The Impact of a Professional Learning Community Initiative on the Role of Teacher-Leaders

Author: Bradford L. Jackson

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THE IMPACT OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY INITIATIVE ON THE ROLE OF TEACHER-LEADERS

Dissertation by:

BRADFORD L. JACKSON

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment Of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY INITIATIVE ON THE ROLE OF TEACHER-LEADERS

by

Bradford L. Jackson

Dissertation Director: Dr. Elizabeth Twomey

This case study evaluated the impact of implementing a Professional Learning Community (PLC) model on the role of teacher-leaders in a suburban school district. The study seeks to understand how the role of teacher-leader has traditionally been viewed by teachers and administrators and what, if any, changes have occurred in that role since PLCs were first implemented. Finally the study looks for signs that the initiative may be sustainable over the long-term by examining the changes that the PLC initiative had on the attitudes of both principals and teacher-leaders.

This qualitative case study was conducted by a senior administrator in the school district, acting as participant-observer. Data collection instruments included pre- and post-study interviews, document review, researcher-observation of relevant events and the results of several surveys conducted by others during the implementation of the initiative.
The study concludes that the role of teacher-leaders changed during the course of the PLC implementation with teacher-leaders becoming more active in school improvement efforts. The study also found that Principals were more willing to distribute leadership to teachers and teacher-leaders after the Professional Learning Community initiative and teachers and teacher-leaders became more committed to working on school improvement efforts as well. Using current research into the topic of sustainable change, the study suggests that these three findings are indicators the Professional Learning Communities may represent a sustainable concept to drive educational improvement efforts over the long-term.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a doctoral dissertation as a full-time student must be difficult enough, but it was, at times, impossible to imagine how it was ever going to get completed while juggling the responsibilities of a full-time job and busy family. Of course, completing this dissertation would not have been possible without the support and help of many colleagues, mentors and friends, including:

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- My Dissertation Mentor, Dr. Lisette Kaplowitz, for her firm but gentle presence; and
- My Phoenix team colleagues, Mary Brown, Bob Fitzgerald, Erin Nosek and Sam Rippen for listening and helping me along the way.
DEDICATION

While colleagues, mentors and friends are critical, it is my family that sustains me. I dedicate this dissertation to them.

- To my mother, Mrs. Charlene Jackson, who taught me to be strong and resilient;
- To my mother and father-in-law, Frank and Helen Carta, who welcomed me into their family over 25 years ago and who have always been there for me;
- To my children, Jessica, Katie, Sarah and Brad, who, as infants taught me what it is truly like to be unconditionally loved by another and who, as young adults, continue to fill our home with love and laughter; and
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CHAPTER ONE
OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The history and landscape of educational change is littered with rusting hulks of failed initiatives. These initiatives failed either because they were difficult to implement or impossible to sustain (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 6). The concept and issue of sustainable change in education has received increasing scrutiny as authors and researchers note the shifting pattern of past educational initiatives. Temes (2002), recognizing that the average length of service of a teacher in a school district is significantly longer than that of a Superintendent, suggests that lasting change always comes from the bottom-up. “Teachers who stick around can keep change going; top-down change is often crippled by advocates for particular reform strategies who duck out just as programs begin to gain traction” (Temes, 2002, p. 140).

The prevalence of this cynical view becomes more apparent following a transition of leadership. As a first year Superintendent, this researcher interviewed many teachers and teacher-leaders in order to develop an entry plan that would guide the first years in the district. Teacher after teacher expressed frustration that frequent administrative turnover was derailing the initiatives already underway. However, the frustration they expressed was not focused on the loss of a promising new initiative; it was concentrated on the waste of energy and the loss of momentum that administrative turnover caused.

Each year, this scenario could play itself out numerous times all over the Commonwealth. In February 2007, The Boston Globe reported that there were 38 Superintendent vacancies statewide (McCabe, 2007). Given that many current
Superintendents vie for these openings, there may be as many as 50 communities that experience a significant change in leadership this year.

But this turnover isn’t the only challenge facing school districts across Massachusetts and the nation. “These are turbulent times…. Schools are under greater scrutiny than ever from parents who want the best for their children. The pressure is on to improve performance in the MCAS statewide achievement tests. At the same time, town finances have been hit hard by rising healthcare and pension costs and stagnant state aid” (Kocian, 2007). In these “turbulent” times, a leader’s work is not just to work with teachers and other administrators to improve their school district; it is also to establish a sustainable legacy of commitment to school improvement that will survive any inevitable administrative turnover.

In response to the challenges facing today’s schools, many eyes are turning toward the popular concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) as a framework for focusing schools on improving student learning. Essential in the development of a PLC is a “shift from a culture of teacher isolation to a culture of deep and meaningful collaboration” (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). They go on to suggest that “every major decision related to the learning mission is made through collaborative processes” (p.11). What is not clear is whether or not PLCs represent a model of educational change and improvement that will be sustainable over the long-run.

**Statement of the Problem**

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) suggest that the key element in realizing sustained change is to create sustainable leadership. They suggest that “sustainable educational change and leadership is three-dimensional – it has depth, breadth, and length” (p. 22).
Breadth of leadership, they suggest, “is leadership that spreads, that is a distributed and
shared responsibility that is taken as well as given. Sustainable and distributed leadership
inspires staff members, students, and parents to seek, create, and exploit leadership
opportunities that contribute to deep and broad learning for all students” (p. 95). Effective
distributed leadership, it appears, is a key component in a school’s efforts to implement
sustained change.

Spillane (2006) builds an exciting new framework for considering the practice of
distributed leadership. He argues that there are two aspects of distributed leadership: the
leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect. The leader-plus aspect acknowledges the
existence of multiple leaders within a school or school district. In Spillane’s practice
aspect of his distributed leadership framework he stresses that “the critical issue is not
whether leadership is distributed but how leadership is distributed. In this way, a
distributed perspective presses us to investigate how leadership practice is stretched over
two or more leaders” (Spillane, 2006, p. 15).

One popular form of distributed leadership is the concept of teacher-leaders. Barth (2001)
suggests “all teachers have leadership potential and can benefit from
exercising that potential. Teachers become more active learners in an environment where
they are leaders. When teachers lead, principals extend their own capacity, students enjoy
a democratic community of learners, and schools benefit from better decisions. This is
why the promise of widespread teacher leadership in our schools is so compelling”
(Barth, 2001a, p. 445).

Arguably, Professional Learning Communities currently represent the “hottest”
trend in educational leadership. Even the current “guru” of PLCs, Rick DuFour (2004),
acknowledges that “the idea of improving schools by developing professional learning communities is currently in vogue” (Richard DuFour, 2004, p. 8). To avoid adding PLCs to the pile of failed initiatives, DuFour refocuses leaders on the three big ideas that drive professional learning communities: ensuring that all students learn; building a culture of collaboration; and a focus on results. These big ideas form the nucleus of the PLC initiative being conducted as part of this study.

The focus of this study will be to continue the implementation of a district-wide Professional Learning Community in Dovington, a suburban Massachusetts school district led by this participant researcher. The PLC initiative was introduced by this researcher in August 2005. Although Hargreaves and Fink (2006) strongly assert that “imposed short-term, target-driven standardization is ultimately unsustainable” (p. 14), Fullan (2005) supports the top-down imposition of short-term projects. The next phase of the implementation, which will be the focus of this study, will be led by volunteer teacher-leaders rather than by the researcher or the district leadership team. During this phase, the Professional Learning Community initiative will move from the second phase of change (implementation) toward the third and final stage of change: institutionalization (Miles, 1983). Paradoxically, the leadership role of the participant-researcher will also be changing as the project moves toward institutionalization. As the project becomes institutionalized, teacher-leaders will begin to sustain the implementation of the PLC while the participant-researcher’s role will become supportive, offering assistance, anticipating obstacles, and acquiring needed resources to maintain momentum.
This study will seek to understand how the role of teacher-leader has traditionally been viewed by teachers and administrators in this suburban Massachusetts school district and what, if any, changes have occurred in that role since PLCs were first implemented. The study will further evaluate the impact that implementing a PLC has had on expanding the number of teachers willing to serve as teacher-leaders in this district and consider the long-term sustainability of the initiative. The research will be focused on answering the following research questions:

1. How has the role of teacher-leader changed since the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative?

2. What impact has the Professional Learning Community initiative had on Principals’ willingness to distribute leadership responsibilities to teacher-leaders?

3. How has the Professional Learning Community initiative strengthened the teacher-leaders’ commitment to working on the district’s school improvement efforts?

Merriam (1998) defines a study’s theoretical framework as “the structure, the scaffolding, the frame of [the] study.” She warns that the lack of a “clearly articulated theoretical framework” will “result in a study proposal or report being rejected by oversight committees and publication outlets.” More importantly, the theoretical framework forms the outline of the research project and the “questions [the researcher] asks that in turn begin to give form to the investigation.” (p. 45).
As Figure 1.1 illustrates, this study’s theoretical framework is rooted in a simple concept: theory informs practice; practice yields results.

Figure 1.1: Theoretical Framework

Since its inception in 1920, the *Journal of Educational Research* has dedicated itself to publishing “manuscripts that describe or synthesize research of direct relevance to educational practice in elementary and secondary schools.” While recently there seems to be general agreement “among researchers and teachers that research findings almost never flow smoothly from laboratory to classroom,” the Journal maintains that there is a strong “link between research findings and practice.”

Fleck (2007) argues that while the connection between theory and practice is obvious, his university-based principal preparation program didn’t touch both bases. “I noticed that even though I felt prepared in the theoretical sense, I was not completely prepared in the practical sense. The university had prepared me well in theory to serve as a school leader, but practical knowledge was based on my teaching experience and principal internship” (p. 25).

Orr (2007) disagrees suggesting that school leadership programs that offer practicing school administrators earned doctorates are “shifting to research-informed approaches to effective school and district leadership.” This shift has yielded an increased emphasis on the development of dissertations that are “designed by scholarly
research and inquiry to improve the practice of leadership.” The clear connection linking theory to practice forms the basis of this study’s theoretical framework.

Yet, the practice of leadership does not and should not exist in a vacuum. It is not practiced for the sake of practice. The purpose behind leadership practice is to improve the institution being led. This connection forms the final link of the overarching theoretical framework – the connection between leadership practice and results.

Underlying the general theoretical framework are the specific theories and practices being studied and the results that the practices expect to yield. This study-specific theoretical framework is presented in Figure 1.2 below.

This study is being driven by two major theories: Adult Learning Theory and Distributed Leadership Theory. In an interview with O’Neill (1995), Peter Senge describes Adult Learning Theory as simply “how teachers learn” (p. 20). Adult Learning Theory forms the theoretical basis for the general concepts of Professional Learning Communities and the implementation of the Professional Learning Community practices in this study. Specifically, the professional development activities that form the foundation of the Professional Learning Community initiative consider and incorporate Adult Learning Theory in the design. Finally, concepts associated in the literature with the practices of effective Professional Learning Communities are supported by specific tenets of Adult Learning Theory. A thorough understanding of Adult Learning Theory is a prerequisite for an effective introduction to and implementation of the practice now known as Professional Learning Communities.
The other major leadership practice being studied is the practice of Teacher Leaders and Teacher Leadership. These practices are informed by the theories of Distributed Leadership offered by such noted researchers as James Spillane and Alma Harris. The practice of Teacher Leadership through the implementation of a role known as Teacher Leaders is rooted in the Distributed Leadership theories found in current literature.

At the apex of the study is the connection of the practices of Professional Learning Communities and Teacher Leadership and whether or not that connection yields sustained change. The research questions are designed to elicit signs of sustainability that this study’s Professional Learning Community and Teacher Leadership initiatives may have yielded. In this way, this study will seek to understand if PLCs and Teacher Leadership offer opportunities for educational leadership, focused on improved student learning, to be sustained over time.
Theoretical Rationale

In order to conduct this study, it will first be necessary to critically review the major research in the following areas of social science research: adult learning, sustained change, distributed leadership, teacher-leadership and Professional Learning Communities. These five areas form the basis of the theoretical framework of the study described in the prior section. A brief summary of some of the major research in each of these areas follows. Chapter 2 will offer a complete review of each of these areas.

Adult Learning Theory

Adult Learning Theory is driven primarily from the work of Norman Sprinthall and Lois Thies-Springhal (1983) and Malcom Knowles (2005).

Sprinthall and Thies-Sprinthal (1983) offer their “broadly based and growing theoretical consensus [that] direct[s] constructs for teacher education” (p. 55). Their cognitive developmental theory has five major components. In effect, Sprinthall and Thies-Sprinthall have taken the cognitive development stages first articulated by Piaget in 1970 and applied that framework to adult learning. The significance of the Sprinthall theory is that different adults are at different locations along the knowledge continuum requiring differentiated professional development and multiple approaches to adult instruction.

In the 6th edition of their classic textbook, The Adult Learner, Malcom Knowles, Elwood Holton and Richard Swanson offer the andragogy theory of Adult Learning, “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 61). They offer six principles of andragony but acknowledge that a “variety of other factors
affect adult learning in a particular situation and [these factors] may cause adults to
behave more or less closely to the six practices.” This flexibility, they believe, is the
strength of andragony, allowing it to be “adapted to fit the uniquenesses of the learners
and the learning situation” (p.3).

_Sustained Change_

Andy Hargreaves and his co-author, Dean Fink, have penned several key works
on the topic of sustainable change and leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, 2006;
Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). They define the concept as follows: “sustainable
educational leadership and improvement preserves and develops deep learning for all that
spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefit for others
around us, now and in the future” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003). Fullan (2005) defines
educational sustainability as “the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of
continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose” (Fullan, 2005).
In their more recent work, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) spend much of their book
exploring the seven principals of sustainability in educational change and leadership:
depth, length, breadth, justice, diversity, resourcefulness, and conservation (Hargreaves
& Fink, 2006).

It is during their exploration of the importance of breadth that Hargreaves and
Fink (2006) suggest that distributing leadership beyond the principal’s office holds great
potential to achieve the goal of sustainability. Still, they argue that distributed leadership
is not automatically sustainable leadership. They offer a seven level continuum of
different kinds of distributed leadership ranging from too cold (autocracy) to too hot
(anarchy). The comfort-zone, they suggest lies in the areas of emergent and assertive
distribution – the areas where, they contend, Professional Learning Communities thrive (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

**Distributed Leadership**

Two major educational research programs focus much of their attention on the subject of Distributed Leadership: The Distributed Leadership Study out of the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University (Northwestern University, 2005) and the Distributed Leadership Project at the National College of School Leadership in Nottingham, England (National College for School Leadership, 2005). There are numerous research studies and scholarly discussions in today’s educational literature around the subject of Distributed Leadership, here in the United States as well as Great Britain and Australia.

The topic of Distributed Leadership began to emerge as a significant area of research following several key studies that reviewed the interaction of leaders, followers and the situation. These studies revealed that, in some instances, a variety of leaders emerged depending on the situation in the school (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, April 2001). This insight spawned scores of studies, primarily focusing on Spillane’s (2006) leader-plus aspect of his Distributed Leadership framework. However, “[r]egrettably, the empirical knowledge on the practice aspect of distributed leadership is thin.” He argues that “most of the work in this area has been done by me [Spillane] and by Gronn and his colleagues” (Spillane, 2006, p. 57)

**Teacher-Leadership**

The literature of the 1980’s focused much of its attention on the powerful role that principals played in shaping school culture. Essentially, the principal’s role was to lead
teachers, set high expectations and teachers would work hard to meet those expectations behind the closed doors of their isolated classrooms. But today schools need more. Schools need teachers’ ideas, invention, energy, and leadership. Barth (2001) suggests that there are ten areas where teacher leadership is essential to the health of a school: choosing textbooks and instructional materials; shaping the curriculum; setting standards for student behavior; deciding whether students are tracked into special classes; designing staff development and in-service programs; setting promotion and retention policies; deciding school budgets; evaluating teacher performance; selecting new teachers; and selecting new administrators. He recognizes that these ten area are not only the domains in which teacher leadership is least seen, it is also the areas where teacher leadership is most needed (Barth, 2001a, p. 444).

