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## **A Community of Practice for School Leaders: Its Impact on their Perceptions of Collaborative Practice, Levels of Trust, Self-Awareness, and Self-Efficacy**

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A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS: ITS IMPACT ON  
THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE, LEVELS OF TRUST,  
SELF-AWARENESS, AND SELF-EFFICACY

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Richard Michael Smith

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## **Dedication**

I wish to express my gratitude to my wonderful family. My work is dedicated to my wife, Missy, and my sons, Zach and Renny. Your love, support, and the sacrifices that you made throughout my journey are the reasons my dream has become a reality.

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## **Abstract**

“There is a marked difference between possessing knowledge and skills and being able to use them well under taxing conditions. Personal accomplishments require not only skills but self-beliefs of efficacy to use them well” (Bandura, 1993, p. 119). Low school leader self-efficacy leads to the poor performance of school leaders and declining climates in their schools (Versland, 2013). The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine the influence of the use of a collaborative community of practice (LCoP) on school leaders’ perceptions of their levels of trust, self-awareness, and self-efficacy. Measurement instruments included semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, participants’ reflection journals, and a researcher’s field journal. The analysis of data included coding methods as prescribed by Saldana (2016). After participating in the LCoP, members describe their optimism that their collaboration diminishes feelings of isolation and builds trust among the members of the cohort. Members express that collaboration in the LCoP strengthens awareness of one another’s needs and provides avenues for effective communication. The LCoP shifts members’ focus from discussing issues to finding solutions, from sharing problems to sharing best practices, from distrust to trust, and from working in isolation to working collaboratively. Obstacles to collaboration exist that potentially erode members’ self-efficacy. However, LCoP members are optimistic that the LCoP will continue to evolve into a vehicle that will strengthen relationships among its members, leading to increased sharing of skills that will lead to a stronger confidence and commitment among the members to address the needs of their schools.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background**

School and district leaders are asked to be instructional leaders, overseeing teacher quality and professional development. They are asked to ensure for safe, efficient, and effective learning environments for children and staff. They are asked to prioritize limited funding that allows for appropriate curriculum, staffing, and resources. They are asked to be leaders in the community, creating strong and lasting partnerships with families. They are asked to provide vision that contributes to their school's culture, and nurture their respective climates, all the while maintaining high expectations and school spirit in the context of continuous improvement. It is difficult for school leaders to feel confident that they can competently address all of these areas. Bandura (1993) states:

There is a marked difference between possessing knowledge and skills and being able to use them well under taxing conditions. Personal accomplishments require not only skills but self-beliefs of efficacy to use them well. Hence a person with the same knowledge and skills may perform poorly, adequately, or extraordinarily depending on fluctuations in self-efficacy thinking. (p. 119)

Diminished confidence, caused by external pressures and a lack of support, can undermine a school leader's self-efficacy. Low self-efficacy leads to the poor performance of school leaders and declining climates in their schools, caused by

diminished trust among the collegial relationships within each principal's school building (Versland, 2013). The problems of a poor or eroding school climate and low trust, as influenced by poor principal self-efficacy, are detrimental for entire school communities, compromising schools' abilities to continuously improve in supporting student achievement outcomes (Goddard & Salloum, 2011; Goddard, Skrla, & Salloum, 2017).

For Barth (2006):

The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else. If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, then the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative. If, on the other hand, relationships between administrators and teachers are fearful, competitive, suspicious, and corrosive, then these qualities will disseminate throughout the school community. (p. 8)

Conditions such as job burnout, isolation, lack of career and skills growth, and lack of colleagues serve to undermine principals' well-being, self-efficacy, effectiveness as leaders, and their relationships in their school buildings. In many rural school systems, school leaders work in isolation, rather than consulting and collaborating in initiatives. Practicing consistent collaboration is difficult for rural school principals because of the isolation and related factors associated with separate school buildings, districts, and governing bodies. The lack of opportunities to collaborate can lead to low principal self-

efficacy compounded by conditions brought on by principal isolation, such as diminished trust and lack of skills growth and acquisition.

Because the extant research demonstrates that school leaders have a large influence in the success of their schools, it is important to develop formats that afford school leaders the opportunities to leverage their collective capacity to support their staffs and students to achieve at their highest levels (Browne-Ferrigno, 2007). Professional learning communities, learning teams, and communities of practice are examples of such formats. Embedded within the context of collaborative formats, are the conditions that foster collaboration and trust. Research of the characteristics of effective collaborative formats and preparation programs for school leaders reveals characteristics and conditions such as collaboration and trusting relationships as being coherent with high self-efficacy among school leaders (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2009; Grissom & Harrington, 2010).

Umekubo, Chrispeels, and Daly (2015) examined districtwide cohort models that served to foster trusting relationships among school leaders. They concluded that the ability to collaborate within a cohort model allows principals the necessary opportunities to strengthen their trust in one another and to improve their knowledge and practice regarding school improvement through professional development, establishing supportive conditions that lead to higher self-efficacy. Umekubo et al. (2015) suggested that opportunities for collaboration among leadership and staff are influential in terms of positive student learning outcomes. A cohort-based, school leaders' community of practice, where school administrators regularly engage in collaboration and reflection, is consistent with the conditions of effective principal preparation programs and cohort

models that feature collaborative structures, and are revealed in the extant research as related to high principal self-efficacy and principal efficacy (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Umekubo et al., 2015).

### **Statement of the Action Research Problem**

This action research study examined the effects of principals and central office administrators collaborating in a professional team of school administrators described as a leaders' community of practice (LCoP), and its impact on increasing principal self-efficacy as measured by increased collaboration and trust among the LCoP members. Through action research, the influence of increased opportunities for collaboration within the LCoP framework was examined to determine whether conditions such as reflective activities, targeted and peer professional development activities, and protocols that foster trust supported the growth of self-efficacy among the school leaders of the New England Island Public Schools (NEIPS).

**Evidence supporting the existence of the problem.** Historically, this rural New England school district has not provided a mechanism for its administration to regularly collaborate. In April of 2018, members of the local teachers' union administered a survey to assess levels of communication, trust, and effectiveness as perceived by staff regarding the administrators of each of the NEIPS schools. Results indicate that poor communication among the study's district principals and their staffs is present in three of the district's schools, as evidenced by over 40% of the teacher respondents in those schools indicating poor communication by their principals. For those respondents, the poor communication has led to the erosion of the climate in their schools.

Though this action research study was specific to this rural New England school district, extant research demonstrates that collaborative team formats lead to higher principal self-efficacy and positively influences the collective efficacy of schools (Goddard et al., 2017). The results of this past research were used as a foundation for designing the action research study as it applies to NEIPS.

**Probable causes related to the problem.** For many years, NEIPS leadership has worked in self-imposed isolation. Rather than partnering in initiatives, school-based leadership has been competitive to achieve at high academic levels. Unfortunately, school administrators' behavior towards one another has manifested in very little to nonexistent sharing of best practices and collaboration. The probable causes related to the problem for NEIPS leadership included the lack of formal and informal opportunities for collaboration and professional development found in emotionally supportive cohorts and professional learning structures such as the LCoP.

### **Context of the Action Research Study**

The NEIPS consists of multiple, small school districts serving school-aged children, drawn from an aggregate population of approximately 15,000 full-time residents. This action research study was comprised of the six school principals, superintendent, and assistant superintendent that serve NEIPS. Whole group cohort meetings occurred on a monthly basis. Additional LCoP exercises were conducted in different formats from within and outside of the monthly cohort meetings.

**Information related to the organization.** NEIPS is comprised of three K-8 elementary schools, each representing a corresponding town. Each of these schools forms its own single-school district. Additionally, two elementary schools comprise a

regional school district, which serves three towns. All students in Grades 9-12 attend the NEIPS regional high school.

The student population of NEIPS numbers 2,163. Demographically, 32% of the children of the NEIPS are in the low socioeconomic range. Regarding race and ethnicity, the profile of the NEIPS population of students is as follows: 2.4% African American, 1.1% Asian, 10.1% Hispanic, 4.1% Multi-Race Non-Hispanic, 2.4% Native American, 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 79.7% White (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MADESE], 2018).

There are 245 teachers attributed to the six NEIPS schools. Ninety-six percent of core academic classes are taught by teachers who are highly qualified. The superintendent of schools leads a cabinet comprised of the six system principals, an assistant superintendent, a certified business manager, an English Language Learner director, two co-directors of student support services, an early childhood coordinator, and a grants coordinator.

NEIPS is governed overall by a 14-member All-Island School Committee. This group oversees the shared programs portion of the overall operating budget. The three single-school districts are governed by their own three-member school committee that oversees the independent affairs of their respective elementary school. Additionally, a five-member committee, oversees the affairs of the three towns that comprise the regional district. The total of these 14 members constitutes the aforementioned All-Island School Committee. Additionally, nine members of the All-Island School Committee form the NEIPS High School Committee. Though a small system, the separateness of the island's towns necessitates the numerous governing school bodies.

**Information related to the intended stakeholders.** The LCoP is a framework that has not existed for school leaders of the NEIPS. The members of the LCoP included the building principals of each of the six schools within the NEIPS and the NEIPS superintendent and assistant superintendent. These members served as action researchers and participants in this study and were chosen for their influence on the efficacy of the individual schools and school system, overall. The eight members of the LCoP met regularly in a format that allowed for opportunities to support their collaborative practices as a leadership cohort, problem-solved through data inquiry and critical friends, and engaged in reflective activities and peer professional development.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For Creswell (2014), the Constructivist Worldview assumes that, “human beings construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (p. 9). Patterns reveal themselves when the researcher is immersed in the context or environment. The constructivist researcher positions himself and collaborates with the participants, observes and collects data from within the context, and brings personal values into the study when making interpretations of the data. As a qualitative study conducted through the lens of a constructivist, this action research study proposed to explore the influence of the LCoP as a social system that served the purposes of strengthening school leadership self-efficacy, providing opportunities for collaboration, and increasing awareness among the cohort members.

Knowles’s theory of adult learning (andragogy) involves adults using their previous experiences and current understandings to provide context for new learning (Cox, 2015). This is characteristic of a constructivist paradigm of learning. Adult

Learning Theory was appropriate in this context, as it was coherent with the collaborative and inductive features of the LCoP and the structure of action research that monitored the LCoP's influence. Westover (2009) explained that adult learners need to feel involved in the planning of their instruction, use their experiences as a basis for their learning, seek to learn what is immediately relevant to their personal and professional contexts, seek to problem solve rather than learn content, and be actively involved in the learning process.

### **Action Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine the influence of the use of a collaborative community of practice format on rural district school leaders' self-efficacy. Additional goals and outcomes included determining the common themes in practices among rural school and district leaders that are supportive of the school administrative team and might lead to strengthening of their self-efficacy. While this action research study specifically examined selected outcomes of increased reflective activities, collaboration, levels of self-efficacy, awareness, and trust among the cohort members, unintended outcomes revealed themselves as a result of the members working together. The central research questions that served to guide this study included the following.

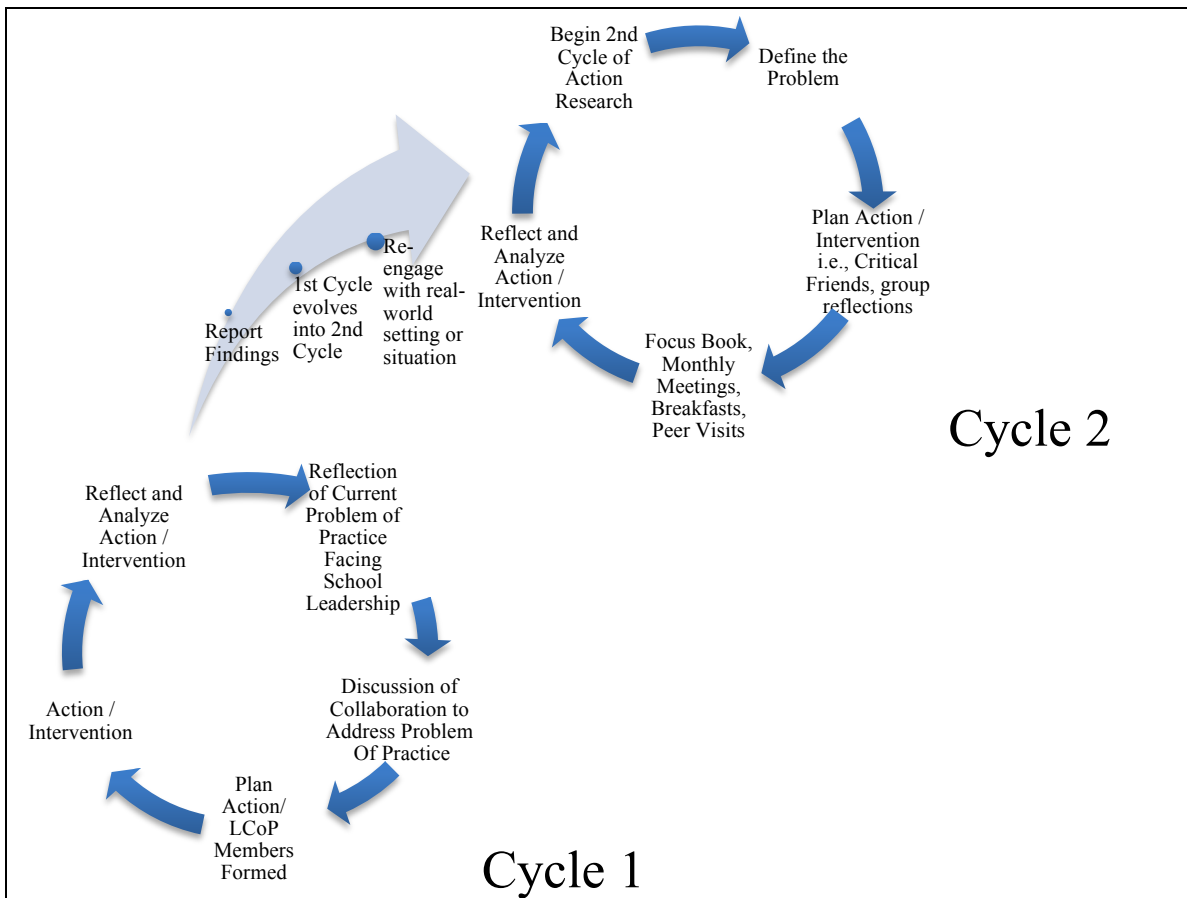
1. After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication with one another?
2. After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of professional knowledge and practice?



3. After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members perceive their levels of self-efficacy?

### Action Research Model

The cyclical nature of this action research study included identifying the problem of practice, developing the action or intervention, testing strategies, gathering data, and reflecting on the effectiveness of those strategies (Figure 1). The cycle of action research allows for continuous revision of inquiry, progressing through several cycles of reflection and intervention (Craig, 2009).



*Figure 1.* Cycles of action research model. This figure illustrates the cyclical nature of action research and the process of the LCoP action research study of the New England Island Public Schools. Additional cycles may occur beyond Cycle 2, in ongoing fashion.

## **Brief Description of the Intervention**

The focus of the action research study was the perceptions of the LCoP members regarding their participation in this collaborative structure. LCoP members' perceptions involved their levels of self-efficacy, growth in their leadership skills, targeted areas of professional development that emerged from reflective activities, levels of trust between the members, levels of effective communication between the members, and levels of support for one another within the LCoP membership. The eight members of the LCoP worked as a whole group, in smaller groups, and individually. LCoP members engaged in on-going reflective journal discussions and study groups, both in small group and whole group settings during monthly LCoP meetings.

**First cycle.** This action research study was coherent with NEIPS administration's desire to work together within a supportive environment and practice. During the first cycle of action research, the membership of the LCoP was formed and the problem of practice was identified.

**Second cycle.** The focus of this study took place in the second cycle of the action research. As the researcher, I met with each of the study participants, describing a reflective process that was designed to support the needs of the LCoP members individually and as a whole group. I asked that participants reflect daily, using a member's journal. The LCoP members' reflections were open-ended and provided opportunities for the participants to increase their self-awareness regarding their leadership self-efficacy. "In essence, reflective practice encourages the action researcher to engage in a critical analysis of practice in a way that helps connect the researcher's experience to the actual act of practice" (Craig, 2009, p. 147).

***Awareness and trust among cohort members.*** Embedded in the framework of the LCoP process, were ongoing opportunities for school leaders to pair or work in small groups, completing tasks and activities that promoted collaboration with the desired outcome of increased awareness and trust of one another. Furthermore, the LCoP used a Critical Friends Group format that fostered support and trust through collegial, problem-solving activities. Critical Friends Groups are collaborative cohorts of professionals who speak critically and honestly within a supportive context, to address crucial problems and weaknesses experienced among cohort members.

Ongoing collaboration that occurred in pairings of the LCoP members encouraged mentoring, outreach, and peer observation, which are coherent with activities that support trust and collaboration. It is with these ongoing practices, that additional collaborative activities were revealed through reflection and analysis of the data.

