor for the community. Participants also all discussed the role of the individual within the community, the impact of roles on the school, and the increased accountability to perform roles within the community. The third sub-theme included new staff, who could be identified as newcomers to the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and lastly, the small school identity was described by all participants, and two described it as central to the identity of the school.
**Uniqueness.** Participants described the uniqueness of the school as valued and motivating, for students and staff. Nichelle recalled a meeting from the early stages of planning for the school, over 21 years ago including the targeted population to be served:

From the beginning . . . I remember going to a meeting when it first started and they were just talking about what they wanted it to be, and that this was a different kind of school. We supported families, and we supported kids who were coming from homeschool situations, or kids who didn't fit in other schools. So, I've always been a weirdo, so you know. (Nichelle, ll. 63-66)

While Nichelle said she was not a teacher at the time, it was the purpose of this school and its intent that motivated her to become a teacher:

It was this school that made me decide to want to go back to school and get my credential, so and then it took me twelve years teaching other places before I got finally here. But that was always my goal, to teach here . . . from the time I volunteered it was clear that the teachers were connecting with each other. And it's just hard to find that in big schools. (Nichelle, ll. 49-59)

Deborah also described the uniqueness of the school as a motivator for staff:

People find it motivating to do things our way. Because we have a unique staff and a unique student population, its motivating to stick together and continue to do what we know works with our staff and our students. (Deborah, ll. 161-163)

Both Preston and Neale spoke to the positive aspects for students and staff of having elementary and secondary students on one campus. They described it as a distinctive feature of the school that students on single level campuses did not enjoy:
It is very unique because it's not like we forget about them once they leave our classroom, especially at a school like our school, it's so small we see students year after year. I can see how having been able to see them into secondary, I think there's a bigger history with the students to draw from, which secondary can talk with elementary about what worked and what successes they had with those particular students and elementary [teachers] can keep in contact with students they have had. I think that both of those are very valuable to being on the same campus. (Preston, ll. 64-69)

Having a place where younger kids can see where they're going, visually and physically see where they're going. Because for most, there is the end of one school building, and they have no idea. [There is a] comfort level for a kid when there is not an unknown, when they've seen the teachers. They've seen the rooms, they’ve seen the other kids that successfully walked across the same path as them. I think it's so comforting for kids. (Neale, ll. 132-138)

**Role.** Descriptions provided by every participant included reliance on the skillset of others, being solely accountable to a role, while assuming many roles in the absence of a larger staff. Deborah described the distribution of expertise as a source of validation and a safeguard against fatigue for the staff:

Everybody has a chance to use their expertise. And that helps some people not to burn out. An example I would use is Ahren heading up the [project]. Brilliant! Because it makes her feel so important and validated, and a couple of other people . . . were like, why didn’t I get to do it? But giving people who have a different
skill, with her . . . background—she’s a perfect fit! And we wouldn’t think about that unless you look closer. And I think you do a really good job of making sure that different people have different chances to do things instead of always one person. You know, the usual leadership people. (Deborah, ll. 61-70)

Deborah also described the connectedness in roles and the necessity of assuming responsibility in the absence of a larger, comprehensive staff:

We don't have a person to handle every issue or situation that comes up, so because of that, we have to cross purposes and take on roles that we typically wouldn’t take, and that involves interacting with a lot of different people. That helps people to feel connected and important to each other. Because, it’s not like you can just look the other way and expect someone else to handle it. You kind of have to jump in there. (Deborah, ll. 13-17)

Tony described the multiple, necessary roles in the context of a supportive community: “You have to wear so many hats, you have to get along. And what’s great is it you don't have that feeling of, I have to get along, you want to get along” (Tony, ll. 188-190).

We have to do so many different things and we have to do them with each other, and we have to learn from each other. Not just take over a job, . . . we not only have to learn the technical end of the job, but the social end of the job, too. (Tony, ll. 205-207).

Nichelle addressed the way teachers supported each other by acknowledging their own strengths and limitations:
I think there's a lack of judgment, you know, I mean it would be really easy to let things happen all the time, and we do things well, and we do things not so well, and I think we're just kind to each other, and so we bring out the best in each other. And we try to play to our strengths and throw the ball to somebody who has strengths that we don't have. (Nichelle, ll. 196-199)

Nichelle described this supportive role in terms of classroom instruction:

We have the things we are really good at and things were not good at. You know, technology and I do not get along at all, so I go to Jose or Katey or somebody else. I help out with National History Day (NHD) you know, I'm the English teacher so I can help with that, you know collaborating with journalism.

(Nichelle, ll. 182-185)

Tony also described the understood accountability when teachers are hired at the school. “The type of people that we are . . . has a lot to do with the type of school we are. We know going in, what's expected of us” (Tony, ll. 16-17). He also referenced the stress from the increased accountability of being the sole teacher of a content area at the high school level. “The actual teaching part, here, is a whole lot more stressful here, having your own classroom, especially in a science classroom” (Tony, ll. 47-48). Nichelle described herself as a better teacher as a result of improved confidence from the increased responsibility, coupled with a supportive community. “I don't think I was a good teacher until I came here, you know? I think I was trying to live up to somebody else's. . . I didn't really know. . . I didn't have the confidence” (Nichelle, ll. 35-37). She elaborated:

I probably became a better teacher coming here, because I responded to the small school and to the warmth and to the genuine feelings here, and maybe it was
having that ultimate responsibility, you know, being the only drama teacher, the
only creative writing teacher, the only English teacher. I had to figure it out, you
know, but I had, it felt like I had the support to do that. (Nichelle, ll. 222-225)

Neale described the roles at the school through the idea of equality. He said each
teacher contributed to the community through their expertise, and every role was
connected to others and the benefit of students. “Community at our school is the idea of
equality and that we all play our own roles, but yet our roles are connected” (Neale, ll.
15-16). He continued:

As far as equality of roles, . . . teachers are more niched. Rather than having three
English teachers, three math teachers, three of everything . . . there's this sort of
someone-in-charge of each aspect of the school and supportive of doing their job,
because we see students as more of a giant puzzle, and we all have to do our piece
to support them and put their picture together. (Neale, ll. 26-30)

Both Neale and Preston addressed the solidarity that comes from serving as the
only teacher at a given grade level, and the potential for isolation when interacting with
other same-grade-level teachers outside of the school:

I am doing more to help more people. I think they get that at this school, it's not
every man for themselves. But elementary tends to be a little more like that
because we have students the entire day, and . . . I am in charge of this kid, no one
else is. Where secondary, you can be a little more supportive as far as you have
one-sixth of the student. Having worked at another school, I don't think it is. I
think the advantage of the schools I've been at outside of this is having multiple
teachers at the same grade level because they know what you're going through,
and they tend to know the kids, the grade band, whereas being the only sixth grade teacher... it gets to the point where I know people care about me, and want to support me, but they’re not dealing with the same [students] at that time. (Neale, ll. 180-193)

Preston also addressed the solo nature of his role that was supported through collaboration: “There’s only one class per grade. I feel like there’s as much collaboration as I’ve had in previous schools, but I feel like it’s more intentional because we are working across grade level bands” (Preston, ll. 76-79).

Newcomers. Tony and Preston both addressed aspects of transitioning to the school from previous teaching positions. They explained how their roles were defined as newcomers to the community. Tony described the introduction and challenges as a staff new to the culture:

[It was] an internal commitment to not just the kids, but to each other... I’ve seen some of the newer teachers come in and start to absorb... it’s really hard your first few years, even if you were a seasoned teacher, being in a new school is always a change. And I can see that. I can see that happen, I can see that support, I can see that the skill of being free to ask for help, let them teach you. (Tony, ll. 142-147)

Tony described the community as supportive of newcomers:

It comes from... collegiality, seeing that you know you are not going to be, I had to use the term judged, yeah, I can't think of another term that works. Go ahead and ask. We all have questions, you know, I can remember my first year here. I did nothing but ask, and everybody was, yeah, sure no problem. We’ll hook you
up, we’ll fix you up. This is what we do, even including the office staff. Here, I really feel like, at least my first year, everybody . . . if they were busy would put down their pencil or look up from the keyboard, and really give you their focus and full attention, and I never felt like I was intruding. Or even if I was intruding, that was okay, because you need to know this. (Tony, ll. 153-165)

Tony also recounted another teacher’s experience as a newcomer:

Since I've been here, . . . only one to the most, three teachers, come at a time. I remember when Neale came in and he seem really uptight the first three or four weeks, and I would talk to him, and I would tell him, I know exactly what's going through your mind . . . When is the other shoe going to drop? It's not. This is it . . . He even came to me later some weeks later and said, wow! You're right, you know. I was waiting for that stress level to rise and you know, it can't really be this good, but it is. (Tony, ll. 77-84)

Preston described his experience as a teacher new to his role in the school this year:

From the perspective of a new teacher I have felt very welcomed, and I'm included in collaboration and discussions, but also just feeling like in the staff room at lunches, not feeling excluded but feeling like part of the group, and so I feel like interpersonally and professionally, I guess there's a real sense of community among teachers and staff. (Preston, ll. 16-19)

Preston elaborated in describing the actions of the community toward him as a newcomer:
Asking questions about me and on taking an interest in me. Where do I come from, and just feeling like teachers are interested in me, and maybe I have something to offer. I am just valued, I think in some places when someone is new, relationships are more solidified in their interactions, and it is a little harder to break that barrier. I have never felt that here. I've always felt at our school that my opinions matter, and I am an equal member of collaboration. (Preston, ll. 28-32)

**Small school.** While all participants mentioned the size of the school in their interviews, two staff described the strengths and limitations of a small school and the impact on identity. Deborah described the size and setting and the effect on relationships:

> We have the benefit of we’re so small, that year after year after year, elementary and secondary, we tend to have the same kids and families, so maybe it’s easier to build relations, but I think maybe it’s something our staff, because of the setting they’re in, is something they’re very strong at. (Deborah, ll. 132-134)

Deborah also described a perceived limitation when standardized test scores were considered:

> With a school as small as us, it doesn’t take more than a couple [of] students scoring low to skew everything, and you have to understand that the small-school dynamic is so different, and for staff not to be scared, just to look at it as one more thing we’ve got to plan around. (Deborah, ll. 76-78)

Nichelle also attributed the size of the school with the ease of building relationships with students and staff:

> The size of the school has everything to do with being able to really get to know each other. You know, the small school, it's really hard . . . to develop that in a
school of 2,400 kids, and you know, 18 English teachers so, . . . being my own department head, our meetings are very cordial . . . We value each other and again, that's because we are [a] small enough group to get to know each other. It comes back to that small school. (Nichelle, ll. 22-25, 211-212)

Wenger’s social learning model provided a framework for the themes identified in the five interviews. Participants described their community, participation, experiences and relationships with others in the community, through these four themes: a) belonging, b) practice, c) meaning, and d) identity. From these themes emerged thirteen sub-themes that further elucidated this research.

**Teacher Social Capital**

Participants in the focus group interview described how their community had affected their practice and the practice of others, and how school leadership could support the community. Lave (2009) asserted that active participation in a group, is both a kind of action and belonging in which learning naturally takes place, and as members move from the peripheral to its center, they become more active and engaged within the culture. By using the resources available to teachers as a result of their community of practice, social capital, then, is the byproduct of relationships (Minckler, 2011).

**Affected practice.** Neale attributed his development as a teacher to the wider range of perspectives available on campus with both elementary and secondary teachers, and the opportunity for autonomy:

Getting points of view from a wider range of levels and expertise rather than just having everyone with an elementary focus . . . on top of that, I think there is a sort
of freedom to individualize things because it's not me supporting a team of three people that have to be lockstep. (Neale, ll. 33-35)

Similarly, Deborah described how teachers were affected by the community:

They were somewhere before they came here, and they felt like they needed something else. To be honest with you, many of the staff wanted more autonomy, they wanted more creativity, they wanted to be able to personalize, so they're coming here for change as well. And for me, that makes me trust them at a high-level, because I know what they're doing is to support change and growth. I’ve worked at a lot of places and that's not a common thread that I have seen.

(Deborah, ll. 43-48)

Preston also described the community with the same terminology of autonomy and trust. “The sense of autonomy that I feel like we have here is very obvious, and I think there's an aspect to have trust in ourselves, but also in the community that we're all working towards the same goal” (Preston, ll. 23-25).