Harris (2005) suggests in her literature review on the subject of teacher leadership that there are overlapping and competing definitions for the term teacher leader. Still she offered some identifiable core components that most definitions have in common: teacher leadership has an instructional component (securing enhanced instructional outcomes); a relational component (generating positive relationships with staff and students); and an enabling component (creating the enabling conditions for others to learn). (A. Harris, 2005c, p. 204).

Finally, Patterson and Patterson (2004) assert that today’s teacher leaders play a powerful role in determining the overall health of a school. Moreover, they suggest that “because the teacher culture is relatively more stable over time, long-term teachers have more opportunities than short-term principals do to shape what people in the school community believe, say and do” (J. Patterson & Patterson, 2004, p. 75). In this
statement, Patterson and Patterson suggest that one of the overall keys to creating sustainable change lies in the hands of the teachers more than it does in the hands of the administration.

**Professional Learning Communities**

Senge (1990) struck a receptive cord among educators in his advocacy for moving toward becoming a learning organization through the use of systems thinking. Senge’s vision of a learning organization was a place where “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 3). He advocated the development of a nurturing culture that encouraged a high level of staff collaboration, working toward a common purpose.

By 1997, the concepts advocated by Senge had been established in the educational community under the concept of Professional Learning Communities. In her thorough literature review, Hord (1997) suggested that Professional Learning Communities shared five common attributes: supportive and shared leadership; collective creativity; shared values and vision; supportive conditions; and shared personal practice (Hord, 1997). The report identified the prominent role that principals play in initiating and developing Professional Learning Communities, but it also noted that there are “few models and little clear information to guide the creation of professional learning communities” (p. 53).

Perhaps in response to that challenge, DuFour and Eaker (1998) published their treatise on their 15 year effort to build a Professional Learning Community at Adlai
Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois. They offer a “new” model of Professional Learning Communities with the following characteristics: shared mission, vision and values; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; and results orientation (Richard DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Their book is designed to offer specific “how-to” information about transforming schools into Professional Learning Communities. The book’s theme, however, is clear and unambiguous -- “the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities” (p. xi).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant at both the local level and beyond. At the local level, this study is a review of an actual, ongoing school-district improvement initiative. Its success will affect real people – real teachers, real administrators and most importantly, real students. For that reason alone, this study is significant. The research reviewed and data analyzed will better inform implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative in the community under study. In addition, the focus on the maintainability and sustainability of change that this study provides will encourage study participants to consider long-term issues of sustainability in the development and implementation of the program. Finally, this study is locally significant because it will provide a model for future, research-based change initiatives to be considered and eventually implemented.

While the study is justifiable simply on the potential positive impact it will have locally, it will also contribute to a better understanding of how using teacher leaders in a Professional Learning Community initiative will impact the long-term sustainability of
that initiative and of the culture changes that the initiative may yield. The three main educational change concepts: teacher-leaders, Professional Learning Communities and sustainability, all suffer from a dearth of studies that actually point to their effectiveness. Most of the literature makes a cerebral or intuitive connection between the concept and its contribution to efforts to improve student learning. Few qualitative and even fewer quantitative studies on the three concepts exist. Most importantly, there is no published research that suggests a link between the concepts of teacher leadership within a Professional Learning Community and the concept of sustainability. This study is designed to reverse this trend and spur the development of more qualitative and quantitative studies in that area.

**Research Design**

While the No Child Left Behind Act “advocates the use of randomized experiments for developing generalizable knowledge to guide practice,” Firestone and Riehl (2005) “argue that high-quality empirical research can provide guidance about the nature of educational leadership and how it impacts learning” (Firestone & Riehl, 2005). Merriam (1998) agrees arguing that qualitative research “focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education” (Merriam, 1998).

This study will be an evaluative case study that will evaluate the impact of implementing a Professional Learning Community model on the role of teacher-leaders. This research will involve the researcher as a participant-observer. The case study will be evaluative in nature – involving “description, explanation and judgment” (Merriam,
The study will seek to understand how the role of teacher-leader has traditionally been viewed by teachers and administrators in this suburban Massachusetts school district and what, if any, changes have occurred in that role since PLCs were first implemented. The study will further evaluate the impact that implementing a PLC has had on expanding the number of teachers willing to serve as teacher-leaders in this district and look for signs that the initiative may be sustainable over the long-term.

In order to discover the answers to the research questions, qualitative data will be collected using primarily interviews, observations and document review. Among the documents that will be reviewed will be the written job descriptions that have been edited and negotiated each year with the local teachers’ union. Data from these three major sources will be triangulated in order to enhance the internal validity of the data analysis (Merriam, 1998).

A purposeful sample of teacher-leaders will be interviewed. In order to select this purposeful sample, the researcher will use the maximum variation sampling technique described by Merriam (1998). This process has also been described as “a deliberate hunt for negative instances or variations” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This sampling technique has been selected to assure that all types of teacher-leaders in the target district will be interviewed and their data analyzed. Teacher-leaders at all three levels (elementary, middle and high) as well as curriculum-focused and grade-level-focused team leaders will comprise the sample. In addition, all four Principals and the President of the local teachers’ union will be interviewed.

Teacher-leaders in the district being studied fall into three main categories: grade/team leaders, high school department heads and curriculum specialists. Each grade
K-5 has a full-time teacher who receives a $3000-plus stipend to act as Grade Leader. These teacher-leaders are primarily responsible for planning and chairing grade-wide meetings and acting as a liaison between building administration and the teachers. Middle School Team leaders have essentially the same responsibility for their three or four member team. High School Department Heads are organized by traditional departmental structures and also assist the administration in hiring new teachers into the department. Teacher-leaders do not have any responsibility for evaluating other teachers in the department. K-8 Curriculum Specialists do not have a formal teaching assignment and are responsible for providing curriculum leadership for either Mathematics, Literacy or Social Studies.

Each of the types of teacher-leaders studied will be a case: grade/team leaders; high school department heads; and curriculum specialists. The researcher will perform a cross-case analysis, “suggesting generalizations” (Merriam, 1998) that apply to all teacher-leaders in the researched school district. Merriam (1998) endorses this approach suggesting that “the inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings.” This approach is also supported by Miles and Huberman (1994). They suggest that “by looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases… we can strengthen the precision, validity, and the stability of the findings” (p. 29).

It is important to note the fact that the researcher in this case study holds a significant leadership role in the district being studied and was the originator of the PLC initiative being studied. Merriam (1998) suggests that “in qualitative research where the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, subjectivity and interaction are
assumed” (p. 103). Accordingly, the researcher must address potential researcher and participant bias in the study design.

In terms of researcher bias, Merriam (1998) reminds us that the onus is on the researcher, to identify any potential changes in behavior brought about by the relationship with those being observed or interviews or perceived bias of the researcher “and account for them in interpreting the data.” (p. 103). Still, sometimes, there are biases that are “not readily apparent to the researcher” (p. 216). For that reason, the researcher will clearly articulate the reasons why a potential exists for researcher bias in the report.

Participant bias is a potential concern due to the reality that the researcher holds a significant leadership role in the district. Although there is a potential in every qualitative study that participants being interviewed will give the researcher the responses they feel the researcher “wants” to “please” the researcher, the leadership role of the researcher conducting this study increases that potential. The researcher’s leadership role also leads to the concern that participant bias might result from the participant’s perceived need to protect him or herself from negative judgments from an authority figure. These potentials for participant bias will be minimized by purposefully selecting senior, tenured teacher-leaders with a history of open and honest communication with senior authority figures. Moreover, all principals being interviewed have multi-year employment contracts with the district being studied. Also, the informed consent form provided each participant will assure all participants of the independence of this study from the researcher’s leadership role, and clearly state that any and all information provided the researcher will remain confidential to the purpose of the study.
Finally, Miles and Huberman (1994) offer several salient suggestions to minimize the impact of the researcher’s leadership position on the participants, including asking an “informant… to be attentive to your [the researcher’s] influence on the site and its inhabitants [and] do[ing] some of your interviewing off-site” (p. 266). Following their recommendation, the researcher’s highest-ranking colleague will be enlisted to review the data analysis and offer areas where potential researcher-bias may be present. All interviews will be conducted at a neutral site, reducing the researcher’s “threat quotient and exoticism” (p. 266).

Limitations of the Study

While this study does offer the opportunity for a better understanding of the impact of a Professional Learning Community initiative on the role of Teacher Leaders, that understanding must be tempered by an objective review of the limitations of the study. It is impossible to eradicate all potential sources of bias and skew so it is important to acknowledge those potential sources that the reader should consider when reviewing this study.

Researcher and participant bias are important considerations when considering limitations of the study. Although the design of the study was developed to reduce the potential of these biases, they must, nonetheless, be considered when identifying limitations. Merriam (1998) acknowledges that all data “have been filtered though [the researcher’s] particular theoretical position and biases” (p. 216). This researcher has approached this study with a belief that Professional Learning Communities represent a significant opportunity for lasting school improvement. Although as a researcher, it will
be his job to set those biases aside and objectively view the data, the researcher’s beliefs may cloud his judgment and limit the study’s validity.

Because a significant amount of data for study will be derived from interviews with participants, the pre-existing relationship between the researcher and the participants must be acknowledged. Since the researcher holds a high-level administrative post in Dovington, the potential exists that participants may, intentionally or not, phrase their responses in a way that they feel the researcher would want to hear. While this potential participant bias was also acknowledged and considered in the design of the study, its possible impact should be considered a limitation.

Also, the Hawthorne Effect may come into play when the researcher is observing the behaviors of teacher-leaders. The Hawthorne Effect theorizes that participants modify their behavior simply due to the fact that they are being observed. This self-fulfilling prophecy can be compounded by the researcher’s high-level administrative position in Dovington, resulting in the researcher observing uncharacteristic behavior instead of typical behavior.

In addition to the potential bias on the part of the researcher or participant, other limitations to this study exist. The short time frame involved in the study represents a limitation. This study will consider the long-term commitment to change through the lens of the role of teacher leaders. Sustainability is best proven through a long-term study that can look at the impact of an initiative over a long period of time. Since this study is, by design, over the course of a shorter time period, any conclusions drawn by the researcher should be considered in that light.
Finally, any conclusions made through this study are limited to the specific circumstances in Dovington and are not necessarily reproducible or generalizable in other schools or school districts. Merriam (1998) warns that “achieving reliability in [qualitative studies in education] is not only fanciful but impossible…. That fact, however, does not discredit the results of the original study.” (p. 206). So, while the results of this study may be valid for the work going on in Dovington, this study may or may not apply to other similar situations in other similar communities.

**Overview of the Study**

This study will be comprised of five chapters. Chapter One provided the introduction to the study, framed the research questions and described the theoretical framework under which this study will be conducted. Chapter Two will provide a detailed description of the relevant bodies of literature for each of the five main areas of study: adult learning theory, Professional Learning Communities, distributed leadership theory, teacher leadership and sustained change. Chapter Three will describe the specific design of the research study and the research-based methodologies that will be used to gather, analyze and report on the data. Chapter Four will present the findings of the study. The study will conclude with Chapter Five where a discussion of the findings in the context of the literature analysis will comprise the bulk of the chapter. Chapter Five will also describe the implications of the findings on policy and practice and recommendations for further research. Chapter Five will close with a narrative analysis of the impact that this study has had on the leadership practices of the researcher.
CHAPTER 2
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Following the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1, this chapter will review the relevant literature that describes the following concepts: Adult Learning Theory, Distributed Leadership Theory, Professional Learning Communities, Teacher Leadership and Sustained Change. Where applicable, research that connects these theories and practices to one another will be highlighted in an effort to describe the interrelationship between and among these concepts.

Adult Learning

A thorough understanding of the various theories on how adults best learn forms the foundation of the implementation of any teacher professional development program. This section will review the literature that articulates the need for that understanding when designing professional development; will describe several predominant theories of adult learning; and will outline how several leading authors suggest high-quality professional development, informed by adult learning theory, should be designed.

The Case for Adult Learning Theory

Many noted researchers recognize that “while there is an extensive body of research on the teaching-learning process, there is a major lacuna on the process of teacher education” (Sprinthall & Thies-Sprinthall, 1983, p. 278). As a result of this gap, many professional development programs “have been created and carried out without a substantive knowledge-base [of the adult learner]” (p. 13). What teachers irreverently refer to as “sit ‘n ‘git” sessions, where teachers sit in their school auditorium listening to
outside “experts,” have consistently failed to yield expanded teacher knowledge that has had a positive and sustained impact on instruction.

In order to address that deficiency, “school leaders need to understand that adults, like children, have distinct learning styles and developmental needs” (Drago-Severson, 2006, p. 58). Lieberman (1995) agrees and argues that “the conventional view of staff development as a transferable package of knowledge to be distributed to teachers in bite-size pieces needs radical rethinking” (p. 591). Lieberman’s call for “radical rethinking” becomes critically important if one is to answer his call to make “teacher development opportunities… integral to the restructuring of schools” (p.592). He appears to chastise Professional Developers and Central Office administrators by reminding them that “what everyone appears to want for students – a wide array of learning opportunities that engage students in experiencing, creating, and solving real problems, using their own experiences and working with others – is for some reason denied to teachers when they are learners” (p. 591).

While not noted for his leadership as an Adult Learning theorist, Peter Senge, in an interview with O’Neill (1995) strongly feels that “we must give systemic attention to how teachers learn.” Senge suggests that “learning always occurs in a context where you are taking action. So we need to find ways to get teachers really working together; we need to create an environment where they can continually reflect on what they are doing and learn more and more what it takes to work as teams” (p. 20). While Senge’s words foreshadow many of the features of Professional Learning Communities described later in this review, it is his focus on “how teachers learn” that drives the connection between Adult Learning Theory and PLCs in practice.
Lieberman (1995) makes an even stronger connection between Adult Learning Theory and the practice of Professional Learning Communities. “Transforming schools into learning organizations, in which people work together to solve problems collectively, is more than a question of inserting a new curriculum or a new program…. Teaching as telling, the model that has dominated pedagogy and the consequent organization of schooling to date, is being called into question as professional learning for teachers increasingly connects to this reconsidered view of schools” (p. 592). Again, the process of implementing a new initiative or program needs to be rooted in a deep understanding of how teachers acquire and apply new knowledge to their practice.

These authors agree that a clear understanding of Adult Learning Theory should underscore any efforts to improve schools through teacher professional development. Accordingly, this analysis will now turn its focus on current significant theories of Adult Learning and how they should manifest themselves in teacher professional development programs.