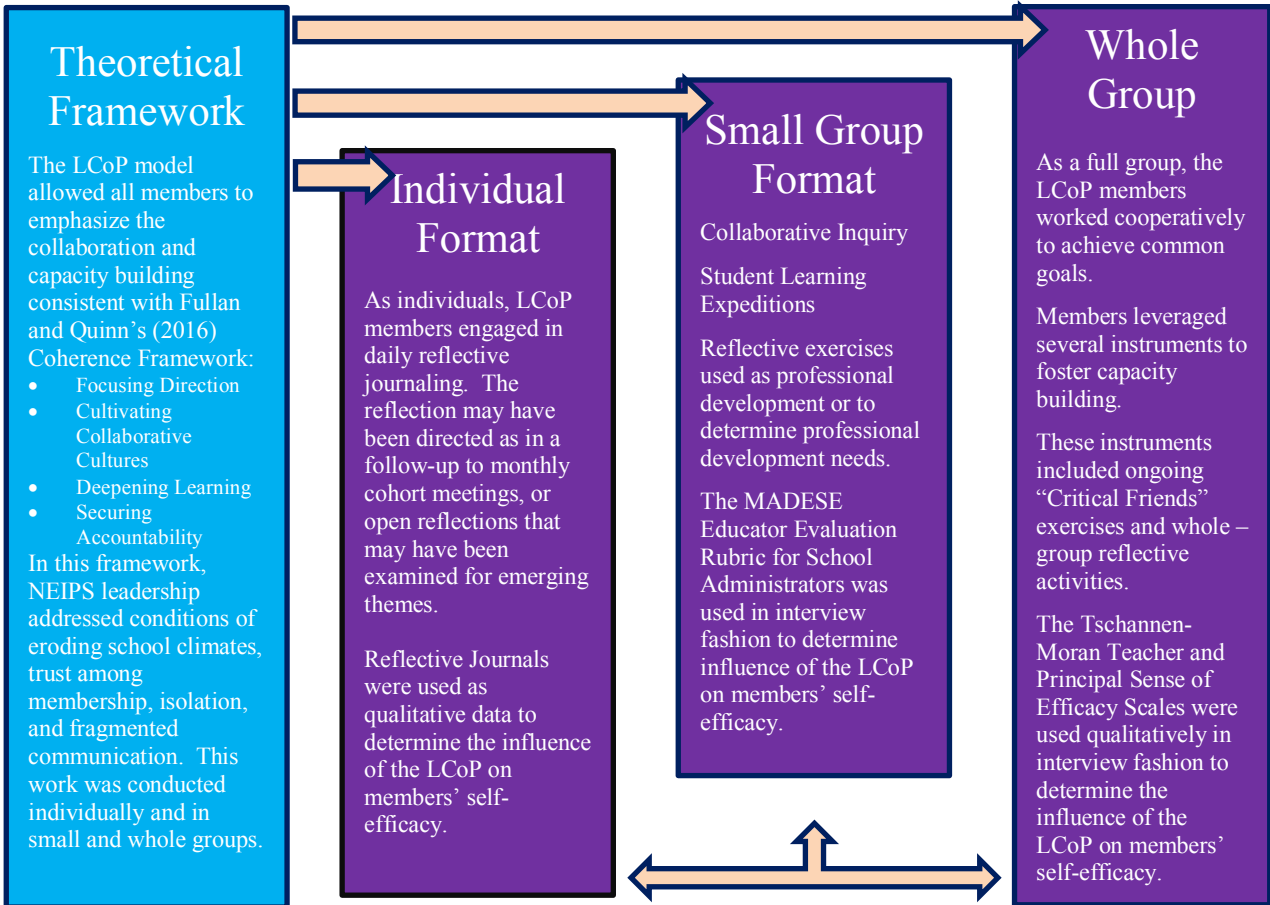
***Professional knowledge.*** The LCoP allowed opportunities for professional learning to take place in collaborative fashion. Themes emerged inductively from the reflective journals of the LCoP members, paired learning expeditions, and whole-group reflective activities. These themes served to guide targeted professional development in need areas for school leaders. Professional knowledge also emerged from opportunities afforded by the whole-group LCoP structure that leveraged the collective sharing of best practices among LCoP members.

***School leader self-efficacy.*** LCoP members regularly engaged in paired collaborative inquiry to examine student learning and achievement, leadership qualities, and teacher best practices. These pairs of administrators reflected on their expedition, sharing their perspectives with one another regarding teacher practice.

Further reflection occurred between researcher and participant in one-to-one meetings using the Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation Rubric for School Administrators (MADESE, 2015). This is the rubric used to supervise and evaluate Massachusetts school and district level administrators. This served to foster self-awareness regarding the principals' perceived competence in the context of the standards, and to identify areas of strength that they shared with other members of the LCoP.

Figure 2 illustrates the implications for the problem of practice in terms of a school leaders' community of practice. Highlighted is Fullan and Quinn's (2016) Coherence Framework, which served as a reference in each of the three formats, individual, small group, and whole group, along with their measures.

Implications for the Problem of Practice in Terms of a Leaders' Community of Practice  
*Quick View:* The model illustrates the features of the LCoP framework in the context of Individual, Small-Group, and Whole Group formats, and the relationships that exist between them in addressing the problem of practice.



*Figure 2.* Leaders' community of practice (LCoP) model. This figure illustrates the structure, activities, and measures of the LCoP framework as a description of the intervention.

## **Definitions of Terms**

*Critical Friends Group* – cohort of colleagues that provides honest, constructive, and often difficult feedback to hear, in order to encourage problem-solving of challenging issues and professional areas of weakness experienced by the members of the cohort.

*data inquiry* – examining student outcomes through the use of achievement data using a continuous cycle of assessment, analysis of the results, and adjustment in practice in response to data indicators.

*peer professional development* – strategies that leverage peers of equal standing to coach one another in a supportive manner to strengthen professional skills.

*reflective activities* – activities that foster analytical and critical thought regarding professional skills in the context of leadership practices.

*rural school systems* – school systems located in areas that are low in population density. These systems often serve local economies that are dependent on natural resource-based industries such as fishing and marine. The job force in rural areas is largely comprised of skilled and experienced workers that are not formally educated.

*self-efficacy* – is the belief held by school leaders that they have the capacity to effectively operate their schools and to have students achieve at high levels under their leadership.

*student learning expeditions* – LCoP members engage in paired walkthroughs of classrooms, observing themes of effective teacher practice and examples of student learning to serve as reflection and discussion points.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

To introduce the conditions and characteristics that are found to influence school leaders' self-efficacy, a review of the existing literature will define self-efficacy using Bandura's constructs, emphasize the importance of school leader self-efficacy on schools, and connect self and collective efficacy to overall school leader efficacy, by examining the conditions and contributions of district supports for school leaders. The review of the literature will highlight these conditions by examining the influence of collaborative practices, increased trust, communication, care, and improved professional knowledge and skills on school leader self-efficacy. Further, conditions under which self-efficacy may decline will be examined. A synthesis of these conditions in the context of the implications of the extant research will summarize the literature review.

#### **Definition of Self-Efficacy**

Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as, "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (p. 71). "Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave" (Bandura, 1994, p. 71).

Self-efficacy among school leaders involves their beliefs in the context of the factors of leadership that lead to student growth and the success of their schools. School leaders' self-efficacy involves the confidence school leaders have in their own knowledge, skills, and abilities to support their schools by leading their staffs and school

communities (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008). In Marek's (2016) study regarding principals' self-efficacy and their abilities in the context of their special education responsibilities, it is noted that principals' beliefs are rooted in their experiences and knowledge. Marek (2016) concluded that leaders' self-efficacy is influenced by prior training, professional experiences, and their belief systems, all of which influence their abilities as school leaders. Continued learning and increased experiences lead to a higher self-efficacy, which improves their abilities as school leaders (Marek, 2016). This is consistent with Bandura's (1994) theories that assume that leaders with high self-efficacy, address more challenging tasks and display a stronger commitment to fulfill those challenges, than leaders who possess low self-efficacy.

Bandura (1977) described four areas of experiences that influence self-efficacy:

- Personal performance accomplishments—Mastering a challenging activity or overcoming obstacles has a strong influence in the growth of self-efficacy.
- Vicarious experiences—When people observe others succeed through resilience or sustained effort, they believe that they too can succeed in similar fashion.
- Social persuasion—People can persuade others to believe they can succeed by providing specific and supportive feedback.
- Physiological condition—A person's sense of social and emotional well-being can influence self-efficacy. Positive emotions can strengthen self-confidence and therefore, self-efficacy.

Bandura (1997) posited that the construct of self-efficacy involves people's beliefs in their abilities to influence their success through their actions and the conditions



and resources that are present in the environment that might support their abilities to achieve success. Because people's self-efficacy is defined by the resources and peripheral support present in their environments, self-efficacy can be described as context specific. The collaborative design of the LCoP will foster opportunities for members to engage in supportive experiences described in Bandura's (1977) four sources of self-efficacy.

### **Importance of School Leader Self-Efficacy**

School leader self-efficacy is important as research indicates a correlation between self-efficacy and actual efficacy regarding school leaders' successes within their school environments. For Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010), self-efficacy influences school leaders' behaviors and attitudes about their abilities to successfully meet challenges in the school environment. Self-efficacy influences the choices leaders make regarding potential change initiatives, including how much effort they will expend to reach the goals of each initiative. Positive self-efficacy can empower school leaders, where negative sense of efficacy limits school leaders' abilities to support their organizations (DeWitt, 2017). Further research reveals that principals with high self-efficacy have a positive influence on collective teacher efficacy, and indirectly, student achievement (Beausaert, Froehlich, Devos, & Riley, 2016; Ross, Hogaboam-Gray, & Gray, 2004).

**School leader self-efficacy and work engagement.** Federici and Skaalvik (2011) found self-efficacy of school leaders is related to their own work engagement. The stronger the feelings of self-efficacy, the longer the leader will persist on a given task. As Bandura (1997) states, "the stronger their beliefs, the more vigorous and

persistent are people's efforts" (p. 394). Sense of efficacy strengthens when leaders persist to address difficult challenges with success or increase their resilience in the face of failure. Simosi (2012) found that levels of leader self-efficacy influence both achievement and humanistic culture-training transfer. High leader self-efficacy strengthens this relationship, while low self-efficacy weakens the relationship. Furthermore, school leaders' self-efficacy is linked to followers' commitment to school community responsibilities and have a positive effect on school staff's work engagement (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000).

**School leader self-efficacy and student achievement.** Principal effectiveness as influenced by their self-efficacy, positively relates to student learning (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Heck & Hallinger, 2010; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). Versland (2013) advanced the idea that positive self-efficacy leads to effective school leadership. School leaders' positive self-efficacy influences the choices they make regarding school programming, to include instructional activities and staffing choices. Their self-efficacy also influences the choices they make when facing challenges. Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) concluded that school leaders' sense of efficacy is crucial to their instructional leadership practices as they relate to vision and direction, staff development, organization development, and the implementation of the instructional program.

### **Contributions to Support School Leader Self-Efficacy and Effectiveness**

Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) conducted research to better understand conditions that influence school leader self-efficacy. Specifically, Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) sought to understand if district contributions exist that might influence school leader efficacy. They also examined if self-efficacy and collective efficacy of school leaders

were related to the same district conditions. Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) defines collective efficacy as a belief about the ability of one's colleagues to collectively perform a task with success or achieve a goal.

They found that school leaders' collective efficacy is related to district conditions and the conditions found in their schools, influencing student achievement. School leaders' sense of efficacy and collective efficacy also had a positive relationship with effective leadership practices (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). The study is important in compelling district leaders to explore ways to support building-based leaders, increasing their self-efficacy and sense of collective efficacy, by focusing on school improvement measures that emphasize student achievement, instruction, and collaborative, cooperative relationships and practices among leaders (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Sense of efficacy among school leaders supports collective teacher efficacy. Ross et al. (2004) found "that school processes that promoted teacher ownership of school directions (shared school goals, school-wide decision making, fit of plans with school needs, and empowering principal leadership) exerted an even stronger influence on collective teacher efficacy than prior student achievement" (p. 163). To this end, cultivating teacher efficacy through the examination of the necessary leadership practices, characteristics, and skills of effective principals is necessary.

The importance of school leaders' self-efficacy as it leads to actual efficacy, involves their professional skills in their school communities. Grissom and Loeb's (2011) research attempted to determine the skills of principals that likely relate to student growth. The study included a broad range of instructional and organizational management skills. The analysis determined that organizational management, which is

an integral responsibility of principals, correlated consistently with improved teaching and positive student growth outcomes.

Hattie (2009) illustrated that principals who “ensured for an orderly and supportive environment, such as protecting time for teaching and learning by reducing external pressures and interruptions and establishing an orderly and supportive environment both inside and outside classrooms,” had an effect size of  $d = 0.49$  (p. 84).

The results of Grissom and Loeb (2011) and Hattie (2009), however, are limited in their application and the extant research regarding traits of effective school principals is limited as well. “Unfortunately, existing research does not tell us enough about the skills principals need to promote school improvement, making the design of policies geared towards recruiting and preparing effective school leaders challenging” (Grissom & Loeb, 2011, p. 1092). Fuller and Hollingworth (2014) concluded “there are currently no strategies to estimate principal effectiveness that accurately capture the independent effect of principals on student test scores; thus, these current strategies send inaccurate signals to both principals and those who make employment decisions about principals” (p. 466). Moreover, little research regarding the efficacy of principal support programs, and cohort models of support for school leaders exists.

The extant research supports school climate, staff job satisfaction, and student achievement as influenced positively by effective school leadership (Beusaert et al., 2016). Within a principals’ community of practice, action research can be conducted regarding the various leadership practices and characteristics, including the aforementioned research and meta-analyses, to improve the conditions for teachers to be at their most effective in their support of student learning.

## **Collaborative Practices to Support School Leader Self-Efficacy**

A review of the literature reveals there is little dedicated research to understanding the influence that the overall school district has on school leaders' self-efficacy, especially in terms of collaborative supports for principals as directed by the district and the influence of collaborative structures, such as the LCoP on school leaders' self-efficacy. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2007) conducted research to determine the antecedents of principals' self-efficacy beliefs. They found that school-based variables, such as teachers, support staff, students, and parents were the strongest predictors of principals' self-efficacy. Principal preparation and district-level supports were significant predictors of principals' self-efficacy as well. This suggests that support for principals from the superintendent and other central office personnel might positively influence principals' self-efficacy.

This is significant, as the Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) research revealed, districts whose supports make principals feel more efficacious about their school improvement efforts, have positive effects on student learning and the conditions in their schools. Confidence in their own leadership grows when principals believe they are working collaboratively with their colleagues, central office personnel, and the superintendent towards common goals (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010).

**Collaboration to reduce school leader isolation and burnout.** The link between school leader self-efficacy and student achievement compels a review of the literature regarding conditions that can diminish self-efficacy (Goddard et al., 2017). Principals who work in isolation are not as effective as those who collaborate (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). Versland (2013) determined that isolation,

through a lack of mentoring support and collaboration, negatively influences new principals' self-efficacy. Extant research regarding school leader self-efficacy, as it relates to job burnout, isolation, and lack of career and skills growth, demonstrates that these conditions serve to undermine a principal's sense of efficacy, well-being, and ultimately can impact school leader efficacy and the relationships in their school communities (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

The problem of principal isolation is one that requires attention, as principal self-efficacy and efficacy is influenced by principal happiness (Beusaert et al., 2016; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Izgar, 2009). Izgar (2009) observed a relationship between principal loneliness and depression. "The degree of changing relationships with former colleagues and friends and the inability to form relationships with other professionals was reported as the primary factor for loss of efficacy by the principals themselves" (Versland, 2013, p. 6). Isolation was found to be a predictor of physical and emotional burnout for new principals (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). Hite, Reynolds, and Hite, (2010) found that aspiring principals who worked directly with more experienced school leaders, had greater success in their experiences. They attribute these successes to increased collaboration and shared problem-solving with their more experienced principal colleagues.

Further research demonstrates certain negative conditions which influence school leader self-efficacy. Federici and Skaalvik (2012) demonstrated that school leader self-efficacy is positively related to job satisfaction and motivation to quit and negatively related to burnout. Regarding principals' motivation to quit their jobs as it relates to principal self-efficacy and burnout, Federici and Skaalvik (2012) concluded, "given the

responsibility of school principals for students' education and well-being at school, it is therefore important that school principals develop high levels of competency as well as self-efficacy" (p. 312).

For Versland (2013), increases in stress experienced by school leaders, affected their aspirations and goals in the context of their school communities. School leaders that experience high levels of stress collaborate less, consult less, and adopt decision-making practices that are conducted in isolation and without consideration for the input of their colleagues or followers (Versland, 2013). This top-down decision-making style has negative repercussions on school leaders' behaviors in managing their schools. For Versland (2013), a school leaders' ability to cope in the context of their self-efficacy, influences their confidence in addressing school reform initiatives. School leaders whose self-efficacy is diminished, also experience a diminishing ability to cope. As a result, these leaders become pessimistic about the challenges that they or their schools face. For these leaders, no amount of effort or creative process will change the conditions created by such challenges.

**Collaboration and the collective efficacy of school leaders.** Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) found that the effects of district leadership are largely confined to the conditions that it sets and have an indirect influence on principals' self-efficacy, their schools, and their student. Yet principals perceive these conditions as supportive of their work. District conditions have larger effects on principals' collective efficacy than on their self-efficacy (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Principals' and their teachers' beliefs (collective efficacy) in their instructional practices contribute significantly to their schools' academic achievement (Bandura, 1993).

District level support for principals is related to school leaders' self-efficacy, and more strongly related to their collective efficacy. The district support that is most strongly related to the sense of efficacy of school leaders is found in managing the instructional program.

This is followed by redesigning the organization, developing people, and setting directions (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). These district conditions are most statistically significant with school leaders' sense of efficacy when there is an emphasis on teamwork, district culture, and job-embedded professional development, which are all coherent with the LCoP.

Principal self-efficacy and actual efficacy is contingent on support found in collaborative structures that serve to foster trust and continued learning through professional development (Barth, 2006; Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Currently, few formats exist that support the ongoing and consistent practice of collaboration among school principals and system leaders.

Collaborative practices, in the form of school leader mentoring support, can be found in cohort models such as communities of practice. For Dewitt (2017), central office leaders can contribute significantly to principal self-efficacy through the support they provide their school leaders:

In order for leaders to have a sense of collective efficacy, which involves groups working together, they need to have a sense of self-efficacy first. Raising a principal's self-efficacy is difficult. Without the support from central office or the help from a critical friend, it seems as though raising principal self-efficacy is an enormous challenge. (p. 3)



## **Communities of Practice and School Leader Self-Efficacy**

“Principals who believe they are working collaboratively toward clear and common goals with district personnel, other principals, and teachers in their schools are more confident in their leadership” (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010, p. 127). A community of practice is a cohort structure that brings together educators of similar roles. The lack of a community of practice or similar structure that promotes collaboration between principals, impedes administrators’ ability to share best practices and cultivate trust with and among their principal colleagues and their school staff, children, and parents (Barth, 2006; Szczesiul, 2014; Umekubo et al., 2015). Communities of practice also promote collaboratively planned professional development opportunities that lead to increased principal efficacy, principal retention, and most importantly, student achievement.

The collaborative nature of communities of practice fosters higher levels of transparency and non-judgmental interactions among members. These conditions lead to the cultivation of trust and are supportive of the internal and external accountability within the cohort. Further, by addressing the problem of poor collaborative practices, school leaders will be empowered, behind a clear vision, to build a climate of high trust, with an emphasis on effective communication and student care, and the capacity for continuous improvement in their own schools.

**Trust.** There is little research that explores trust as it relates to school leader self-efficacy. However, there does exist research regarding trust as it relates to teacher self-efficacy and the support they receive from their principals. Research has demonstrated that supportive leadership and a supportive school climate lead to higher self-efficacy in teachers (Kass, 2013; Reames & Spencer, 1998; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990). A strong self-

efficacy positively influences student achievement through teacher effectiveness (Kass, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2007). An assumption can be made that supportive leadership from district leaders can foster trust and growth in principal self-efficacy.