Nichelle described herself as a better teacher and different person as a result of the community:

I don't think I became a good teacher until I came here, and I think part of it was that this is a place where you can really be yourself . . . I am a different person having worked here. I know, I know that. (Nichelle, ll. 13-14, 20-21)

**School leadership support.** Participants also described ways that school or district leadership could further support the community. They identified the benefit of time and structures to support collaboration such as co-teaching and intervention.

Nichelle described:
We are a special place and we have those opportunities [to collaborate], but not a lot of schools have that, where that's encouraged, and . . . it can't be just encouraged, it has to be built into the system. You have to provide those opportunities in a real way so that it doesn't feel like it's just lip service . . . but to provide those real opportunities in the schedule. (Nichelle, ll. 73-77)

Preston also addressed co-teaching as a benefit. “So many of the kids are here for so many years that continuing to implement co-teaching strategies intentionally . . . a lot of relationships can be formed given the structure of the school” (Preston, ll. 79-84).

Deborah further described the benefit of supporting dedicated time for co-teaching and intervention:

Piggybacking on co-teaching, the reason that it is working is that the leadership has planned in actual time for people to be able to do that, because everybody likes to support each other, but having actual time blocked out to do it within your day is really important. Having time blocked out for some people to do a higher level of intervention with other students, so that the teachers have a little extra support, that is essential. (Deborah, ll. 86-90)

At the same time, participants acknowledged feeling constrained by mandated meetings:

In teaching, you start to see things that lose their authenticity, and some of it comes down to the bureaucracy of what we do, of having to have to have x number of meetings for this long and provide notes. When I think back to [when I] first started teaching, I had some such valuable meetings, because I chose to go meet with someone and strategize and plan. (Neale, ll. 110-114)
The benefit of validation and positivity were also described by participants:

The district, in particular, could be more visible and present physically . . . [This] is sort of a little . . . school. It's not the first place they would stop by . . . I feel like when you work really hard and your passion[ate] about kids, you want people to see that, and I think the teachers here would love to be recognized more in a present way. (Neale, ll. 58-62)

Nichelle also described the need for recognition:

I think it's so important that you know us. I've been in buildings where . . . I'm wondering if the principal even knows my name . . . we want the same things our students want. We want to be seen, we want to be valued . . . and it's not just recognition. It's just, I see what you're doing, and I acknowledge that . . . just to have that kind of a personal connection. (Nichelle, ll. 99-105)

Deborah explained the benefit of encouragement:

About the positive spin to what our culture is like, the principal does an excellent job of making sure that she does kudos and recognize what we're doing . . . encouraging the staff to give each other positive comments, because that just spins off of us feeling more positively about each other . . . bringing out the positives from the staff about each other is a really good thing. (Deborah, ll. 120-124)

Neale described the benefit of positivity, too:

So many places we've been, there’s teachers who focus on the negative, the kids that have struggles. And yes, its human nature to vent, but . . . staying on the positive, how much we love teaching, how much we love working with kids. And
when you do something like that, it kind of feeds into what we're going to do in
our classrooms, or how we talk about school, so I like the positivity. (Neale, ll.
130-134)

Participants described how their community had affected their practice and the
practice of others, and how school leadership could support the community. Among
others, they included benefits from collaboration and intentional leadership decisions that
supported the community.
Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

In this study, the researcher examined and described how communities of practice, grounded in situated learning theory, generated social capital through the relationships that develop through belonging, practice, meaning, and identity. Social capital is the idea that relationships are a valuable asset (Smith, 2009). The teachers interviewed in this study were public school teachers at the same school serving students at the elementary and secondary levels. The method of qualitative case study research was employed for this study. Participants were interviewed twice during the month of February 2019, first in an individual interview, followed by a group interview. Three participants were male and two were female. The ages of the participants ranged from 34 to 65 years old, and their number of years of teaching experience ranged from six to twenty-two years. While none of the participants was a first-year teacher, one participant was new to the school this year.

Through this study, the researcher aimed to address the research questions examining how communities of practice generated teacher social capital. More specifically, the researcher explored how teachers described their community of practice through the lens of legitimate peripheral participation, how teachers connected their trajectory to social capital, and the implications for school leaders to grow social capital through communities of practice.

Through the first question, the researcher asked how teachers described their community of practice. Through the second question, the researcher examined how
communities of practice generated teacher social capital, and through the third question, the researcher explored the implications for school leaders to grow teacher social capital through communities of practice. Four themes based on Wenger’s social learning system, also characteristic of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), were evident through an analysis of the interview transcripts. They were as follows: a) belonging, b) practice, c) meaning, and d) identity. From these themes also emerged thirteen sub-themes that further described the community of practice at this school. Participant responses during the focus group interview described how the community affected their practice, or trajectory. Participants also described ways school leaders could support the community. These themes and their subsequent sub-themes, and their relationship to the three research questions are discussed throughout this chapter.

Community of practice teacher descriptions. The researcher asked teachers in the first question to describe their community of practice. In a community of practice, connections with community members produce a collective practice and a shared accountability (Baker-Eveleth et al., 2011). Further, these communities of practice exhibit four characteristics: a) attachment to the community (belonging), b) engagement by involvement (practice), c) shared experiences that create common understanding (meaning), and d) becoming a part of something (identity) (Wenger, 1998). Within these four characteristics, codified as themes, all five of the participants’ responses included descriptions that aligned as sub-themes. Of the sub-themes, three, specifically, were discussed by every participant including the importance of belonging within their community, practice through engagement, and the role of the individual necessitating interdependence on each other.
The researcher’s analysis of the responses by all five participants regarding community acceptance and attachment aligned with Wenger’s (1998) suggestion that this sense of belonging reinforces the value or importance of participation. Participants reported feeling a stronger sense of community at this school compared to previous schools. They discussed this attachment through descriptive words including the following: safe, valued, accepted, close, strong, relational, complete, cohesive. Participants attributed this sense to the relational nature of staff, shared expectations, and friendships among colleagues.

All five participants also addressed practice through engagement and noted they believed they have experienced meaningful changes in their ability as a result of the community (Wenger, 1998). Participants contrasted the top-down feel of the district-implemented PLC practice with the non-manufactured, organic nature of the school’s community of practice. Participants said their practice was improved as a result of their community involvement. They also commented that they learned from each other and collaboration enhanced their own instruction. One participant said she was a better teacher as a result and would not still be a teacher if it were not for the school community.

The role of the individual as an aspect of identity was also addressed by all five participants. Wenger (1998) asserted the personal identity of the individual became more in line with the community as shared experiences created a common view that encompassed who the members have been and what they valued. Participants addressed the high expectations they have of themselves and others and noted the necessity of assuming multiple responsibilities and wearing many hats as part of their role. One
participant stated the need to safeguard against teacher burnout, and another said his teaching role in this school is more challenging than his previous assignment. They also acknowledge they are niched, or valued for their expertise, and rely on collaboration with each other in order to fulfill their roles. Their willingness to assume these responsibilities is a result of support from the community.

While not comprehensively addressed by all five participants, another sub-theme that surfaced as notable included the need for trust. During the individual interviews, it was worthy to note the only participant who did not address the topic of trust within the community was the teacher who is new to the school this year. However, during the focus group interview, he did describe the need for teachers to have trust in themselves and in the community. Participants also said trust enabled them to be open to new ideas and try new instructional strategies in their classrooms, including co-teaching and project-based learning. Trust is also necessary in a school where teachers are solely responsible for all students in one grade level or content area. Others described the trust within the community as something to be protected. They said they would go to great lengths to guard the community that has grown collegially and personally close, even likening the relationship to family. If someone is struggling, however, participants described that genuine care and a tolerance for idiosyncrasies allowed staff to be supported. This provides a safety net for teachers to be vulnerable and make mistakes, and in the process, builds confidence within of the community.

The informal nature of engagement within the community was described by participants as a means of practice. It is also described by Baker-Eveleth et al. (2011) as behaviors that sustain the community, and “sharing so-called war stories, informal
discussions, and sending email or text messages are techniques to be utilized by members of the group” (p. 34). Participants referred often to lunchtime conversations that resulted in supportive practices, even if they originated as grumbling. Another participant said that the informal engagement with colleagues benefitted their formalized work, noting it was less awkward if teachers had relationships outside of structured meetings.

While informal opportunities for building community were described, participants also noted the benefit and constraint of structures, including scheduled time within the day for collaboration. Decisions by leaders impacting these structures were described by participants. A participant noted through the intentionality of reserving time within the school day for teachers to work together, the leader communicated that collaboration was valued. Another participant discussed the building structure and the ease of connecting with the teacher in the adjacent classroom, but the not with the rest of the staff. He said he made time to visit other teachers in their classrooms, but the layout of the building did not easily lend itself well to this purpose.

The uniqueness of the community and its small size were also described by the participants and connected to its identity. While most discussed the uniqueness in positive terms, others pointed out the additional challenges of serving a population of students who have not experienced success elsewhere. Another alluded to feeling isolated from same grade level colleagues, although he also said the benefits of working here had enabled him to make a greater difference for students. One participant also noted that the uniqueness of the small school can result in skewed standardized test scores if just a few students perform poorly.
Teacher descriptions of their community of practice were analyzed through Wenger’s (1991) social learning framework including: a) belonging, b) practice, c) meaning and d) identity, and the subsequently emerging sub-themes. These descriptions helped inform how communities of practice generate teacher social capital in the following section.

**Generating teacher social capital.** Through the second question, the researcher sought to connect communities of practice with the generation of teacher social capital. For the purpose of this analysis, Minckler’s definition of teacher social capital is used, and is defined as the resources available to and used by the teacher through membership in a community of practice to produce outcomes that are beneficial to the teacher, her students, and ultimately the school community as a whole (Minckler, 2014). While teachers were not directly asked questions about generating teacher social capital during the individual interview, their responses provided insight to the possibilities. The focus group interview questions, however, were more closely aligned with the benefits to members through legitimate peripheral participation and the implications for school leadership.

The participants identified practice through engagement as an opportunity to benefit their own abilities in the classroom, and specified informal opportunities were also valuable. Additionally, participants connected motivation with their community and referenced the term, motivation, twelve times in their collective transcripts. Adler and Kwon (2002) identify opportunity, motivation, and ability as three sources of social capital. Minckler (2011) elaborated, stating if social capital is to develop, teachers need: a) opportunity to form and develop working relationships, b) the motivation to work with
other teachers to improve teaching and learning in the school, and c) the ability through competencies and resources to share with other teachers. If these three elements are present, the development of teacher social capital will follow.

Participants identified the development of social capital through opportunities, motivation, and their improved abilities generated through the community. Participants said opportunities to form and develop relationships with their colleagues included informal collaboration such as in lunchroom conversations and structured collaboration through co-teaching practices and intervention teamwork. Participants described the relationships that formed within the community created a high level of trust and freedom to be themselves with one another while growing in their practice, or trajectory. Key motivating factors described by the participants included encouragement from within the community and school leadership, and acknowledgement of their work. Participants said this type of recognition was motivating, created a personal connection, and was a reminder of their love for teaching. Participants also noted positivity through encouragement was then reflected in the classroom. Opportunities, too, for collaboration affected their practice and strengthened their abilities through access to broader perspectives, increased autonomy, and the expertise of teachers at multiple levels on one campus.

**Implications for School Leaders**

Through the third question, the researcher explored implications for school leaders to grow social capital through communities of practice. Minckler (2011) asserted the quality of leadership determined the quality of social capital generated, and whether it was harnessed for organizational effectiveness. Based on Adler and Kwon’s (2002) three
sources of social capital—opportunity, motivation, and ability, this study has implications for school leaders.

Opportunity. Participants in this study identified perceived differences in district-mandated professional learning communities (PLCs) and their communities of practice. While participants said they valued collaboration and the opportunity to build relationships with their colleagues, they resented the top-down nature of regularly-scheduled, mandated meetings with the requirement to submit meeting minutes in a specific format. Instead, they described the benefit of scheduled opportunities within the school day for team planning and collaboration. Examples included shared teacher preparation time, arranged co-teaching, and intervention planning. Participants described meetings as beneficial if they included choice, autonomy, and informality.

Subsequently, school leaders can play a pivotal role in creating and sustaining the conditions necessary to foster teacher social capital. Providing time structures within the schedule for collaboration that allows teachers flexibility and autonomy enables them to work together and create a system of learning built on relationships (Smith, 2009). For example, leaders can provide opportunity for teacher communities to conduct the work they see necessary such as collaboratively identifying and planning interventions for students, as in the case of the participants in this study.