**Adult Learning Theory**

Drago-Severson (2006) reminds readers that “all teachers have a particular developmental perspective and understanding the varying developmental perspectives of the faculty can help school leaders improve a school’s overall educational practices and create contexts in which both adults and children can grow” (p. 59). The question then becomes, what is that developmental perspective and how does one design professional development with that perspective in mind? Answers to this question can be found in a variety of different adult learning theories currently under study.
Sprinthall and Thies-Sprinthall (1983) offer their “broadly based and growing theoretical consensus [that] direct[s] constructs for teacher education.” Their cognitive developmental theory has five major components:

- All humans process experience through cognitive structures called stages;
- Such cognitive structures are organized in a hierarchical sequence of stages from the less complex to the more complex;
- Growth occurs first within a particular stage and then only to the next stage in the sequence. This latter change is a qualitative shift – a major leap to a significantly more complex system of processing experience;
- Growth is neither automatic nor unilateral but occurs only with appropriate interaction between the human and the environment; and
- Behavior can be determined and predicted by an individual’s particular stage of development. (Sprinthall & Thies-Sprinthall, 1983, p. 16).

In effect, Sprinthall and Thies-Sprinthall have taken the cognitive development stages first articulated by Piaget in 1970 and applied that framework to adult learning. The significance of the Sprinthall theory is that different adults are at different locations along the knowledge continuum requiring differentiated professional development and multiple approaches to adult instruction. Most importantly, “the conception of adulthood as a period of slow cognitive-developmental degeneration is invalid. The stability of functioning during adulthood may well be the result of inadequate stimulating interaction” (Sprinthall & Thies-Sprinthall, 1983, p. 22).

In the 6th edition of their classic textbook, *The Adult Learner*, Malcom Knowles, Elwood Holton and Richard Swanson offer the andragogy theory of Adult Learning, “the
art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 61). The andragogical model is based on several assumptions:

1. **The need to know.** Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it. As a result, professional developers must first engage the adult learner through the effective use of a tool designed to raise the learner’s level of awareness of the need to know. “Personnel appraisal systems, job rotation, exposure to role models, and diagnostic performance assessments are examples of such tools” (Knowles, et al., 2005, p. 65).

2. **The learners’ self-concept.** Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions and their own lives. Adults resist situations where they feel others are imposing their wills on them. This resistance to placing their own individual self-concept in jeopardy of being judged by others can result in significant resistance of the typical teacher-as-expert model so predominant in today’s Professional Development models. Adults counteract this phenomenon by avoiding traditional “sit ‘n git” events and focusing their efforts on becoming independent, self-directed learners. Professional Developers must accommodate this tendency in adults by guiding their adult-student’s learning rather than providing information through lectures or similar means.

3. **The role of the learners’ experience.** Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from that of youths. Hence, greater emphasis is placed on individualization of teaching and learning strategies for the adult learner. Also, because of the richness of their experiences, the adult learners in the classroom represent a significant resource
for information and experience. As a result, Professional Developers should design courses with ample opportunities for peer-helping activities. However, teaching adults can also have its pitfalls. As adults accumulate experience, they develop ways of looking at things that can impede new thinking. Professional Developers have to learn ways to break through these barriers and biases, primarily by using techniques that force the Adult Learner to articulate their own predispositions prior to introducing new knowledge or material.

4. Readiness to learn. Adults become ready to learn those things that they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with real-life situations. This assumption is based on the concept of timing and a suggestion that adults learn best when in the midst of moving from one developmental stage to the other. Here again, there are ways to induce readiness, such as exposure to models of superior performance, career counseling or simulation exercises.

5. Orientation to learning. Adults are life-centered learners and motivated to learn when they perceive that learning will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations. Most importantly, adults learn new knowledge most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations. This assumption is clearly important to Professional Developers who must work to keep their information relevant to the on-going work of classroom teachers. Moreover, it speaks to the issue of timing. This assumption suggests that even the best designed Professional Development program on instructing English Language Learners, for example, will not be effective unless it is taught to teachers who currently facing the
issue. “Just-in-time” Professional Development is the key for breaking through this barrier to new learning.

6. **Motivation.** While adults are responsive to some external motivators such as a higher salary or a promotion, the most significant motivators to learn revolve around internal motivators such as increased self-esteem, increased job satisfaction or improved quality of life. Here again, presenting material that is relevant to real-life situations, which will in turn improve the adult’s quality of life, are essential elements when designing Professional Development with this assumption in mind. (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005, pp. 64-68).

Drago-Severson (2006) offers the constructive-developmental theory, first developed by Robert Kegan, as the context for planning Professional Development programs. “Kegan’s theory is guided by three premises: (a) that we all actively and continually make sense of our experiences in particular ways, (b) that the ways we make meaning of our experiences can become more complex over time, and (c) that ‘holding environments’ (the various contexts in which we grow) can either enhance or inhibit emotional and intellectual growth” (Drago-Severson, 2006, p. 59). Essentially, the constructivist-developmental theory shows that adults make meaning of their experiences in different ways and those ways advance along a continuum of development. Drago-Severson (2006) describes three significant stages along the continuum of development as:

1. **Instrumental.** This highly-pragmatic stage is where adults tend to look to others for useful information and, in return, offer information or knowledge that the adult-learner thinks the other might be able to use. As
instrumental knowers are generally very rule-based, Professional Development should be designed to help them better understand the benefits of multiple perspectives.

2. **Socializing.** Unlike instrumental knowers, socializing knowers have the capacity to think abstractly and to subordinate their own needs to those of others. Because socializing knowers need to be known and accepted by colleagues, these adult learners benefit greatly from being able to share their knowledge with small groups of colleagues. To assist socializing knowers in their journey across the continuum, they need to be encouraged to look inward, be reflective, and express their own perspective rather than adopt another’s solution or perspective.

3. **Self-Authoring.** These adult learners generate their own value system, can identify abstract values, principles and longer-term purposes and are able to prioritize and integrate competing values. They feel comfortable in situations where they can demonstrate their own abilities – sometimes to a fault. Professional Developers need to help these adult learners learn to be comfortable setting aside their own values in order to allow them to better understand the values or perspectives of others (Drago-Severson, 2006, p. 59-61).

**Adult Learning Theory in Practice**

While these various theories of adult learning are both interesting and thought-provoking, it is important, before leaving this topic, to focus analysis of these theories on the impact that they have (or imply) to the practice of Professional Development.
Sprinthall & Thies-Sprinthall (2001) bridge the gap between theory and practice by suggesting that Professional Developers “switch [a teacher’s] cognitive-developmental stage from a dependent variable to an independent variable [through the] creation of... a teacher education curriculum differentiated by developmental concepts” (p. 281). This simple idea represents a fundamental shift in thinking by encouraging Professional Developers to not only consider adult learning theory in the design of their programs but to explicitly make it an objective of the program to move the participant along their developmental continuum. In an effort to accomplish that goal, several noted researchers have encouraged the use of specific Professional Development techniques designed to facilitate that growth of the adult-learner.

For example, the five components of the cognitive developmental theory articulated by Sprinthall and Thies-Sprinthall (1983) suggest an effective instructional model for professional development that includes:

- Growth toward more complex levels of cognitive-developmental functioning appears to be most influenced by placing persons in significant role-taking experiences;
- These role-taking experiences need to take into account the developmental stage differences in the teachers’ ability to take a role;
- There is a genuine need for careful and continuous guided reflection;
- Balance is needed between real experience and discussion/reflection/teaching;
- Professional Development programs need to be continuous;
• Since developmental stage growth represents by definition functioning at a new and more complex level, instruction needs to provide for both personal support and challenge; and

• Considerable theoretical work still needs to be done in cognitive developmental theory, particularly at the assessment level. (Sprinthall & Thies-Sprinthall, 1983, pp. 27-30).

Lieberman (1995) links to the theoretical research in adult learning and reminds us that “learning theorists and organizational theorists are teaching us that people learn best through active involvement and through thinking about and becoming articulate about what they have learned” (p. 252). He offers several clear ways to accomplish this goal:

• by building new roles (e.g. teacher leader, peer coach, teacher researcher);
• by creating new structures (e.g. problem-solving groups, decision-making teams);
• by working on new tasks together (e.g. learning about assessment, creating standards);
• by creating a culture of inquiry, wherein professional learning is expected, sought after, and an ongoing part of teaching and school life. (p. 255).

Lieberman’s suggestions clearly support the practices of teacher-leadership and Professional Learning Communities implemented as part of this study and implies that both practices are firmly rooted in Adult Learning theory.

Drago-Severson (2006) offers four “pillar” practices of growth that “offer adult-learners” the kind of support they need:
• **Supporting the practice of teaming.** This promotes personal and organizational learning through adult collaboration. Working in teams enables adults to question their own and other people’s philosophies of teaching and learning, and creates a context in which teachers can grow from new and diverse perspectives.

• **Providing Leadership Roles.** This allows teachers to share power and decision-making authority and offers teachers the opportunity for transformational learning – “learning that improves one’s capacity to handle the complexities of work and life.”

• **Engaging in Collegial Inquiry.** Drago-Severson describes collegial inquiry as “a shared dialogue that involves reflecting on one’s assumptions and values as part of the teaching and learning process” (p. 61). Through private reflection and public discussion, collegial inquiry facilitates adult learning and institutional growth.

• **Mentoring.** Mentoring, Drago-Severson argues, “is arguably the oldest form of supporting adult learning and development” (p. 61). Mentoring enables adults to explore their own thinking and contradictions and, in doing so, enhance self-development of the adult learner (Drago-Severson, 2006, pp. 60-62).

Knowles, Holton & Swanson (2005) best sum up the importance of understanding adult-learning theory and using that theory to inform system-wide practices to improve school performance such as Professional Learning Communities. “All normal adults are motivated to keep growing and developing, but this motivation is
frequently blocked by such barriers as negative self-concept as a student, inaccessibility of opportunities or resources, time constraints, and programs that violate the principles of adult learning” (p. 68). The practical suggestions described in this section, based on the tenets of adult learning theory, offer a clear roadmap for the Professional Developer or school leader to follow when implementing school improvement reforms.

Professional Learning Communities

Much of the literature of today is rife with discussion and analysis of the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and their role in the improvement of education today. However, DuFour (2004) warns us that people use the term Professional Learning Community (PLC) to describe “every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education…. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning” (Richard DuFour, 2004, p. 6). In an effort to avoid that pitfall, this section will review the literature describing the need for PLCs, review the various definitions of PLCs, describe the process that noted authors recommend for developing a PLC (with an emphasis on the role of the Principal and the need for trust), outline the qualitative and quantitative studies that support the PLC concept, summarize the value of PLCs as described by leading educators and finally, detail the link to sustainable change that some feel that PLCs represent.

The Source for Professional Learning Communities

Michael Fullan (2006) says that the history of PLCs “started with Judith Little’s 1981 work on collegiality… and Susan Rosenholtz’s study of ‘learning enriched’ and ‘learning impoverished’ schools” (Fullan, 2006, p. 12). Bezzina (2006) agrees: “The decentralization movement and the literature in teacher collaboration appear to have been
significant precursors to an emerging concept called professional community” (Bezzina, 2006, p. 159). Accordingly, our review of the literature will begin there.

In her review of four successful and two unsuccessful schools, Judith Warren Little’s conclusions still influence our practice 25 years later: “In successful schools more than in unsuccessful ones, teachers valued and participate in norms of collegiality and continuous improvement (experimentation); they pursued a greater range of professional interactions with fellow teachers or administrators, including talking about instruction structured observation, and shared planning or preparation” (Little, 1982, p. 325). This landmark research shifted the focus from simply a review of teacher practice while in front of students to a broader review of adult behaviors while in school.

Rosenholtz (1989) studied 78 schools in Tennessee and characterized the majority of them as “stuck” or “learning impoverished.” She described these learning impoverished schools as showing little or no attention to schoolwide goals, isolation among teachers, limited teacher learning on the job and low commitment to the job and the school. “Teachers seemed more concerned with their own identity than a sense of shared community. Teachers learned about the nature of their work randomly, not deliberately, tending to follow their individual instincts” (Rosenholtz, 1989, p. 208). Here again, the behavior between and among adults rather than their pedagogical performance is linked to poor performance within schools.

Others suggest intermediary steps in the journey from Little and Rosenholtz to Professional Learning Communities. Joyce (2004) believes that three initiatives spawned the current focus on PLCs: team-teaching, the middle school movement, and the Coalition of Essential Schools (Joyce, 2004). Langford (2003) suggests that the source of
Professional Learning Communities comes from within – that PLC’s appease a “greater hunger…. The notion of adding value to our lives, for our own sake, or own sense of exploration, renewal and new experiences…. This is the ‘hunger’ that PLC’s satisfy” (Langford, 2003, p. 19). Finally, DuFour and Burnette (2002) believe that PLCs are formed to “root out weeds of bad culture” (Rick DuFour & Burnette, 2002, p. 29). These weeds, they suggest are: “we aren’t responsible for student learning; we prefer to work by ourselves; and we must protect our territory.” (p. 29).

In the end, though, it is the work of Judith Warren Little (1982) that spawned this emphasis on professional community as a means to improve student learning. But, what exactly is a Professional Learning Community and how does it manifest itself? This review turns its attention to that question next.

Defining the Term: Professional Learning Community

Rather than define the term Professional Learning Community, several noted authors have instead offered descriptive lists of features that are present in schools that are commonly called Professional Learning Communities. Newman and Wehlage (1995) describe three general features of a professional community: “(1) teachers pursue a clear, shared purpose for all students’ learning; (2) teachers engage in collaborative activity to achieve the purpose; and (3) teachers take collective responsibility for student learning” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 30). Two years later, in her often-cited literature review on the subject of PLC’s, Shirley Hord describes five attributes of PLCs: “supportive and shared leadership; collective creativity; shared values and vision; supportive conditions; and shared personal practice.” (Hord, 1997).
Richard DuFour, a noted author and practitioner, has recently been waving the flag of Professional Learning Communities through several books and journal articles. In his 2004 article in *Educational Leadership*, DuFour offers the three pillars that make up a Professional Learning Community: “ensuring that students learn; a culture of collaboration; and a focus on results” (Richard DuFour, 2004, pp. 8-10). Most recently, Giles and Hargreaves (2006) further refined the descriptive lists that describe the components of a PLC as including: “collaborative work and discussion among the school’s professionals; a strong and consistent focus on teaching and learning within that collaborative work; and the collection and use of assessment and other data to inquire into and enable progress over time” (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 126).

Other noted authors offer narrative descriptions of Professional Learning Communities and what they comprise. Harris (2003) describes PLCs much like other authors but suggests that adults in Professional Learning Communities “accept joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work” (A. Harris, 2003a, p. 379). In an interview with Sparks (2004), Andy Hargreaves describes a PLC as “an ethos that infuses every single aspect of a school’s operation. When a school becomes a PLC, everything in the school looks different than it did before – for instance, how time is used, the grouping of students, the participation of all teachers on learning teams, and the use of technology to improve staff communication and collaboration. (Sparks, 2004, p. 48).

Similar to Hargreaves’ “ethos” description, Morrissey (2000) describes a PLC as “the supporting structure for schools to continuously transform themselves through their own internal capacity” (Morrissey, 2000). Protheroe (2004) agrees and reminds readers that “PLCs should not be considered new initiatives or programs. Rather, a school
characterized as a professional learning community has a culture that recognizes and capitalizes on the collective strengths and talents of its staff” (Protheroe, 2004, p. 39).

But, Scott LaFee offers what this researcher believes is the strongest definition – one that deftly intertwines the two concepts of school culture with accountability for improving student learning. LaFee (2003) suggests that a Professional Learning Community is “an idea that goes beyond raising achievement standards and test scores. It involves transforming the organizational culture, changing the way participants interact, and allowing greater freedom to explore and pursue new ideas for educating students” (LaFee, 2003, p. 4). Even in the context of current federal mandates and while recognizing the “oxymoron of strategizing in a collaborative setting about improving instruction… within programs that are perceived to be rigid,” Wilhelm(2006) speaks for all of the noted authors in this section by concluding that “PLCs are the key to meeting our goal of leaving no child behind” (Wilhelm, 2006, p. 28).