It is important for principals to experience the cultivation of trust among their colleagues, and to better understand how to cultivate trust in their school communities. Umekubo et al. (2015) studied districtwide cohort models that served to foster trusting relationships among school leaders. Their study demonstrated that members of principal cohort groups fostered trust within the cohort and in each member's school. Umekubo et al. (2015) concluded the ability to collaborate within a cohort model allowed principals the necessary opportunities to strengthen their trust in one another and improve their knowledge and practice regarding teacher efficacy and trust in their own schools, conditions that lead to increased self-efficacy.

The problem of eroding trust can be severely detrimental for the entire school community and most importantly for school children. As cited in Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000), Baier asserted that "we notice trust as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted" (p. 549). The influence of positive principal sense of efficacy and efficacy on the intellectual, physical, and emotional welfare of children must be emphasized and addressed through the context of a trusting environment. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) argued, "When distrust pervades a school culture, it is unlikely that the school will be effective" (p. 585). High levels of teachers' trust towards their principals fosters the necessary conditions for student achievement (Bayhan-Karapinar, 2015).

As Barth (2006) asserts, principals have a significant influence over the climate and health of relationships within a school. It is important for district personnel and principals to understand how to cultivate trust in school communities. By expanding their base of trust within groups, principals experience increased collaboration and improved relationships in their unique sites. Umekubo et al. (2015) argued:

Our evidence showed how trusting relationships fostered strong collaboration amongst principals and led to higher levels of social capital and intellectual capital, which in turn enabled the schools and cohorts to practice the components of organizational learning. These schools and the district achieved sustained increases in student achievement. (p. 451)

The research conducted by Umekubo et al. (2015) suggests trust is related to schools that offer opportunities for collaboration among leadership and staff, which in turn is strongly related to positive student learning outcomes. “In short, if schools are to realize the kinds of positive transformations envisioned by leaders of reform efforts, attention must be paid to issues of trust” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 585).

**Communication.** The efficacy of schools is a responsibility of principals and as such, the quality of communication in schools must be initiated and maintained by school leaders. Morale, as it is impacted by the conditions of the relationships in school buildings, is measured by the levels of effective communication that exist in those relationships. Helmer, Holt, and Thompson (2015) studied the quality of relationships between principals and teachers through principals’ communication with their teachers. The researchers found that, “The manner in which a principal communicates and the teachers’ perception of campus morale showed a statistically significant relationship” (p.

23). Further, face-to-face communication between principals and their teachers was perceived to boost morale and positively influence student learning outcomes, whether the communication was formal or informal.

**Emphasis on care.** Principals and teachers who work collaboratively through effective organizational structures, share best practices to the benefit of their students (Bayhan-Karapinar, 2015; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Highly effective principals support their school communities, children, staff, and parents, by demonstrating genuine interest and care through behaviors such as listening and empathizing (Helmer et al., 2015; McEwan, 2003). Strong social interactions between principals and their teachers, strengthen relationships and foster opportunities to build a caring environment. Care, as influenced by an efficacious principal, can permeate a school building, improving social relationships with all stakeholders, most notably, children. Enthusiasm and principals' and teachers' positive attitudes towards their profession are supportive of student learning. As cited in Stronge (2007), Noddings explained that "a teacher's happiness can affect the classroom climate and therefore affect students" (p. 22). Stronge (2007) asserted, "Specific teacher attributes that show caring include listening, gentleness, understanding, knowledge of students as individuals, nurturing, warmth, and encouragement, and an overall love of children" (p. 23). For Stronge (2007), care is an educator attribute that leads to high achievement for all students, whether at-risk or of high ability.

### **School Leader Professional Knowledge and Practice**

It is important for school leaders to collaborate in order to enhance their professional knowledge and competence through ongoing professional development

(Edge & Mylopoulos, 2008). The members of the LCoP will engage in practices consistent with district-led leadership support, such as principal learning teams and similar cohort models that emphasize peer learning to support their own professional development. Professional development exercises will be determined inductively through reflective activities that will reveal areas of support for participants in the context of the LCoP framework and within their unique communities.

School leader cohort groups such as the LCoP, are consistent with appropriately leveraging practices of effective leadership, which include collaboration, supporting staff, and deepening knowledge (Umekubo et al., 2015). However, it can be challenging for school leaders to find the time necessary to collaborate with other colleagues. Furthermore, there are relatively few studies that have been conducted to examine the relationship between principal professional development, principal effectiveness, and student learning, when compared to the volumes of research that exist with teachers in the same regard (Grissom & Harrington, 2010).

As has been previously noted, the effectiveness of principals benefits entire school communities. Owings, Kaplan, and Nunnery (2005) observed, principal effectiveness, developed through continued professional training, is a predictor of student achievement. Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) suggested by not developing leadership with continuing professional development, school systems compromise school improvement efforts. To this end, school districts should emphasize increasing principals' efficacy, knowledge, and skills, by emphasizing principal professional development as a priority. Grissom and Loeb (2011) observed, "Recognition of the importance of principals has led to increased policy attention on attracting and preparing

school leaders” (p. 1091). Grissom and Harrington (2010) examined principals’ continued professional development as it relates to their levels of engagement and their efficacy. They found “a significant positive association between principal participation in formal mentoring and coaching and principal effectiveness” (Grissom & Harrington, 2010, p. 585).

The Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) research reveals that district led, targeted professional development that is embedded in cooperative leader teams, has a strong association with principal self and collective sense of efficacy. Umekubo et al. (2015) studied districtwide cohort models that served the purpose of providing professional development to school leaders and served to foster relationships between and among central office leadership and principals, by considering whether such models supported student learning. Umekubo et al. (2015) concluded the ability to collaborate within a cohort model allowed principals the necessary opportunities to improve their knowledge and practice and cultivate their base of trust and communication among other district principals and personnel.

Highly effective principals also engage in continuous learning through professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). The importance of professional development is underscored by the necessity of its continuation in a consistent manner. Hattie (2003) has often drawn a distinction regarding the differences between experienced and expert educators. Experienced educators are those that have been in the profession for significant time. Expert educators are those that establish the frameworks and behaviors that support their own learning and understand the need to explore models that allow for professional development to occur in an embedded fashion.

In research regarding a bench-learning program for principals in Norway and Sweden, findings indicate that principals' desire to initiate change in their schools was characterized by in-district professional development opportunities that supported growth in their professional knowledge. Activities such as structured school visits and collaboration in professional learning groups within one another's schools enhanced principals' self-efficacy, which increased their confidence in trying new practices (Aas & Blom, 2018).

Opportunities for principals to reflect on their practice in collegial settings are valuable to principals' development and improved effectiveness (Barth, 1986). Principals' reflection fosters their increased awareness and understanding regarding the relationships in their schools, self-awareness of their own behaviors in the context of those relationships, and understanding among principals of their own needs for professional support (Barth, 1986). Szczesiul (2014) researched the use of protocol-structured dialogue in promoting reflective practices and shared theories of action within leadership teams. These practices and protocols help principals to focus their understanding of how change works and to deepen their use of reflection to support their collaboration (Szczesiul, 2014).

Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) explored principals' self-efficacy and collective efficacy in their professional development experiences, by examining professional development in the context of factors that might affect principals' sense of efficacy. These factors include feedback from the superintendent or district personnel to principals regarding the quality of their leadership in the context of their evaluations, and encouragement of principals to take risks by having them apply what they learn from

professional development training and support. Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) found that these two factors are highly correlated to principal sense of self and collective efficacy.

To better support school leaders' sense of efficacy, it is imperative that principals engage in high-quality professional development in educator evaluation. Stronge (2010) contends, "Teachers' instruction has the most proximal relation with student learning, while teacher background qualifications and other educational inputs can at most, influence learning indirectly through their association with teacher instructional performance" (p. 43). Hattie (2009) argued that principals that engaged in, "planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (e.g., direct involvement in support and evaluation of teaching through regular classroom visits and provision of formative and summative feedback to teachers)," had an effect size of  $d = 0.74$  on teacher effectiveness (p. 84).

Stewart and Matthews (2015) examined the need for principals of small, rural districts to improve their skills as evaluators, including principals' understanding of evaluation policy standards. Based on the study results, the researchers declared, "we recommend that district and state administrators and policymakers target small school principals and provide them with needed professional development in order to assist them in an already isolated and overloaded position" (p. 59).

Principals also positively influence teacher quality by collaboratively deciding on relevant professional development and providing those opportunities to teachers. Hattie (2009) found that principals who participate in teacher development and learning have an effect size of  $d = 0.91$  on student achievement. Additionally, efforts should be made to foster job-embedded professional development through an emphasis on collaboration



among school leaders, which will also have a positive influence on their sense of self and collective efficacies (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010).

### **Summary**

“Districts that help their principals feel more efficacious about their school improvement work have positive effects on school conditions and student learning”, (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010, p. 127). Given the importance of school leader self-efficacy as it relates to student learning, it is important to understand how districts can build leadership capacity and quality through the enhancement of leaders’ sense of efficacy.

A synthesis of the literature regarding school leaders’ self-efficacy reveals implications that compel this action research study and the collaborative framework of the leaders’ community of practice. A collaboration of school district leaders, to include building principals and central office leaders, such as the superintendent and assistant superintendent of schools, enhances their self-efficacy and the collective efficacy of the entire group. Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) consider the enhancement of sense of efficacy among school leaders to be an important endeavor, as leaders’ self-efficacy is a necessary resource for school improvement and increasing student achievement.

Efforts should be made to focus on leadership quality by targeting school improvement with job-embedded professional development through an emphasis on teamwork and a culture that fosters cooperation, collaboration, and relationships among school leaders, which will have a positive influence on their sense of self and collective efficacies. Ongoing collaborative practices that regularly bring school leaders together are coherent with the type of high-quality implementation of district-level supports that lead to higher levels of leaders’ self-efficacy. A community of practice, where school

leaders regularly collaborate, share best practices, and support one another as managers and leaders in their own schools, fosters their sense of efficacy, through the enhancement of trust and effective communication among their cohort members. The reciprocal or mutual trust between and among school administration will benefit the children of each school, leading to their growth in achievement. “Given the innumerable variables that exist in becoming an effective leader in public education, it is noted that learning to be a more sensitive and effective communicator ultimately leads to student success” (Helmer et al., 2015, p. 23).

School leader cohort models that emphasize collaborative practices enhance leaders’ professional skills and knowledge through the exploration of relevant skills training and professional development. School districts that attend to principals’ needs minimize principal job burnout. Stability among school leadership minimizes the relationship that exists between high principal turnover and negative effects on school culture (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). The opportunities found in collaborative models such as the LCoP are coherent with supporting school leaders’ professional and social-emotional needs, which likely supports the retention of talented, experienced school leaders. Most notably, cohort models that emphasize collaborative practices support school leaders’ self-efficacy, which has a positive influence on student achievement and effective leadership (Ross et al., 2004).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

This action research study was conducted among the leadership members of a rural New England school system within the context of their six school buildings. The study examined the influence of a school leaders' community of practice (LCoP) on cohort members' self-efficacy and the influence of increased collaboration among LCoP members on their feelings of isolation, growth in their peer professional support, professional skills, and trust and self-awareness. This chapter will highlight the rationale for choosing action research, the role of the researcher, the sources of data, data collection and analysis, limitations and delimitations of the study, and ethical considerations.

This qualitative study was conducted through a constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2014). Within the qualitative design, I positioned myself as a researcher-participant. Throughout the process, I collected data from participants and interpreted meaning from those data in the context of the LCoP. My values were brought into the study, but I made a concerted effort to reduce any personal biases that may have influenced the interpretation of data. The influence of the context of the LCoP was studied in an ongoing and cyclical manner. All participants collaborated regularly, helping to shape agendas for the monthly LCoP meetings and activities.

The process for this study followed steps that allowed the researcher to pose theories regarding potential outcomes of collaboration within the LCoP. These theories

included the relation between collaboration and isolation and trust, as they influence LCoP members' self-efficacy. Specifically, did increased opportunities for reflection, peer professional development activities, and problem-solving protocols, serve to foster conditions such as trust, awareness, professional skills, and communication among the LCoP members, leading to an increase in their levels of self-efficacy?

Action research is a model that supports continuous professional growth of educators in their specific environments using the capacity of their staffs with little outside involvement. This study was conducted through the methodology of action research, focusing on the area of ongoing leadership development. The cycle of action research included identifying a problem of practice, testing strategies, gathering data, and determining the effectiveness of the strategies. The action research process was based on inquiry into real practices that occur in the context, allowing the findings to inform those practices and provide solutions to improve conditions. The cyclical nature of action research allows constant revision of inquiry, progressing through several interventions. This recursive process creates a climate of continuous improvement and reflection, allowing for formative assessment through progress monitoring (Craig, 2009).

The process of continuous inquiry, which leads to the introduction of new interventions and reflection, is effective in promoting professional learning. The plan for inquiry involved identifying the problem and determining the data methods, including gathering data sets, analyzing the data sets, and designing the action plan. The action research was conducted in the practicing environment of the LCoP members.

The LCoP members engaged in multiple cycles of intervention and data collection. Conclusions were drawn, leading to newer questions in a continuous cycle of

action research. Action strategies were refined through inquiry until the problem of practice was successfully addressed.

Reflection is a hallmark of action research as it supports the cyclical and ongoing process of action research. The end result is relevant to the participants and the specific environment in which the action research occurred. The ongoing cycle of gathering and analyzing data and making meaning from this data based on the participants' experiences, shaped the formative process of this action research study.

### **Rationale for Choosing Action Research**

Action research was appropriate for this study because it is a process that allows researchers to participate in the setting of which they conduct the research, allowing them to make sense of the world through a social perspective and through personal experiences within the setting. This is coherent with many characteristics of a constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2014). As the "researcher-as-instrument," I assumed the roles of researcher, participant, and practitioner, not just an observer evaluating the conditions within the environment. All members of the LCoP were participants and acted as "experts in the field" (Craig, 2009).

**Cost-benefit analysis of the design.** Action research is practical research, driven by goals that are achievable, relevant, and solution focused. The LCoP members experienced and evaluated the conditions from inside the environment, obtaining authentic, and relevant data. The collaborative design of action research encourages community, collegiality, and provides insight into behaviors. Action research is consistent with the implementation process of the LCoP, which focused collectively on specific activities that promoted community among its members. The necessary

collaboration of action research allowed the LCoP members/practitioners/researchers to directly experience success in improving the conditions they experienced, which directly influenced their self-efficacy as school leaders (Craig, 2009).

Open-ended qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews and field journals allow for greater flexibility in the research process. With qualitative data collection methods, participants are free to respond instinctually to the researcher with greater depth and detail of their answers. Consequently, researchers are available to respond to the participants by reflecting content and feeling in interpreting and clarifying participants' meaning.

In weighing time and social/emotional costs for this study, I considered the current challenging conditions that exist for school leaders. Embarrassment, lack of engagement, diminished trust and self-efficacy among the LCoP members, and researcher bias were potential costs of administering this action research study.

**Description of the action research intervention.** The process for this study followed steps that allowed the researcher to offer theories regarding potential outcomes of collaboration within the LCoP. Through action research the influence of the implementation of the LCoP framework was examined to determine if increased collaboration among LCoP members led to an increase in their self-efficacy. Research conducted by Umekubo et al. (2015) suggests that opportunities for collaboration among school leaders and staff are influential of positive student learning outcomes. The LCoP provided the framework for members to experience consistent collaboration with one another, engaging in activities and collaborative practices that were examined for their influence on school leaders' self-efficacy.

The overall organization of the LCoP included monthly whole group meetings and frequent, ongoing, one-on-one meetings between each member and the primary researcher. Conditions such as peer professional support and skills growth were highlighted to determine their influence on LCoP members' self-efficacy. Growth in LCoP members' self-efficacy was examined through the consistent application of collaborative practices and activities in the LCoP framework.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Action research is a process that allowed me to conduct the research in the setting being studied. My roles as the researcher included facilitator, participant, and practitioner. As the "researcher-as-instrument," I observed the conditions within the environment and the behaviors of the LCoP members and evaluated the influence of the interventions and activities that took place in the LCoP structure, documenting my observations and evaluations in a field journal. Because this was action research, I also observed the conditions and interventions as they influenced my own behavior as a member of the LCoP. I consistently and frequently reflected on my behaviors and the influence of the interventions on my own levels of self-efficacy, as my self-reflections became an important part of the study process and findings.

As a participant-observer, I conducted interviews one-to-one and among the whole LCoP group as part of an action research data set. Periodically, interviews were conducted in the setting, which served to foster collaboration among the members (Craig, 2009). I was aware of my bias and controlled for this bias by consistently reflecting on how it may have been influencing my conduct as a facilitator of the interventions and my management of the study while practicing as a school leader. In this context, I ensured

that I asked questions that provoked discussion, being aware of my responsibility to facilitate rather than instruct.

### Participants

Research and interventions took place in the six schools and central office that comprise the NEIPS. LCoP members acted as researchers, participants, and practitioners as each school leader was uniquely qualified to discuss the needs, dynamics, and relationships of their respective school communities. The LCoP action research study participants included the five elementary school principals, one high school principal, one superintendent of schools, and one assistant superintendent of schools of the NEIPS.

Descriptions of the LCoP participants follow in Table 1.

Table 1

#### *LCoP Member Descriptions*

Member/Role	Degree	Age	Years of Experience			
			Teacher	Asst. Principal	Principal	Central Admin.
Elementary 1	M.Ed.	64	22	0	10	10
Elementary 2	M.Ed.	65	7	4	26	2
High School 3	M.Ed.	46	7	4	7	0
Elementary 4	Ed.D.	54	22	0	4	0
Elementary 5	M.Ed.	48	11	3	8	0
Elementary 6	M.Ed.	48	18	1	7	1
Central 7	Ed.D.	54	14	2	5	6
Central 8	M.Ed.	56	14	5	8	4

*Note.* LCoP = Leaders' Community of Practice.

### Data Sources

Constructivist research typically uses narrative and phenomenological approaches in data gathering over a sustained period of time. Both approaches consider and incorporate the beliefs and experiences of the researcher. The qualitative data sources



revealed perceived levels of awareness, trust, and self-efficacy in an ongoing fashion. Meaning was derived inductively by examining the participants individually and as a whole, regarding their influence on the complexity of the group's behaviors and dynamics.