Motivation. School leaders also influence the social structure of the school through establishing values and norms. Whether the norms and values of the network of teachers support collaboration, capacity building and student achievement is up to leadership (Minckler, 2014). Leadership may also affect teacher motivation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). In this study, participants reported acknowledgements, positive feedback
and supportive decisions were all motivating for them. Participants noted they felt supported and motivated when the leader’s words, attitude, and action were aligned. One participant provided an example of the leader listening to concerns of truth-tellers in a staff meeting and inviting push-back. Another described a time when test scores dipped, the principal’s actions were not punitive toward staff, but supportive.

Consequently, leaders who know the names of staff, are present in classrooms, and develop caring, professional relationships exemplify what is valued within a community. Leaders can model this alignment of words, attitude and action to motivate teachers within the community.

**Ability.** Communities of practice can strengthen the skills and abilities of teachers and contribute to their social capital. Collaboration necessitates a broadening scope of the traditional understanding of teaching abilities. For example, leadership support of communities of practice can lead to increased teacher skills in communication, conflict resolution, teambuilding, team leadership, and problem solving (Minckler, 2011).

Increased skill also accompanies confidence. Participants described their practice as improving as a result of the community, and confidence plays a critical role in either constraining or enabling the development of teacher identity (Harlow & Cobb, 2014).

School leaders can help develop teacher skills and confidence through providing teachers with the opportunity to observe their colleagues who can serve as role models, engage in co-teaching professional development and practice, provide positive feedback, and support the development of communities of practice.

When opportunity, motivation and ability converge, teachers can collaborate to share resources and increase the teaching capacity of the community. When these
relationships are formalized, the impact is more likely to be effective (Minckler, 2014). Moreover, school leaders can use opportunity, motivation and ability as levers to develop a school environment where teacher social capital flourishes.

**Teacher retention.** High levels of teacher social capital should result in positive outcomes of student achievement, teacher quality, and teacher job satisfaction (Minckler, 2011). While this study did not include an examination of these outcomes, teacher job satisfaction is of particular importance as it relates to the need to attract and retain teachers in the field of education. Participants within this study referenced their previous community experiences at different schools and described their current community of practice as significantly improved and beneficial to their practice. One participant said she would not be teaching today if it were not for her teacher community. While findings connected to teacher retention were limited, it is worthy of further research.

**Limitations**

This case study included only five teachers from one public school. The school is also considered a small school with an unconventional grade level configuration and staffing model. While generalizations cannot be drawn from this case study, the study may provide insight for future researchers. Moreover, while the gender and age span of the participants were similar to the rest of the staff, all participants identified as caucasian. Future studies in this area should aim to include greater diversity in minority participants.

Most significantly, while the participants were all teacher volunteers and all staff were invited to participate, the sole interviewer was also their principal and evaluator. For
this reason, it should be acknowledged that participants’ responses could have been influenced by the perception of a supervisory figure conducting the interview.

**Areas for Further Research**

Through this case study, the researcher examined how teachers in a small school described their community of practice, how communities of practice generate social capital, and the implications for school leaders. Participants represented the demographics of the staff, multiple grade levels, and content areas. The findings of this study may inform leaders about generating social capital within communities of practice.

Additional research is needed to further explore the connections between communities of practice, teacher social capital, and the resulting outcomes. For example, qualitative studies could examine the outcomes of job satisfaction, teacher retention, and teacher quality. As addressed in Chapter One of this study, attracting and retaining teachers in the profession, and particularly specific areas such as math, science, and special education, is a growing need. The increasing staffing needs within the teaching workforce, examined through the perspective of the social network of relationships in schools as a means of building social capital (Vorhaus, 2014), continues to be a topic for further research.

This case study included teachers at the elementary, middle and high school levels and in varying content areas. However, studies at a specific level or larger school could explore differences between the contexts and the relationship between communities of practice and teacher social capital.
While this study examined the generation of social capital through teacher communities of practice, expanding to a broader context to include total school social capital, or district social capital could inform system and organizational leadership.

Lastly, the definition for teacher social capital in this study did not address the type, or nature, of the social capital. Communities of practice are temporal and have life cycles (Wenger, 1998). An emerging toxic culture might result in values that are detrimental to performance and student achievement. Researchers could examine the presence of both positive social capital and negative social capital within a community.

Conclusion

The researcher investigated how teachers described their community of practice, how communities of practice generate social capital, and the implications for school leaders. Participants, including teachers from the same school, provided insight on the development of social capital within their community.

Four themes were selected based on Wenger’s social learning system and are also characteristic of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). They were as follows: a) belonging, b) practice, c) meaning, and d) identity. From these themes also emerged thirteen sub-themes that further described the community of practice at this school. Participant responses during the focus group interview described how the community affected their practice, or trajectory. Participants also described ways school leaders could support the community. The emerging themes aligned with other qualitative studies examining communities of practice (Baker-Eveleth et al., 2011; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Harlow & Cobb, 2014). This researcher, however, examined how communities of practice generate social capital, and provided implications for school leaders to grow
social capital to benefit teachers. While the researcher’s results supported the tenets of a
social learning system and the convergence of opportunity, motivation, and ability to
generate social capital, the connections to teacher retention were limited.

The researcher’s learning. As an embedded researcher who is also the principal
of the school in this study, a key learning emerged for her that further elucidates
communities of practice. Prior to conducting this research, the principal would have
considered herself as an outsider, privileged to observe this community of practice. The
principal came to the realization, however, that she had been a member within this
community of practice all along, since she was hired at the school six years ago. She was
not on the outside, but an actual participant.

Upon her hiring, the principal was welcomed as a newcomer to her role. During
her first year, the staff amicably continued their community practice despite the
principal’s efforts to impose PLCs upon them. The community’s ability to sustain their
practice while allowing the principal limited participation aligned with the idea that
newcomers tend to engage on the periphery until they demonstrate competence (Lave &
Wenger, 1991). Wenger (2000) describes that it is through “knowing” that competence is
displayed within the community.

The descriptions of leadership provided by participants, including authenticity,
building relationships, and developing trust within the community defined the
competence necessary for the researcher’s trajectory within the community. It was
through demonstrating these leadership traits over subsequent years that the principal’s
participation allowed her further access within the community. Based on the descriptions
of the participants as members, the principal demonstrated the essential “knowing” to be considered an old-timer (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Teachers learn together through sharing knowledge and experience through mutual engagement in a community of practice. Scholars remain committed to the view that it is the interacting members who make the maintenance and reproduction of this social asset possible, and they share an understanding that social capital consists of resources embedded in social relations and social structure (Lin, 2001). Social capital, then, is a function of the informal organization of teachers, and can be harnessed to benefit a school. While a leader can force relationships through assigned groups within rigid constructs, relationships tend to grow better when people like each other. Supporting communities of practice can benefit positive, professional relationships and foster the growth of teacher social capital.
References


Qualitative Data Analysis Miner Lite (Version 2.0.6) [Computer software]. (2016). Provalis Research.


Dear (Name),

Thank you for your expressed willingness to participate in a study about the teacher community and culture at this school. Through this study, I am seeking to understand teacher perspectives of our social learning network so that school and district administrators can better support teacher communities. Since you are in a unique position to share your views and insights, I am thankful for your willingness to participate in the following way:

Participate in a one-on-one interview and a focus group interview. The one-on-one interview will be about 20 minutes and the group interview will be about 20 - 30 minutes.

Both will be outside of school hours. We can arrange the one-on-one interview at a time and location convenient to you between now and February 16, 2019.

The group interview date and time will be determined soon based on the availability of participants. While 4 - 5 participants are anticipated, all certificated staff are invited to volunteer.

I will provide you with an informed consent document and the questions for you to review prior to our interview date. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. All information will be kept confidential.

Please let me know what time and dates works best for your one-on-one interview. I’ve listed some dates/times that are currently available:

2:40 – 3:15pm on January 30, February 1, 4, 8, 11, 13, 14, or 15

Thank you again for your consideration of participating in this study.

Appreciatively,

Stephanie Knipp
Title of the Study: A Case Study of Communities of Practice in Schools

Principal Investigator: Stephanie Knipp, Student, sknipp@spu.edu, (206) 276-4399
Co-Investigator: Dr. John Bond, bondj@spu.edu, (206) 261-2554

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH
The purpose of the research is to explore and describe teacher communities of practice. The investigator is seeking to examine possible themes that emerge that would help building and district administrators support teacher communities for the purpose of retaining teachers in the profession. This study will provide insight on teacher perspectives about their communities of practice and their social learning networks.

You have been invited to participate because you are a certificated staff member at the school selected for this study.

This study will include males and females between the ages of 22 and 67.

The research will take place at Seattle Pacific University, 3307 3rd Ave West, Seattle WA and at Kent Mountain View Academy, 22420 Military Road South, Des Moines, WA.

WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate in this research you will be asked to participate in one, one-on-one interview and one, focus group interview. The interviews will be no more than 30 minutes each. We can arrange the interviews at a time and a location convenient to you between now and February 16, 2019. These interviews will be audio-recorded. You may withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, you will be invited to offer feedback on initial written transcriptions for accuracy should you choose.

☐ Yes, I give my permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded
☐ Yes, I give my permission for the interviews to be transcribed
☐ No, I do not give my permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?

There are no known major risks to your participation in this research study.

Seattle Pacific University and associated researchers do not offer to reimburse participants for medical claims or other compensation. If physical injury is suffered in the course of research, or for more information, please notify the investigator in charge, Stephanie Knipp (206) 276-4399.

Participant’s Initials __________________
Page 1 of 2
ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?

We do not anticipate direct benefits; however, your participation will contribute to an understanding of teacher communities of practice and how administrators can support them, and you may derive satisfaction from your contribution.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

The results of this study will be written and presented in the Principal Investigator's dissertation. While there may be publications as a result of this study, your name will not be used, nor will you be identified in any way. The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your de-identified data may be used in future research, presentations or for teaching purposes by the Principal Investigator listed above.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research, you should contact the Principal Investigator, (Stephanie Knipp (206) 276-4399).

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Seattle Pacific University Institutional Review Board Chair at 206.281.2201 or IRB@spu.edu.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you begin participation and change your mind you may end your participation at any time without penalty. You may elect not to answer specific questions in the interviews.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research, and voluntarily consent to participate. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Participant's Name (please print):

Participant's Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________

PI's Name (please print): Stephanie Knipp

PI's Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________

Copies to: Participant Principal Investigator
Appendix B

Interview Questions

Individual Interview Questions:

1. Describe the sense of teacher community at our school. For this purpose, sense of community is defined as a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met by the commitment to be together.

2. How is the teacher culture shaped in our school? Culture includes norms, values and beliefs.

3. What opportunities do teachers have to collaborate to impact teaching and learning?

4. Describe the skills that comprise the teaching ability in our school.

5. What motivates teachers in our school?

Focus Group Interview Questions:

1. How has the teacher community here at this school affected your practice?

2. How can school or district leadership support this teacher community?
Appendix C

Interview Transcripts

Teacher 1 [Pseudo name Deborah]; Female; 59 years; 22 years of experience; 15 years at this school; certificated support staff
2/18/19; 3:00pm; Interviewed by Stephanie Knipp

To start, can you state your name and acknowledge that you are being recorded.

My name is [Deborah] and I acknowledge that I am being recorded.

The first question is: Describe the sense of our teacher community at our school. And for this purpose, sense of community is defined as a feeling that members have of belonging, of being important to each other, and a shared faith that members needs will be met by the commitment to be together.

I feel that our sense of community at our school is extremely strong. I’ve worked at five different buildings in this school district, and our school is by far the strongest community, and when you asked me that question, I’m thinking about—where is that coming from? What is it make of? I think one of the things is we are so small, we don't have a person to handle every issue or situation that comes up so because of that we have to cross purposes, and take on roles that we typically wouldn’t take, and that involves interacting with a lot of different people so I think that helps people to feel connected and important to each other. Because, it’s not like you can just look the other way and expect someone else to handle it. You kind of have to jump in there. Something else I would say that I’ve seen in the building is that frequently, they will go to each other before going to an outside source like the district. Because being so small, and being so unique, I think that sometimes people don’t get us, and that we're so connected within each other they were more trusting of ideas or seeking help from people within the building than outside, and that's an example of the belonging and feeling connected to each other. Another one I would point out... do you want a couple of examples? Another example I would use is, we found out this year that we're moving sites type of a thing. And until people were really feeling confident that we were all moving together, it was a bit of a freak out at the building. But then when people realized that we’re all going, that was calming. Whenever people get upset, and they get nervous, someone will say, remember, we’re all going together, and they all laugh. So that’s an example of that. I also seen the commitment to be together, the co-teaching thing, I’ll have to tell you for me, it’s like I don’t have time for this, but I am so excited with how much the building teachers are excited to work together and help each other feel each other's needs through the co-teaching. Some people
have time built-in, but other people, like Joe, are just doing it, type of a thing. And they have to take the time to plan for that, and I think that’s just really cool. And if I had to think of, you said view this question under the guise of what leadership can do, I think they have that commitment I would say, providing time and removing obstacles. And I think our building principal, Stephanie Knipp, does a very good time of building in time for people to be able to cross teach you where your plan time is being the flexibility to letting people have the time to get to know each other I think is a is a really it's one of the reasons that that happens.