Building a Professional Learning Community

The review of the literature describing the process for building a Professional Learning Community begins with a warning from Michael Fullan who reminds us that PLCs are more complex and difficult to attain than some expect. He warns that “the term [PLC] travels faster and better than the concept. Thus we have many examples of superficial PLCs – educators simply calling what they are doing ‘professional learning communities’ without going very deep into learning and without realizing they are not going deep” (Fullan, 2006, p. 10). This caveat should remind the reader that despite a specific focus on process that is included in this section, it is the focus on learning that, while sometimes not specifically stated, is, nonetheless, assumed.
Like seeds growing from fertile soil, it is first necessary to prepare the garden for planting. PLCs also require the proper environment in which to flourish. Snow-Gerano (2005) suggests that “PLCs work in a community where uncertainty is not only valued, but supported” (Snow-Gerono, 2005, p. 241). The Alabama Best Practices Center (2004) suggests that “without the pressure of high expectations, collaboration may never move beyond a surface activity” (Alabama Best Practices Center, 2004, p. 2). Both authors suggest that, like a reluctant flower, PLCs need a supportive environment in order to take root.

Where, in a collaborative environment, should the initiative to build a PLC emanate? Should an administrator wait for the teachers to discover the PLC concept, research it and adopt it, or should the administrator offer PLCs as a top-down initiative appearing to ignore efforts to build collaboration among professionals? DuFour and DuFour (2003) offer a compromise and admonish administrators to “reject the Tyranny of the ‘Or’ and embrace the Genius of the ‘And’” (Richard DuFour & DuFour, 2003, p. 13). They call this approach ‘tight/loose’ leadership and encourage administrators to “focus on identifying and articulating both the fundamental purpose of the organization and a few ‘big ideas’ that will help the district improve in its capacity to achieve that purpose. At the same time, encourage individual and organizational autonomy…. This autonomy is not characterized by random acts of innovation, but rather is guided by carefully defined parameters that give focus and direction to schools and those within them” (p. 2).

The first step to creating a PLC is offered by Protheroe (2004) who suggests that “helping teachers to organize around discussions of high-interest problems or issues
provides a good introduction to the dynamics of a PLC” (Protheroe, 2004, p. 41).

Schnitzer (2005) began the PLC in their Central Office by “concentrating on applying the lessons learned from a single book to the work of the school district. [That work] gave focus and meaning to the work of the team” (Schnitzer, 2005, p. 46). Others suggest establishing a social community before attempting to convert it to a PLC by using the social community to focus on establishing shared norms and values (Mulford, 2006).

Many recognize that establishing a PLC is a process that requires commitment and consistency. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) liken establishing a PLC to the process of building a house and outline the structural conditions that are needed: “shared governance that increases teachers’ influence over school policy and practice; interdependent work structures, such a teaching teams, which encourage collaboration; staff development that enhances technical skills consistent with the schools’ mission for high-quality learning; and deregulation that provides autonomy for schools to pursue a vision” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 52). The Annenburg Institute for School Reform (2004) also uses the house-building metaphor, encouraging school leaders to “build the capacity of schools, districts and community leaders to learn together and construct meaning and knowledge needed to support collaboration around improved instructional practices” (Annenburg Institute for School Reform, 2004, p. 9).

Most call establishing a PLC what it truly is – reculturing a school. Fullan (2000) defines reculturing as “going from a situation of limited attention to assessment and pedagogy to a situation in which teachers and others routinely focus on these matters and make associated improvements” (Fullan, 2000, p. 582). Bezzina (2006) agrees and remarks that “one of the most notable outcomes [of his study of PLCs] is the length of
time staff may need to change beliefs and behaviors…. Schools need time and support to learn together as they pursue the road less traveled” (Bezzina, 2006, pp. 165-166).

While some noted authors choose one aspect of PLCs or another to focus on, they are nearly unanimous in their belief that the essential ingredient for building a successful PLC is an environment of trust. Riley and Stoll (2004) call trust the “super-glue” that bonds communities together” (Riley & Stoll, 2004, p. 39). Hargreaves (2002) agrees stating that “if schools are going to become stronger professional learning communities, they must seek not only to establish trust in teaching, but also to avoid the causes of pervasive betrayal” (Hargreaves, 2002, p. 393). Leonard and Leonard (2001) “believe strongly that PLCs can only exist in a climate of trust founded in professional regard, personal respect and shared commitment to common goals” (P. E. Leonard & Leonard, 2001, p. 396).

Why is trust a crucial component in the development of Professional Learning Communities? Because teachers “need a place where teachers could share both success and failures. Something more fundamentally enabled these teachers to share the problems they experienced in their classrooms with a school administrator. And that was trust” (Carver, 2004, p. 59). Barlow (2005) agrees and best summarizes the need to trust. “Teachers need to be assured that administrators will not use test results to evaluate staff. Teachers need to be free to experiment, and they need to know that sometimes they will fail without being punished” (Barlow, 2005, p. 65).

The principal plays a central role in the establishment of trust within a school (Protheroe, 2004). But their responsibility does not end there. Huffman and Jacobsen (2003) in a research study designed to study the relationship between PLCs and the
leadership style of the principal found that “the collaborative style of leadership by the principal influenced the presence of professional learning community characteristics” (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003, p. 239). Resnick and Hall (1998) and Thompson (2004) also specifically remark that “principal leadership plays a significant role in the ability of a school to become a PLC that enhances student learning” (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004, p. 35).

**Studies of Professional Learning Communities**

Most of the most popular books on the development of Professional Learning Communities lack references to direct qualitative or (even less likely) quantitative studies linking PLCs to improved student learning. In fact, the entire PLC movement was initiated as a result of Judith Warren Little’s 1982 study of the role of collaboration in school improvement. In that study of six schools – four unsuccessful and two successful – Little’s conclusions that faculties at successful schools “pursued a greater range of professional interactions with fellow teachers, including talk about instruction, structured observation and shared planning or preparation” are as influential today as they were when first published (Little, 1982, p. 325).

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) analyzed the results of the School Restructuring Study (SRS) of 24 elementary, middle and high schools as well as the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (including a nationally representative sample of over 10,000 students), the Study of Chicago School Reform (including survey data from 8,000 teachers and principals) and the Longitudinal Study of School Restructuring (including four-year case studies of eight schools). Their landmark meta-analysis of the impact of school restructuring efforts offered a clear conclusion, supported by extensive
evidence that “if schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a professional community that is characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity and collective responsibility among school staff” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 37).

While few studies have the same breadth and depth of Newmann and Wehlage, other more recent studies offer continued encouragement on the impact that PLCs have in improving student learning. In a comparative study of three school improvement projects in England, Alma Harris’ analysis “emphasizes the need to generate professional learning communities within schools if improvement is to be sustained” (A. Harris, 2003a, p. 369). Parr and Ward (2006) described several failed efforts to link 10 isolated schools online due to the failure to first work to build learning communities first within safe, known and supportive environments before trying to share practices online (Parr & Ward, 2006).

Mason (2003) draws upon 3 related research studies in the Milwaukee Public Schools where they are working to build the capacity of school staff to use data more effectively for continuous improvement and decision-making to improve student learning. She concludes that “PLCs contribute to improving the organizational, culture and structure necessary for effective data use” (Mason, 2003, p. 12). Stahan (2003) offers a three-year evaluative case study of 3 elementary schools in North Carolina where implementing PLCs improved low-income and minority student achievement. Through extensive interviews, they found that “data directed dialogue, purposeful conversations guided by formal assessment and informal observation, connected the way that adults and
students cared for each other and that provided energy to sustain the efforts” (Strahan, 2003, p. 127).

While we mostly learn from our successes, occasionally, our failures offer opportunities to learn and grow as well. In an interpretive study of 45 North Louisiana schools, Leonard and Leonard (2003) report that “despite the rhetoric, major impediments to joint professional work remain” (L. J. Leonard & Leonard, 2003, p. 1). “The most debilitating of the concerns that teachers continue to espouse about efforts to establish learning communities is the lack of consistent resolve at the district and state level.” (p. 10).

Despite the infrequent, spotty qualitative studies that link Professional Learning Communities to improved student learning, the most comprehensive quantitative study conducted by Newmann and Wehlage is now over 20 years old. Renewed efforts are called for in an attempt to replicate the Newmann and Wehlage study with updated qualitative data. Without these updated studies and despite the extensive, authentic, qualitative data that link PLCs to improved student learning, Fullan’s recent conclusion that “PLCs are at the early stage of being pursued seriously” (Fullan, 2006, p. 13) seems the most logical.

Others Weigh-In on the Value of Professional Learning Communities

Noted educators and authors from across the globe believe in the value of establishing Professional Learning Communities to improve student learning. From England, Buffum and Hinman (2006) notes that the essential work of PLCs, “collaborating on why some students are not learning, rather than on pedagogy, revives the fundamental purpose of our profession. (Buffum & Hinman, 2006, p. 17). Here in the
US, Mason (2003) believes that “PLCs provide an ideal organizational structure to address both the challenges schools face and the needs of teachers as school staffs seek to learn from data and use it effectively to improve student learning.” (Mason, 2003, p. 1).

In New Zealand, Stewart (2005) urges principals to form PLCs – “a professional development programme for school principals who choose to work in collaboration with a group of trusted colleagues” (Stewart, 2005, p. 1).

Stodolsky et al. (2006) compared the current realities in Jewish schools and their “research suggests the need for a sustained effort to make Jewish schools better places for teacher learning and growth through the development of Professional Learning Communities” (Stodolosky, Dorph, & Nemser, 2006, p. 103). In response to average scores by German students of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, Rolff (2003) recommends PLCs as the method to examine PISA feedback and attempt to interpret it. “PLCs are considered in the North American discussion to be the most effective institution for school development with a view to improving student achievement.” (Rolff, 2003, p. 29).

Several authors are encouraging Science teachers to adopt the PLC model as the method for improving student learning. Crippen (2004) encourages science teachers to collaborate over the use of curriculum carts suggesting that “if teachers feel a sense of community and experience relationships with their [science] colleagues whom they can comfortably try new methodologies in the classroom, change is more likely to occur.” (Crippen, Archambault, Ford, & Levitt, 2004, p. 327). Lumpe (2007) encourages science teachers to “foster PLCs” and “stop facilitating one-shot workshops” by “work[ing] with funding agencies to reconfigure request-for-proposal guidelines” (Lumpe, 2007, p. 127).
Link to Sustainability

The essential question, not just in the literature but in this study, is “Are Professional Learning Communities sustainable?” While the sustainability of the Professional Learning Community initiative in Dovington is left to later chapters, several noted authors have already weighed in on the subject.

Leonard and Leonard (2001) are reluctant to award the Medal of Sustainability to PLCs just yet. They suggest that “if the reforms currently transforming public education are to be sustained, then … teachers and other educators must learn to work together in ways heretofore considered to be discretionary and, consequently, largely a matter of personal and professional preference. [But,] collaborative practice remains an erratic and elusive enterprise that is fraught with uncertainty. The literature and the authors’ own research [suggest] that the wide-scale establishment and nurturance of so-called professional learning communities may continue to evade realization. A fundamental problem may be a lack of evidence that there is strong and manifested valuing of teacher collaborative practice as an integral component of schools as morally bound communities” (P. E. Leonard & Leonard, 2001, p. 283).

Others disagree. In their recently published literature review of the concept of Professional Learning Communities, Stoll, et al. (2006) conclude that “developing PLCs appears to hold considerable promise for capacity building for sustainable improvement. As such, it has become a ‘hot topic’ in many countries.” (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006, p. 221). Because they are unable to point to specific research that supports that conclusion, their weak reference to the “promise” of PLCs undermines the force of their conclusion. The Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning
(2003) includes their conclusion in the title of their literature review: *Sustaining School Improvement: Professional Learning Community*. McREL clearly states that “in schools that successfully sustain improvement, time, teams and other support structures that support shared practice and inquiry are essential.” (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2003, p. 2).

The Annenburg Institute of School Reform (2004) offers their conclusions regarding sustainability in the form of a warning about the stumbling blocks to effective PLCs. “District level leaders were aware that the PLCs were emerging in their schools but lacked a clear understanding of how they could emerge in the work or provide the system-level supports necessary to sustain learning communities” (Annenburg Institute for School Reform, 2004, pp. 5-6). The message here is clear – PLCs that lack strong administrative support are doomed to fail.

Michael Fullan (2006) offers perhaps the most positive and encouraging conclusion about the sustainability of PLCs. “Professional Learning Communities are in fact about establishing lasting new collaborative cultures. Collaborative cultures are ones that focus on building the capacity for continuous improvement and are intended to be a new way of working and learning. They are meant to be *enduring* capacities, not just another program innovation” (Fullan, 2006, p. 13). Fullan’s hope aside, there appears to be little current empirical evidence that PLCs are any more sustainable than all the other initiatives that have come and gone in the hope that they would provide lasting improvement in student learning.
“Few schools operate democratically. Their governance is more akin to a dictatorship than to a New England town meeting” (Barth, 2001a, p. 657). Traditional, hierarchical leadership remains the rule rather than the exception in education today. Heck and Hallinger (1999) believe that this tendency is also reflected in research. “The preoccupation with documenting if principals make a difference has subtly reinforced the assumption that school leadership is synonymous with the principal. Scholars have, therefore, largely ignored other sources of leadership within the school” (p. 141). Several authors (Elmore, 2000; Gronn, 2002; A. Harris, 2005a, 2005b; Spillane, 2006) agree and offer the theoretical concept of distributed leadership as an alternative to the conventional top-down model of school leadership.

**Defining Distributed Leadership**

Bennett et al. (2003) conducted a review of the literature up to that date on behalf of the National College for School Leadership in England. They acknowledge that “the concept of distributed leadership has a variety of meanings…but it is possible to identify elements that suggest what may be distinctive about the concept” (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003, pp. 6-7). The three elements they offer are that distributed leadership:

- Highlights leadership as an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals;
- Suggests openness of the boundaries of leadership; and
- Entails the view that varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few (p. 7).
Spillane (2006) provides the following definition and description of the concept of distributed leadership:

A distributed perspective is first and foremost about leadership practice. This practice is framed in a very particular way, as a product of joint interactions between leaders, followers and aspects of their situation such as tools and routines. This distributed view of leadership shifts the focus from school principals…and other formal and informal leaders to the web of leaders, followers, and their situations that gives form to leadership practice. (p. 4)

Expanding on this definition, Spillane (2006) builds an exciting new framework for considering the practice of distributed leadership. He argues that there are two aspects of distributed leadership: the leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect. The leader-plus aspect acknowledges the existence of multiple leaders within a school or schools district. While the leader-plus aspect allows for the concept of leadership distributed between or among multiple administrators (Gronn & Hamilton, 2004; Grubb & Flessa, 2006), most research focuses on distributing leadership among administrators and teachers. In Spillane’s (2006) practice aspect of his distributed leadership framework, he stresses that “the critical issue is not whether leadership is distributed but how leadership is distributed. In this way, a distributive perspective presses us to investigate how leadership practice is stretched over two or more leaders” (p. 15).