Action research studies may utilize responses from in-depth interviews and observations in the participants' practicing context as data sets. As the participant observer, I used semi-structured interviews, open-ended, unstructured interviews, a researcher's field journal, and the LCoP member participants' reflection journals as data sources. Data sets were grouped according to the three overarching research questions that served to guide this study. The qualitative data sets were comprised of the following primary sources; transcripts of responses to semi-structured and open-ended interviews, researcher observation field notes of participants' conversations and interactions, and participant journals. Each overarching question was addressed by at least three sources of data (Craig, 2009). Responses of LCoP members, when paired in their inquiry, served as secondary sources of data.

An interview schedule was created in a collaborative manner with the other LCoP members. The schedule supported the planning of data sources which revealed other pertinent relationships and meanings. The schedule considered the researcher's preferences, the practicing environment, the scope of the study, the activities, and the data sets (Craig, 2009).

**Semi-structured interviews.** Quantitative scales and qualitative approaches can often complement each other. Administering quantitative scales as sources of data collection in qualitative fashion, such as semi-structured interviews, allows the data sets

to be interpreted qualitatively, fostering depth and detail in the analysis. For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to inform levels of school leaders' general self-efficacy. Semi-structured interviews were administered one on one, between the researcher and each participant, allowing the LCoP members to describe their experiences working with one another in the context of the cohort. With semi-structured interviews, all participants responded to the same questions, which supported consistency of data sets. The semi-structured interview combined elements and questions from the Tschannen-Moran (2001) Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale, the Tschannen-Moran (2004) Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (MADESE) Model System for Educator Evaluation Rubric for School Administrators (MADESE, 2015), and researcher-conceived questions.

**Unstructured interviews.** Unstructured interviews were conducted to inform school leaders' levels of general self-efficacy, trust, and awareness in the context of the LCoP. Unstructured interview questions are inductive in nature, which allows participants to reveal feelings and provide depth of detail that are not limited by the direction of more structured questions. Unstructured interviews explored the members' perceptions regarding their experiences with the activities of the cohort, with one another, and with what they determined as influencing these experiences (Creswell 2014; Moustakas, 1994). Unstructured interviews were administered one on one, between the researcher and each participant.

***Semi-structured and unstructured interview questions validation.*** Seventeen of the questions that comprised the semi-structured and unstructured interviews were grounded in the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), and the

Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). These scales measured aspects of the educator's context, sense of influence in the context, and work alienation. The construct validity of various sense of efficacy scales was determined using a measure of work alienation (Forsyth & Hoy, 1978). The questions from the scales were modified for relevance to the context of the action research study.

The composition of six interview questions followed the categories prescribed by Craig (2009) and Creswell (2014) that fostered and directed participant reflection in the areas of critical analysis, problem-solving, self-analysis, professional growth, and application. The remaining five interview questions were derived from the Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation, School Administrator Rubric (MADESE, 2015). This rubric describes administrative leadership practices at the school and district levels. The rubric offers indicators for effective leadership practices and is used throughout the evaluation cycle for principals and other district administrators (MADESE, 2015).

Tables 2, 3, and 4 illustrate the process of validating each of the semi-structured and unstructured interview questions by illustrating a basis for the manner in which the questions in each instrument were developed. The tables match the research questions with their corresponding interview questions and express the literature base that yields validity for each of the interview questions' relevance regarding the LCoP.

Table 2

*Semi-Structured and Unstructured Interview Prompts Addressing Question 1*

Interview Prompt	Research Basis
Would you describe the LCoP members as typically looking out for each other? Why do you answer this way?	
How would you describe the level of candor among the members of the LCoP?	
How true is this statement? “Even in difficult situations, I can depend on my colleagues.”	Tschannen-Moran (2004) Sense of Efficacy
Please describe your experiences in terms of your participation in LCoP activities.	
In what ways has the LCoP supported you in terms of being a school leader?	
How do you feel about your collaborative experiences with your LCoP colleagues?	
Please describe your level of commitment to the other members of the LCoP.	
How do you describe changes in your level of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication in the context of the LCoP?	Craig (2009); Creswell (2014)

*Note.* LCoP = Leaders’ Community of Practice.

Table 3

*Semi-Structured and Unstructured Interview Prompts Addressing Question 2*

Interview Prompt	Research Basis
<p>Please describe how you might promote the learning and growth of all students in your school environment and the success of all staff:</p> <p>by cultivating a shared vision that makes powerful teaching and learning the central focus of schooling.</p> <p>by ensuring a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.</p> <p>by using resources to implement appropriate curriculum, staffing, and scheduling.</p> <p>through effective partnerships with families, community organizations, and other stakeholders that support the mission of the school and district.</p> <p>by nurturing and sustaining a school culture of reflective practice, high expectations, and continuous learning for staff.</p>	<p>MADESE (2015) Evaluation Rubric</p>
<p>What do you perceive are your professional strengths and weaknesses as a school leader?</p> <p>In what ways do school leaders in our system perform their jobs well and are competent in their professional responsibilities?</p> <p>How would you describe changes in your levels of professional knowledge and practice?</p>	<p>Craig (2009); Creswell (2014)</p>

*Note.* MADESE = Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Table 4

*Semi-Structured and Unstructured Interview Prompts Addressing Question 3*

Interview Prompt	Research Basis
In your current role as a school leader, describe the extent to which you:	
influence student learning in your school community.	
generate enthusiasm for a shared vision.	
manage change in your school community.	
handle the time demands of the job.	
promote school spirit among a large majority of the student population.	Tschannen-Moran (2004) Sense of Efficacy
create a positive learning environment in your school community.	
motivate teachers.	
promote the prevailing values of your community.	
shape the operational policies and procedures that are necessary to manage your school community.	
promote acceptable behavior among students.	
cope with the stress of the job.	
Please describe your level of self-efficacy and any changes in your level of self-efficacy.	Craig (2009); Creswell (2014)

***Field test of interview questions.*** A brief field test was conducted with district administrators from the NEIPS, and curriculum administrators and assistant superintendents from other New England school districts, all of whom did not participate in the study. This field test was employed to determine any necessary improvements to the interview questions in order to demonstrate the validity of the study’s instruments. In soliciting feedback, the action research study was described in an email request to the aforementioned colleagues, referenced as Appendix A.

Of the 25 administrators solicited for feedback, four local district administrators, and six administrators from other New England school districts responded. The feedback from the responses involved dividing broader questions into smaller and more specific questions, rewording questions for clarity, and eliminating the redundancy of some

questions. I divided questions regarding generating enthusiasm for a shared vision and managing change in the school community, ensuring a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment, and using resources to implement appropriate curriculum, staffing, and scheduling. I reworded questions regarding the activities, contexts, and/or colleagues influenced by collaboration in the LCoP, and a question regarding school leaders' professional strengths and weaknesses. I limited redundancy by eliminating questions regarding conditions of school leaders' workload, and student behavior.

Additionally, the feedback compelled me to reflect on the alignment and connectedness of the interview questions to the thoughts and dispositions of the members, after their participation in the LCoP. Considering the frame of reference of Research Question 3, I pondered whether Research Questions 1 and 2 were too specifically grounded as conditions changed by the collaboration in the LCoP. Furthermore, the feedback offered insight into the sensitive nature of the questions in exploring the relationships of the participants, and their trust towards one another and the researcher. After thoughtful consideration, I decided not to make some of the suggested changes regarding the general approach to questioning, rewording certain questions, and using quantitative measures for the study rather than the qualitative interview questions.

**Field journal.** The researcher utilized a field journal throughout the action research study to inform the process and researcher's self-efficacy, and the perceived self-efficacy of the other members of the LCoP. The field journal included descriptive entries and reflective entries made by the researcher regarding the following three categories of information; ideas and wonderings, general research information, and environment and participant-based information (Craig, 2009).

Field journal prompts included:

- reflections of my role in the research and as a member of the LCoP.
- What are LCoP members doing or trying to accomplish?
- How do LCoP members characterize LCoP activities and colleagues?

**Participant journals.** The LCoP participants recorded their own reflections by utilizing a participant's journal to inform their trust and awareness of their LCoP colleagues and their general self-efficacy. LCoP members used the qualitative data from their reflective journals to engage in analytical dialogues with the researcher to determine emerging themes. These themes served to guide interventions and activities for the LCoP members and continuously determine subsequent agendas and actions of the cohort meetings. A sample of questions and reflections is included in the journaling boilerplate, referenced as Appendix B.

**Validity of data sources.** To ensure validity, the researcher employed a number of strategies to support the credibility of the sources and findings, noting that generalizability is not applicable to this study as it was action research, specific to this context and these participants (Creswell, 2014). Triangulation was achieved by analyzing the multiple data sets to determine if they were found to have similar results, or if emerging themes were coherent with one another and the findings of the researcher (Craig, 2009). Member checking occurred throughout the process of analysis with members of the LCoP, to determine accuracy of my interpretations of the data sets. Inherently, the significant amount of time spent in the field for this study deepened my understanding of the context of the LCoP.



Focusing my reflection as a researcher, practitioner, and participant was necessary in considering my bias as it influenced the study. Reflexivity is a characteristic of qualitative research that compelled me to reflect on my role in the study, in the context of my role as a school district leader, and how my experiences, background, and bias might have influenced the other members and the process of the study, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2014). It is important to note that I removed myself from any formal evaluative role of the principals, as part of my school district leader responsibilities.

### **Data Collection**

The collection of data focused on the areas of study in the context of the action research questions. These areas included principal self-efficacy, awareness and trust among the members of the cohort, and professional leadership development. Data collection and the interpretation of the data influenced the altering of original assumptions found in the initial focus areas. New assumptions and meanings discovered throughout the process of research were anticipated. Therefore, the plan for research was not tightly prescribed, and the initial plan and process changed when I began to collect and analyze data from the field (Creswell, 2014).

Data were collected monthly, from October through December 2018, through 30-45 minute recorded semi-structured and unstructured interviews. These interviews were conducted in a one-on-one manner, between the researcher and each LCoP member.

Data from the researcher's field journal and participants' reflection journals were recorded on a daily basis, from October through December 2018. The data from the

participants' reflection journals were incorporated into participants' responses in the context of the monthly unstructured interviews.

Monthly, two-hour-long observations occurred in the context of the LCoP whole cohort meetings. These observations were recorded in the researcher's field journal. Member checking interviews occurred between the researcher and each participant throughout the cycles of analysis.

**Semi-structured interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were administered, beginning in October and concluding in December 2018. One-on-one meetings began with cohort members reflecting in the context of semi-structured interview questions that incorporated the Tschannen-Moran (2004) Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale and the Tschannen-Moran (2001) Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale, and the Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation Rubric for School Administrators (MADESE, 2015).

**Unstructured interviews.** Unstructured interviews were conducted in a conversation-like manner. Keirsey's (1998) descriptions and insights into temperament and character were referenced in the interviews and in LCoP activities that promoted self-awareness among the cohort members. Keirsey (1998) believed that behavior is predisposed and understanding the temperament types of people can support better awareness for why people behave as they do. Embedded in the framework of the LCoP process, were ongoing opportunities for school leaders to work in pairs or small groups, completing tasks and activities that promoted collaboration with the desired outcome to determine the influence of this collaboration on participants' trust and awareness of their member colleagues.

**Field journal.** A researcher-as-participant field journal was kept to record daily entries in the practicing environment, which included observations of the LCoP members, and the researcher-participant's reflections of the process. Journal entries included the researcher's thought processes, identification of problems, information on the participants, logistical notes and plans, new ideas, to do lists, progress or hindrances of the study, observation notes, reminders, and general wonderings (Craig, 2009). Field journal entries were made in an ongoing manner, beginning in September and concluding in December 2018.

**Participant journals.** The researcher asked that participants reflect daily using a journaling boilerplate (Appendix B). LCoP members used the qualitative data from their reflective journals to engage in analytical dialogues during the interview meetings with the lead researcher. The reflections served to guide interventions and collaborative activities for LCoP members.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative research examines significant statements that might be made by participants in interviews, during observations, and in their reflections. Meaning is derived from these significant statements and sorted and synthesized into themes. Using data sets from semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, the researcher's field journal, and participant's reflection journals, I conducted content analysis inductively to determine emerging themes. Once a set of themes was established, I worked deductively to determine if there were sufficient data to support the themes (Creswell, 2014). Because the LCoP constantly evolved, data collection and analysis changed as well. Emerging themes from recurring data analysis led me to

consider additions to the questions that initially served to guide this study and the data collection that occurred throughout this study.

Creswell's (2014) approach to data analysis involves an ordered and interrelated process that occurs throughout the action research study. Though linear, Creswell advocates for an approach of data analysis that is cyclical, occurring in no particular order. For the purposes of explanation and clarity, a description of Creswell's (2014) steps follow.

The first step involves organizing and preparing the data for analysis. This refers to sorting and arranging the data from the different sources. Transcribing interviews and documenting observations and reflections are part of this step. Reading the transcribed data allows the researcher the opportunity to begin reflecting on participants' meaning through general impressions of the information.

Using one data source, I began the coding process by documenting significant statements, sentences, or quotes that highlighted the participants' experiences. Descriptive codes, which describe topics of data, emotion codes, which involve participants' accompanying emotions throughout the process, and in vivo codes, that use actual participants' terms or quotes from transcripts of the data source were included among the methods of coding used in the first cycle of action research analysis (Saldana, 2016). This process allowed a general sense of the relationships between the codes, their frequencies, and the overall, underlying meaning across the codes (Saldana, 2016). Following first cycle coding, I organized the information into topics or clusters of information. I abbreviated these topics or clusters and coded the remaining data by

writing the appropriate topic abbreviations next to corresponding segments of the remaining data.

In second cycle coding, I used methods such as axial coding, which allowed me to group and reduce the number of first cycle codes, and focused coding, which determined significance and frequency of the codes. These methods allowed me to organize the clusters of data into categories or themes (Saldana, 2016). I used theoretical coding to synthesize the categories to determine central themes and write summary descriptions focused on the common experiences of the participants in a narrative manner (Saldana, 2016). This synthesis led to my final step in the analysis cycle, which involved making an interpretation of the findings.

**Action research question one.** Semi-structured and unstructured interviews, the field journal, and the participants' reflection journals served to inform the question, "After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication with one another?" The semi-structured interviews were coded using Saldana's (2016) first cycle methods of descriptive, emotion, and in vivo coding, and second cycle methods of focused coding and axial coding. The field journal was coded using Saldana's (2016) first cycle methods of descriptive, emotion, and in vivo coding, and second cycle methods of focused coding and axial coding. The unstructured interviews, which incorporated the participants' reflection journals were coded using Saldana's (2016) first cycle methods of descriptive, emotion, and in vivo coding, and second cycle methods of focused coding and axial coding. All data sources in the context of action research question one, underwent Saldana's (2016) theoretical coding.

**Action research question two.** Semi-structured and unstructured interviews, the field journal, and the participants' reflection journals served to inform the question, "After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of professional knowledge and practice?" The semi-structured interviews were coded using Saldana's (2016) first cycle methods of descriptive and in vivo coding, and second cycle methods of focused coding and axial coding. The field journal was coded using Saldana's (2016) first cycle methods of descriptive, emotion, and in vivo coding, and second cycle methods of focused coding and axial coding. The unstructured interviews, which incorporated the participants' reflection journals were coded using Saldana's (2016) first cycle methods of descriptive, emotion, and in vivo coding, and second cycle methods of focused coding and axial coding. All data sources in the context of action research question two, underwent Saldana's (2016) theoretical coding.

**Action research question three.** Semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, the field journal, and the participants' reflection journals served to inform the question, "After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of self-efficacy?" Semi-structured interviews were coded using Saldana's (2016) first cycle methods of descriptive and in vivo coding, and second cycle methods of focused coding and axial coding. Unstructured interviews and participants' journals were coded using Saldana's (2016) first cycle methods of descriptive, emotion, and in vivo coding and second cycle methods of focused coding and axial coding. The field journal was coded using Saldana's (2016) first cycle methods of descriptive, emotion, and in vivo coding, and second cycle methods of focused coding

and axial coding. All data sources, in the context of action research question three underwent Saldana’s (2016) theoretical coding. Table 5 provides a summary of the research questions, data sources, and analysis of the data.

Table 5

*Evaluation Questions, Data Sources, and Analysis Method*

Evaluation Question	Data Sources	Analysis Method
After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe changes in their levels of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication with one another?	Semi-structured interviews	Qualitative coding and analysis
After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe changes in their levels of professional knowledge and practice?	Unstructured interviews Field journal Participants’ journals	
After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe changes in their levels of self-efficacy?		

**Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

**Assumptions.** Many of my assumptions may have biased the research process, as I may have perceived the collaborative activities engaged in by LCoP members as automatically leading to improvement, rather than examining the influence of these activities objectively, through the perspectives of the members. I was aware of my assumption that all LCoP participants have interest in their own participation and in the outcomes of their collaboration. I also assumed the honesty and integrity of the participants’ disclosures in their interviews and in their personal reflection journals.

**Delimitations.** The delimitations and limitations for this action research study were related to my choice of methodology. The most notable delimitation is that I chose

to conduct this study as exclusively qualitative. The potential for bias in qualitative research is significant. Researcher bias can influence the direction, process, and interpretation of data, leading to inaccurate results. Another delimitation was my choice of action research as the study's methodology. By choosing action research, I delimited this study to the small set of school leaders in this rural New England school system, who served as participants of this study.

**Limitations.** The limitations of this study were rooted in the action research method itself. Although the researcher-as-instrument is an advantage of action research, the role of the researcher is complex, as the “practitioner” advocates for change, while the “researcher” strives to remain objective while conducting an inductive study process. Another limitation of this action research study was the requirement of buy-in from the LCoP participants in order to influence any change. The most notable limitation involved my roles and responsibilities as a leader of the school system in which the LCoP took place, and the bias and influence on other members that were likely present due to my personal involvement in this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As this was a qualitative study that involved the participants sharing potentially sensitive information, a profound ethical consideration was the confidentiality of the participants' responses. Confidentiality lies in the context of my respect for the rights, needs, and perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 2014). To ensure that the participants were and are protected before, during, and following the study, I employed the following measures. Clear objectives for the action research study, along with data collection procedures and sources were discussed with the participants (Creswell, 2014).



Transcripts are available pertinent to each participant. Results of the study will be shared with the participants.