So that sounds like that structure is beneficial.

Absolutely, and having to go out of the way like even giving a couple of hours for intervention, so that the intervention people can go in and help to meet a need. Even if it’s not their subject, or maybe take the class so that the teacher can do it. There are a lot of different ways and I think that time issue, whether it be through an interventionist or co-teaching or me as a counselor, I've gone in sometimes, and done things that co-teachers do. I never have to worry that you think I should be doing something else because if someone sees a need you don’t question that they want to do it.

So next question: How is the teacher culture shaped in our school? And school culture includes norms, values, and beliefs.

That's a good question. We don't have a ton of teacher turnover, but we've had some in the last, little bit because we had some people leave. I think the shaping of it starts with the leadership—actually, with you. Your focus on student growth and taking kids of individuals, and their needs are our top priority. We tolerate a lot of stuff but being unkind to kids is not one of them. All the staff knows, and they are, when you think about it, they’re student-centered. They make positive comments and celebrate success, and plan for the details. Basically, I would say. If you want examples, that’s my overall statement, but look at the staff meetings. How we do problem-solving, and it goes out of the box, you do the thing with the common ground statements with each other, We try and build off the positive. That’s really important. I think another thing we do is validate each other. But also, you as a principal do a really good job of helping everybody on their staff to use their strengths. So I’m just going to be blunt, we have a couple of staff members who would want to do everything and control everything, and you do a really good job of making sure everybody has a chance to use their expertise. And that helps some people not to burn out. An example I would use is Ahren heading up the move. Brilliant, because it makes her feel so important and validated and a couple of other people who were like, why didn’t I get to do it? But giving people who have a different skill with her military background—she’s a perfect fit! And we wouldn’t think about that
unless you look closer. And I think you do a really good job of making sure that different
people have different chances to do things instead of always one person. You know, the
usual leadership people. Also, when you're looking at how our staffing meetings go or
you know those ways we use those Wednesday trainings. If we have something that’s not
quite right, like if a certain number of test scores are down, you don't come down on the
people, you look at it as like what the barriers, what we need to do, like problem solving
instead of punitive. And I think that help people to keep their norms, values and beliefs
going towards that positive, like everybody-can-grow philosophy, instead of being
concerned about getting dinged. With a school as small as us, it doesn’t take more than a
couple student scoring low to skew everything, and you have to understand that the
small-school dynamic is so different and for staff not to be scared, just to look at it as one
more thing we’ve got to plan around. So, when you asked how it shaped, it shaped by
student-centered, they are our priorities, and barriers only mean problem-solving. If
everyone goes forward with that attitude, we’ll be fine.

So that is a segue into the next question. You talked about our Wednesday meeting times
and co-teaching. So, question three asks what opportunities do teachers have to
collaborate to impact teaching and learning? So, what are some of those ways?

So, what are some of those specific things? We’ll I did talk about the Wednesday thing
and co-teaching and PLCs are good, but I kind of think that people treat those as top
down. I don’t think there is quite the gusto in those. But I will say, of the PLCs, I think
the flag team is awesome and anybody is welcome to come to a flag team meeting, but to
have time for our little group, we have a very diverse group from the PE to the counselor
to the EA to the language teacher, we have a very varied group. It allows us to get a peek
from the top and collaborate with the other people on something as even as small as
grades, because in our school, we’re so small, we can’t have failure because of the make-
up ability. So, we work super hard on making sure students are successful. And that isn’t
just the flag team, the flag team spreads the information out to other people and works
with other people to get things turned around, I think that’s another chance to… even
though it seems like just a monitoring team, to be a collaborative team. I think everything
we do is collaborative. For example, the special ed teachers work so closely with the
regular ed teachers, we have collaboration with the aides in there talking with the
teachers, gathering information and bringing it back to the special ed teachers.

Those are great examples and very specific. Are there any informal ways that you see
collaboration happen?

You know, as funny as it sounds, I've actually seen it in the lunchroom. We’ll all be
sitting down for lunch and someone brings something up even if it starts as a grumble and
then someone else says, well I did this and it worked really well, and ahh, I’ll try that,
too. So, the lunchroom is a spot where I’ve seen that. And I know that they have Friday
get-togethers and even though I don’t attend them myself, and they talk about students at
that time as well. I’m trying to think about other times that I’ve seen informal ones.
Sometimes, we’ll have small group-like meetings and call parents in. I wouldn’t call it an
SST but, what would I call it? We had one for the young man, you know. I’d call it a
parent support meeting. We gather ideas first as a staff about what we’re going to do,
then we have the parent support meeting and a meet-back time. And along each of those
steps, we have to collaborate, and we include the parents again. And all the talking when
you see a parent on campus, we’ll pull them aside and talk with them. It’s not just
collaboration with staff, it’s with parents, too.

That kind of sets the stage for question four: Describe the skills that comprise the
teaching ability in our school.

That is a big question! Our teachers’ abilities are wide and varied. I think one of the skills
that is the strongest, and I’ve worked in a lot of buildings, is the engagement piece. Our
teachers have engaged students. You can feel it when you walk into the classroom, it’s
easy to see, and that’s a really strong skill. They also use a lot of project-based learning.
Look at what Jen does, what Jose does, I look at what Shae does. They do a lot of project-
based things. I know they also vary their instructional practices a lot. Like in Nichelle’s
classroom, they might just be reading. Sometimes they’re writing. Sometimes she has
them do everything from pack a suitcase for a trip to wherever they’re reading and the
book was set. And sometimes she goes very off the radar and sometimes she’s very
traditional, but they vary it a lot. They tend to have a lot of presentations which I think is
cool. Their teaching abilities are to scope and foster a student’s ability to present, get up,
and speak. I’ve worked in a lot of buildings and we have a lot of student presentations
here. I think I would say that a skill that the staff has as a whole is relational with students
and families. We have the benefit of we’re so small, that year after year after year,
and families. We have the benefit of we’re so small, that year after year after year,
elementary and secondary, we tend to have the same kids and families, so maybe it’s
easier to build relations, but I think maybe it’s something our staff, because of the setting
they’re in, is something they’re very strong at. They assume that they can build that
relationship. We tease and say that if you just love on them enough, they’ll come around.
I think they have strong problem-solving abilities. Because we’re so small, sometimes
with remediation or extra tutoring, we get extremely creative, there’s a creative approach,
creative skills in remediation, and we’re really strong in that, too.

How would you describe the teachers’ skills and interactions with each other?
It's probably the best this year than it’s ever been. I can honestly say they all seem to be getting along really well and they reach out to each other, they offer suggestions, they’re willing to go into each other’s’ classrooms, it’s that co-teaching thing, I’ve never seen anything like it in the whole time I’ve been there, with the stuff they are doing.

And that brings us to the last question: What motivates teachers in our school?

When I think of what motivates them to strive hard, work hard, and also to stay there, you know, everybody loves watching students grow, and we have such a mixed bag of students, and they all come in at a different place, and we have a lot of students who have had issues at other places come in, but to watch them come in and join in on our culture, that is very cool. I think the small learning environment, because its small, doesn’t mean it’s any easier, you might have a few less kids in your classroom, but the kids in the classroom have extra challenges. So, I think that small environment keeps a lot of our staff wanting to be there and motivated. For me, personally, being able to reach students that have not been successful in other schools, that is really big for me. In a strange sense, it’s easy to work with the kids that everything goes well, but when you look at turning kids around who haven’t done well in any place they’ve been, that is extremely motivating. In talking about what motivates us, this is something that we should watch for in the move. People find it motivating to do things our way. Because we have a unique staff and a unique student population, and its motivating to stick together and continue to do what we know works with our staff and our students. I know a lot of people are concerned that if they go with someplace else, that it would be harder to have the say to do it our way. And that motivates people to stay.

All right, well Deborah, those are the questions that I have, and you were super helpful and informative and I’m really, really appreciative of your time. Thank you so much and enjoy the rest of your break.

Teacher 2 [Pseudo name Nichelle]; Female; 65 years; 19 years of experience; 7 years at this school; secondary teacher
2/15/19; 10:00am; Interviewed by Stephanie Knipp

SK: To start, can you state your name and acknowledge that you are being recorded.

My name is [Nichelle] and I acknowledge that I am being recorded

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this interview. I am truly grateful for your assistance. With that, so what this is going to look like—it's about 20 minutes. I'll just ask you some questions. I will follow the five, but then we can go off
So, first of all, I feel very attached to the school, and I've never felt as attached to a school and a staff. I mean, where else when I dress up like the yellow brick road or an Elvis record or Ghostbusters? I never participated in those kinds of activities, school spirit things in my other schools, so just that is for me is telling you know, that I feel safe enough. I feel welcomed, encouraged to do silly stuff. And I just witnessed the, you know, the hundreds of texts that flew by this week with snow days. I mean it was like, you know, in groups of 25, you know, every time something happened. So, every day we were in contact with each other, you know, knowing what's going on with each other, so I feel like I have friendships here as well as colleagues and I've never had that with any other school. I mean the closest I've come to that kind of community is when I worked in theater a small company, so I think the size of the school has everything to do with being able to really get to know each other. You know, the small school, it's really hard I think to develop that in a school of 2,400 kids, and you know, 18 English teachers so, you know, being my own department head, our meetings are very cordial. So I think you know, I just feel I feel like we have a really strong sense of community and we know what each other is going through in family life as well as school life and we're pretty supportive of each other and try to you know, take up the slack when somebody's having a hard time and that's I think that is a genuine thing that's come from this place.

So, question two: How is the culture shaped at our school? You addressed some of that, but maybe speak more to how the culture is shaped in our school. School culture includes norms, values, and beliefs.

I think this is also the first school where I felt safe enough to be myself. I don't think I was a good teacher until I came here, you know? I think I was trying to live up to somebody else's. . . I didn't really know, I don't know, I didn't have the confidence. So, part of it and you know, it's a part of it is just the size again the size of the school. We know each other, and you know, messages from the top. My very first complement as a teacher came from you. And this is after being a teacher for 20 some years. So that you know, I mean on paper, I don't know, I think leadership is, well it's kind of like with kids. If you're seen, and if you're acknowledged, then you want to work harder, you want to figure out how to be a good teacher or a good student, and I just never experienced that in other schools. I started at the junior high where the discussion was, we need combat pay, and then I went to the high school, which is huge, and then—which is it called? I was
moved three times. So, the third time, I applied to the school twice and was turned down, so the third time, they had to take me as an involuntary transfer. And it was in also the reason I got my masters and teaching credential was because I was teaching college before, and you don’t need to be a teacher to teach college—that’s a little scary, but I volunteered in the fifth-grade class, doing drama, and I decided, and it was this school that made me decide to want to go back to school and get my credential, so and then it took me 12 years teaching other places before I got finally here. But that was always my goal, to teach here.

So, what was it about the school that drew you in and then 12 years later you’re still wanting to be here?

That's a good question. I think I'm in part of it was the teachers and the fact that it was an elementary and secondary, the fact that I think the size has everything to do with it because you know from the time I volunteered it was clear that the teachers were connecting with each other. And it’s just hard to find that in big schools. So, I think that was part of it. My sister was a volunteer here. She was doing a horticulture at the time in the good old days when you could be anybody and teach, which was great so her and her kids were here, so I had a family connection and my dad had a history here. So part of it was that, but more but I think you know from the beginning the school from can I remember going to a meeting when it first started and they were just talking about what they wanted it to be and that this was a different kind of school and we supported families and we supported kids who were coming from homeschool situations or kids who didn't fit in other schools, so I've always been a weirdo, so you know. I wanted to go to my dad’s school, but I wasn't pregnant, and I wasn't a delinquent, so I couldn't get in. You know, so that you know I mean his stories they played volleyball, the whole school would stop in the afternoon and play volleyball, because it was it was 100 then or 50 maybe when it's for started. So, it was always, you know, it's always been kind of the gold standard for me, but it took me a long time to get here. I never gave up. So, I was really lucky.