Gronn (2002) offers two possible “definitions” of the term: numerical or holistic. From a numerical or additive point of view, distributed leadership refers to the collective leadership behavior of some, many or all members of an organization. From a holistic
point of view, the unit of analysis of distributed leadership is “concertive” action, rather than aggregated behavior. In this viewpoint, distributed leadership follows three main patterns: spontaneous collaboration; interpersonal relationships that come from close working relationships among colleagues; and purposeful structures built by the school to distribute responsibility among many (Gronn, 2002, pp. 654-656).

Gronn’s (2002) “meaning” of distributed leadership offers much promise as a framework to study the origins and impacts of distributed leadership but little in the way of true definition of the term. However, Gronn (2000) offers a simpler, more concrete definition – distributed leadership implies a different power relationship where the distinctions between followers and leaders tend to blur. This definition is similar to Spillane’s (2006) concept of leadership practice “stretched” over two or more leaders. Actually one might combine these two experts’ definitions into one – distributed leadership implies a power relationship where distinctions between followers and leaders tend to blur and responsibility for student achievement is stretched among several educators in a school or school district.

A “Distributed” View of Distributed Leadership Frameworks

Because many leading researchers offer differing definitions of the concept, it is likely that there are several diverse structures in the literature that seek to frame the issue of distributed leadership. Here several key structures are reviewed.

Gronn’s Taxonomy

Grounding much of his work in the concept of activity theory, Gronn (2002) offers a two-dimensional taxonomy to categorize instances where leadership is distributed. The horizontal dimension is divided into two parts based on whether the
individuals are working in close physical proximity (co-performed work) or are dispersed across a work-site or over a number of sites and communicate by technology (collectively performed work). The vertical dimension of this two dimensional taxonomy is the three main patterns of distributed leadership: spontaneous collaboration; emergent interpersonal relationships that form as a result of collaboration; and institutionalized attempts to formally distribute leadership among many individuals.

Spontaneous collaboration takes place in what Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004) calls “the social and situational contexts of the school” (p. 6). Gronn (2002) defines this type of distributed leadership as “when groupings of individuals with differing skills and knowledge capacities … coalesce to pool their expertise and regularize their conduct for duration of the task, and then disband” (p. 657). These temporary groupings offer little opportunity to institutionalize the concept of distributed leadership.

In the second pattern, emergent interpersonal relationships, two or more people develop an intuitive understanding over time and come to rely on one another as a team. Leadership, Gronn (2002) maintains, “is manifest in the shared role space encompassed by their relationship” (p. 657). Shared roles emerge when members rely on intuitive mutual understanding moving toward becoming a joint working unit with an implicit framework of understanding. Gronn likens this relationship to that of a successful marriage.

Gronn’s third form of concertive distributed leadership lies in the formal structures created by schools to foster or promote distributed leadership. The most common instance of this structure occurs in the formation of committees. Oftentimes,
districts develop committees consisting of a wide variety of individuals with a common expertise or interest. Other specific examples of this form of distributed leadership will be discussed later in this paper.

Gronn uses his taxonomy of distributed leadership to classify 21 mostly descriptive accounts of joint leadership. He provides no substantial theoretical basis for the classification scheme he offers, leaving us, instead to believe that the purpose of this taxonomy is “essentially descriptive” (Timperley, 2005, p. 397).

A Fluid Framework

Bennett et al. (2003) believe that distributed leadership should be “seen as an analytical orientation to leadership, which leaves open … choices and priorities to be made concerning its operation.” This situational perspective results in “varying tangible types and forms of distributed leadership” (p. 8). They offer several salient features of distributed leadership garnered from their own review of the literature.

Control and autonomy is identified as a major variable in the discussion of how distributed leadership is defined. Specifically the amount of control and autonomy that is distributed is dependent on the organizational context. Some goals (improved student performance, perhaps) are seen as non-negotiable so while the group may not have autonomy when setting goals, they may have control and autonomy as to how the goal is achieved.

The social and cultural context in which the work is being performed also represents a major variable impacting how and if leadership is to be distributed. The context can act in a positive way, creating and sustaining the conditions in which distributed leadership can flourish, or it can have the opposite effect. For example, a
school where isolation has been the social norm may find it difficult to encourage participation. Also, schools where a culture of distrust exists among teachers and administrators may also find it difficult to implement this structure.

Another consideration is the source of the change toward distributed leadership. Bennett et al. (2003) suggest that the source is either coming from outside the organization; from the bottom-up; or from the top-down. While they contend that one is not necessarily more conducive to the implementation of distributed leadership than the other, the source of the change is, nonetheless, significant. In the case where distributed leadership is being brought in from outside the organization, a structural re-organization may result. They specifically suggest that top-down implementation of the concept from a charismatic leader is not necessarily a contradiction. “Indeed, the view of distributed leadership as concerted action through relationships allows for strong partners in relationships which at the same time entail power disparities between them” (p. 9).

Finally, while Gronn (2002) believes that the three dimensions of distributed leadership (spontaneous collaboration; emergent interpersonal relationships that form as a result of collaboration; and institutionalized attempts to formally distribute leadership among many individuals) are three separate, isolated factors, Bennett et al. (2003) suggests that true distributed leadership is more fluid, “resting on expertise rather than position, exercised through changing adhoc groups created on the basis of immediate and relevant expertise” (p. 9). This fluid leadership requires a climate of trust and mutual support and will result in a “blurring of the distinction between ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’” (p. 10).
Spillane’s (2006) recently published work provides educators with easier access to the complexities of distributed leadership theory. Spillane offers a two-part framework on distributed leadership: the leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect. He presents this two-part framework in acknowledgement that too much attention has been paid on what distributed leadership is and not enough on how it happens.

In describing the leader-plus aspect, Spillane suggests that this area offers the answers to four essential questions:

- Who takes responsibility for leadership work?
- How are these responsibilities arranged?
- How do these arrangements come to pass?
- How do individuals get constructed as influential leaders? (Spillane, 2006, p. 31).

In response to his first question, Spillane acknowledges that leadership is distributed among those in both formal leadership positions and teachers not in formal leadership positions (p. 33). Distribution of leadership among teachers is dependent upon a number of different variables including leadership function, subject matter, school type, school size and the stage of implementation that the distributed leadership initiative is in.

In terms of options for determining who will be responsible for what in a distributed leadership environment, Spillane offers that participants either decide to divide the responsibilities (division of labor), perform the responsibilities together (collaborate) or perform them in parallel (duplication). In describing the collaborative portion of the distributed leadership model, Spillane relies heavily on the work of Gronn
In determining which of these options is chosen (Spillane’s third question), Spillane suggests it either happens by design (creating job descriptions, for example), by default (stepping in to overcome someone’s perceived deficiencies) or through crisis (which Spillane likens to Gronn’s (2002) “spontaneous collaboration” described earlier). Perhaps most important among Spillane’s four questions is the issue of what makes an influential leader. Here Spillane calls on the results of his earlier research (Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003) that suggests that teachers consider another teacher influential based on their individual assessments of the potential leader in terms of their human capital (a person’s knowledge skills or expertise), cultural capital (a person’s way of being or doing), social capital (a person’s social network or connection) and economic capital (a person’s access to material resources) (Spillane et al., 2003, pp. 3-4).

Available empirical research

While Spillane et al. (2004) and Gronn (2002) offer significant insight into the theoretical aspect of distributed leadership, what type of empirical evidence do they offer to support those theories? Gronn (2002) offers none. Spillane (2006) intersperses evidence from the Distributed Leadership Study – a study conducted by Spillane and colleagues from Northwestern University involving 15 Chicago area K-5 and K-8 schools. Spillane’s study used “mixed methods, including ethnography, structured observations, structured and semi-structured interviews, teacher and principal questionnaires, social network surveys and videos of leadership activities in schools.” Still, he clearly defines his work as a “theory-building study” (Spillane, 2006, p. 15).

Many noteworthy researchers acknowledge the paucity of empirical research on the topic of distributed leadership. Lashway (2003) calls the research bases for
distributed leadership “embryonic. While there is considerable theory about distributed leadership, we have relatively little empirical knowledge about how, or to what extent, principals actually use it. And evidence that firmly links distributed leadership to student achievement is still far in the future” (p. 3).

Timperley (2005) concedes upfront that “a coherent conceptual base” on the topic of distributed leadership is non-existent, acknowledging that “the term means different things to different people” (p. 396). Timperley argues that the work of Spillane, Halverson & Diamond (2004) (a precursor to Spillane (2006)), Bennett et al. (2003) and Gronn (2002) are all “essentially descriptive” and “more than a descriptive analysis is needed” (Timperley, 2005, p. 398). This weakness, she argues, can be overcome though a review of “normative” research around the subject of distributed leadership. Timperley’s research took place over four consecutive years and involved observations, interviews and an analysis of student achievement data for each year. Among her findings is the warning that “teacher leaders with high acceptability among their colleagues are not necessarily those with expertise. Conversely, the micro-politics within a school can reduce the acceptability of those with expertise” (p. 418).

Harris (2005a) notes the strong theoretical base provided by Spillane et al. (2004) and Gronn (2002), but suggests the absence of significant empirical data to support their theories. Calling the Spillane et al. (2004) study of 13 elementary schools “vignettes … that offer support for their argument” (A. Harris, 2005a, p. 258), Harris suggests that the empirical case linking distributed leadership and improved student learning draws on three strands: the research that makes a clear association between school culture and improvement; the composite lists of the characteristics of the ‘improving school’; and
organizational development research (A. Harris, 2005a, p. 259). Essentially, Harris (2005a) offers “a variety of studies that show clear evidence of the positive effect of distributed leadership” from the “teacher leadership literature” in support of her claim. As evidence, she offers the results of the study by Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) that she quotes as concluding that “teacher leadership does have a significant effect on student engagement” (A. Harris, 2005a, p. 259).

However, a direct review of Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) does not support that same conclusion. In fact, in their replication study they found “statistically non-significant effects of teacher leadership on student engagement.” They went on to acknowledge that “advocates of teacher leadership may find these results disappointing… They do not confirm the belief of such advocates, or the implications typically drawn from qualitative studies of teacher leadership” (p. 429).

Harris (2005a) also uses a study by Griffin (1995) to support her contention that the “positive benefits of distributed leadership are clearly identified within the teacher-leadership literature” (p. 260). Harris (2005a) concludes that “Griffin (1995) found that distributed leadership resulting in positive effects on pedagogy, on school culture and on educational quality” (p. 260).

An independent review of Griffin (1995) uncovers several concerns that could call Harris’ conclusion into question. First, even as Griffin (1995) acknowledges, the small sample size (n=5) might cause “some critics, scholars and practitioners [to] deny the importance, perhaps even the place” of this study (Griffin, 1995, p. 32). More importantly, however, is the fact that the study is about shared decision making, not teacher-leadership, or distributed leadership. The fact that Harris (2005a) feels
compelled to use a 12 year old study of five teachers on shared decision making to support her earlier conclusion that “there is a wide range of empirical evidence that reinforces the importance of distributed leadership” (p. 258) calls that conclusion into question.

An Intuitive View of Distributed Leadership

With most scholars agreeing on neither the definition nor the theoretical framework of distributed leadership, it isn’t surprising that there isn’t a vast wealth of empirical evidence linking distributed leadership to improved student learning. Still, for the purposes of this research, a reasonable definition and theoretical framework must be provided. Since both the theoretical and empirical realms have failed to yield adequate concreteness, we will instead turn our view to the intuitive view of distributed leadership and for that we turn to Richard Elmore.

In his 2000 work *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*, Richard Elmore offers researchers and practicing educators an intuitive view of distributed leadership adequate for use and for further study. Elmore (2000) grounds his view in the theoretical concept of “loose coupling” that suggests that the “technical core” of education, including “detailed decisions about what should be taught, how it should be taught,… and how their learning should be evaluated – resides in individual classrooms, not in the organizations that surround them” (Elmore, 2000, p. 4).

Accepting this view of loose coupling allows a simpler, “de-romanticied” definition of leadership to emerge. “Leadership is the guidance and direction of instructional improvement” (Elmore, 2000, p. 11). This definition, Elmore maintains, rejects the notion that “principals should embody all the traits and skills that remedy all
of the defects of the schools in which they work” (p. 12). Gone too, is the notion that the role of the leader is to exercise “control” over certain functions in the organization. What emerges is an “organized system [where] people typically specialize, or develop particular competencies, that are related to their predispositions, interests, aptitudes, prior knowledge, skills, and specialized roles” (p. 12).

What follows from this logic, then, is Elmore’s (2000) clear, concise though intuitive definition of distributed leadership, namely that “distributed leadership, then, means multiple sources of guidance and direction [of instructional improvement], following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture.” The job of the principal, then, is not to be the school’s “instructional leader,” but to “enhanc[e] the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creat[e] a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, hold the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and hold individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result” (p. 13).

Finally, Elmore (2000) offers five principles that lay the foundation for a model of distributed leadership focused on large-scale improvement:

- The purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of role;
- Instructional improvement requires continuous learning;
- Learning requires modeling;
- The role and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution; and
The exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity (pp. 17-19).

These five principles will provide the framework for presenting the research regarding Teacher Leaders and the role they play in implementing Distributed Leadership theory across a school district.

**Teacher Leadership**

Noted education researcher Alma Harris roots the practice of teacher leadership in the theories of distributed leadership by suggesting that teacher leadership is “the DNA of distributed leadership” (A. Harris, 2005c, p. 203) where the “authority to lead need not be located in the person of the leader but can be ‘dispersed’ within the school between and among people…. This means empowering others to lead” (A. Harris, 2002b, pp. 22-23).

This section of the literature review will summarize the current research around the practice of teacher leadership. The review will begin with a description of the various definitions of teacher leadership and a review of the need for teacher leaders. Then, a summary of what constitutes effective teacher leadership will be presented, following by a review of the various techniques and recommendations for the development and support of teacher leaders. The literature review will continue with an analysis of the obstacles that school leaders face when working to develop teacher leaders. Next, an in-depth review of the current research regarding the effectiveness of teacher leadership will be presented. The review will conclude with a description of the links found in the current literature between teacher leadership and sustainability and teacher leadership and Professional Learning Communities.
Teacher Leadership – A Definition

Much like the other concepts reviewed in this chapter, the concept of teacher leadership has several different definitions in the literature. York-Barr and Duke (2004) agree. “In writing about teacher leadership, many authors readily assert its importance, but usually fail to define it.” (York-Barr, Sommerness, Duke, & Ghere, 2005, p. 260). Lord and Miller (2000) write that “at present, we lack a comprehensive view of what teacher leadership is, how it works, and whether and how well it can be harnessed to reformers’ goals.” (Lord & Miller, 2000, p. 9). This review is designed to respond to all of these questions.

Some authors view teacher leadership through a romantic lens. Charlotte Danielson suggests that teacher leaders “inspire others to join them on a journey without a specific destination” (Danielson, 2006, p. 13), while Barth (2001) uses a nautical metaphor and describes his belief that a school “community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm…. You don’t have to be or to become a principal or a superintendent to influence the course of a vessel – or a school” (Barth, 2001b, p. 48). Crowther and Olsen (1997) see teacher leadership as “an ethical stance that is based on views of both a better world and the power of teaching to shape meaning” (Crowther & Olsen, 1997, p. 12).

Romanticism aside, there are a few practical definitions of teacher leadership that will serve this study well. The first comes from Danielson (2006) who offers that “teacher leadership refers to that set of skills demonstrated by teachers who continue to teach students but also have an influence that extends beyond their own classrooms to others within their own school or elsewhere” (Danielson, 2006, p. 12). Katzenmeyer and
Moller (2001) offer a similar view. “Teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond
the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and
leaders and influence others towards improved educational practice” (Katzenmeyer and
Moller, 2001, p.5). The essential ingredients of these two definitions are practicing
teachers working with other practicing teachers to improve instruction. These two
ingredients (practicing teachers and working to improve instruction) form the basis of the
teacher leadership practice in Dovington as well as the broader form of teacher leadership
being studied here.