Additional ethical considerations were made and explained to the participants regarding this study. They included: worthiness of the study in the context of the participants' efforts and time, and my competence as a researcher in the context of my ability to maintain the integrity of the research process. I sought approval to conduct this study from the College of William and Mary's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and within my school system. To support this process, I highlighted the confidentiality of the action research study, the voluntary and purposeful participation of NEIPS administrators as potential members of the LCoP, the method of data collection and use, and the procedures for storing the data following the study's completion. The participant's informed consent form is referenced as Appendix C.

**Positionality.** Positionality in relation to the research study participants and setting is important, yet complex to understand. While I may have been aware of the potential influence of my positionality, it was far more difficult to determine the aspect and degree of that influence. My positionality in the context of this study was considered before I began to conduct the research. I was aware that my subjectivity might serve to inform the nature and quality of my reflections, the manner in which I interpreted my setting, the participants' behaviors, the construction of research questions, and the analysis of the data.

My positionality in this study involved my role as researcher-as-instrument. I served as a facilitator of this study, a direct participant in this study, and a member of the LCoP. As the facilitator, I had to remain non-directive, yet as the researcher, I had

already directed the collaborative structures that served as the setting for the LCoP members, myself included. My positionality also included the role in which I serve my district, that as a school administrator. This role carries positional authority. In this role, I evaluate the principals who make up the LCoP.

Thomson and Gunter (2011) explain researcher positionality as a fluid concept that considers both an insider influence and perspective, as well as an outsider influence and perspective. This frames the experiences that I encountered as the researcher-as-instrument (Craig, 2009). My perspective of my personal experiences as a researcher, participant, and school district administrator was naturally subjective in defining my multiple contexts, interactions, and identities. My awareness of how these variables influenced my perspective served to inform my reflections, and as such, inform this study, while limiting my bias. My awareness of the inherent subjectivity of action research fostered transparency in my behaviors and framed my reflections. This strengthened my study, rather than invalidating it.

Reflexivity compelled constant and consistent reflection of my roles as the researcher in the study and school administrator of my district (Creswell, 2014). In my role as the researcher-as-instrument, I employed the use of a field journal to record my reflections of the research process and my behaviors regarding my colleagues in the LCoP setting. I used these reflections to determine if I was acting appropriately in my role as researcher-as-instrument. As a school district administrator, I advocate for change and improvement. As the researcher, I maintained an objective stance within the framework of the study. As a school district administrator, and to a lesser degree, the

researcher, I decided the “why” of this study. As a participant and practitioner, I ensured that the group determined the “how.”

With the field journal, I used my entries to inform my perspective as a member of the LCoP. My reflections helped to clarify my point of view as a researcher rather than a school district administrator. Further, my field journal supported the collection and analysis of data as a researcher, drawing conclusions for the study. Analysis of data through my lens as a school district administrator was influenced by my desire to see positive efficacy of the collaboration. Because I was invested in the LCoP as a school district administrator, it was difficult to refrain from shaping my behaviors to ensure for the success of the LCoP, rather than passively observe the outcomes as a researcher. While my school district administrator position compelled me to focus on desirable, positive results, I had to code all data and not limit the results of the analysis to what I perceived as positive outcomes. My reflections served to ensure that my conduct remained as a researcher and participant and limited my behaviors and bias in the context of my role as a school district administrator.

To minimize positional authority in the setting of which the action research study took place, I relinquished my role in the supervision and evaluation of the principals for the research year. To minimize the potential influence of my future return to that role, the possibility of making this a permanent change was considered.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine the influence of the use of a collaborative community of practice format on rural school and district leaders' self-efficacy. Additional goals and outcomes included determining the common themes in practices among rural school and district leaders that are supportive of the school administrative team in strengthening their self-efficacy. Chapter 3 described the methodology of this study, which was conducted as action research specifically designed to examine levels of self-efficacy using the selected indicators of decreased isolation, increased reflective activities, increased collaboration, increased levels of awareness and trust, and feelings of competence regarding professional skills among the eight cohort members. Unintended outcomes revealed themselves as well as a result of the members working together. The central research questions that guided this study follow.

1. After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication with one another?
2. After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of professional knowledge and practice?
3. After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members perceive their levels of self-efficacy?

The measurement instruments employed to inform the action research questions included semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, participants' reflection journals, and a researcher's field journal. The analysis of qualitative data included multiple coding methods as prescribed by Saldana (2016). Inductive analysis involves reducing and systematically organizing data in ways that foster the understanding of data sets, categories, themes, and theories (Saldana, 2016). Chapter 4 details the findings regarding each of the three action research questions and the method of data analysis.

The methods used in first cycle coding are among those described in Saldana's (2016) *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. The first task to be completed in the analysis of the data was to transcribe the responses from the tape-recorded semi-structured and unstructured interview sessions that I conducted with each member. The process of transcribing allowed me to further reflect on my colleagues' responses by paying closer attention to what the members were expressing.

During the process of first cycle coding, I considered single words, sentences, and short expressions found in the members' responses, and labeled what I believed best represented the core meaning of each member's responses (Saldana, 2016). Methods included Emotion, Attribute, Descriptive, Domain and Taxonomic, In Vivo, and Process Coding. Emotion Coding provides insights into the values and emotions of the LCoP members in the context of their experiences, actions, and relationships. Attribute Coding was used to describe the research setting and the LCoP members. Single words that represented broad topics were used in Descriptive Coding. When conducting the coding process, I discovered cultural practices that are unique to this island community. Domain and Taxonomic Coding was used in categorizing the unique cultures of the Island's six

towns and their governments. Domain and Taxonomic Coding led to categories of budget pressures and the distinct practices of town leaders and members of the school committee that are influenced by the politics of their respective towns. In Vivo Coding was helpful in creating categories by using actual words and short phrases of the members' responses. The routines of the LCoP members' collaboration were described through Process Coding.

The first cycle codes led to patterns that formed categories which represented the feelings and content expressed in the members' responses. Further, I engaged in multiple cycles of coding to ensure that I exhausted all opportunities for the emergence of categories. This continuous cycle of coding allowed for new categories to emerge or evolve from the previous categories.

Focused Coding and Initial Coding helped to transition sets of data from the simple labels of the first cycle, to creating categories by linking similar labels that overlapped or converged between and among the members' responses in second cycle coding (Saldana, 2016). Linking helped me to compose longer expressions that represented the feelings and content of the members' responses.

Second cycle coding methods led to the conceptualizing of themes regarding LCoP members' worldviews, emotions, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Saldana, 2016). Second cycle coding methods included Axial Coding, which relates the characteristics of first cycle categories to the LCoP setting and members. Pattern and Values Coding methods were used to reveal patterns in the relationships of the LCoP members, along with their values and perspectives regarding their social experiences within the LCoP format.

## **Change in the Interview Protocol**

Initially, it was my intent to use the structured, quantitative questions based on the Tschannen-Moran (2004) Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale questionnaire as open-ended interview prompts. By not limiting the responses to the multiple-choice options presented in the original scale, it was my hope the resulting responses would be rich in both details and depth. Using a quantitative scale in a qualitative fashion, I inherently created open-ended questions that allowed the participants freedom in the manner in which they responded. I chose the questions from the scale for the content they would address, but the questions in their entirety did not translate as well to a qualitative approach as I had predicted. Through the first interview session, it became clear that using all of the initial questions from the Tschannen-Moran (2004) Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale in a qualitative manner resulted in a cumbersome and lengthy interview process, which became counterproductive to the first respondent's engagement.

Following the first interview session, I restructured the interview protocol based on feedback from the first respondent and my own observations of the session. I condensed questions found in the scale that were similar in nature into an abridged interview guide of prepared, semi-structured interview questions. Following these changes, all participants engaged in the same, abbreviated interview process, including offering the revised questions to the first participant. The revised changes to the interview questions are referenced in Table 6.

At a later date, and following the semi-structured interviews, I conducted unstructured interviews in a conversation-like manner with each participant, using the broad theme of each action research question as an interview prompt to solicit members'

responses. Additionally, I asked the participants to incorporate the content of their reflection journals as part of their responses. I did not ask further questions during the unstructured interviews with the exception of questions that served to clarify the participants' content or emotions. The unstructured interview responses were non-directed, and therefore unrestrained, leading to members' disclosures that otherwise might not have been as detailed and sincere.

Important to the action research process was ensuring that the participants had a clear understanding of the interview protocol. By explaining this change in the interview process to all members of the LCoP, trust among the members to share their feelings may have been fostered. Member checking for clarification and accuracy was conducted following the transcribing and coding of the semi-structured interviews. The researcher engaged member checking with the participants by reflecting the content of the interviews back to the respondents. This ensured that the researcher captured what the participants were attempting to express. This process of member checking resulted in no changes to the original responses but did result in a limited number of additional responses, which were included in the data.



Table 6

*Revised Semi-Structured and Unstructured Interview Prompts*

Prompt Type	Prompt
AR#1 Semi-Structured Questions and Prompt	<p>Would you describe the LCoP members as typically looking out for each other? Explain.</p> <p>Please describe your level of commitment to the other members of the LCoP.</p> <p>How do you feel about your collaborative experiences with your LCoP colleagues?</p>
AR#1 Unstructured Question	How do you describe your level of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication with your colleagues?
AR#2 Semi-Structured Questions	<p>Do you cultivate a shared vision that makes powerful teaching and learning the central focus of schooling?</p> <p>Do you support learning through effective partnerships with families, community organizations, and other stakeholders?</p> <p>Do you support learning by nurturing and sustaining a school culture of reflective practice, high expectations, and continuous learning for teaching staff?</p> <p>In what ways do school leaders in our system perform their jobs well and are competent in their professional responsibilities?</p>
AR#2 Unstructured Question	What do you perceive are your professional strengths and weaknesses as a school leader?
AR#3 Semi-Structured Prompt	<p>In your current role as a school leader, describe the extent to which you:</p> <p>promote school spirit, acceptable behavior, and positive learning environment among a majority of your students.</p> <p>generate enthusiasm for a shared vision, motivate teachers, and manage change in your school community.</p> <p>cope with the stress of the job.</p>
AR#3 Unstructured Question	How do you perceive your level of self-efficacy?

*Note.* AR = Action Research; LCoP = Leaders' Community of Practice.

## **Action Research Question #1**

*After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication with one another?*

Exercises that were conducted in the context of the LCoP included engaging in monthly meetings with all members to discuss challenges and engaging in embedded professional development exercises to strengthen skills and increase awareness of the members' unique conditions within their school communities. Social collaboration, which included breakfasts involving the LCoP membership, took place as occasional alternatives to professional collaboration.

**Semi-structured interview questions.** Semi-structured interview questions, which were based on the Tschannen-Moran (2004) Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale, served to describe members looking out for one another, being committed to one another, and their collaborative experiences with one another in the LCoP.

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding LCoP members looking out for each other.** Seven of 8 LCoP members feel they typically treat each other well, take care of, and look out for one another. They look out for one another by keeping each other informed and by trying to ensure that nothing negative will happen to their colleagues if they can help prevent it.

- “I know the difficulty and complexity of this job, so I respect very greatly, others in this job. I can empathize with what they are doing, and I will help them where I can.”

Only one member of the LCoP described the cohort as not looking out for each other.

- “We don’t look out for each other. Principals self-promote their own community at the expense of one another. I don’t think we collaborate effectively because of this.”

***More support from district leaders.*** Although 7 of 8 LCoP members feel they typically look out for each other, a theme emerged regarding 4 of 6 principal members desiring more support from the two central office members of the LCoP. This support would appear primarily in the form of prioritizing direct, one-way communication to the principals and being present in their schools more often.

- “[The assistant superintendent] and the superintendent need to find out what we need and how you can help. We will feel that you care and see us. That will build trust.”
- “Spend more time, be in school more. Principals and staff need to see you in school more. You will make such in-roads.”

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding LCoP members’ commitment to one another.** Although 7 of 8 members of the LCoP describe themselves as looking out for the other members, the cohort does not appear to be committed to one another and the health of one another’s school communities. Comments regarding LCoP members’ commitment to one another include:

- “We cancel meetings without consideration for one another.”
- “I feel a weird competitiveness. We denigrate one another’s accomplishments rather than celebrating them.”
- “I have felt abandoned by my colleagues at times when we should be sticking up for one another.”

*No commonality among the LCoP members.* The apparent lack of commitment among the LCoP members is evidenced by 4 of the 6 principal members' responses that have been coded to reveal a theme that principal members feel they have little in common with the other members of the LCoP.

- “We have nothing in common. The irony is there are no others in jobs that have more in common than the principals, but I don't feel many similarities with my colleagues.”
- “We should have commonality. Our job responsibilities and sources of stress are similar. Our children are from the same demographic. We live and work on the same island. I expect that you are concerned with my children's learning as I am. Yet we really don't have much in common, so your issues don't have relevance for me.”
- “We don't want to engage in problems.”

*The influence of six different town governments on the LCoP members.* The island community is composed of six disparate towns, each with a separate government operating under different budgetary conditions. Members of the LCoP interact in this political climate daily, managing budgets allotted to their schools by their school's governing town. The separate towns operate budgets with revenue amounts and sources that are vastly different from one another. These differences manifest in unique stresses that compel the principal members to prioritize their own schools rather than the school district as a whole, thus diminishing the commitment that members make to one another and reducing the collaborative potential of the LCoP.

- “You’ve got to protect your own turf. You have to look out for your own school. Are we committed to each other? Yeah, but only to the degree that things get sticky.”
- “I struggle with district-wide initiatives with the other principals when my budget and staffing amounts are so different from theirs.”
- “This is a tricky district with multiple school committees and multiple town governments forcing us to hold on to our independence.”

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding members’ collaborative experiences.** Seven of 8 members wish to collaborate within the LCoP framework as evidenced by their reflections and responses.

- “I think when we have a community of practice and we are trying to work together to a solution, you also have different ideas of ways to solve a problem. That is why I like our group work in the LCoP. It is good to have colleagues that provide safety.”
- “When there are 5-6 principals in the room, this is a very powerful gathering. They are community leaders. When you have these leaders in the room, the impact of that is pretty awesome. So, the big thing is getting people together in a room, getting them to know each other. The more we collaborate together as a team, the better we are as a team. This is what I value in the LCoP.”
- “Synergy. When you have synergy in problem-solving, you will come to different solutions, and I love when I am wrong.”
- “It is important to share together. This is the best thing about the LCoP.”

Emerging from the analysis is the revelation that one member appears to be consistently pessimistic regarding the collaborative opportunities, both real and potential within the LCoP framework.

- “No one makes themselves vulnerable to learn so I feel our collaboration is unproductive. I would be down with working with each other and being supportive of one another, but there are some dynamics that are so bizarre that I just feel like getting on my email and just getting things done. I hate being that person.”
- “Until the conversation gets to the struggles of the transitioning middle schoolers, I don’t feel there is a great deal of collaborative potential.”

***Improving collaboration.*** Responses from all eight members indicate a strong interest in the collaboration found in the LCoP format. A theme developed, suggesting a desire to improve upon the LCoP members’ collaborative efforts.

- “When we put our notes on the table with all of the LCoP members, you have the potential support of others. When you do things alone, no one is there to support you. I want to be more collaborative as a group. I really think the potential is there to be great as a group.”
- “They need to be better. LCoP is a collaborative practice, the cabinet is not. I think it would be productive to collaborate on one specific goal. We only currently collaborate on the contract. We don’t work together on how to move our school district forward.”
- “I want our team to succeed.”

- “The superintendent, assistant superintendent, and principals, there is no better thing than making relationships with one another, nothing more important. This is the most effective way to make gains in our school system. When the team is working together, we can make gains.”

***Differentiating the approach to collaboration.*** Four of 8 LCoP members feel we should approach our collaborative team individually. By each member getting to know the other members more intimately as individuals, the collaborative potential of the LCoP is strengthened. The theme of building collaborative potential through members approaching one another individually emerged as a way to foster the desire to increase collaboration.

- “Go out and spend time with the LCoP members. Once we figure out each other individually, we can differentiate our approaches with one another within the larger LCoP group.”
- “Are we the same? No, but we should not have to be treated differently to perform our tasks. Differentiate how we do things, not what we do.”
- “We must figure how we work as individuals, not how we work as a group. You have to start individually. Once you have the relationships, we can move to the things that we want as a group. Then we can find commonalities that we can discuss as a group.”

**Unstructured interviews.** Unstructured interviews incorporated short prompts, entries in the participants’ reflection journals, and the researcher’s field journal to inform members’ responses regarding their levels of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication with one another in the context of their participation in the LCoP. Levels

of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication served as indicators that led to themes in coding, and when considered together, informed levels of members' self-efficacy. Categories and themes that emerged from the unstructured interviews follow.

**Responses to interview prompt regarding isolation.** Only 2 of 8 LCoP members describe themselves as not feeling isolated as evidenced by their responses.

- "I don't feel terribly isolated. I think I have some relationships that are beneficial."

The remaining members experience some isolation, but not to the degree that it is compromising their emotional health.

- "I feel leadership is an inherently isolating position, but accept this as long as I don't feel it is to my detriment."
- "I don't feel isolated. I can pick up the phone and I can call any principal for advice or to bounce ideas."

**Responses to interview prompt regarding trust.** Levels of isolation may be tied to levels of trust found among the members of the LCoP. Analyzing the members' responses regarding levels of trust as an influence of school leaders' self-efficacy, 6 of 8 members believe trust is important in diminishing feelings of isolation. In the context of collaborating in the LCoP, these same six members feel the LCoP has already begun strengthening trust in the relationships among the members or has the potential of strengthening trust.

- "So, getting together professionally and socially and getting us to know each other, you combine fun and seriousness, lots of things can get done. I think there is value in us working together or being social together. The big thing is



getting people together. The more I spend time together with someone, usually, the more I trust that person.”

- “If I have a relationship with these people, then I know I can trust them. Spending time together collaborating, is supporting that.”
- “I am pretty honest and open with the other members. The more we collaborate together as a team, the more I trust them.”

***Influence of low trust.*** A theme emerged regarding low trust as a hindrance to collaboration. While 6 of 8 LCoP members feel trust is important in diminishing isolation, all LCoP members recognize that low levels of trust hinder their motivation to collaborate and the potential for their collaboration within the LCoP framework. While all LCoP members recognize the importance of trust in the cohort, only 3 of 8 members have full trust in all members of the LCoP.