You mentioned teachers connecting and that really leads into question number three: What opportunities do teachers have to collaborate or connect to impact teaching and learning?

Well, first of all you've built it into our schedule. I have an hour where my job is to hook up with other teachers and students. So, I've been able to collaborate with Melissa in both yearbook and art. A couple years ago, they did the sets for the Lorax and fourth grade, fifth grade, so just so having that opportunity built-in, you know, I mean again it's kind of that message from the top that this is something you value, and if you value it, you've
made place for it. You know, it's easy to give lip service, oh we want to collaborate, we want to, you know, we want this community. We have these values, but if it's not, if there's not a place made for that, then it's really hard and after a while it doesn't feel genuine. So, you've really . . . I have my notes. And then Ahren, starting her initiative and getting encouragement from not only you but from her and the book that we read, I can’t remember the title—the co-teaching book. So, it's kind of built into our structure, so that makes a big difference. I think we also have people who are maybe not as afraid to collaborate. You know, old-school teachers: You closed your classroom door and it was your kingdom. You know, it was terrifying if anybody walked in. And I think that still the norm with most big schools. See, you know, this is mine, don't mess with it. I've worked out my little schedule and how I'm going to do it and don't bug me. and I don’t think that's true. So, we have to be a little more vulnerable here, and we have to be willing to be a little uncomfortable sometimes. You know, that that kind of learning curve the old Vygotsky, you know, I don't get it, I don't get it, I don't get it—oh, I get it! It’s the same thing we do with our students, so I think that's huge, and it takes a special teacher, but I think it also takes that encouragement from the higher ups, which is you. It’s the intentionality. But back to two: the other thing its again that structure you know the whole den time thing, you know, where PRIDE and digital citizenship and Katey coming in with mindfulness and you know the intentional community-building, I miss first period. I mean there's some nice things about just be strolling in late, but I do miss our little I think I think we had we something was lost with [grades] 10 and 11 not having that that morning community bonding thing because we have to work harder to get us to get them on our side. So, there was something really nice about that, although you know, it's always a trade-off. But I think, you know, so it's kind of like the proof is in the pudding. The teachers actually practice all these things that we have to, and you give us time in our meetings to talk about that, and if something comes up, you know, we have a couple of truth tellers in our faculty, and you know and you're open to that even if it's not something you always like to hear, you make room for that. You know, and that's that makes a huge difference yeah, yeah.

It's interesting, you talked a little bit about that uncomfortableness and vulnerability. What do you think it is about this community that allows people to be uncomfortable?

I think it's all about trust. And I think, you know, again part of its size, part of it’s the way you approach us, you know? I mean when you seem to genuinely care. I think most people sense your genuine care. And that, you know, that makes you do…it's just like with students, if they don't think you care about them, they're going to do with they want to do. You know, yeah, they're smart, and I think you're a good listener and so it's a slow process of building trust it's all about trust and confidence. You know, people want to
please other people if the sense that they're valued. And if they don't sense they're valued, it's like, I'll do this for me, or why should I work so hard? I've been in both places.

On that note, this is a quick bird walk. You talked about other places. Compare your teacher community—good, bad or otherwise, with the teacher community here and create some kind of a contrast.

Okay, so my first job was at the junior high which is, you know, inner-city, huge poverty. And I never, ever ate in the lunchroom. I sat in my classroom, and I didn't even know where it was until like June. Nobody ever said, oh here's the classroom, nobody ever said you have these 37 hours at the end of the year, you know, so there was no... It was a big school and people were in kind of lockdown mode all the time. I got to know a couple of the teachers, but not well, and it wasn't like we were a community. So, the head of the English department kind of looked out for me, but beyond that, it was definitely not a, “I want to get to know you,” it was, “I need to help you.” I was a teacher of concern right from the beginning when I got there. So, you know, it's like this old lady comes in because I was 47 when I got my when I start teaching a public school. I was, I was a little overwhelmed, and so then when I went to the other junior high, which is my first involuntary transfer, because that's when they changed to middle school or do you know from junior highs to middle schools, just got here so we all had to leave. They closed us down. That was a huge school. I got very close with my other seventh grade English teachers so we were kind of like a triad and for one year we had planned together and it was a wonderful thing because we planned together. I would come up with these huge, impossible ideas and then they would break them down into some kind of reasonable...okay, we can't do that, but we can do this. You know, and so we really supported each other. And those are the only two people from that school that I'm still in contact with. but as far as a broader, you know, so there was like there was a small group of people who look out for each other, and I think that was because of one person who made it her mission to make sure that people were welcomed and seen, but I never got it from the other administration there and they didn't really know who I was. I just, I was. And then the other high school, I was another involuntary transfer. When the new principal came in, oh no, the new principal came in to the junior high and she must've had a list of who she was supposed to get rid of because she started hounding from day one. two of the teachers who were struggling. Rather than trying to help them she just drove them out. One died, the other left teaching all together. And he had been successful, I think he was probably on the spectrum, so he was doing computer classes and he was doing well, but she came in and he had a social studies degree so having not touched social studies for 20 years, she just changed the schedule and, I think, and it felt intentional like, we know we have to get rid of you, so rather than supporting him in any way, she just... so that was very sad. She never asked us what worked well at our school,
you know, so that was it. It was her, that's her style, you know. She has an agenda, and I
wouldn't be still teaching if I had to stay there. Then I got bumped to the high school the
day of the strike. So, I didn't get to strike with my buddies, I had to strike with brand new
people so that was interesting. I got to know some people. I think it was fine and I got to
know the principal, and I got to know the assistant principal, but again it was a huge
school, and my schedule was changed like, one week I was teaching 11th grade, and then
you know the numbers come through so then all of a sudden my schedule was changed
like the second week. You're no longer teaching this your teaching this. So, who is yeah
and just the size of it. So, when I had an opportunity to go back to middle school. I took it
and then, lucky, lucky, lucky! I got here, right? I think it's the size, it’s the style of the
administrator. Whether not they really want to get to know the teachers, or they see
leading as, “I tell you what to do.” Kind of like that PLC thing, right? You know, that the
teachers at both the middle school and high school resisted PLCs all the way through, so
it was like, okay, we have to get together, but we're doing it under duress and we're going
to do as little as possible. Where we kind of have natural PLCs. They happen naturally
and luckily Katey is a good secretary so she just kind of writes down what we say but
without her, I don't know if it would ever been recorded, maybe Jose. You know, we
have PLCs every day, because I work with Melissa on a regular basis, I connect with
Shae with middle school. What are you doing, what are we doing, how can we support
each other? I work with Jose, you know, and of course, Katey, so we're doing it all day
long. And then now that I'm in the elementary which is fun, that's kind of cool making
connections so they happen but it's a real organic thing. It's not, you have to do this. It's
not manufactured.

So, as I am thinking about your perspective in secondary and elementary, describe the
skills that comprise the teaching ability in our school.

I think we're open to new ideas, we’re willing to keep learning, we’re willing to try new
things, it’s not hard for us. If we’re too fixed, we kind of crash and burn. Sometimes it's
not easy, but I think it goes back to trust that we trust each other, and we know each other
well enough to know we're all kind of weird, and we all have our idiosyncrasies. We have
the things we are really good at and things were not good at. You know, technology and I
do not get along at all so I go to Jose or Katey or somebody else. I help out with NHD
you know, I'm the English teacher so I can help with that, you know collaborating with
journalism when they had to write profiles of, you know, Melissa said, “I don't know how
to teach this. I know this is really important,” and so we collaborate for it was like five
weeks, I think. We did that work together and so I got to know them, and then some of
them came into drama, and then when she needs, you know, yearbooks not done yet, so
we have small classes for that, so she borrows her journalism students back who are in
my class, so we will let you know, it's that trust, I think so we have the skills, we just
know that we count on each other, and we’re very, I think we’re tolerant of each other's shortcomings, you know because we all have them.

What does that tolerance look like?

I think there's a lack of judgment, you know, I mean it would be really easy to let things happen all the time and we do things well and we do things not so well, and I think we're just kind to each other, and so we bring out the best in each other. And we try to play to our strengths and throw the ball to somebody who has strengths that we don't have. You know, like we really depend on Jazz for all kinds of things you know and she seems to thrive there, you know, I will I'm worried sometimes we're going to wear her out, but you know, she has certain, I don't know, she has an energy that you can't be matched for one thing. She's a truth teller, she's you know, and she'll make things work, and she cares and, you know, her caring is very easy to climb onto.

I mean if she's a leader in school and since she cares and she's her committed to this place is so deep that it really encourages other people to say, okay, I follow you. So, you know, again it's whoever the qualities of the leader really kind of set the tone. At my other schools, you know, the only complaining sessions I ever have is when I go to the district meetings. You know, but that was the norm when I worked at both middle school and high school when we had our PLCs, most of the time was spent complaining about students, complaining about what we had to do, and that just isn't true here. And every once in a while, we get frustrated, but really, we're trying to help each other work things out. So, we value each other and again that's because we are small enough group to get to know each other. It comes back to that small school.

So, this last question which maybe should've been the first question, is what motivates teachers in our school?

Well, I think the same thing that motivates students. We’re seen, we’re valued and it's the relationships, you know, you foster relationships with staff, relationships between each other, and that you know that makes all the difference. If there's no relationship, then there's no reason to really commit and to give your best self, right? So, you know, it goes back to that one that you know. . . I was struck dumb when you complimented me because it never happened, you know? In all those years, and so it's true, I probably became a better teacher coming here, because I responded to the small school and to the warmth and to the genuine feelings here, and maybe it was having that ultimate responsibility, you know, being the only drama teacher, the only creative writing teacher, the only English teacher. I had to figure it out, you know, but I had, it felt like I had the support to do that, you know? That's the thing we need with our kids, that five-to-one. If, you know, if you going to criticize, you’ve got to really push up the compliments, and the
encouragement. So, I think it's the structure of this school makes it helps that to be happening the other thing I think you know they say that elementary teachers are like elementary students, and middle schools are like middle school students, and high school teachers are like. . . I think high school teachers get this kind of holier-than-though, we're-all-that kind of thing because we have this expertise and we're having to work with everybody from all the different levels. I have such a respect for elementary teachers having spent time in the elementary teachers’ classes, plus they don't get breaks, you know. Technically, they can cobble together a kind of a break, but they don't, you know, and they're responsible for more kids than we are, you know. So, I'll just all these complaints from English teachers, all these papers I have to read, and blah blah blah. There's really a class system, so I think that's another thing that's able to be broken down here when you have elementary and secondary you know, so I know you know so my students who are juniors now I've had for six years that is, so Eliza and Sabrina, they were in my seventh grade class, and now they're the 11th graders you know so by the time they graduate all of known them for seven years, and that you know, that makes a real difference. And the same thing with it, one of the reasons I never got here until I was moved here was because teachers won't leave, you know. They're happy to be here and that in itself says something you know. If you, if you're happy to be here then you're not going to want to leave. I would be retired now. My plan was to retire, and more aches and pains, but these are my peeps, kind of, you know, and this is a good, this snow week, was a really good practice for if I retired. I tried to write, I wrote a little bit every day. I wrote I have one day when I wrote most of the day, but you know, I guess I could become a slug so quickly, so easily. So, I need to know, so I need that to keep going. I mean I still have to figure out the balance, but I'm not ready. I'm not ready to leave, and I'm sure if I had been at any of the other schools, I would have retired as soon as I could. I just feel so there's some other English teacher waiting in the wings, but for now. I think it goes back to the two big things: it's a small school and you as an administrator are a good listener and supportive. It does. The messages from the top make a huge difference, you know, those are important things.

Nichelle, thank you. I really appreciate your time and your perspective. It was hugely beneficial.

Okay, thank you.

Teacher 3 [Pseudo name Preston]; Male; 34 years; 6 years of experience; 1 year at this school; elementary teacher 2/13/19; 6:00pm; Interviewed by Stephanie Knipp

SK: To start, can you state your name and acknowledge that you are being recorded.
My name is [Preston] and I acknowledge that I am being recorded.