The Need for Teacher Leadership

Since the early 1990’s, many noted authors have recognized the need for
developing teacher leadership within schools. This need is driven by one of two main
factors: the need to improve instruction and the need to attract and retain quality
teachers. The practice of teacher leadership satisfies both those needs well.

In 1993, Cooper in Astuto (1993) describes an environment where teacher
leadership is all but non-existent. “The fundamental role of the ‘typical’ teacher and the
usual tasks of teaching have changed little despite the Progressive era, the growth of
comprehensive schools, the union movement in education, the technological revolution
and recent school restructuring efforts. One gets the sense of the nation’s largest
profession, a restless giant, searching for outlets for its creativity and energy” (Astuto,
1993, pp. 7-8). Linda Darling-Hammond (1994) offered a vision of teacher leadership as
being “essential to restructure schools for the twenty-first century” and encouraged
educators to “invent approaches that allow us [teachers] to connect with students and
colleagues in ways that allow us to focus on what individuals as well as groups need.” (Darling-Hammond, 1994, p. 1).

Perhaps inspired by Darling-Hammond’s vision, Hart (1995) was more adamant about the critical need to develop teacher leaders. “Teachers will make or break any serious attempts to reform instruction and curriculum. With their leadership, new techniques and approaches that fundamentally redesign teachers work will be more likely to take hold and persist.” (Hart, 1995, p. 11). Six years later, in a landmark study of teacher leadership, the Institute for Educational Leadership (2001) still talked about teacher leadership in terms of its prospective influence, not its current impact. “The raw potential for teachers to become a serious force in local school policy would appear to be enormous.” (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001, p. 3). “The teachers’ role in school leadership is still limited to what goes on in, or directly affects, the classroom. The expertise and good judgment of classroom teachers in all these matters patently strengthen a school’s capabilities as it should be defined, or in the case of teachers, redefined” (p. 10).

The next year, Alma Harris also talks of teacher leadership in terms of its potential by suggesting that “a fundamental re-conceptualization of leadership is required that equates leadership with the many rather than the few” and recognizing that a “fundamental relationship between teacher leadership and school improvement” exists. (A. Harris, 2002a, p. 15).

A review of the 2006 writings on the subject of teacher leadership offers hope – while some authors continue to discuss teacher leadership in terms of its potential, others write of the positive impact that the practice has had on teaching and learning. Ackerman
and MacKenzie (2006) still see teacher leadership as an untapped source of improvement. “Teacher leadership offers a variety of unseen opportunities for forcing schools out of established frames of reference and toward genuine school reform” (Ackerman & MacKenzie, 2006, p. 69). Duffy, et al (2006) lament the misuse of “legendary teachers who, by force of will, had us on the edge of our seats. However, due to the way that schools typically operate, such mythic teachers are usually focused on their own practice and closeted in their own classrooms” (Duffy, Mattingly, & Randolph, 2006, p. 24).

At the same time, others recognize that the practice of teacher leadership has already filled a need in our schools. Bezzina (2006) recognizes that “teachers as leaders and teachers as supporters of leaders are beginning to play a central role in determining school reform” (Bezzina, 2006, p. 161). But Ackerman and MacKenzie offer the most hope for the current state of the practice of teacher leadership. “The quieter bravery of teacher leaders is reflected in new patterns of relating to peers and deeper understanding of fellow teachers, suggesting that teachers themselves are becoming more at ease with the genuine complexities of leadership” (Ackerman & MacKenzie, 2006, p. 69).

While these and many other authors recognize the need for teacher leadership for improving instruction in our schools, other believe that teacher leadership fills another, more practical, need – the need to attract and retain quality teachers in our schools. Judith Warren Little makes the connection – “it is increasingly implausible that we could improve the performance of schools, attract and retain talented teachers, or make sensible demands upon administrators without promoting leadership in teaching by teachers” (Little, 2000, p. 390). Coyle (1997) agrees arguing that failure to encourage the practice of teacher leadership “will discourage the best and the brightest from entering the field
and remaining in it” (Coyle, 1997, p. 240). Finally, while “our schools are on the verge of losing their teacher leadership infrastructure” due to the retirement of baby-boomers, Howard Carlson (2004) believes that “the next generation, bright and well-educated, independent and willing to challenge existing norms that have been put in place by their predecessors” offer the best chance for the practice of teacher leadership to achieve the potential success that so many authors believe it has (Carlson, 2004, pp. 36-37).

How to Develop and Support Teacher Leaders

The Alabama Best Practices Center (2002) believes that “highly effective principals are successful because they know how to create many highly effective leaders within their schools” (Alabama Best Practices Center, 2004, p. 1). Frost and Durrant (2002) agree. “The nurturing of teachers as leaders is fundamental to effective school improvement” (Frost & Durrant, 2002, p. 157). This section of the literature review will focus on how to nurture and develop teacher leaders within a school.

The first step in developing teacher leaders is to find potential teacher leadership candidates within the school. Knapp et al. (2003) suggest that “principals don’t have enough time to be involved in all the decisions, so [they] have to disaggregate the jobs and fit them where they go. Consequently, every staff person in a school has some form of leadership role. For example… making sure that agendas are organized and the work that needs to be done progresses.” (Knapp et al., 2003, p. 38).

Ackerman and MacKenzie (2006) imply that a principal should look for its best teachers because “teacher leaders derive their authority from their experience [and expertise] in the classroom.” They suggest that teacher leadership is most effective when “teachers lead informally by revealing their classroom practice, sharing their expertise,
asking questions of colleagues and modeling how teachers collaborate on issues of practice” (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006, p. 66). Berry, et al. (2005) advocate “using the expertise of Nationally Board Certified teachers to transform teaching and learning” and support their contention by citing that practice’s effectiveness in their “cutting-edge rural school district” (Berry, Johnson, & Montgomery, 2005, p. 56).

Knapp et al. (2003) warn against overburdening these classroom superstars and reminds us that effective teacher leaders require “considerable support.” They recognize the practical reality that a school’s most effective teachers are sometimes already their most overburdened with the extensive time commitment that truly excellent teachers require. In acknowledgment of this burden, they suggest offering “either extra pay or the provision of additional classroom release time” to teacher leaders.

Following the identification of potential teacher leaders, the next step is to begin the process of developing that potential into a reality. Harris (2002b) sets the context for the process by reminding administrators that “the principle of teacher collaboration is at the core of developing teacher leadership” (A. Harris, 2002b) Simple collaboration, Harris suggests is not enough – developing effective teacher leaders requires “empowering teachers and giving them some ownership of a particular change or development.” (p. 23).

A few key authors acknowledge the leap-of-faith that teacher empowerment requires. “For teacher leadership to be most effective, it has to encompass mutual trust, support and inquiry.” (A. Harris & Mujis, 2003, p. 3). Terry (n.d.) makes the connection to trust most explicit – “trust is the foundation of shared governance, which provides the impetus for teacher leadership” (Terry, n.d., p. 6).
Lambert (2005) suggests that building teacher leaders has a cultural and practical side in her six critical factors to build high leadership capacity in schools:

1. Core values must focus on school priorities.
2. As teacher leadership grows, principals must let go of some authority and responsibility.
3. Educators must define themselves as learners, teachers and leaders.
4. We must invest in each other’s learning.
5. The first tenet on leadership capacity is broad-based participation.
6. We must provide professional time and development. (Lambert, 2005, p. 40).

Steel and Craig (2006) offer six specific recommendations for how school leaders can support and facilitate the growth of teacher leaders by: showing confidence in teachers’ professional judgment; listening to teachers’ input; validating and recognizing contributions from all levels of a school; encouraging teacher leaders via positive feedback; supporting professional development; and working to reduce teacher isolation (Steel & Craig, 2006, pp. 678-679).

In summary, these authors suggest that the effective school principal develop effective teacher leaders by establishing a school culture of empowerment, encouragement and joint accountability. None suggest that this process is easy, yet all suggest it is essential. “This balancing act – the ability to set high expectations while building a professional partnership with teachers – is the hallmark of today’s successful principal” (Alabama Best Practices Center, 2004, p. 2).

Principals also play a key role in maintaining and supporting teacher leaders once the practice has made a foot-hold. “The inter-personal skills of the principals makes the
difference in the willingness of teacher leaders to take on these roles. A principal who listens, encourages and advocates for teacher leaders gives them the courage to take on the formidable task of driving innovation within the school.” (Moller, 1999, p. 4).

Acknowledging the central role of principals in the support of teacher leaders, Hart in Astuto (1993) recommends that “training programs for school administrators should refocus the study and teaching of leadership, moving from heroic to interactive models, from principals ‘leading the charge’ to teams sharing the burden” (Astuto, 1993, p. 77).

Support and encouragement for teacher leaders also comes from external sources. As early as 1987, Lieberman explored the role of universities in the creation and support of teacher leaders (Lieberman, 1987, pp. 400-401). Valli et al. (2006) describe the creation of a new Masters’ degree program in teacher leadership at the University of Maryland that models “a culture of inquiry in program design and publicly engages in classroom inquiry and action-research” (Valli et al., 2006, pp. 97-98). For practicing teacher leaders, the Teacher Leadership Network has created an on-line support program where teacher leaders from across the US “have the opportunity to learn what others in their profession are doing and to take ideas that have proven successful back to their own schools” (Teacher Leadership Network, 2006).

**Obstacles to Effective Teacher Leadership**

In spite of the myriad of research in support of the practice of teacher leadership and the availability of support to schools looking to develop their teacher leadership capacity, there are a number of obstacles that can impede effective implementation. The research identifies four major obstacles: teachers themselves, other teachers, lack of structural support, and an unsupportive culture.
Sato (2005) suggests that many teachers resist the label of leader, describing herself as “struck by how often each teacher talked about not seeing herself as a leader or not wanting to be known as a teacher leader” (Sato, 2005, p. 55). Hellner (2004) believes that “attitude is the vehicle: people have to want to be leaders. They have to want to change. To do this, teachers need an attitude that is predisposed to changing themselves” (Hellner, 2004, p. 10).

Other authors suggest that it is the colleagues of potential teacher leaders who offer obstacles to taking that role. Chrisman (2005) reports that teacher leaders she interviewed “cited personality conflicts with colleagues and perceived resentment from those teachers who were not in leadership positions” as the biggest challenge that new teacher leaders faced. (Chrisman, 2005, p. 18). The IEL (2001) also noted that teacher unions represented a major roadblock to teacher leadership. (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001).

Many teacher leaders reported a lack of supportive structure as a major inhibiting factor behind the lack of teacher leaders. Coyle (1997) believes that “our present structure doesn’t encourage teachers to be leaders” specifically noting that teacher leadership “requires time for teachers to reflect, confer and then act” (Coyle, 1997, pp. 237-238). Sanders (2006), in a qualitative study of 7 teacher leaders, noted several obstacles to teacher leadership including “lack of principal support” as a leading cause of difficulty. (Sanders, 2006).

Finally, some noted authors identify the overall school culture as an obstacle that teacher leaders must overcome. Roland Barth, in an interview with Sparks (2002), observed that “there is a taboo in the culture of many schools against discussing craft
knowledge…. Another problem is that schools place teachers and principals in the cruel position of being competitors for scarce resources and recognition. [As a result] individuals tend to hoard and compete” (Sparks, 2002, p. 1). Wilson (1993) agrees and notes that “teacher leaders perceive that school culture does not reward (and perhaps obstructs) risk-taking, collaboration and role-modelling” (Wilson, 1993, p. 25).

Studies of Teacher Leadership Effectiveness

In spite of the obstacles that teacher-leaders encounter, many studies (both qualitative and quantitative) point to their effectiveness. Others suggest that teacher leadership has not achieved the potential. This section will review the relevant studies in both camps.

Foster (2004) in a qualitative study out of Manitoba, Canada, reports “findings [that] support the growing recognition that competent administrative and teacher leadership contributes to school success” (Foster, 2004, p. 35). Salsberry and Wetig (2004) used their qualitative study of ten clinical instructors to derive several benefits of becoming a teacher leader, including: “more willingness to take instructional risks and experiment with new content and approaches; being intellectually stimulated through exposure to new ideas; having opportunities to conduct research; feel less ‘powerlessness’; and a greater feeling of professionalism” (Salsberry & Wetig, 2004, p. 39).

Patterson and Patterson (2004) conclude from their qualitative analysis that “teacher leaders exert a major improvement on how the dynamics of the school culture evolves” (J. Patterson & Patterson, 2004, p. 75). Finally, a qualitative study by Henning
(2006) of 24 elementary and middle school teacher leaders provided a practical
description of how data is analyzed by teacher leaders (Henning, 2006).

In her critical look at the effectiveness of teacher leaders, Harris (2005c)
acknowledges that “the ‘teacher leadership equals improvement’ equation is difficult to
counter argue – it seems like common sense. Future empirical studies are needed that go
beyond purely descriptive accounts of teacher leadership to look at its effects and impact,
particularly upon student learning” (A. Harris, 2005c, p. 214). While Harris’ conclusions
may be valid, there are several quantitative studies that point to teacher leadership as an
effective practice.

As far back as 1994, a quantitative study by Rinehart and Short showed a “strong
and positive relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction…. To increase job
satisfaction among teachers and administrators, policy makers should develop
management structures that enhance teacher empowerment” (Rinehart & Short, 1994, p.
570). As part of a series of 4 studies using student engagement with school as the
dependent variable, Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) surveyed 1818 teachers and 6490
students. The results of their studies “demonstrated greater effects on student
engagement of principal, as compared with teacher, sources of leadership. The effects of
principal leadership were weak but significant, whereas the effects of teacher leadership
were not significant” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000, p. 415).

There appears to be only one quantitative study linking the practice of teacher
leadership to improved student learning. Patterson and Rolheiser (2004), in a study
conducted in the Edmonton (Alberta, Canada) Catholic School District, observed teachers
and leaders working together on school leadership teams to build collaborative school
cultures. They report an 11.5% improvement from 99-01 in district scores. In 2001, students met or exceeded the provincial mean in 14 of 21 curriculum fields. In 2002, that number increased to 20 of 21 curriculum fields (D. Patterson & Rolheiser, 2004).

Following a thorough review of the quantitative studies of the effectiveness of teacher leaders, Harris’ (2005c) conclusion that “the empirical evidence upon which to base the claim of the highly beneficial effects of teacher leadership remains modest” (A. Harris, 2005c, p. 213) seems almost generous.

**Linking Teacher Leadership and Professional Learning Communities**

There is a substantial body of literature that connects the practices of teacher leadership and Professional Learning Communities. Harris (2003b) believes that “if we are serious about building Professional Learning Communities with and between schools, then we need forms of leadership that support and nourish meaningful collaboration among teachers. This will not be achieved by clinging to models of leadership that, by default rather than by design, delimits the possibilities to lead development work in schools” (A. Harris, 2003b, p. 322).

Lambert (2003) agrees, calling learning communities and high leadership capacity schools “parallel constructs” (Lambert, 2003, p. 426). Harris (2005c) reiterates her belief in the connection stating that Professional Learning Communities “embrace the notion of teacher leadership as it is assumed that teachers will be the catalysts for change and development within a PLC” (A. Harris, 2005c, p. 207). In her step-by-step guide to building a Professional Learning Community, Joyce (2004) instructs “central office folks… to create structures that small teams of teachers” lead by teachers (Joyce, 2004, p. 81). Fullan (2006) also makes the connection – “the spread of Professional Learning
Communities is about the proliferation of leadership. Leadership is not about making clever decisions…. It’s about energizing other people to make good decisions and do better things” (Fullan, 2006, p. 14).