- “I trust the other principals a great deal.”
- “I feel trust and can reach out to them (LCoP members).”
- “The level of trust I think is very high. I don’t have any reason to not have a high level of trust. It is not perfect, but I have pretty good trust for the other members and the more we work directly together, the more I feel this way. I hope they feel that way too.”

In opposition, are the responses from 3 of 8 members with disclosures such as,

- “I feel pockets of trust among my colleagues, but I won’t go to everyone with my issues.”
- “I don’t trust some of my colleagues. I think sometimes, they only look out for themselves.”

One member's comment summarizes how low trust among the LCoP members diminishes the potential for collaboration.

- “I don't know the incidentals that have led to the erosion of trust and I don't want to. We are guilty of being stuck on the incidentals and not on the solutions. We should own that, but we can't because we are fearful of conflicting relationships, which stresses us out.”

**Responses to interview prompt regarding self-awareness.** Regarding levels of self-awareness among the LCoP participants, all members demonstrated a sensitivity and understanding about themselves and in terms of their collaboration with their colleagues.

- “I think I am very honest with myself.”
- “I think a lot of people associate their success with the achievement of kids, not the progress of kids.”

In some instances, members' self-awareness was apparent both in terms of themselves and their behavior as influenced by their LCoP colleagues.

- “My personal goal is acceptance.”

**Responses to interview prompt regarding communication.** Five of 8 members feel their levels of two-way communication with the other members of the LCoP is satisfactory.

- “I communicate well with them and feel I can call any of them.”
- “I think I communicate fine with them.”
- “There are people that I can reach out to.”

All members recognize the value of effective communication and are seeking to better their communication as they understand the capacity of the LCoP members is better served with improved two-way communication.

- “I am trying to be a good communicator. I think the LCoP has the potential to improve our opportunities to communicate more effectively.”

***Erosion of relationships.*** A theme emerged from the data regarding the erosion of relationships among the LCoP members due to poor communication. Morale is measured by the levels of effective communication that exist in relationships. Communication and morale show a statistically significant relationship (Helmer et al., 2015). Six of 8 members are frustrated by slow or little communication from central office leaders.

- “I have frustration with slow communication from the central office.”

The frustration grows when slow communication results in a negative consequence for an LCoP member.

- “The poor communication felt like a kick in the ass. I felt very unsupported.”

Two of 8 members feel that the LCoP principal members are not the priority when communication originates from central office leaders.

- “I think anything that happens in a school should first go through the principals. I should not hear about things after a parent or school committee member has. We are the bottom rung, instead of the frontline. We should be treated as the frontline.”
- “We are your generals. You have to put us first.”

Still, the LCoP format inspires optimism for better communication for that same member.

- “We don’t work together on how to move a school district forward. The LCoP is the vehicle to do this and it starts with strengthening our communication in our group.”

This member’s optimism is consistent with research conducted by Umekubo et al. (2015), who concluded the ability to collaborate within a cohort model led to more opportunities for school leaders to cultivate effective communication among the members.

**Summary.** In summary, members express a desire for the LCoP to continue, as this framework supports diminishing school leader isolation, and the strengthening of trust, self-awareness, and communication among its members. The LCoP has offered a perspective for collaboration in ways that did not exist prior to introducing the framework to its members.

The participants' reflections were descriptive of the feelings of their levels of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication with one another, in the context of the LCoP. The LCoP appears to be supporting a decrease of isolation among the NEIPS school leaders. All LCoP members describe themselves as not feeling overly isolated and the collaborative practices among the members allow them to get the necessary support from one another, to minimize any feelings of isolation.

Low trust is an issue that needs to be addressed as it hinders the collaborative efforts of the group by lowering motivation and commitment to work together regarding district-wide interests. There does seem to exist optimism and understanding among the members that their collaboration supports strengthening trust. Six of 8 members feel the LCoP has already begun strengthening the relationships or has the potential of strengthening the relationships among the members.

The LCoP members have an awareness of themselves, their manner of interaction with their colleagues, and their colleagues' unique conditions and challenges. However, while the LCoP members appear to feel empathy for one another and reach out to look after one another, their commitment to others dwindles due to a lack of commonality and the pressures brought about by operating within the separate town governments that oversee each school.

All members feel a need to improve communication as there has been an erosion of trust in some of the relationships within the LCoP. There is currently frustration among the principals regarding a lack of priority involving communication that should emerge from the central office but is not. Still, the LCoP format inspires 6 of 8 members to feel optimistic for better communication.

Field journal entries indicate that the conversations and interviews spent in a one-on-one setting were inherently supportive of building trust and offered a perspective that I was lacking prior to conducting this research. The exercise of interviewing allowed participants to reflect, while the researcher/participant used the opportunities as learning conversations. The exercise of conducting interviews led to the strengthening of trust, awareness, and communication, which are conditions conducive to strengthening the self-efficacy of the members.

The LCoP members feel that increased collaborative experiences in the LCoP will support their work. Members expressed the desire to spend time together, getting to know one another as individuals. The members believe this will strengthen the entire group and the members will have greater success working together as a group, which

positively influences levels of their self-efficacy. Emerging themes that informed Action Research Question 1 are illustrated in Table 7.

Table 7

*Emerging Themes, Frequency, and Percentage of Respondents for Question 1*

Emerging Theme	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Desire among principal members for more support from district leaders.	4 of 6	67%
Lack of LCoP member commitment to one another.	4 of 6	67%
Desire to improve collaboration.	8 of 8	100%
Differentiating the approach to collaboration.	4 of 8	50%
Influence of low trust as a hindrance to collaboration.	8 of 8	100%
Erosion of relationships due to poor communication.	6 of 8	75%

*Note.* The number of respondents varied with questions that considered the different leadership roles within the LCoP membership. LCoP = Leaders’ Community of Practice.

**Action Research Question #2**

*After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of professional knowledge and practice?*

Members of the LCoP engaged in one-on-one reflective interviews, Critical Friends Group discussions, and peer learning activities to support the growth of their professional skills. Professional development exercises included a book group that engaged the members in discussions of Schmoker’s (2011) *Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning*; increased school visits between members that included peer walkthroughs of classrooms; and reflective activities to support members faced with challenging issues using a format similar to that of a Critical Friends Group, which occurred monthly during full meetings of the cohort.

Semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, the field journal, and the participants' reflection journals informed the members' descriptions of their levels of professional knowledge and practice in the context of their participation in the LCoP. The members' responses underwent processes of qualitative analysis described by Saldana (2016) as first and second cycle coding methods.

**Semi-structured interview questions.** Semi-structured interview questions informed members' abilities to cultivate a shared vision, create effective partnerships with families and other stakeholders, and nurture and sustain a school culture of reflective practice, high expectations, and continuous learning for staffs. From coded categories, the following themes regarding the members' professional skills and influence on their school communities emerged.

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding creating a shared vision.** At the same time as discussions were taking place regarding the members' professional strengths, some members disclosed their perceived professional weaknesses. Allowing themselves to become vulnerable to other members by disclosing their areas of weakness, indicates growing trust among the LCoP members. An area of weakness that many members appeared to share was in the establishment of a common vision in their contexts and in the district. Four of 8 LCoP members feel it is challenging having their staffs embrace a common vision regarding themes of teaching and learning that drive the instructional program.

- “Creating and communicating out a vision, a unifying vision, this is something that I am working on.”

- “One of the things I struggle with here is making a vision I have permeate the culture of the district.”

***Understanding the importance of vision.*** A theme emerged, demonstrated by 7 of 8 members’ comments that revealed their understanding that vision is important to working together in guiding improved instruction and learning.

- “One of my values is in giving feedback to students in thoughtful ways. This needs to happen all the time.”
- “My role is to exemplify the core values of the district. The staff looks to us to be positive examples of how we want them to behave with each other and their students.”
- “I think it would be productive to collaborate on a vision of moving our system together.”
- “The primary role of a leader is to treat all with high regard, with respect. My fundamental role is to ensure that all of the spirit and positive learning behaviors that we do in this community, starts with building trust, by respecting teachers and having them say to children, I am here for you, to support you and protect you. If children see this in the relationships in the building among the adults and children, they will feel taken care of. I feel strongly to effect this, but we are never at the mountain top. We are in the people business so this is complicated.”

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding effective partnerships with families and other stakeholders.** The importance of establishing and maintaining strong family and community partnerships cannot be emphasized enough in this school district.



Yet, only 3 of 8 LCoP members feel they are competent in the area of family and community engagement.

- “Leveraging parents by demonstrating your commitment to their children, helps to create support for the children both at home and school, and creates the necessary trust to properly support the children.”

The remainder of LCoP members not only questioned their ability to create these partnerships, but also questioned the benefit. There exist numerous conflicting interests that compete for the time and resources of school leaders and their staffs. Family apathy diminishes some members’ motivation and efforts to cultivate these partnerships. Costs of time and effort in the context of what is perceived by these school leaders as a small return, potentially, negatively influences the self-efficacy of the LCoP members who put forth significant effort to nurture these relationships. Still, all members continue to dedicate their efforts to strengthening the home-school partnership.

- “What parents want most is to feel heard and to know their children are cared for. This is empowering for parents, just being heard and acknowledged regarding the care of their children.”

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding nurturing and sustaining reflective practices for staff.** One-on-one interviews offered opportunities for the members to reflect openly with a colleague. These interviews were inherently supportive of self-efficacy, as they offered opportunities for members to discuss issues of isolation, trust, awareness, and communication. The level of disclosure in some members’ responses appears to indicate trust between the participant and researcher. This was an

unintended outcome that became a valuable part of the collaborative activities in the LCoP. Seven of 8 members value reflective practice.

- “Your reflection has to be short and you have to move on. If you make a mistake or do something well, you move on.”
- “With me, I always reflect on my part in conflicts. I reflect before I go to bed every night, asking myself if there is a side of the street that I need to clean.”
- “Reflection supports my ability to listen to people and make them feel heard. I am very reflective on teacher practice, differentiating my approach of offering my teachers clear and specific feedback.”
- “The exercise like what we just did, the interview, is valuable. With the right questions, you really give pause and think about how you are doing and how you feel, which is not something that I have done in a while. When you do stop, it is just to rest your brain. You don’t really reflect. This interviewing is a good form of reflection.”

***Desire to collaborate professionally in the LCoP.*** The LCoP is a district level support that all members in this study valued for its collaborative potential of bringing the members together regularly to provide consistent opportunities for them to share professional knowledge. Sharing practices ranged from discussions about resources, strategies, aligning our work together, and simply being a sounding board for the members.

Noting in the field journal, I observed several examples of the members sharing professional practice, support for one another regarding challenges that members faced, and ideas for professional development to support their own practice or that of their

teachers. The members' responses and observed behaviors indicate their desire to continue with the LCoP format of collaboration.

- “I think there is valuable potential in the LCoP. The other members are hard folks to make themselves vulnerable. I don't know if this group is willing and wanting to work together, but [LCoP] can build a culture of sharing our skills and practices, so I think it is important that we continue.”
- “The boat is sailing. Keep doing [LCoP].”
- “We need to keep doing things together. Our leadership structure needs to be the LCoP.”
- “The collaboration can lead to more openness and willingness for sharing ideas and supporting one another professionally. Our work in the LCoP has begun to address issues of trust.”

***Embedded professional development opportunities.*** The LCoP provides a direct mechanism to improved professional practice through peer and group work, sharing of practice, and focused discussion of practice. All members valued the discussion of *Focus* and said they would like to engage in more of this type of professional development. Terms used by the members to describe the exercise included, appreciated, relevant, positive, important, enlightening, and affirming. LCoP members engaged in multiple discussions regarding the content of the book, especially in terms of writing instruction.

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding valued professional attributes of LCoP members.** All members recognize strengths among their LCoP colleagues. Additionally, the members recognize the value of sharing the strengths of each of the members in occasional, professional “share-outs”.

- “Professional share-outs allow us to say what we think our strengths are and what we believe are the strengths of others, allowing us to learn what others perceive as our strengths, and to help each other face our issues.”

Examples of the attributes that have been shared in the context of the LCoP include:

- “innovative and open to criticism, admits her faults”
- “focuses on areas of need for his school and stands up for what he believes in”
- “resilient, a fighter, empathetic”
- “smart, personable, warm, creates a nice feel in the building and is principled”
- “very passionate and protective of her school”

**Unstructured interviews.** Unstructured interviews employed short prompts, entries in the participants’ reflection journals and the researcher’s field journal to determine LCoP members’ perceptions of their professional strengths and weaknesses. Members were asked to reflect on their professional strengths and weaknesses and to reflect on their feelings of self-efficacy regarding those skills and weaknesses, with consideration to any influence of their collaboration in the LCoP. The result with all LCoP members was increased depth of reflection and details in their responses.

**Responses to interview prompt regarding strengths found in school leaders’ skills.** Six of 8 LCoP members were able to express their individual strengths in terms of professional tasks. Within the LCoP format, the members received feedback from one another to help refine these strengths in the context of actual challenges the members faced in their settings.

- “My strengths are understanding of education law, curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy as well as my love for managing my school’s fiduciary

responsibilities.”

- “My strength is as an active listener and having an open mind. It has been helpful for me to hear other members’ struggles and desires in their school settings, and how I can help them, or they help me with my own struggles.”

LCoP members spoke to their abilities in structuring schedules and staffing and the potential benefits of sharing their strengths in organizational management with one another in the collaborative environment of the LCoP.

- “My strength is I am very organized. I have a grasp of what successful schools look like and I have always considered myself someone who can organize people.”
- “I have strong people skills and can motivate teachers which helps to create a strong climate in my building.”

**Responses to interview prompt regarding strengths found in school leaders’ values.** Six of 8 LCoP members determined that their professional strengths were rooted in their high morals.

- “My strength is in my background in guidance. I have a deep interest and commitment in the care of children.”
- “Compassionate concern and regard for others, I consider a strength. It is important to establish a foundation of trust and community through interpersonal interaction and distributive leadership. I consider my commitment to this a strength.”

**Summary.** LCoP members appreciate the emphasis and time spent on professional knowledge and skills in the context of their collaboration together in their

cohort group. These members prefer to discuss professional practice and improve their knowledge and skills. All LCoP members appreciated the activities that were part of *Focus* (Schmoker, 2011). The LCoP allows for embedded professional development in an ongoing manner, which is valued by all members.

LCoP members described their professional weaknesses in terms of creating a shared vision. Still, they understand the importance of vision and would like to emphasize work in that area. Partnerships with families and stakeholders are important and effort is made to nurture these relationships. However, many members feel these efforts are compromised due to family apathy. There is an overall desire among the LCoP members to strengthen their work with families and community stakeholders and feel the LCoP is a vehicle to support the sharing of ideas to foster family engagement. Emerging themes that inform Action Research Question 2 are illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8

*Emerging Themes, Frequency, and Percentage of Respondents for Question 2*

Emerging Theme	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Understand the importance of vision.	7 of 8	88%
Desire to collaborate professionally in the LCoP.	8 of 8	100%
Understand the value of reflection.	7 of 8	88%
Appreciation of embedded professional development opportunities.	8 of 8	100%

*Note.* LCoP = Leaders' Community of Practice.

### **Action Research Question #3**

*After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members perceive their levels of self-efficacy?*

Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as, "people's beliefs about their capabilities

to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (p. 71). “Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave” (Bandura, 1994, p. 71). Semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participants’ reflection journals, and the researcher’s field journal were used to illustrate the LCoP members’ perceptions of their capabilities in influencing their school communities, staff and student behavior, change initiatives, and their own levels of isolation, in attempting to determine a link to their perceptions of their self-efficacy. Members’ responses regarding their abilities to lead their staffs served as indicators of their perceptions of self-efficacy levels as they collaborated with one another in the LCoP framework. School leaders’ self-efficacy involves the confidence they have in their abilities to lead their staffs and school communities (Hannah et al., 2008). Members’ responses were coded to determine the following categories and themes.

**Semi-structured interview questions.** Semi-structured interview questions informed members’ perceptions regarding their abilities to promote school spirit, acceptable behavior, a positive learning environment, enthusiasm for a shared vision, teacher motivation, and positive change. Semi-structured interview questions also served to inform members’ perceptions regarding their abilities to cope with stress.

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding promoting school spirit and acceptable behavior.** LCoP members were asked to describe the extent to which they promote school spirit and acceptable behavior among their children. Four of 8 participants cite their ability to influence school spirit and positively influence student behavior as reasons they feel strongly about their sense of efficacy.

- “We create the conditions most favorable for kids to succeed and I believe they know that.”
- “I talk with kids as a way to promote school spirit and positive behavior and they understand that spirit and good behavior are ways for them to show pride. Kids behave here because they might say adults in the school care about them. Well, I hope kids feel adults care and hold them accountable. I can know every child’s name, and I do.”

All members devoted a large amount of their efforts to supporting children’s positive behavior by focusing on fostering a culture of respect between adults and students, adults and adults, and students and students.

- “We are making the decisions to say we are serious about students’ behavior. We are trying to tackle this, this year around academics by creating consistency around school-wide reading and creating a text-based learning environment.”

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding promoting a positive learning environment.** The promotion of a positive learning environment is an important responsibility of school leaders. Seven of 8 LCoP members expressed a desire to provide a positive learning environment but all cited challenges to doing so. Demands on their time compromise LCoP members’ abilities to properly supervise and evaluate teaching practice. Other responsibilities, such as managing budgets and facilities, student discipline, and numerous committee meetings were also cited by all LCoP members as obstacles to their ability to promote a positive learning environment.



- “I think if I could be with teachers and kids, I would feel a lot more successful in managing the change that people want but are unwilling to allow me to do, school committee especially. The paper decisions happen in meetings, but the selling of the decisions, getting the groundswell and the support, happens out there.”
- “Because of the demands of the job, I do indirect things that support the kids and provide the resources and support that teachers can use to more directly influence student learning and the environment. So, I would say I do what I can to support the environment by supporting the teachers.”

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding generating enthusiasm for a shared vision.** In responding to the prompt, “In your current role as a school leader and among a majority of your students, describe the extent to which you generate enthusiasm for a shared vision,” 5 of 8 members cited challenges regarding shared vision.

- “Is the vision determined collaboratively or is it predetermined and sold to the staff?”
- “I am not good at cultivating a shared vision. I think democratizing things too much leads to impasse.”
- “I am on the fence about shared vision. I am like screw it, the change is happening. You can complain about it all that you want. I have a limited capacity to indulge in it any longer and it is getting more and more limited. Sometimes change just needs to happen.”