Thanks so much for taking my phone call. First of all, I appreciate you being willing to do this interview, especially on your own time when it's family time. I think we'll take maybe 20 minutes, give or take. I'll be transcribing it, and I'll give you a copy of the transcription just so you can look it over and say yeah, that is what I meant, or if I missed anything you can certainly change that. So, there are five questions, and I sent these to you via email, but you didn't have to do anything to prep for them, and there's no right or wrong answers, so I'll go ahead and just get started with the first question. Describe the sense of community at our school, and for this purpose, sense of community is defined as a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other and a shared faith that members needs will be met by the commitment to be together. Describe that sense of teacher community at our school.

From the perspective of a new teacher is I have felt very welcomed, and I'm included in collaboration and discussions but also just feeling like in the staff room at lunches, not feeling excluded but feeling like part of the group and so I feel like interpersonally and professionally, I guess there's a real sense of community among teachers and staff, and I think that I haven't been at a school that has had the most cohesion from where I just feel welcome from the front office and the teachers and then in the secondary level so yeah, so that's how I feel the sense of community is very high as far as feeling like members needs are met, I've never had a need that I felt like I couldn't ask someone and have it be dealt with.

Talk to little bit about feeling of being included. What are some of the ways that teachers made you feel included?

Even just asking questions about me and on taking an interest in me. Where do I come from, and just feeling like teachers are interested in me, and maybe I have something to offer. I am just valued, I think in some places when someone is new relationships are more solidified in their interactions and it is a little harder to break that barrier. So, I have never felt that here. I've always felt at our school that my opinions matter and I am an equal member of collaboration.

So, I can kind of move this into question two. How would you say the teacher culture is shaped at our school? Culture includes norms and values and beliefs.

I think that values like important values would be like making sure that everyone’s opinions are heard/ I’m thinking about our elementary team collaborations and it’s very
much a level playing field. I don’t feel like there's any voices that drown each other out. We are actually interested in what we can learn from each other, so I think that that is a value, too, seeing what we can learn from each other and how we can all become better because of what we can learn from our peers.

All right, that kind of ties into question number three. What opportunities do teachers have to collaborate to impact teaching and learning?

The elementary team has been able to collaborate across grade levels and that’s been beneficial because we've able to hear about fourth grade and what’s going on in fourth grade, and I’ve been able to share what we're doing in third grade, and I think it’s helpful to know where the students are going to next and to frame our instruction with that mindset, too. But then our weekly staff meetings too, I feel like there’s been opportunities to learn from our teachers at the secondary level, too, and that is something that I have never experienced before being able to interact so closely with people from secondary so that's been a very cool opportunity for me, to be able to get their insight, too.

I think that you brought up a good point about secondary and elementary collaboration. It's kind of unique to our school. This is really more of a follow-up question: How do you think that secondary and elementary collaboration, being all on one campus, how does that impact our sense of teacher community?

I think that . . . I think that it's a stronger sense of community then when they’re on separate campuses because I’m able to see I guess there’s a shared commitment to the same students and so students that are able to go to school through elementary and then into secondary, there's teachers across all those grade level bands that are invested in the same students, and I think that it is very unique because it's not like we forget about them once they leave our classroom, especially like a school like our school, it's so small we see students after year, I can see how having been able to see them into secondary, I think there’s a bigger history with the students to draw from, which secondary can talk with elementary about what worked and what successes they had with those particular students and in elementary can keep in contact with students they have had. I think that both of those are very valuable to being on the same campus.

So just a couple more questions. Describe the skills that comprise the teaching ability in our school.

I think that I have really enjoyed seeing all the creativity that the teachers have for skill-wise I’d say that it’s a very creative staff that teachers think out of the box and look at creative ways to impact their students. Collaboration I say that is very important, because
there's only one class per grade. I feel like there's as much collaboration as I've had in previous schools, but I feel like it's more intentional because we are working across grade level bands. I like, yeah, I said there's the collaboration, the creativity those skills those two come to mind.

So, in light of what we’ve talked about, what motivates teachers in our school?

There is a steely-eyed focus, I guess, on student success and everything else is kind of framed around that and student engagement, and students enjoy being at school. I’ve seen a lot of creative things teachers are doing and I think that’s from their motivation, they want to get the kids to succeed. I think that's a big motivation that I’m noticing is student success.

Is there anything else that you're kind of thinking about our teacher sense of community in our school that I haven’t asked you about?

I guess just reiterate you asked how I felt included.

Preston, and that’s the end of my formal questions, and I just want to thank you for taking time to answer my questions. I am I'll be using this information, along with several other teachers who are interviewing with me, to compile and put together a perspective on what ways that we can support teachers and teacher communities. Take care and enjoy the rest of your evening.

Teacher 4 [Pseudo name Neale]; Male; 36 years; 8 years of experience; 3 years at this school; elementary teacher
2/8/19; 12:30pm; Interviewed by Stephanie Knipp

SK: To start, can you state your name and acknowledge that you are being recorded.

My name is [Neale] and I acknowledge that I am being recorded.

Thanks so much for participating in this interview today. I really appreciate you, and I would just like to ask five questions, and I may ask you some follow-up questions or clarifying questions along the way. I anticipate this will take about 20 minutes or so, but if we need more time or less that's fine, and I'll provide a copy of the transcript to you so that you have a chance to look at it. We will just use this phone as our microphone of sorts so I'll give it to you, and you can hold onto it unless I ask for it back, all right?

Describe the sense of community at our school. For this purpose, sense of community is
defined as that feeling that members have a belonging and been important to each other and shared faith that members needs will be met by the commitment to be together. So, could you describe community at our school?

I think probably the first thing that I see when I think of community at our school is the idea of equality and that we all play our own roles, but yet our roles are connected, and we truly have to trust each other. I think there is that trust in the school where if I do my job and prepare students for you, I can trust you're going to do your job and help them succeed beyond that. I also think at our school there's a base of positivity rather than focusing on negatives and struggles. While we do try to address student struggles, I think we try to celebrate a lot more of the positive that we do.

So, you talked about equality of roles. Can you tell me just a little bit more about what you mean by that?

As far as equality of roles, I guess in this school what I see is the teachers are more niched rather than having three English teachers, three math teachers, three of everything where there's this sort of someone in charge of each aspect of the school and supportive of doing their job because we see students as more of a giant puzzle in and we all have to do our piece to support them and put their picture together.

I like that giant puzzle idea. Let's move to that next question: How is the culture shaped in our school? School culture includes the norms, values and beliefs. So how do you see how the culture is shaped?

I think the culture is initially shaped by is having a common goal, and I see in this school, I don't know these are official common goal, but it feels like we're all here to support students as humans and prepare them for life rather than just learning random things and passing tests and moving to the next level seems to be a true buy-in to what's best for students. I think a lot of that comes from having students that want to be here and whether or not they enjoy being at school for say, or just being a part of a group of kids who want school to be an okay place, a safe place, I also see there's a lot of flexibility with what students want to learn and how we how we meet their needs. As far as learning is an action not as a concrete thing they get, they walk away with.

So, we were talking about culture... how would you say that teachers are instrumental in shaping culture for students and for staff?

I think it starts at the beginning with a shared expectation, and that's what where kids build a culture is what we expected them how they talk to each other, how they work with
each other, how they even think as students. I see that as their culture. They embrace each other or they have to figure out how to work with each other even if they don't like each other. So, some of that comes from rules or you know common goals like at our class or school...what is it called? PBL is that it? That's not right.

*Like our PLCs?*

PLCs, or that's not what I was thinking of. The positive...

*Oh, like PBIS?*

Yeah, PBIS so we have that pride in school pride in and having really clear, solid, foundational words where students know what we expect and that we're all striving to be better people in these five ways, and it helps with the culture. At that point it becomes down to the follow-through in and truly supporting. I don't think students can become a culture or accept others around their cultures until they feel accepted. I feel like here, students individually feel accepted first and then there are more willing to accept others.

*Yes, all right, so question three: What opportunities do teachers have to collaborate to impact teaching and learning? And just to collaborate, it doesn’t have to be specific to that. What opportunities do you see?*

So as professionals, I think there's always the opportunity to ask each other for advice, suggestions, or even just bouncing ideas off people, I think it comes down to communication. Teachers wanting to be open, wanting to strive to be better, not just to be happy with good enough, but there are the PLCs and the times where we collaboratively get together as a staff and will work on just general teaching skills and ways to look at kids, and help kids, support them. I think one of the biggest difference makers is when we do work together, physically together, and when it comes to like you, so what is it called, when students are being tracked by multiple teachers [flag team] rather than just having one teacher to be connected to. I am, guys, I think that just helps because the next time we talk we have something to talk about that support students rather than just, “what a day—oh, I'm tired!” I think it’s also having opportunities, at least at the elementary level, but as we try to encourage going into each other’s classrooms and sharing what the students are working on and even having students work with other students across grade levels in classrooms. Because in order to do that you have to collaborate with the teachers, and that pushes, changes, the way you see what you're teaching and kind of, I think it only helps the comparing ability to me comes down to being open-minded. I think we're all guilty of coming in and hearing someone’s thought and thinking yours is better, but true collaboration is the idea that maybe I'm wrong, but this is what I've been doing,
and what have you been doing? And then throwing I think we all have such different backgrounds as far as how we got here as teachers especially here. A lot of the teachers come from different places and experiences so it helps us I think, not to think about it through the I went to elementary, I have my four year teaching degree, but everyone has a different version of getting that, that helps because our kids are over going to the same place so I guess I think we need to collaborate as we all different pasts and we all are able to see kids in different lights I think that way.

So, describe some of the skills that comprise the teaching ability in our school.

That's a loaded question. Skills that comprise the teaching ability in our school. I hate to go to knowledge first but for us it's hard to teach something you're not knowledgeable of. I don't think you need to be Stephen Hawking or an expert on the subject, but you need to know what the end result is going to be. And then secondarily, probably more important comes to me the idea that we're teaching how we are supposed to learn, how you're supposed to challenge the way you think. I see a lot of teachers especially at the school who really embrace that. I mean, realistically, we don't need to memorize who found the Pacific Ocean first. But we learn how to research and ask questions and challenge the way we view the world. I think that's embraced here and the skills, you know, most people get into teaching were successful in school, so they've seen what it takes to be successful. I think being a good teacher comes down to helping the kids that don't think that way. In reality, there are a ton of kids you probably would be fine with anyone as their teacher, but we're here to help those kids he wouldn't be otherwise. It makes for a successful place for them. Do you think that's what the rest of the staff would think about that idea? That all depends who's hearing my answer. There I don't know, I have a hard time speaking for anyone in secondary, I just have no experience. They take on such heady concepts, it is hard for me to even…the things we ask is to learn. Personally, I think we're going way too wide and not deep enough so the things we do in high school now, I have a hard time personally seeing the relevance of life for most kids, the majority, so remind me of the question?

Describe the skills that comprise the teaching ability in our school.

So, we were I guess we were talking about the idea that students who struggle through school. How does your teacher see that is kind of the main goal? I think most elementary teachers do because from my experience even if were complaining, or like pulling our hair out, it's because we love these kids and want them to truly have it. I definitely believe secondary feels that way, it's a different version of it, because you're dealing with near adults. It's when a 10-year-old makes a mistake it's vastly different from a 15-year-
old goofs up. So, I believe they're here for their best interest, but there is a little bit of higher expectation for the older kids, which there should be.

So, this is a question kind of combining ideas. When we’re thinking about the main goal of elementary and secondary and the fact that we are both on the same campus, how do you think that contributes to our school culture?

I think it's huge. Having a place where younger kids can see where they're going, visually and physically see where they're going, because for most there is the end of one school building, and they have no idea. I was on the other side of the door it's just fear and I remember, most of us remember middle school and high school being scary transitions because of the unknown. The comfort level for a kid when there is not an unknown, when they've seen the teachers. They've seen the rooms, they’ve seen the other kids that successfully walked across the same path as them. I think it's so comforting for kids and I guess on the flipside for another student is there has to be a lot more faith in with their parents say, what the teachers say, because their brothers and sisters are saying and then you're hearing from primarily negative sources which can be scary.

All right, so this is kind of the last question. What motivates teachers in our school?