The link between teacher leadership and Professional Learning Communities is also clear to educators across the globe. Based on Australian research into PLCs, Crowther (2001) suggests that “within the community, pedagogical leadership works in parallel with strategic leadership as teacher leaders and administrative leaders develop new roles and relationships within the school” (Crowther, 2001). Finally, an in depth, quantitative study from Australia links the attributes of learning organizations with teacher leadership. “Our results indicate that in high schools operating as learning organizations, teacher leadership include whole staff working together to influence activities within their schools, as well as teacher committees or teams set up especially to provide leadership, and individual teachers providing leadership on an informal basis” (p. 459). Clearly, research and literature from the US, Great Britain and Australia agree that the practices of teacher leadership and Professional Learning Communities are corresponding and parallel constructs whose interplay poses significant opportunity for school improvement.

**Sustainable Change**

This section of the literature review will focus on the concept of sustaining an educational initiative over the long term. The need for sustainability and barriers to sustainability will be outlined. Next, a review to how to achieve and maintain sustainability will be conducted. Then, a brief review of studies involving sustainability will be described. Finally, the analysis will conclude with a summary of how noted
authors have described their beliefs that distributed leadership, teacher leadership and, most importantly, Professional Learning Communities are important items in the quest for sustainability.

The Need for Sustainable Change

“Give a man a fish and he will eat today. Teach a man to fish and he will eat everyday.” Education researcher Mark St. John (2003) uses this old fish proverb to illustrate the challenges that educators face when it comes to sustaining change. He describes an in-depth professional development effort to teach a village to fish, including additional funding to purchase boats, tackle and bait. They [the professional developers] left the village with a small group of ardent fishing advocates well-trained to fish. When they returned to the village three years later, no one was fishing. When asked what happened, the villagers explained that “over time it kind of fell apart. Some of the key people, the best veteran fisherman, retired. And there were no people or time or money to train others how to fish. For a while a few wily veterans would still fish, but we fished out the easy grounds and it was much harder to fish farther a field. And the species of fish changes so that we weren’t as good catching them. And the rewards and incentives were simply not there. It takes a lot of work and effort to fish! And while it is a noble endeavor, we just couldn’t get enough people committed to keep the whole thing going. Plus, for years, this village was happy with eating cheeseburgers. We don’t think the villagers ever really got to like fish very much. They liked and trusted cheeseburgers, even though there’s a lot of scientific evidence that fish is better for them. So, in truth, the community never really bought into the fish-thing” (St. John, 2003).
Fullan (2000) pulls us away from our fictitious village back to the realities of school – but essentially tells us the same thing. “Successful change only occurs in a small number of schools. In terms of the change process, there has been strong adoption and implementation, but not strong institutionalization” (Fullan, 2000, p. 581). Buffam and Hinman (2006) agrees – “as years wear on, passion and purpose are, all too often, replaced by complacency and cynicism.” (Buffum & Hinman, 2006, p. 16). Albeit less poetic, Giles and Hargreaves (2005) state their concern directly and succinctly. “Secondary schooling with its age-graded, subject-based curriculum and lesson-by-lesson schedule has proved remarkably resistant to the influence of successive reform movements” (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, pp. 124-125). Like St. John’s fishing village, many reforms simply fade away, overcome by the inertia of the status quo.

Other times, reforms lack sustainability because of the process of change that brought those reforms about. The Alabama Best Practices Center reminds us that “forceful leadership may produce compliance, but it rarely breeds understanding and ownership.” (Alabama Best Practices Center, 2004, p. 2). The challenges of sustainability due to the forcefulness of the leader are not limited to the educational community. In his New York Times Bestseller Good to Great, Jim Collins notes that “charismatic, commanding figures might be able to transform organizations in the short-term, but that success is often so closely tied to the leader that the organization sputters once he or she leaves.” Sustainable organizations, Collins says, needs what he calls “Level 5 Leadership” – “self-effacing leaders inclined to share power and decision-making” and “people driven by organizational, rather than personal success.” (Collins, 2001).
Barriers to Sustainability

Several noted authors are direct in their analysis of the barriers to sustainability in schools. Fullan (2000) specifically remarked that “sustained change is not possible in the absence of: internal school development of an initiative; actively connecting the school to the outside; and becoming actively nurtured by external infrastructure.” In describing his last point, Fullan acknowledges the importance of external accountability mandates, noting that “greater energy for reform is generated in a system of integrated pressure and support in which capacity and accountability are both increased.” (Fullan, 2000, p. 584). While NCLB clearly applies significant “pressure,” the level of “support” it provides is debatable.

Based on their study of the concept of sustainability, Giles and Hargreaves (2006) describe three factors that contribute to the weak record of sustainability of innovative schools over time: (1) they tend to be perceived by fellow professionals as being unlike “real schools”; (2) innovative schools seem to possess a predictable, evolutionary life span of creativity and experimentation; and (3) changes in the external context. (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 125). They contend that the current standardized reform movement fits clearly into category 3 and is responsible for imperiling the sustainability of change efforts.

Finally, Brown and Spangler (2006) suggest that a significant barrier to sustainability comes from a lack of proper foundation that they feel needs to be laid before change can be implemented. “Typically, it takes at least four or five years for a change to become fully institutionalized and part of the systems’ culture. School leaders
are wise to spend considerable time at the beginning of a reform initiative building an infrastructure that supports change over the long-term.” (Brown & Spangler, 2006, p. 18).

With these barriers and challenges in mind, we can now turn our attention to describing how the literature suggests that sustainability can be achieved.

Achieving Sustainability

Larry Cuban (2003) begins the discussion of how to achieve sustainability with a reminder that “little research has been done on sustainability.” Yet, he offers three generic (independent of context) strategies to promote sustainability: “maintain stability in leadership; maintain funding; and create structural support of the initiative.” (Cuban, 2001, p. 4). In effect, Cuban is proposing a circular argument -- sustainability can be achieved if one avoids the pitfalls that can lead to change. Others offer more specific suggestions for educational leaders interested in sustaining a change.

In fact, Hargreaves (2005) acknowledges that sustainability must be achieved in spite of changes in leadership. He defines sustainable leadership as “not the leadership of heroes, the leadership of charismatic individuals, the leadership that comes and goes, that rises and falls. It is leadership that spreads over people over long periods of time, and spreads from one school, one place, to another, so it benefits many schools and many children, not just a few schools that are bright exceptions in odd or eccentric places” (Hargreaves, 2005, p. 17). Thomas (2005) offers five keys to successful and sustained leadership: “principles, passion, people, performance and perserverance” (Thomas, 2005, p. 8), while Goldberg (2006) suggests that sustainability is a matter of limiting improvements to a few high priorities. “Establish priorities, announce them, publicize them, conduct staff development around them, include them on the board agenda two or
three times a year and give them pride in position when budget decisions are made” (Goldberg, 2006, p. 34).

Noted author Michael Fullan has written extensively on the subject of sustainability. In 2002 and 2003, Fullan offered the reader four conditions that support sustainability of reforms: improving the social and moral environment of the school/district; creating schools in which teachers and principals learn on the job in a learning community; developing leaders at many levels, not depending on charismatic leaders but fostering a pipeline of leaders at all levels, including teacher-leaders; and improving the working condition of teachers in order to attract and retain a high quality workforce. (Fullan, 2002, 2003)

In 2005, Fullan expanded his writing on the subject of sustainability to include the concepts of accountability and capacity-building. Accountability, Fullan (2005) suggests, “involves targets, inspections, or other forms of monitoring” while capacity-building “consists of developments that increase the collective power in the school in terms of new knowledge and competencies, increased motivation to engage in improvement actions, and additional resources.” (Fullan, 2005, p. 175). He differentiates between the two concepts by concluding that “when accountability pressures dominate, the gains will be only short-term. The key to sustainability is capacity-building.” (p. 177).

Other authors link the concept of sustainability to an on-going investment in professional development. “Sustainable improvement requires investment in building long-term capacity for improvement, such as the development of teachers’ skills which will stay with them forever, long after the project money is gone.” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, p. 694). Donaldson, etal. (2004) describe the Maine School Leadership Network
where “a community of learners network to support the efforts of principals and teacher-leaders to develop effective and sustainable leadership.” Their report concludes that the relationship among Maine’s school leaders “to support continued learning for improving practice” is what sustains improvement in the state. (Donaldson, Bowe, Mackenzie, & Marnik, 2004, p. 544).

To others, building collegial relationships is the key to attaining sustainability. De Lima (2002) argues that “while there is widespread agreement on the idea of collegiality as an instrument for promoting and sustaining change, scholars are much less clear on the characteristics that teachers’ professional communities must possess in order to promote and sustain such change. (De Lima, 2001, p. 97). But “getting along” does not necessarily mean “going along.” De Lima argues that “cognitive conflict in a work environment is not necessarily the enemy of effective, innovative and change-oriented group and organizational functioning in teaching. Rather, it may be its most important ally.” (p. 118).

In an interview with O’Neil (1995), Larry Cuban offers his position that common beliefs help build sustainability. He advocates using a learning process to make changes. A learning process, he describes, is “a process that occurs over time whereby people’s beliefs, ways of seeing the world, and ultimately their skills and capabilities change. It always occurs over time and it’s always connected to your domain of taking action.” (O’Neill & Cuban, 2000, p. 23).

In the end, it’s Andy Hargreaves (2004, 2005) who offers the best summary of how to develop sustained change in schools. He articulates seven principles that define sustainable leadership, including:
• Sustainable leadership matters;
• Sustainable leadership plans for succession;
• Sustainable leadership distributes leadership throughout the schools’ professional community so others can carry the torch when the principal is gone;
• Sustainable leadership is socially just;
• Sustainable leadership is resourceful by providing intrinsic and extrinsic incentives that attract and retain the best school leaders;
• Sustainable leadership promotes diversity; and
• Sustainable leadership is activist. (Hargreaves, 2005, pp. 10-11).

Maintaining Sustainability

Although, at first, the words maintaining and sustainability may appear to be a tautology, many authors agree that new ideas require on-going attention in order to sustain the initiative. Organizations concerned with issues of sustainability must address issues around capacity, rewards and benefits, maintaining active beliefs, maintaining a focused culture, and establishing personnel policies and expectations designed to reduce turnover among key staff.

Harris and Mujis (2002) suggest that sustainability is dependent on a school district’s commitment to apply additional resources, be they fiscal or cerebral, to the initiative in need of being sustained. “Sustainability depends on the school’s internal capacity to maintain and support developmental work” (A. Harris & Mujis, 2003, p. 39). They imply that sustainability is a self-fulfilling prophecy – projects that deserve sustaining must be allotted the necessary resources required to be sustained.
Farmer (1999) makes a specific suggestion about where these additional resources should be focused and directed. His case study chronicled the paradigm shift that transformed King’s College from a teaching-centered to a learning-centered culture. “The ability to sustain change at King’s College is due primarily to designing a faculty reward system that mixes intrinsic and extrinsic incentives” (Farmer, 1999, p. 89). Some would argue, however, that an initiative that still requires incentives to maintain it, is not an initiative in the institutionalized stage of change.

A more permanent change is instilled into the core of the organization when that organization envelopes the change as part of its belief system. “Ensuring sustainability also requires revisiting beliefs and values on an on-going basis, while recognizing that newcomers will have different perspectives to offer to it” (Riley & Stoll, 2004, p. 36). Riley and Stoll not only address the issue of inculcating an initiative into an organization’s belief system, they suggest that an initiative, if it is to be truly sustained, must mold to the beliefs of the organization as other change naturally occurs. To accommodate that need for flexibility, Hargreaves (2005) suggests applying initiatives to the broader beliefs that can naturally endure over time. “Sustainable leadership is therefore fundamentally not just about keeping things going, but also about social justice, about your impact on other people, who your actions affect over time. (Hargreaves, 2005, p. 18).

While some authors suggest that linking an initiative to an enduring belief of the organization will assure its sustainability, others recommend linking an initiative to another enduring force within schools – its culture. Belinda Harris (2005) highlights the “importance of trust, autonomy and ‘no-blame’ innovation in securing and sustaining

Finally, many noted authors link the concept of sustainability with the need to minimize turnover among key staff members. Goldberg (2006) places the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the leader. “Sustained leadership that maintains effective progress means the school leader values the programs and is willing to support them [stay in the job] for years to come” (Goldberg, 2006, p. 33). Most agree that maintaining sustainability requires consistency in leadership, Dearborn (2002) contends that “our traditional deployment of leadership development and communication skills training fails to produce sustainable change in behaviors. [She] supports [Daniel] Goldman’s initiatives to invest in the emotional intelligence of leaders with individualized plans to impact the climate and performance of an organization.” (Dearborn, 2002, p. 523).

A natural outcropping of the work of Hargreaves and others that suggests that “sustainable leadership involves (among other things) staying the course,” Lucas (2006) argues in favor of “sabbaticals as a means of extending the working life of school leaders to the maximum.” (Lucas, 2006, p. 17). Finally, in recognition that leadership turnover is, perhaps, inevitable, increasing attention is being paid to the potential of leadership succession planning as an effective way to help promote sustainability. (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

The key issues to achieving sustainability appear to be, at first, oxymoronic – rigidity and flexibility. Rigidity and focus are required to maintain the initiative in the hearts and minds of the school and to build infrastructure that will support the initiative
over the long-haul. Flexibility is necessary to accommodate for natural changes that will occur over time and to mold the initiative in response to those new issues. Maintaining this delicate balance between focus and flexibility requires the artful exercise of leadership.

Current Research

Current research on the subject of sustainability remains sparse. There are, however, plenty of studies that support the contention that change initiatives are frequently unsustained. For example, Chai and Merry (2006) wrote a qualitative case study on the process that one community used to move toward becoming a knowledge-based community (KBC). Their study found that while “teaching in a KBC is seen [by the teachers] as having benefits for students,…the sustainability of the teachers’ change is questionable” (Chai & Merry, 2006, p. 145). Specifically, their study found that only 5 out of the 30 participants have tried some form of further participation in KBC teaching.

Still, some research in the specific area of sustainability does exist. Johnson et al. (1990) offered a qualitative description of the change process used by the Pittsburg School District in the 1980’s. They identified “shared decision making” as the critical factor involved in building and sustaining change in their school district. (Johnston, Bickel, & Wallace, 1990, p. 47).

Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) offer the most comprehensive and wide-ranging study into the subject of sustainability. Their study found, through the eyes of more than 200 teachers and administrators, that a key force leading to meaningful, long-term change is leadership sustainability. They concluded that “most school leadership practices create
temporary, localized flurries of change but little lasting or widespread improvement” (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006).

On the international front, Sahlberg (2007) offers Finland as a model for sustainable leadership at a national level. “Finland seems particularly successful in implementing and maintaining the seven key policies that constitute sustainable educational leadership by Hargreaves and Fink (2006)” (Sahlberg, 2007, p. 166). They conclude that “Finnish education policies intended to raise student achievement have been built upon ideas of sustainable leadership that place strong emphasis on teaching and learning, intelligent accountability, encouraging schools to craft optimal learning environments and implement educational content that helps their students reach the general goals of schooling.” (p. 147).