Still, there were responses from 4 of 8 LCoP members that suggest they understand the need for a shared vision in the context of school improvement and strive to reach this collaboratively.

- “I hope that I generate my enthusiasm for that because I believe shared vision and distributive leadership are important.”
- “If we can push the conversation to teachers, vision might be better embraced.”

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding motivating teachers.** When describing the extent to which the LCoP members motivate their teachers, challenges were referenced by only 2 of 8 members. In the context of collaboration, LCoP members were able to share their methods for motivating teachers with one another. Six of 8 participants feel they have a significant influence and responsibility in motivating their teachers.

- “We motivate our staff together. We are global. I try very hard to generate enthusiasm in the teachers. I always say in every faculty meeting; how very proud I am of the teachers’ work and effort with our children.”
- “I have complete confidence in the teachers. I motivate them by letting them know this and by being positive and demonstrating my sincere confidence in their abilities on a daily basis.”
- “I think I motivate teachers by demonstrating trust to support them to do their job the way they see fit. They have the ability to create their own agendas in their own collaborative learning teams. I trust the teachers and they are

motivated by knowing that I believe the people who do the work should inform the work.”

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding managing change in the school community.** Structured interviews revealed that managing change in the school community is a challenging endeavor for the members of the LCoP. All members acknowledged the difficulty in compelling change, describing their staffs’ emotions regarding change initiatives as fearful, difficult, and feeling sadness from the loss.

- “Change in the school community is often difficult. Sometimes I battle for change from within the school with staff, but sometimes these challenges come from the outside, like from school committee, town leaders, and most of all, parents.”
- “I want to protect people. I want to protect their time and I strive in my efforts to do so. I also am aware that time demands are less taxing when the reasons for the change are understood by all to be important. Change is hard. I do things deliberately because it is comfortable. I manage change deliberately, trying to get staff buy-in.”

***Managing change and coping with stress.*** A broad theme emerged regarding the challenges that the members face in initiating and managing change and coping with stress which may influence their self-efficacy.

- “If you are going to manage change, you need to be out there, face to face with the teachers. The best way to manage change is to be out there. However, I feel so distant from these people. I am always in meetings. The best way to effect change is to be out there, to be seen. I am right by the pool,

but the gap that I see is that I am expected to be behind closed doors, managing the logistics. For me to manage change, I need to be out there managing the tension. I am unable to do either of these things well.”

The challenges brought on by initiating and managing change were discussed and reflected upon by the LCoP members, using the collaborative format to support one another. Principals expressed the need to better understand the process of change and be aware of the sensitivity needed to bring about change in a manner that is embraced by their staffs. All members felt the support from one another in the whole group format, by discussing one another’s challenges in initiating and managing change in their settings.

**Semi-structured interview responses regarding coping with the stress of the job.** Five of 8 members state there exist numerous impairments to their self-efficacy such as; stress from meetings, erosion of trust in their communities, change that is inherently criticized, endless demands, and the vast scope of the job.

- “Stress for me is the job does not feel fun. I am used to having fun. That is a gap. I don’t know how to cope. I think people expect others to solve their problems, shifting the onus on people to solve their problems by giving them choices and having them make the choices. People expect to have their problems solved for them. Trust comes from reducing conflict. That is not what I do, nor is it what change does. So, I probably create distrust by creating conflict through the change I try to foster.”
- “Sometimes there feels like there are so many things coming at one time, and it seems no one is happy, and I struggle to find support in my building. At these times, I feel I should just stop pushing.”

Six of 8 LCoP members feel the need to engage in a type of ritual that allows them to better cope with stress. Such rituals may involve exercise, fellowshiping with other LCoP members in social settings outside of school, or simply small acts that allow the members to disengage from school.

- “You get a routine that allows you to unplug from the job. It is detrimental to bring the job home. I guess the ride home for me represents a big transition, get a routine of being able to unplug from the job.”
- "Meditation, spiritual readings, and prayer, managing stress is a learning curve. I have to put myself first. The job is low on the totem pole."

**Unstructured interview prompt regarding perception of school leader self-efficacy.** The unstructured interview incorporated a short prompt regarding members’ perceptions of their levels of self-efficacy along with entries in the participants’ reflection journals and the researcher’s field journal. The main theme that emerged was a general feeling among the LCoP members of a strong self-efficacy. Six of 8 members of the LCoP have a positive sense of efficacy, and feel that collaboration among their colleagues is important to their feelings of support and their strong self-efficacy. Furthermore, the principal members have a desire to create stronger collaborative relationships with their central office colleagues through the LCoP format.

- “I feel I do a good job here. This place requires more personality than skill as a leader. I fit well in this community. Not everyone can do this in this community. My style of leadership is effective here. I am a good fit here and I feel confident in my abilities.”

- “My sense of self-efficacy is very strong, especially when it comes to standing up for the needs of the children. I am grateful to be supported in the value that I see as most important, addressing the needs of children. My self-efficacy feels stronger if I know I have the support from my peers. The LCoP is great for keeping us working together in support of each other.”
- “The job gets easier with each year. I did not enjoy this job for my first couple of years. It has taken time to enjoy the job. I used to become upset about the job and the time it took. I am not as angry about this. Over the years I have accepted it. I am not doing less. I have comfort and familiarity now with the work and the people, like those on my advisory council. I have support from my LCoP colleagues and other groups.”
- “My self-efficacy is pretty high. With support from the principals, I feel I can make positive change for students to the extent change can happen.”

**Summary.** LCoP members cite their ability to influence school spirit and positively influence student behavior as reasons they feel strongly about their self-efficacy. Five of 8 members mentioned challenges regarding shared vision, though all members expressed a desire to provide a positive learning environment and strive to reach this collaboratively. Six of 8 participants feel they have a significant influence and responsibility in motivating their teachers. All members acknowledged the difficulty in compelling change. However, all members of the LCoP feel support in discussing one another’s challenges. LCoP members overall, have a positive sense of efficacy and feel that collaboration among their colleagues is important to their feelings of support. Emerging themes that inform Action Research Question 3 are illustrated in Table 9.

Table 9

*Emerging Themes, Frequency, and Percentage of Respondents for Question 3*

Emerging Theme	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Member support for change.	8 of 8	100%
Improving levels of self-efficacy.	6 of 8	75%
Coping with stress.	5 of 8	63%
LCoP members perceive a strong self-efficacy.	6 of 8	75%

*Note.* LCoP = Leaders' Community of Practice.

**Overall Summary of Findings**

The LCoP framework supports members in successfully navigating challenging conditions in their leadership through the strengthening of their collaborative relationships. The LCoP is a framework that fosters behaviors among the members that are consistent with those described by Bandura (1977) as the four areas of experiences that directly support strengthening school leader self-efficacy.

- Personal performance accomplishments involve mastering challenging activities or overcoming obstacles. Members of the LCoP collaborate with one another to support members in addressing challenges and obstacles.
- Vicarious experiences involve members observing one another succeed through resilience or sustained effort. This leads the members to believe that they can succeed in similar fashion. The supportive collaboration in the LCoP allows the members to discuss or observe examples of one another overcoming challenges.
- Social persuasion describes how people can persuade others to believe they can succeed, by providing specific and supportive feedback. LCoP members

support one another through discussions, offering specific and supportive feedback in an atmosphere that fosters trust.

- Physiological condition illustrates that a person's sense of social and emotional well-being can influence their self-efficacy. The LCoP allows opportunities for members to foster collegial support for one another to experience positive emotions in the context of their leadership.

After participating in the LCoP, members describe their optimism that their collaboration diminishes feelings of isolation and builds trust among the members of the cohort. Members also express that regular collaboration in the LCoP, is the direction that the cohort should follow to strengthen awareness of one another's needs in their unique contexts, and to embed more effective avenues of communication.

Obstacles among the members exist that potentially erode their self-efficacy by compromising their desire to commit to working more collaboratively. Competitiveness is evident among some members, which is further aggravated by the government structure of this island community. A feeling among members of having little in common with one another further complicates collaborative efforts. This is indicated by the members' perceptions that they mostly look out for one another, while at the same time, expressing their relative lack of commitment to one another for district-wide interests.

Members describe the LCoP as a mechanism that fosters the sharing of professional knowledge and skills. Members express that the LCoP is changing the ways they address their work with one another, by shifting their focus from exclusively discussing issues to finding solutions, from sharing problems to sharing best practices,



from distrust to trust, and from working in isolation to working (and playing) collaboratively.

This action research study examined the influence of a cohort-based, school leaders' community of practice on members' perceptions of collaborative practice, levels of trust, self-awareness, and self-efficacy. The LCoP model afforded members opportunities to strengthen their trust in one another, increase their professional skills, and improve the relationships in the cohort. Members expressed their beliefs that the LCoP will continue to evolve into a vehicle that will strengthen relationships among its members, leading to increased sharing of skills that will lead to stronger confidence and commitment among the members to address the needs of their schools.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Discussion of Findings**

“There is a marked difference between possessing knowledge and skills and being able to use them well under taxing conditions. Personal accomplishments require not only skills but self-beliefs of efficacy to use them well” (Bandura, 1993, p. 119). Diminished confidence, caused by external pressures and a lack of collegial support, leads to the poor performance of school leaders and declining climates in their schools (Goddard & Salloum, 2011; Goddard et al., 2017). It is important to develop collaborative formats that afford school leaders the opportunities to leverage their collective capacity to support their staffs and students to achieve at their highest levels (Browne-Ferrigno, 2007).

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine the influence of the use of a collaborative, leaders’ community of practice (LCoP) on school leaders’ perceptions of collaborative practice, levels of trust, self-awareness, and self-efficacy. Semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, participants’ reflection journals, and a researcher’s field journal served to provide data that were analyzed using Saldana’s (2016) coding methods.

Decreased isolation, increased reflective activities, increased collaboration, increased levels of trust, awareness, communication, and members’ feelings of competence regarding their professional knowledge and skills served as indicators to

inform the influence of the LCoP on members' self-efficacy. After participating in the LCoP, members expressed optimism that their collaboration diminishes feelings of isolation, builds trust among the members of the cohort, strengthens awareness of one another's needs, and provides avenues for effective communication. While this study examined the influence of collaboration on self-efficacy, it became apparent through the research process, that members' disclosures also focused on the relationships within the LCoP, leading to increased sharing of skills to support each member in addressing the unique needs of their schools.

**Action research question one.** After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication with one another? Observations of members' behaviors, their personal reflections, and their responses to questions regarding their levels of isolation trust, self-awareness, and communication served to indicate their levels of self-efficacy.

Regarding levels of isolation experienced by LCoP members, the participants do not feel that their levels of isolation compromise their ability to perform their professional responsibilities. However, members do feel isolated as compelled by their unique conditions within each of their schools. Isolation as a condition that school leaders experience, serves to undermine their well-being, and negatively impact their self-efficacy (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Mascal, & Leithwood, 2010).

Members feel some isolation is attributed to the trust they feel towards one another. While most members of the LCoP trust one another, there exist pockets of mistrust. The majority of members feel trust is an area that should be addressed and possibly strengthened in order to more effectively collaborate. Members understand that

low levels of trust compromise their desire and motivation to collaborate with one another. Some members feel the LCoP has already begun to strengthen collaboration and trust.

Regarding members' self-awareness, disclosures in the interviews revealed members' understanding of themselves and one another. Their levels of awareness indicate their perceptions of their attitudes and behaviors in the context of their jobs and in their collaborative efforts. All eight members expressed the importance of communicating effectively with one another. While most members feel the quality of two-way communication is satisfactory, there has been an erosion of trust and relationships in the LCoP due to the perception of disrespect arising from poor communication from central office leadership.

Members feel they typically look out for one another. However, commitment is lessened regarding members supporting one another's interests. Members expressed that this may be due to a lack of commonality in terms of their unique cultures, interests, and government structures among the six different towns of the island that support the schools. All members expressed a desire for more support from central office leaders. District leaders that help their principals feel more supported in their school improvement efforts have positive effects on their collective efficacy and on school conditions and student achievement (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010).

One principal member appears to be consistently pessimistic regarding the real and potential collaborative opportunities within the LCoP framework. The pessimism of this principal suggests a negative sense of efficacy, which in the review of the literature was found to limit school leaders' abilities to support their own schools (DeWitt, 2017).

Except for this member, there is a general consensus within the LCoP that collaboration is improving and there exists optimism for continued improvement within the LCoP framework. Members' statements reveal their desire to continue with this format for collaboration. To improve the collaborative efforts of the group, members should improve their relationships with one another as individuals first. Collaboration and an increased awareness of one another as individuals are coherent with strengthening the members' leadership. Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) found, "Principals who believe they are working collaboratively toward clear and common goals with district personnel and other principals...are more confident in their leadership, which strengthens self-efficacy" (p. 127).

**Action research question two.** After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe their levels of professional knowledge and practice? The continuous collaboration afforded by the LCoP provided for embedded professional development opportunities. It is important for school leaders to collaborate to support the growth of their professional knowledge and skills through ongoing professional development (Edge & Mylopoulos, 2008). Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) found that district led, targeted professional development that is embedded in cooperative teams such as the LCoP, has a strong association with school leader self-efficacy. To this end, members expressed appreciation for the opportunities to share practice and discuss new knowledge. Umekubo et al. (2015) found that collaborating within a cohort model allowed principals opportunities to improve their knowledge. Professional discussions highlighted Schmoker's (2011) tenets of *Focus* and how they might be incorporated into practice in the LCoP members' schools. Activities such as collaboration in professional

learning groups such as the book discussion group enhances school leaders' self-efficacy, which further increases their confidence in trying new practices (Aas & Blom, 2018). Members also used collaborative opportunities to share their strengths and weaknesses with one another in the context of challenges that they face in their school settings.

Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) found that feedback from district personnel to principals regarding the quality of the of principals' leadership and encouragement from district personnel for principals to take risks by applying their professional strengths and what they learn from professional development training, are highly correlated to principals' collective efficacy within the cohort. Within the LCoP setting, members received direct feedback from one another, which fostered various strategies for members to address challenging issues or opportunities to refine their professional strengths. This manner of sharing practices with one another provides members opportunities for continued learning and sharing of their experiences with their colleagues, leading to their higher self-efficacy, and the improvement of their professional skills (Marek, 2016).

An area of weakness that emerged from member responses was in terms of creating a vision that supports learning and teachers' best practices. Another area of weakness in terms of professional practices among the members was found in the school-home partnership. Few members feel competent in the area of family involvement. However, all members understand the importance of fostering the relationship that exists between the school and the home.

Members understand the value of reflection and some expressed their appreciation for the reflection that occurred during the research interviews, as well as the open reflection that occurred during whole group activities. Allowing principals to reflect on

their practice among their colleagues is valuable to their development and improved effectiveness (Barth, 1986). Moreover, all members expressed a desire to continue with the sharing of professional knowledge and practices in an ongoing and collaborative manner.

**Action research question three.** After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members perceive their levels of self-efficacy? Only half of the members feel confident in promoting positive spirit and acceptable behavior in their schools. However, all members understand the importance of promoting a positive learning environment and acceptable behavior. Therefore, all members exert considerable effort in these areas. For some members, themes of care highlight their efforts to promote school spirit and acceptable behavior. This can be evidenced by the respectful relationships that exist in their school buildings. Stronge (2007), asserts educator attributes that demonstrate care, such as knowledge of students as individuals, lead to high achievement for all students.

School leaders' self-efficacy is linked to followers' commitment to school community responsibilities and have a positive effect on school staff's work (Chemers et al., 2000). The majority of members feel they have a significant influence on their schools through their ability to motivate their teachers. Demonstrating trust and sharing decisions among the staff are ways that members foster teacher motivation. This is consistent with research conducted by Ross et al. (2004) who found, school practices that foster shared decision making and teacher ownership, cultivate collective efficacy among leaders and teachers. However, 4 of 8 members' responses illustrate a disconnect

between their perceptions of their trust towards their teachers, and the trust they extend to their teachers in terms of shared decision making and vision.

For Versland (2013), school leaders' abilities to cope with difficulties influence their confidence to address challenges that might arise from change. LCoP members express that initiating and managing change is challenging work, citing resistance from staff as a primary reason. Managing change is problematic for LCoP members, yet they see potential in the support that the LCoP might offer. Members described ways in which they cope with stress. Members believe there may be value in collaborating to support one another in meeting similar challenges regarding change.

A concern arose regarding members' abilities to cope with stress when initiating change and its possible influence on their self-efficacy. One member has experienced challenges, feelings of isolation, and reduced ability to cope with stress, as evidenced by her responses. The problems of principal isolation and stress require attention, as principals' sense of efficacy is influenced by their happiness (Beusaert et al., 2016; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Izgar, 2009). Six of 8 members feel strong levels of self-efficacy and believe the LCoP has had a positive influence on this.

The LCoP is a vehicle intended to support the collaborative efforts of school leaders. A theme emerged during the one-on-one interviews. School leaders were able to honestly disclose during interviews, which served as potentially therapeutic reflective exercises. While interviews fostered reflection for the participants, they facilitated learning for the researcher. With the LCoP, the amount of reflective exercises, both individually and as a group have increased, leading to an overall belief that awareness of



one another has increased. Members believe that their self-efficacy has grown due to the potential alone of collaboration in the LCoP.

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

Bandura (1993) believes, “a person with the same knowledge and skills may perform poorly, adequately, or extraordinarily depending on fluctuations in self-efficacy thinking” (p. 119). Supporting self-efficacy by improving the collaborative efforts of school leaders to help address the conditions they face, is coherent with Bandura’s beliefs. Federici and Skaalvik (2012) concluded from their research, “given the responsibility of school principals for students’ education and well-being at school, it is therefore important that school principals develop high levels of competency as well as self-efficacy” (p. 312). This action research study has revealed a number of noteworthy implications for policy and practice leading to the following recommendations related to the findings and as referenced in Table 10.

**Policy/practice recommendation one.** It is recommended that efforts are made to strengthen the trust and relationships among and between members of the LCoP through their increased collaboration. Mechanisms that offer opportunities for school leaders to consistently collaborate are coherent with strengthening trust in the members’ relationships. As trust is strengthened, the desire to increase collaboration will grow as well. This is consistent with the research of Umekubo et al. (2015), which demonstrated trusting relationships foster strong collaboration among school leaders.