This school in general, I think what motivates is success. I think a lot of teachers, a lot here specifically, love to see students succeed. That comes back to when we talked about positive and celebrating students. So, there’s’ kind of an internal drive to help every student succeed so we can celebrate all students which is awesome. I love that as far as success, I think we're all very good at understanding what that means. It doesn't mean every kid is passing, you know, UW classes, yet it means for them they've made it further than they would have if they weren’t at this school. They’ve done things they didn't think they could do, or they’d never take it on. I think that's truly motivating for this group. Especially we have some kind of personalities I think here where they love throwing things that a kid that will scare them, and then coming back three months later and say, you didn't think you could do this, which is really cool.

And why do you think they do that?

I think I kind of comes back to what we talked about with the idea that the unknown can be scary, and some kids are more apt, or humans I guess, are apt to say things are undoable. And if we can train them from a young age or help them see that even if you don't succeed, you don't get it right, you can always try, and you'll get something out of it. It's always worth trying because when it comes, I just me personally, it's hard to understand other people's motives, I'd like to believe we're all here because we want kids
to have a good experience in education. I mean even if teachers tend to be people who
succeeded in school, I think we've all seen people who didn't, and wish they could've had
that. We tend to be people who care about people. We want the world to be a better place,
and I guess we can't change everyone's life so let's start with this--as many kids as we can
get in our rooms, and it's a lot harder to change an adult life then set a kid up to find the
right place for themselves.

How do you see staff supporting each other as they get better?

Here, I see a lot of them is very similar to the way we support kids, to be honest. We
celebrate each other a lot and did a lot of positive interaction as far as, you know, I
noticed what you guys are doing. That’s so cool! Do you want to share that with my
students? I also think we're very good at supporting each other outside like our personal
lives as well which seems unimportant. I had a hard time in my life getting over myself to
that point yet where do you have to be bigger than yourself and care about people
because you can't teach if your life is falling apart. We think about with students, but not
always think about it with peers. I know for me—this kind of relates to everything. My
biggest change for me when I was young, I thought, just close the door and just be a great
teacher yourself. I worked so hard, but I realized I'm only helping 20 something students
when I started trying to help the entire school’s problems or issues, I feel like I'm I am
doing more to help more people. I think they get that at this school, it's not every man for
themselves. But elementary tends to be a little more like that because we have students
the entire day and is like I am in charge of this kid, no one else is, where secondary you
can be a little more supportive as far as you have a sixth of the student.

Do you think that's different at this school? I mean, these are my students versus another
school where you don’t have a secondary on the campus?

Having work at another school, I don't think it is, I think the advantage of the schools I've
been at outside of this is having the multiple teachers in the same grade level because
they know what you're going through and they tend to get to know the kids, the grade
band, where as being the only has six grade teacher, you at times it gets to the point
where I know people care about me and I want to support me but there not dealing with
the same animals at that time.

I think I've run out of questions! Yeah, thank you, Neale. I think that that wraps up our
interview—I appreciate it.

Teacher 5 [Pseudo name Tony]; Male; 60 years; 7 years of experience; 4 years at this
school; secondary teacher
SK: To start, can you state your name and acknowledge that you are being recorded.

My name is [Tony] and I acknowledge that I am being recorded.

Thank you so much for your willingness to interview with me today. I’m truly grateful. So, first question of five, and I anticipate that should take about 20 minutes, describe the sense of teacher community at our school. And for this purpose, a sense of community is defined as a feeling that members have a belonging, and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members needs will be met by the commitment to be together. So, coming back to that question: Describe the sense of teacher community at our school.

Okay, well I would say it’s strong, it’s something that’s hard to define, but you know it when you feel it I’m looking at your definition of feeling that members have a belonging, yes, and being important each other, yes, and a shared faith that members needs will be met by the commitment to be together. Yes, now I’m trying to think of actual data points for you. How does that happen? Well, it’s subtle. I think some of it is probably the type of people that we are and that has all a lot to do with the type of school we are. We know going in, what’s expected of us.

What type of people are we?

People people, in which teachers tend to be anyway, but even those of us that are more that I would say stem-focused, also are people people rather than just, you know, the mad scientist out there. I’m finding this is harder to speak than I thought it was gonna be. I’m on that I’m on the so so let me a let me try to gather my feelings are in my thoughts here let’s see, um.

I could take you on a bird walk if you like to.

What does that mean?

So that would be me asking: compare your previous school community to this community.

Okay, our community here okay. I can do that. So, my experience before, as you know, was with a comprehensive high school. I did not feel that feeling at all between departments. As a matter of fact, it was a lot of competition, yes because there was a lot of time crunches over there and every department saw every other department as being the reason, but at the same token intended to make the departments tight. Now, there was interdepartmental defections and by that, I mean, some of the English guys were friends
with the science guys and they would come over and chat so it wasn't like, you know tribes, at least, right? But it was usually good natured, but not always, and but in the department as we've mentioned, it was really tight. Not one hundred percent, it's not, like you know, everything went like clockwork for sure. A lot of that was due to the norms in routines of the department the physical layout of the department and I think also the fact that a lot of people, especially at my level had to teach multiple classes, so we interacted, a lot.

_How does that compare to here? Now describe your community here._

The actual teaching part, here, is a whole lot more stressful here, having your own classroom, especially in a science classroom. We are so much gear driven, stuff and things, and you know setting an environment. I hate to use the word science-y, because I just hate that, but I think you understand what I mean, and I think that really supports the kids too, because their teachers are not discombobulated, they feel a little less discombobulated. I really picked that up immediately when I was here. So, I think here, there is only one other science person here and that is Jazz, and we don't even cross that much in our science tasks, and yet we work really well together. Part of that is because naturally we are right next to each other so it's easy for us to communicate which I think is important. Comparing that to classrooms, where we have to get out go to the hallway walk down the hallway and go in. There's just a natural barrier there. And but even those classrooms where I do have to leave and go, I always feel welcome, I never feel like I'm intruding. We show respect for each other's classroom's when we enter as any teacher would. I also feel like when I have a sub, my co-teachers immediately take them under their wing. I don't have to ask like, I am going to have a sub. Can you watch out? They just do it as I do it, you know? I check in with the sub. How are you doing? Is everything going okay? blah blah blah Speaking as you know, anybody who subbed, they realize how invaluable that is, and then also I don't know whether it's because were a small school or it's the type of people we are, but it seems that way across the entire school, even say with the elementary wing. Even though we don't see the elementary wing as much—we don't lunch together; still, there just when we come together for meetings or when we have to work together just seems to be a complete. I don't want to say, willingness because willingness to sounds like it's an expectation that you're willing, to you know, “sure, I'll do that” but it's more of a, “of course, I'll do that!” Yeah, it's not even a question of whether I should or shouldn't, it's just of course. I don't even think it's articulated in your brain, it's just something we do that is really helpful as well.

_That really folds well into the next question: so how is the teacher culture shaped in our school, and school culture includes like norms, values, and beliefs._
Well, I think a lot of it is shaped by you, and also, I again think that it's shaped by the kind of people. Perhaps all teachers would work this way if they had this type of, maybe, expectation or culture coming in. Now we've always been pretty lucky at least since I've been here that only one to the most three teachers come in a time. I remember when Neale came in and he seem really uptight the first three or four weeks, and I would talk to him and I would tell him, I know exactly what's going to your mind. And he said, what's that? And I said when is the other shoe going to drop? And he's like, yeah, and I go it's not. This is it. That it's not going to get worse than this. This is it. And he is like, really? And he even came to me later some weeks later and said, wow! You're right, you know. I was waiting for that stress level to rise and you know, it can't really be this good, but it is! And it spoils you, some of the teachers of been here for a while even say they're not sure they could go back to another school. We come to thrive in it, and it's nice to be, to look forward to coming to your job to be around the people that you like working around. The thing is, I've noticed that anytime there's even any stress at all, people know when to back off because their coworker is more important than whatever it is that the stress was causing. I saw this a lot during the election. People knew enough and cared enough about each other to just leave it alone.

Where does that care come from?

That's a good question. I am, where does that come from? While I can't really speak for everyone else, but for myself, I think it we like this so much that we're not willing to damage it. And sometimes it's hard to explain especially as teachers we all have teacher's disease, we like to talk, we like to you know, inform and instruct and learn. You know, we like a good debate, but I think I know when you care enough about each other, you know, it's kind of like family around the dinner table, you just know, we'll do this later. Well you know, we're not going to solve the world, but you know, we are going to solve the sandwich right here with everyone else.

So, what opportunities do teachers have to collaborate to impact teaching and learning?

Here at this school, in general? Well, a lot I mean there's both formal and informal and the informal happens all the time. We talk, we share notes, we lunch together, which is nice. I probably lunch together with everyone else the least. Apparently, that's a science teacher’s disease, and because sometimes I just want to be alone with my thoughts for a little bit, and then sometimes I have kids in my classroom doing testing, or if it's a cold day, I just let them in there and eat. But even so, I still feel like I have a lot of time informally. I kind of make it a habit to check in with all the other teachers at least once a week to stick my head in the classroom see what they're doing, what's new, what's happening, and then also the lunches go on a big way. And we do so much informal work
at our lunches and that when we do formal work, it's not as awkward. It's not as awkward— that is something that I hadn't thought of before. It's more collegial it's more, man I'm having a hard time thinking of the word… I'll come back to it. So, I feel what opportunities teachers have, well we've got Learning First. we collaborate someone with there and that's more of a directed collaboration, I guess, right? But on the weeks that we don't have you, we will spend, sometimes, not all the time, sometimes we have to it'll go off on our own, but sometimes we will collaborate. what I find interesting is at this school, I mean I will even collaborate with the PE teacher.

Tell me about that.

Well, I am especially when I get into the physics, is so much of the physics is math that I try to take it as far away from math as possible so that people can, and by people I mean students, can understand what it actually means and Dean, our PE teacher is really good at that because he allows us to use the gym and he thinks of ways or helps in ways that we can use body movement. He's even let me hang a huge pendulum in his gym. Yeah, he's been very good about that and also, you know, doing things like motion with balls, motion with weights, motion with the actual student weights, so they can actually feel the difference, and the students have reported that this has been really helpful. And so you know, I'm I really like the opportunity to do that wherein maybe a different school that wouldn't just yeah, that wouldn't get much traction at all. Love to help, but no.

So, describe the skills that comprise the teaching ability in our school. What do you what do you see in terms of what the skills are.

For me, or for just in general, or both?

Yeah, big picture.

I think the skill at least in the school, I don't know, if I would call it a skill, or a I suppose it could be a skill, if you learned it, but it really a quality, there you go, is just a commitment an internal commitment to not just the kids, but to each other, some of that commitment I think you would be a skill because I’ve seen some of the newer teachers come in and start to absorb. You know, because it's really hard your first few years, even if you were a seasoned teacher being in a new school is always a change. And I can see that. I can see that happen, I can see that support, I can see that the skill of being free to ask for help, let them teach you, so I’m trying to think of things that would be different about the school than any other school.
Something you just said about feeling free to ask. Where is that coming from, tell me more about that.

Well, I think it comes from like collegiality, seeing that you know you are not going to be, I had to use the term judged, yeah, I can't think of another term that works. Yeah, go ahead and ask. We all have questions, you know, I can remember my first year here, I did nothing but ask, and everybody was you know, yeah, sure no problem. We’ll hook you up, we’ll fix you up. This is what we do, even including the office staff. I never felt like I was, you know, because especially the office staff in a large school, they’re extremely busy, and sometimes they forget and treat you like, you know, you're really bothering me, and I have important things to do. And, you know, I'm sure we've all been on the other end of that or both end of that, but here, I really feel like, at least my first year, everybody if you know, if they were busy would put down their pencil or look up from the keyboard, and really give you their focus and full attention, and I never felt like I was intruding, or even if I was intruding, that was okay, because you need to know this, it's something that I guess it's hard to define at first blush. But maybe it will come to me as I think about it some more. Skills.

Maybe, something that we can move on from this idea of skills is to question five. Maybe it is a bit more broad. What motivates teachers in our school?

Oh, my goodness, yeah, that's interesting. Why this school and not another school? Yes, well, it wouldn't be money because the money would be the same at whatever school you went to. I think there is a little bit of, maybe because were a small school we tend to have a little bit of a family feeling. I think that we recognize in a small school that you have to bring more to the table than just your expertise as a teacher.

Why is that?

I think if you're if you're not a people person, I think if you're not comfortable being collegial, I don't think it's going to work here very well. I’ve been at some schools especially when I was subbing where teachers didn't want to be bothered by anybody or anything. They wanted to blow into the classroom, do their job, grades some tests, and run out to their car and leave. And the less time they spent anywhere else, the better. And you know, maybe that works in that situation. But I could not see that working here.