Though it is perceived by some members of the LCoP that low trust may be influencing their desire to collaborate with other members, it is important to note that members expressed a desire for increased collaboration in their interview responses and

personal reflections. The lack of a collaborative structure, such as a community of practice that fosters collaboration, impedes school leaders' ability to continue their professional growth and engage in collegial activities that strengthen trust and effective communication (Barth, 2006; Szczesiul, 2014; Umekubo et al., 2015). Therefore, it is recommended to increase opportunities for continued collaboration, both socially and professionally by offering ongoing school leaders' breakfasts, professional pairings, and formal professional development from a Critical Friends Group trainer to further support each member with the challenges they face.

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews conducted during the research process revealed the value of reflection and were inherently valuable exercises. Continuing with the interview format allows for therapeutic opportunities for members to disclose the challenges that threaten their self-efficacy. It is recommended to continue a model of conducting regular interviews among and between the members, allowing members to serve in the role of interviewer and interviewee. Levels of members' trust may be evidenced by the level of disclosure in each member's responses.

A recommendation to support trust among the LCoP members is to engage the cohort in formal Critical Friends Group training. This will allow the members to conduct Critical Friends Group exercises in the most effective manner, leading to the refinement of their fidelity to the process. Formal Critical Friends Group training will also help to ensure that LCoP members are supporting one another in the most sensitive and professional manner possible. Most importantly, the training will allow members to engage in a collaborative exercise intended to strengthen members' trust and relationships within the LCoP. For Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000), "if schools are to

realize the kinds of positive transformations envisioned by leaders of reform efforts, attention must be paid to issues of trust” (p. 585).

It is important to have at least one member of the group who will consistently ensure that a variety of collaborative opportunities are offered and accountability is in place to ensure there is follow-through of these offerings. This member should also ensure that members approach one another as individuals in order to build collaboration as a whole group. Strengthening relationships by building belonging in the LCoP fosters trust and the collaborative efforts of the cohort (Umekubo et al., 2015).

**Policy/practice recommendation two.** Central office leaders will prioritize communicating with the principal members. While most LCoP members feel the quality of two-way communication among NEIPS leaders is satisfactory, a theme emerged regarding poor one-way communication from the central office members to the principal members and the resulting erosion of trust and relationships in the LCoP. Fair or not, without knowingly doing anything wrong, I have possibly broken trust with the principal members of the LCoP because I have not been available or present for the principals in my school district administrator role. It is vital for communication and trust that central office leaders spend more time with the principals.

All principal members of the LCoP expressed a desire during the research process for more support from central office leaders. For Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2007), district level supports are significant predictors of principal self-efficacy, while Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) found that the effects of district leadership are largely confined to the conditions that it sets, having an indirect influence on principals’ self-efficacy. The recommendation is made that the superintendent and assistant superintendent will

become more available to each principal member by approaching them individually to determine the principal's wishes on how the central office might best support that principal and his or her school community. Differentiating the approach regarding a principal's needs is important in accurately determining the manner best suited to support each principal. By approaching and communicating in this manner, principal members may feel more supported and respected by the central office members. By being more visible in the schools, district leaders that help their principals feel more supported in their school improvement efforts have positive effects on their collective efficacy and student achievement (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Central office leaders learning to become more available, sensitive, and effective listeners, supports respectful practices of communication, leading to strengthened relationships and increased student achievement (Helmer et al., 2015).

**Policy/practice recommendation three.** It is recommended to continue using the LCoP format to increase collaborative efforts to strengthen district-wide goals that have been determined through a shared process involving all members. LCoP members do not appear to be committed to one another and the welfare of one another's school communities. Rather, competition exists between and among the members of the LCoP. Members question the value of collaborating with people who do not see one another as potentially being helpful or having professional worth regarding similarities of jobs. Competition manifests in areas involving budgets, student population growth and the subsequent growth in programming needs, and relevance of district-wide initiatives among other areas.

Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) concluded that school leaders' sense of efficacy is crucial to their instructional leadership practices as they relate to vision and direction. A theme of weakness emerged from members' responses in terms of a lack of clear direction and a lack of coherence in leadership from the superintendent's office in creating a vision that supports student learning and considers all school communities. This is minimized when collaborating on shared goals. A recommendation is to offer members additional opportunities to collaborate as a whole in conceptualizing a district-wide vision for school improvement. This is important in compelling district leaders to support principals by focusing on school improvement measures that emphasize student achievement, instruction, and collaborative, cooperative relationships and practices among leaders, which may lead to an increase in their self-efficacy (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

LCoP members have expressed that they wish to work closely with one another only if there is a decrease in competition and a more global and unified approach to improvement. Increased and focused collaborative efforts regarding a district-wide vision, created through the collective capacity of the membership is coherent with research conducted by Seashore-Louis et al. (2010), who concluded that school leaders' sense of efficacy and their instructional leadership practices, as they relate to vision and direction, are influential of one another. It is therefore vital that members' self-efficacy is strengthened by addressing unique issues within each school building and the creation of an overarching, district-wide vision that is determined in a shared manner and embraced by all LCoP members.

**Policy/practice recommendation four.** Darling-Hammond et al. (2009)

suggested that school improvement efforts are diminished when school leadership is not developed through continuous professional development. Increased use of the LCoP model will provide more opportunities for targeted and embedded professional development for the members. Efforts should be made to focus on leadership quality by targeting school improvement with job-embedded professional development through an emphasis on teamwork and a culture that fosters cooperation, collaboration, and strong relationships among school leaders. This may have a positive influence on members' sense of self and collective efficacies within the leadership team. Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) found that collaborative opportunities and high-quality professional development provided by district leaders, result in principals feeling more confident in their leadership, leading to increased levels of their self-efficacy. The recommendation is to continue to nurture reflective practices and develop members' knowledge and skills through increased professional collaboration in the context of the LCoP. Owings et al. (2005) found that supporting principals with ongoing professional development leads to increased student achievement.

Members expressed a desire to focus on increased professional activities in their collaborative exercises rather than areas of malcontent. It is recommended that members of the LCoP engage in professional development activities using *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems* (Fullan & Quinn, 2016) and the companion book, *The Taking Action Guide to Building Coherence in Schools, Districts, and Systems* (Fullan, Quinn, & Adam, 2016) to serve as a foundation for continued professional learning and collaboration. Fullan and Quinn's (2016) *Coherence*

Framework provides guidance on how NEIPS leadership currently measures in the context of focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability. These four areas of the Coherence Framework outline a foundation for effective leadership and the sharing of professional knowledge. The results of this action research study compel particular attention be paid to addressing the area of focusing direction within the Coherence Framework to address weaknesses in the creation of a shared vision in each individual member's setting and the district as a whole.

**Policy/practice recommendation five.** The construct of self-efficacy involves people's beliefs in their abilities to influence their success through their actions and the resources that support their abilities to achieve (Bandura, 1997). LCoP members express that initiating and managing change is challenging work, citing resistance from staff as a primary reason. School leaders whose self-efficacy is diminished also experience a diminishing ability to cope. As a result, these leaders become pessimistic about the challenges that they or their schools face (Versland, 2013). Professional development will be offered to support LCoP members in their understanding of the change process, including the differences that exist between initiating and maintaining an adaptive versus technical change.

Szczesiul (2014) researched the use of protocol-structured dialogue in promoting reflective practices and shared theories of action within leadership teams. These practices and protocols help principals to focus their understanding of how change works and to deepen their use of reflection to support their collaboration. School change concerns loss that staff members experience and the manner in which school leaders

support staff members in their loss. In helping LCoP members to better understand the process of change through the collective reflection that happens in the LCoP, members are better suited to navigate the process, using proper approaches to address the types of change, such as technical and adaptive. Technical change is often consummated by an authoritarian leader, acting alone. Top-down decisions, as part of the process of technical change often are not met with resistance. The nature of technical change involves low stakes and low impact, and it does not evoke the same anxiety and sense of loss experienced by stakeholders who face adaptive changes.

Adaptive changes often involve changes in staff beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and loyalties (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Therefore, adaptive changes require collaboration with stakeholders in order to reach shared decisions. For leaders initiating and managing change in their schools, it is important to learn strategies for successfully implementing the different types of change. It is recommended that professional development is provided in the context of the LCoP that will support the members' understanding of change processes.

Another recommendation to address the challenges faced by LCoP members who initiate and manage change in their communities is to provide them with an understanding of Rogers's (2003) *Diffusion of Innovations*. Rogers's theory illustrates how change diffuses or permeates through a social setting such as a school and offers effective ways to approach and communicate with each group of adopters. Understanding how to communicate with and approach the different adopter groups (*innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards*) allows school



leaders to identify staff members who might be supportive of the initiative (Rogers, 2003).

Both recommendations are supportive of school leaders in helping them to cope with the complexity and stress of initiating adaptive change. This is important for entire school communities, as stress negatively influences school leaders' self-efficacy. For Versland (2013), school leaders who experience high levels of stress collaborate less, consult less, and adopt decision-making practices that are conducted in isolation and without consideration for the input of their colleagues or followers. This is consistent with school leaders using technical change practices to manage adaptive changes, leading to their stress and a likely reduction in their self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is related to school leaders' work engagement, as principals will persist on tasks longer when their self-efficacy is strong (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011). It is therefore important that school leaders understand effective methods for introducing and managing change through the entire process, so as to positively influence necessary school reform.

Table 10

*Recommendations Related to the Findings of the Action Research*

Finding	Related Recommendation	Specific Interventions
1. Low levels of trust compromise the motivation among the members to collaborate.	Increase opportunities for continued collaboration for LCoP members, both socially and professionally.	Critical Friends Group Training Focused interviews among the members
2. Poor communication from central office leadership results in the erosion of trust and relationships in the LCoP.	The superintendent and assistant superintendent of NEIPS will be more available to each principal member, approaching them individually to determine the principal's wishes on how central office leaders might best support the member and school community.	Walkthroughs and increased, regularly scheduled visits with principal members
3. LCoP members are only marginally committed to one another and the health of one another's school communities.	Create a district-wide vision through the strengthening of district-wide goals that have been determined through a shared and collaborative process involving all members of the LCoP.	Focused collaboration on creating a shared vision that considers district-wide priorities
4. Nurturing reflective practice and developing professional knowledge and skills are crucial to supporting school leaders' sense of efficacy.	Utilize the collaborative model of the LCoP to increase opportunities for targeted and embedded professional development for the members.	Coherence Framework activities around focusing direction
5. LCoP members express that initiating and managing change is challenging work, leading to the inability of LCoP members to cope with stress and its detriment to their self-efficacy.	Support LCoP members in their understanding about the change process, most notably the difference between adaptive and technical changes.	Training in Adaptive vs. Technical Change and Diffusion of Innovations

*Note.* LCoP = Leaders' Community of Practice; NEIPS = New England Island Public Schools.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

As this study only involved one cycle of action research, it would be valuable to engage in additional cycles of action research to further refine the findings of the influence of collaboration on school leaders' self-efficacy. By staying engaged in research for a longer duration, observations and members' responses may be more detailed, further revealing the influence of collaboration on school leaders' self-efficacy.

It is also beneficial to explore various activities and practices in the LCoP setting, such as instituting the recommendations and determining the efficacy of the recommendations, such as determining the influence of the Critical Friends Group training in supporting trust among the members. The recommendation to support strengthening members' professional knowledge through the *Coherence* (Fullan & Quinn, 2016) book study, and determining the influence of the activities found in *The Taking Action Guide to Building Coherence in Schools, Districts, and Systems* (Fullan et al., 2016), on the professional knowledge members might gain, should be consummated in subsequent cycles of action research.

School leader self-efficacy is positively related to job satisfaction and motivation to quit and negatively related to burnout (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). Research conducted by Stewart and Matthews (2015) led to their recommendation that district leaders should support principals of small school districts by providing them with professional development that might assist them in addressing conditions of isolation and work overload. It is therefore important for districts to explore methods for minimizing conditions that might lead to school leaders' isolation while strengthening their collegial trust, self-awareness, communication, and collaboration, which are endeavors that are

coherent with supporting self-efficacy. As conditions such as low trust and isolation are predictors of physical and emotional burnout, it is important that NEIPS continues to explore extant research and conduct further action research to strengthen the stability of school leader staffing (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). This is coherent with exploring methods to reduce the negative influence on school cultures brought on by high principal turnover (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

School leaders' self-efficacy influences their job performance, attitudes, commitment to tasks, and professional behaviors (Bandura, 1994). Principals who work in isolation are not as effective in their leadership practices as those who collaborate (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). Collaboration in the LCoP that resembles mentoring programs may serve to diminish the potential of school leader isolation, real and perceived.

### **Summary**

Supporting school leaders' self-efficacy is vitally important work. "Without support from the central office or the help of a critical friend, it seems as though raising principal self-efficacy is an enormous challenge" (DeWitt, 2017, p. 3). This study is important in determining the influence of school leaders collaborating with one another in a cohort-based, community of practice, on their levels of self-efficacy. It is apparent that members of the LCoP desire increased collaboration with one another. It is largely their belief that the increased collaboration has and will lead to strengthened trust and a deepening of their professional relationships, in hopes of leveraging their collective capacity to support the students of their school communities. Increasing collaboration is a worthwhile and necessary endeavor that inspires and fosters trust, reduces isolation, and

strengthens relationships among the cohort members. By collaborating in small but meaningful ways, socially and professionally, members diminish the remaining reluctance of working with one another for the benefit of their students. High levels of school leader self-efficacy are positively related to student achievement (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Heck & Hallinger, 2010; Waters et al., 2004).

The collaboration in the LCoP should occur in non-directive ways, avoiding prescribing initiatives, agendas, and outcomes. This ensures that all members are granted the opportunity to shape the direction of the group's goals and the manner in which the cohort addresses its needs.

As the researcher, I have been subservient to the data collection by actively and exclusively listening during often difficult interviews and conversations with the members. It is important to support our collaboration moving forward by engaging in authentic, two-way communication, which involves responding and advocating for my beliefs and values as a member of the LCoP while maintaining the delicate balance of providing a safe environment for members to disclose, as discussed in policy/practice recommendation one.

The LCoP is a mechanism that provides opportunities for school leaders to strengthen their relationships and their self-efficacy, which leads to their support of the emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of students in their school communities. As previously written, Barth (2006) believes:

The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else. If the relationships between administrators

and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, then the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative. If, on the other hand, relationships between administrators and teachers are fearful, competitive, suspicious, and corrosive, then these qualities will disseminate throughout the school community. (p. 8)

Given the responses of the LCoP members, Barth's beliefs about relationships can be extended to school leaders that regularly collaborate in a community of practice.

## APPENDIX A

### FIELD TEST EMAIL REGARDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A field test was employed to determine any necessary improvements to the interview questions in order to demonstrate the validity of the study's instruments. The field test was offered to district administrators from NEIPS, and curriculum administrators and assistant superintendents from other New England school districts, all of which did not participate in the study. In soliciting the feedback, the action research study was described in the email request referenced below.

Dear Colleagues, I am currently beginning the dissertation proposal for my doctoral program at William and Mary. For my proposal, I will be conducting action research within my own school district by asking the 6 principals, superintendent, and myself to engage in a school leaders' community of practice (LCoP), which focuses on educator practices, as they impact student learning. In the context of the LCoP, I would like to understand the influence of the community of practice on our school leaders' efficacy within their own schools or settings. I will focus on the school leaders' self-efficacy, or their feelings of how much they impact change, their personnel, and the students in each of their school settings. I have composed three questions for my dissertation proposal. They are as follows:

Q1 - After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe changes in their levels of isolation, trust, self-awareness, and communication with one another?

Q2 - After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members describe changes in their levels of professional knowledge and practice?

Q3 - After participating in a cohort-based community of practice, how do the members perceive changes in their levels of self-efficacy?

To measure these three research questions, I have created structured and unstructured interview instruments. I need to determine if the questions in each interview are valid in the context of their value and relevance, and if the interview questions actually measure the three, overarching research questions that are written above. I am asking if you would please review the interview questions below (interview questions not part of Appendix A) and offer feedback regarding the quality of the interview questions, any suggested changes, and the elimination of questions that you feel do not belong. Your feedback will remain confidential.



## **APPENDIX B**

### **PARTICIPANT JOURNAL BOILERPLATE AND SAMPLE TOPICS**

The LCoP participants will record their own reflections by utilizing a participant's journal to inform their trust and awareness of their LCoP colleagues and their general self-efficacy. The following questions constitute the journaling boilerplate. Broader topics to foster participants' reflections are included.

Boiler Plate:

As I look back on the day, what were the most significant events?

- What did I accomplish?
- In what ways was this day unique from other days?
- What were my reactions to my interactions with others?
- How did I feel during the day? Why did I feel as I did?

More general topics for reflection may include the following (Craig, 2009):

- Critical analysis
- Problem-solving
- Self-analysis and professional growth
- Application

## APPENDIX C

### PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research study to examine the effects of principals and central office administrators collaborating in a professional team of school administrators described as a leaders' community of practice (LCoP), and its impact on increasing principal self-efficacy as measured by increased collaboration and trust among the LCoP members.

I understand that all NEIPS principals, including the superintendent and assistant superintendent of schools, will be asked and have the opportunity to participate in the action research process as members of the LCoP, and that my participation in the study is purposeful and voluntary. Data collection will be ongoing throughout the cycle from October, 2018 to December, 2018. Data collection methods will include personal journals maintained by each of the participants to be shared with the researcher. All members of the LCoP will also have the opportunity to participate in structured and unstructured interviews that are conducted one to one between the participant and researcher, based on participant interest.

I understand that the interviewer has been trained in the research of human subjects, my responses will be confidential, and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I understand that the data will be collected using an audio recording device and then transcribed for analysis. Information from the audio recording and transcription will be safeguarded so my identity will never be disclosed. My true identity will not be associated with the research findings. I understand that there is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this research and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time. I agree that should I choose to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the study that I will notify the researcher listed below, in writing. A decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw from the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher, the College of William and Mary generally or the School of Education, specifically.

If I have any questions or problems that may arise as a result of my participation in the study, I understand that I should contact Richard M. Smith, the researcher, at phone number: (508) 939-1678 and/or email at: [rmsmith02@email.wm.edu](mailto:rmsmith02@email.wm.edu). I understand that I may also contact Margaret E. Constantino Ph.D., dissertation chair and Director of Executive Ed.D. Programs, at phone: (757) 221-2323 and/or email at: [meconstantino@wm.edu](mailto:meconstantino@wm.edu) or Dr. Tom Ward, chair of EDIRC, at (757) 221-2358 or [EDIRC-L@wm.edu](mailto:EDIRC-L@wm.edu). My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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