Why doesn’t it work here?

You know, that's a really good question. That’s something that's hard to quantify. I maybe the social message would be misunderstood, or I think because the small school,
like this you have to wear so many hats, you have to get along. And what's great is it you
don't have that feeling of I have to get along, you want to get along.

And why is that?

How that's a really good question I think I'm going to go back to my navy days. Here I
was on a very small shift when I started out: 200 crewmen. And parts of that ship we're
pretty tight because we had to be because it was a small ship that it times, we had to wear
many hats. And then my second job, and was on a much bigger ship, 800 crewmen, and
half of what she didn't even see. And you tend to get really tight with your little group,
and not tight with any other group. And you had a more us versus them mentality.

Resources. You are scrambling for resources, you're scrambling for time and the enemy
becomes the other rather than the bigger job.

So how is that, how does that comparison hold true or not hold true at this school?

Well, I think it's because we have to do so many different things and we have to do them
with each other, and we have to learn from each other. Not just take over a job well and
we not only have to learn that the technical end of the job but the social end of the job
too. Teaching science is not the same as teaching math. And teaching a math is not the
same as teaching English, and what's really interesting is being in a small school and
seeing how it's done it's interesting how different they really are taught. One thing that I
always fascinates me is to go in and watch Jazz teach, because she's so good at one on
one and she's so good at time management, and I don't use the word discipline, that's not
the word I'm using, expectations and her own follow through is incredible I don’t want to
use the word disciplined because that sounds like a bad thing, but she is self-disciplined,
and so I learn a lot from that and learning from each other, I think, is really important.

That's where I think that legitimate peripheral participation comes in, right? Because you
know even though I learned the technical end of my job, and I don't really get much of
that from Jazz, the teaching end of it, I get enormous amounts from watching Jazz, even
watching Dean, watching Nichelle, because they all relate to their students differently,
but it all works. Oh, that other analogy. So, when I went to Navy the second time, I got
put in a small boat unit. There was six of us on a boat, and that was it. So, you had to
depend on each other. And it was it was strange because it wasn't collegial, it was serious.

I mean it, I guess you could say it's collegial, but I get but it's not exactly the same
because it is serious business. And so, yeah, that doesn't, you can drop that, I can't make
that metaphor work at all; I also think having a shared, something that just occurred to
me, a shared vision is probably really important to and I don't know if it would be easy to
articulate, but I think, you is the principal, you kind of have your vision of what you want
to school to be, and I think we pick up on that either through each other or directly from
you. And then there's all the little signs, the signage, the actual signage, the way it's written, the way its presented, communicates an expectation or a feeling. I also think it comes back to us from our kids.

What do you mean by that?

I have a lot of different relationships with my kids here than I did at my other school. Not to say I didn't have some good relationships with my other school, I did, but interestingly enough, the best relationships I had were either from kids I had had subbing in middle school, and or believe it or not, my knuckleheads. Because I really worked hard on my knuckleheads, and I learned through subbing that the harder the kid, the more important the relationship.

So, you said you had good relationships here with kids. So why do you think that is more so here than maybe your previous experience?

Well, I think just like I don't have to exercise power as much, you know. It's always there, of course, but if you think about it, it isn't, I think, because we're a choice school and they realize if they goof off, they'll get kicked out. I don't think that even occurs to them. I think it's more of the fact that because they see how we relate to each other, they feel how we relate to them, they realize none of it's personal, as much as well it is personal, it's personal in that we care about their education, we care about the environment. We want it to be the best possible environment. It also gives us a chance to I think being more open and honest about who we are. I feel much more comfortable sharing me with the students than I would at the big comprehensive. I felt like the least they knew about me, the better. Where is here, you know I mean of course, you can run off at the mouth and tell them more than they need to know, right, but a little personal information or anecdotes goes a long way to letting the kids feel why this is important to you. I had to say when I was a student it never even occurred to me why teachers taught. They were just furniture like anything else, talking furniture. But how many ran out into the mountain town it was the most awkward thing on planet earth because, why aren't you at school? Whereas, I have run into a lot of students here and they will come up to me and say hi.

Why do you think that is?

It's not awkward. Because the relationship is different it's like a lot of them invite me to come watch their games or their plays, or whatever, because you know it isn't like I don't think so much is the authority figure as much as they're trying to share some of their life. Some of this is kind of hard to articulate.
Tony, this is, this is great, and the conversations been really rich, and you responded to
the questions. And if later you're thinking, I would've added this, you're more than
welcome to send me a text or something like that. This has been really, really helpful.

Thank you so much.

Teacher 1 [Pseudo name Deborah]; Female; 59 years; 22 years of experience; 15 years at
this school; certificated support staff
Teacher 2 [Pseudo name Nichelle]; Female; 65 years; 19 years of experience; 7 years at
this school; secondary teacher
Teacher 3 [Pseudo name Preston]; Male; 34 years; 6 years of experience; 1 year at this
school; elementary teacher
Teacher 4 [Pseudo name Neale]; Male; 36 years; 8 years of experience; 3 years at this
school; elementary teacher
2/25/19; 3:20pm; Group interviewed by Stephanie Knipp
Thank you so much for participating in this group interview, and I'd like to ask your permission to record you, so I'm going to pass you the phone and if you could just state your name and that yes, I have permission to record you.

Deborah, yes you have permission to record me. Neale, yes, you have permission to record me. Preston, yes, you have permission to record. Nichelle, yes, you have permission to record me.

All right, now that we have that out-of-the-way, the first question that we're going to talk about is a group conversation: How has this community affected your practice, or the practice of others? So how is this community, our teacher community, affected your practice or the practice of others? Any thoughts on that?

Nichelle: I don't think I became a good teacher until I came here, and I think part of it was that this is a place where you can really be yourself. So I worked really hard at my other schools, but I was never, I never felt like I could be totally myself. So, part of that was getting old, but I think there is something about the students who risk things that you don't see when you're in at a school with 164 students. And so I think part of it just comes from that, and you know it's messages from the top, and it's school on a human scale. I think the numbers of students that we have when you have a smaller school. And you have, not necessarily smaller classes, but a smaller class load over all. It makes a total difference. So I am a different person having worked here. I know, I know that.

Preston: Yeah, to piggyback on that, I think the sense of autonomy that I feel like we have here is very obvious, and I think there's an aspect to have trust in ourselves, but also in the community that we're all working towards the same goal. And we're all professionals, and I feel like that I trust the elementary team to carry on. And as my third-graders go on into other grades, I feel like that trust is reciprocated, that we are all, yeah, working toward a singular. I feel like that's not a given in schools. That do you have the same level of trust that um I think for me.

Neale: For me, this being my second school, I really got the advantage of getting new points of view. When you teach so long at one place, and then you see that, oh, there's some things you do habitually without thinking about is that the right thing to do as a teacher. And secondly, getting points of view from a wider range of levels and expertise rather than just having everyone with an elementary focus on training as well. And on top of that, I think there is a sort of freedom to individualize things because it's not me supporting a team of three people that have to be lockstep. And there's trust, like you said, Preston, said trust. When I can trust that the fifth grade, the teacher before me has
done well, and I can trust that whatever I do will be supported the next year, it's allows me to . . . I feel like I was so much for your to do what I believed as a teacher, it is at this location.

Deborah: For me, if there's one thing I've seen, it is a common thread that runs through the the whole school, not only with staff, but with students is the desire to see change. Most of our students come to us because they want to change. They were somewhere before they came here, and they felt like they needed something else. To be honest with you, many of the staff wanted more autonomy, they wanted more creativity, they wanted to be able to personalize, so they're coming here for change as well. and for me that makes me trust them at a high-level because I know that what they're doing is to support change and growth, and I worked at a lot of places and that's not a common thread that I have seen. So, for my practice it helps me to be in trustful and to know that I can look around and see with many other people are doing to do change and coach others to do the same.

All right, so in light of some of the points you have just brought up on everything from that idea of autonomy, trust, maybe being creative, and also being yourself, as we think about those things, how can school or district leadership support this community? Maybe in some of those aspects, or other ways, but just thinking about how a district and school leadership can support this community.

Neale: I've always, I've always felt that the district, in particular, could be more visible and present physically. I think in a school, it's a difficult and one that is sort of a little hidden choice school, it's not about the first place they would stop by, and its smaller, too, so I feel like when you work really hard and your passion about kids you want people to see that and I think the teachers here would love to be recognized more in a present way, not just to get awards, or a piece of paper, or email, and I've always felt like schools could do a better job of connecting buildings across buildings, you know, whether it's a sixth grade teacher meeting with seventh grade teachers before they let kids go, or it's just multiple high schools talking about where they see success, I think that we could start to have more of an identity as a district rather than just building, building, building.

Nichelle: I think the opportunities to collaborate with other grade levels and other teachers and you've done you know we've we've had some really really wonderful opportunities, and we can do that, but I think I am I think that something [intercom interruption] I forgot to say, oh, collaboration, yeah, I've had to to somehow provide that as a as an ordinary thing rather than a super special thing. I mean we are a special place and we have those opportunities, but not a lot of schools have that where that's
encouraged and it’s not just it can’t be just encouraged it has to be built into the system you have to provide those opportunities in a real way so that it doesn't feel like it's just lip service. Yeah, it's really good you guys working together, but but to provide those real opportunities in the schedule.

Preston: I think given the nature of the school and the fact that so many of the kids are here for so many years that continuing to implement co-teaching strategies intentionally and um working, I think you'd be cool for like elementary teachers be able to work with their kids, like the kids they've had previous years, as they move up and also it's a really good opportunity for secondary teachers to be able to see who is kind of in the pipeline. I think that a lot of relationships can be formed and continued given the structure of the school.

Deborah: So, piggybacking on the co-teaching, the reason that it is working is that the leadership has planned in actual time for people to be able to do that, because everybody likes to support each other, but having actual time blocked out to do it within your day is really important. Having time blocked out for some people to do a higher level of intervention with other students, so that the teachers have a little extra support, um, with that is is essential as well, not easy to do with the small staff, but something that's possible. So that's my comment coming off of yours. In a different direction is that I think leadership letting people's passion sometimes dictate who gets assigned to what tasks of work somewhat things is very important. I've been in buildings where there are certain people that always get to do everything. And I think that having somebody in leadership that can pair with people’s passions so that everybody gets to get excited about something, but also everybody feels valued for their different qualities is something that's incredibly important.

Nichelle: Yet to kind of go off of that, I think it's so important that you know us. I've been in buildings where did you know that I'm wondering if the principal even knows my name, and just say it's not something you can measure necessarily, but it something that is um I mean we want the same things our students want. We want to be seen, we want to be valued, kind of like what you're going on, and it's not just recognition. It's just, I see what you're doing, and I acknowledge that, and even if it's, you know, we do we need to work on this, just to have that kind of a personal connection, I think it's so important. And even in large schools, it makes a difference. If you don't feel, if you don't feel like you're seen, then you're the only engine and you need you need that that I am don't know the fuel from other people, I guess. and I think that some administrators could do more of.

Neale: That's way one of my struggles. I think in teaching as you start to see things that lose their authenticity, and some of it comes down to the bureaucracy of what we do,
having to have to have x number of meetings for this long and provide notes. When I think back to my first started teaching, I had some such valuable meetings, because I chose to go meet with someone and strategize and plan, and I'm, I think here, we do a pretty good job of, because everyone is doing different things, we have we have real focus on when we're meeting what we're going to get out of it, but there still a little bit of that forced, we have to, and yeah, we make it valuable, but is it authentic when we haven't, are we doing the things we’re passionate about. Are we doing the things we really wanted to get out of meetings?

Deborah: About the positive spin to what our culture is like, the principal does an excellent job of making sure that she does kudos and recognize what we're doing, but but also setting up things like in staff meetings, encouragements, what we call them, when you give people the positive comments, but encouraging the staff to give each other positive comments, because that just spins off of us feeling more positively about each other. I think before we start doing it, there's many times you might've thought of something positive, but did you actually get time to go over until the person. So positives, bringing out the positives from the staff about each other is a really good thing.

Neale: I think that also connects to something I remember Preston saying when we first started school this year which is, so many places we've been there’s teachers who focus on the negative the kids that have struggles. And yes, its human nature to vent, but I really I'd like to be better personally on staying on the positive, how much we love teaching, how much we love working with kids. And when you do something like that, it kind of feeds into what we're going to do in our classrooms or how we talk about school, so I like the positivity.