**Linking Sustainability and Distributed/Teacher Leadership**

Many authors are direct in linking the goal of sustaining change with the theories of distributed leadership and the practices of teacher leadership. Knapp et al. (2003) state the connection clearly and directly. “The sustainability of learning improvement is predicated on shared ownership and leadership” (Knapp et al., 2003, p. 48).

In terms of sustainability and the practice of teacher leadership, many authors believe the link is clear and substantial. Chrisman (2005) writes that “when asked which changes contributed to sustained increases in student achievement, teachers at the successful schools cited… teacher-initiated changes in teaching and learning” (Chrisman, 2005, p. 17). Alma Harris (2002b) agrees. “If sustained school improvement is to be achieved, teacher partnerships and other forms of collaboration should be encouraged” (A. Harris, 2002b, p. 23). McREL (2003) believes that the strategy that is “most likely to
sustain improvement [is when] most teachers act as leaders in some area and are routinely involved in school-wide decision-making processes” (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2003, p. 3). In TERC’s First Virtual Conference on Sustainability, held on-line between May 14-23, 2001, Panelist Linda Gregg opined that “building leadership capacity is the foundation of sustainability” (Gregg).

Why is the educational community so clear in establishing the links between teacher leadership and sustainability? Danielson (2006) suggests that it is because “the concept of teacher leadership recognizes that teachers’ tenure in a school is normally longer than that of the administrator who are nominally in charge (20 to 30 years for many teachers, as compared with the typical 3 to 5 years for a principal” (Danielson, 2006, p. 36). On the other hand, Patterson and Patterson (2004) believe the link between teacher leadership and sustainability is because teacher leaders: “stay focused on what matters most; create a climate of caring and support; and maintain hope in the face of adversity” (J. Patterson & Patterson, 2004, pp. 76-77). Regardless of the reason, the research clearly supports a direct and positive relationship between the practice of teacher leadership and the concept of sustainability.

**Linking Sustainability and Professional Learning Communities**

Several well-known authors have also weighed in on the link between Professional Learning Communities and sustainability. Michael Schmoker (2004) urges school districts to “break free from our addiction to strategic planning and large-scale reform” (Schmoker, 2004, p. 424) and sees Professional Learning Communities as a “powerful alternative to conventional improvement efforts” (p. 430).
Giles and Hargreaves (2006) offer that Professional Learning Communities “seem to have the capacity to offset two of the three change forces that threaten the sustainability of innovative efforts. They can learn how to halt the evolutionary attrition of change by renewing their teacher cultures, distributing leadership, and planning for leadership succession.” (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 152). But it is Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) that offers the clearest and most direct link between Professional Learning Communities and sustainability. “Sustainability of educational improvement, in its fullest sense, is unlikely to occur without a theory and a strategy that is more historically and politically informed. [Among] the implications of the ‘Change over Time?’ study for securing truly sustainable improvement for all students that matters, spreads and lasts [are] turning schools into more activist professional learning communities” (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006, p. 35).

But it’s not just the creation of the PLC that researchers believe will achieve sustainability – it’s the content of the work that the PLC will perform. Schmoker (2002) believes that “there is substantial evidence that results are inevitably sustainable when teachers, working in teams:

- Focus substantially on assessed standards;
- Review simple, readily available achievement data to set a limited number of measurable achievement goals; and
- Work regularly and collectively to design, adapt, and assess instructional strategies targeted directly at specific standards. (Schmoker, 2002, pp. 1-2).

However, not all educational authors are convinced. In their comprehensive review of the literature on the subject of Professional Learning Communities, Stoll et al.
(2006) offer this caution. “This literature review demonstrates that PLC’s appear to be worth the considerable effort put in to create and develop them, although there is still much more to learn about sustainability” (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 247). Giles and Hargreaves (2006) appear to agree. “The Professional Learning Community model may provide a more robust resistance to conventional processes of the attrition of change and of surrounding change focus…. It also shows signs of defaulting to conventional patterns of schooling in the face of standardized reform” (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 124).

Which brings this literature review back full circle – back to the article that started this researcher on the road that this study documents – the article “What is a Professional Learning Community?” by Richard DuFour published in the May 2004 edition of *Educational Leadership*. DuFour (2004), sensing a degradation in the definition and meaning of the term Professional Learning Community, wrote an article to refocus educators on the three big ideas of PLCs. But in the article, he shared his concern that, unless the concept of Professional Learning Communities became more universally defined, it was doomed to succumb to the sustainability virus. “The PLC model has now reached a critical juncture, one well known to those who have witnessed the fate of other well-intentioned school reform efforts. In this all-too-familiar cycle, initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative, followed by inevitable implementation problems, the conclusion that the reform has failed to bring about the desired results, abandonment of the reform, and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative. Another reform movement has come and gone, reinforcing the conventional education wisdom that promises: ‘This too shall pass.’” (Richard DuFour, 2004, p. 6).
Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the current literature on the subjects of Adult Learning Theory, Professional Learning Communities, Distributed Leadership Theory, Teacher Leadership and Sustainable Change. Where applicable links between and among these theories and practices have been documented. Next, Chapter 3 will describe the design of this research study.
CHAPTER THREE

DESIGN OF THE RESEARCH

With a clear understanding of the published research that frames this study, we now turn our attention to the design of the study being conducted at the Dovington Public Schools. This chapter will describe the basic study design and methodology that will be employed to conduct the field research. A description and rationale for the sample of teacher-leaders that will be studied will follow. The chapter will conclude by describing the specific procedures that will be employed to gather the data, analyze the data and report on the data.

Research Questions

The study described in this chapter is designed to answer the following research questions:

- How has the role of teacher-leader changed since the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative?
- What impact has the Professional Learning Community initiative had on Principals’ willingness to distribute leadership responsibilities to teacher-leaders?
- How has the Professional Learning Community initiative strengthened the teacher-leaders’ commitment to working on the district’s school improvement efforts?

Research Methodology

While the No Child Left Behind Act “advocates the use of randomized experiments for developing generalizable knowledge to guide practice,” Firestone and Riehl (2005) “argue that high-quality empirical research can provide guidance about the
nature of educational leadership and how it impacts learning” (Firestone & Riehl, 2005). Merriam (1998) agrees arguing that qualitative research “focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education” (Merriam, 1998).

This dissertation will be an evaluative case study that will evaluate the impact of implementing a Professional Learning Community model on the role of teacher-leaders. This research will involve the researcher as a participant-observer. The case study will be evaluative in nature – involving “description, explanation and judgment” (Merriam, 1998). The study will seek to understand how the role of teacher-leader has traditionally been viewed by teachers and administrators in this suburban Massachusetts school district and what, if any, changes have occurred in that role since PLCs were first implemented. The study will further evaluate the impact that implementing a PLC has had on expanding the number of teachers willing to serve as teacher-leaders in this district and look for signs that the initiative may be sustainable over the long-term.

Each of the types of teacher-leaders studied will be a case: grade/team leaders; high school department heads; and curriculum specialists. The researcher will perform a cross-case analysis, “suggesting generalizations” (Merriam, 1998) that apply to all teacher-leaders in the researched school district. Merriam (1998) endorses this approach suggesting that “the inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings.” This approach is also supported by Miles and Huberman (1994). They suggest that “by looking at a range
of similar and contrasting cases… we can strengthen the precision, validity, and the stability of the findings” (p. 29).

It is important to note the fact that the researcher in this case study holds a significant leadership role in the district being studied and was the originator of the PLC initiative being studied. Merriam (1998) suggests that “in qualitative research where the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, subjectivity and interaction are assumed” (p. 103). Accordingly, the researcher must address potential researcher and participant bias in the study design.

In terms of researcher bias, Merriam (1998) reminds us that the onus is on the researcher, to identify any potential changes in behavior brought about by the relationship with those being observed or interviews or perceived bias of the researcher “and account for them in interpreting the data.” (p. 103). Still, sometimes, there are biases that are “not readily apparent to the researcher” (p. 216). For that reason, the researcher will clearly articulate the reasons why a potential exists for researcher bias in the report.

Participant bias is a potential concern due to the reality that the researcher holds a significant leadership role in the district. Although there is a potential in every qualitative study that participants being interviewed will give the researcher the responses they feel the researcher “wants” to “please” the researcher, the leadership role of the researcher conducting this study increases that potential. The researcher’s leadership role also leads to the concern that participant bias might result from the participant’s perceived need to protect him or herself from negative judgments from an authority figure. These potentials for participant bias will be minimized by purposefully selecting senior, tenured teacher-leaders with a history of open and honest communication with
senior authority figures. Moreover, all principals being interviewed have multi-year employment contracts with the district being studied. Also, the informed consent form provided each participant will assure all participants of the independence of this study from the researcher’s leadership role, and clearly state that any and all information provided the researcher will remain confidential to the purpose of the study.

Finally, Miles and Huberman (1994) offer several salient suggestions to minimize the impact of the researcher’s leadership position on the participants, including asking an “informant… to be attentive to your [the researcher’s] influence on the site and its inhabitants [and] do[ing] some of your interviewing off-site” (p. 266). Following their recommendation, the researcher’s highest-ranking colleague will be enlisted to review the data analysis and offer areas where potential researcher-bias may be present. Finally, all interviews will be conducted at a neutral site, reducing the researcher’s “threat quotient and exoticism” (p. 266).

Sample and Rationale for Sample

The Community

The Dovington Public Schools (a pseudonym) is a PreK-12 school system located within the I495 belt. Dovington is an upper middle class community known for its high quality schools and innovative practices. Dovington is a community with a strong rural culture despite being located on the outskirts of a major metropolitan area. According to the United States Census Bureau, the median income of a Dovington family in 2000 was $84,878 with over 50.8% of the adults holding at least a Bachelor’s degree and another 28.9% with at least two years of college.
The Dovington Public Schools serves approximately 3100 students using four large schools – a 800-student Grade PreK-2 school; a 750 student Grade 3-5 school; a 750-student Middle School (Grades 6-8); and an 800-student comprehensive high school. Dovington offers all incoming Kindergarten students choice of three programs: Traditional, French Immersion or Montessori. Dovington is one of two school systems in Massachusetts that offers French Immersion education from grades K-12 and one of two that offers a public school Montessori program to its students from ages 3 to 10.

The Sample

In terms of this study, the total population from which the sample will be drawn will be all 37 of the teacher-leaders in the Dovington Public Schools. There are four categories of teacher-leaders in Dovington: Curriculum Specialists, Elementary Team Leaders, Middle School Team Leaders and High School Department Leaders, distributed as outlined in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 – Number of Teacher-Leaders by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher-Leader Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Specialists</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Grade Leaders</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Team Leaders</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Department Heads</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Teacher-Leaders</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Dovington, all Elementary and Middle School Team Leaders are full-time teachers who receive a $3000-plus stipend to act as Team Leader. High School
Department Heads receive a similar stipend but teach one less class than their other High School counterparts. Elementary teacher-leaders are primarily responsible for planning and chairing grade-wide meetings and acting as a liaison between building administration and the teachers. Middle School Team Leaders have essentially the same responsibility for their three or four member team. High School Department Heads are organized by traditional departmental structures and also assist the administration in hiring new teachers into the department. They do not have any responsibility for evaluating other teachers in the department. Finally, Curriculum Specialists do not have a formal teaching assignment and are responsible for providing curriculum leadership for their particular curriculum area in their assigned grades.

Table 3.2 describes the average number of years of teaching experience and teacher-leader experience as well as the average level of interaction each teacher-leader has had with Central Office issues and high ranking district administrators.

Table 3.2 – Summary of Teacher-Leader Experience by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Average Total Years Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Average Total Years Teacher-Leader Experience</th>
<th>Average Level of Exposure to Central Office Administrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Specialists</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Grade Leaders</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Team Leaders</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Department Heads</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to develop an assessment of level of exposure, the researcher, based on his observations and experience in Dovington assigned a numerical indicator to reflect
the level of exposure that each teacher-leader has had to Central Office personnel. Each individual teacher leader was assigned a number from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest (little if no exposure) and 5 being the highest (significant exposure). The personnel records of all teacher leaders in Dovington will be reviewed to ascertain the number of years of teaching and teacher-leadership experience. Experience in Dovington as well as other school districts was counted so that an accurate total experience level could be distinguished. Finally, all teacher leaders were grouped according to their category and averages calculated for all four categories.

Gay, et.al. (2006) encourages qualitative researchers to select “good ‘key informants’ who will contribute to the researcher’s understanding” of the phenomenon under study. Qualitative researchers are also reminded to select participants who are “comfortable with the researcher’s presence” (L. R. Gay, G. E. Mills, & P. Airasian, 2006, p. 113). This criterion is crucially important in this study, given the researcher’s leadership position in Dovington Public Schools and the concern that that position may influence the participants’ responses to data-gathering inquiries.

Gay et.al. (2006) also reminds us to recognize that “[t]he researcher relies on experience and insight to select a sample” (L. R. Gay et al., 2006, p. 114). In order to minimize the possibility of bias, it is important to select teacher-leader-participants who are most likely to not be influenced by the researcher’s leadership position. The researcher’s “experience and insight” suggest that teacher-leaders who are higher in seniority and who have extensive experience in dealing with Central Office administrators on a day-to-day basis are more likely to provide unbiased information to the researcher. As the data in Table 2 indicates, teacher-leaders who fall in the
Curriculum Specialist category are most senior (an average seniority of 17.5, the highest among the four categories of teacher-leader) and also have had the most interaction with Central Office administrators (significantly higher than the other three categories of teacher-leaders. Accordingly, teacher-leaders from the Curriculum Specialist category will be sampled from the total population of teacher-leaders.

A purposeful sample of Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders will be interviewed. In order to select this purposeful sample, the researcher will use the maximum variation sampling technique described by Merriam (1998). This process has also been described as “a deliberate hunt for negative instances or variations” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This sampling technique has been selected to assure that all types of Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders in Dovington will be interviewed and their data analyzed. Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders from all three levels (elementary, middle and high) will comprise the purposeful sample. The following Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders have been selected as the sample: District World Language Curriculum Specialist (K-12); Mathematics/Science Curriculum Specialist (K-5); Literacy/Social Studies Curriculum Specialist (PreK-2); and Literacy/Social Studies Curriculum Specialist (6-8).

These four teacher-leaders will provide detailed, in-depth, experiential, first-person information on their roles as teacher-leaders in Dovington as well as what changes, if any, have taken place in their roles since the Professional Learning Community initiative began. In an effort to broaden the researcher’s understanding of the teacher-leader roles in Dovington, it is necessary to cast a broader net and interview other professionals who can provide third-person insight into these roles. Interviewing other Dovington professionals will also allow the researcher to inquire into the roles of other
teacher-leaders in the district, expanding the data acquisition beyond the roles of the four
teacher-leader sample. This expansion will broaden the research and may increase the
accuracy of any conclusions drawn by the researcher regarding the changing roles of
teacher-leaders district-wide. In order to accomplish these goals, several Dovington
administrators will be interviewed by the researcher.

In order to select these administrators, the researcher will utilize a “criterion
sampling technique,” where the researcher selects “all cases that meet some set of criteria
or have some characteristic” (L.R. Gay, G.E. Mills, & P. Airasian, 2006, p. 115). In
selecting administrators to sample, the researcher has established the following criterion:

- Three years experience in Dovington as an administrator;
- Works extensively with teacher-leaders in the day to day performance of
  their duties; and
- Has significant experience interacting with Central Office (to reduce bias
  as explained above).

Using these criteria, all four Principals of Dovington Schools will be interviewed.

Finally, the “intensity sampling” technique will add final members of the sample.
Intensity sampling calls for the researcher to select “participants who permit study of
different levels of the research topic” that allows the researcher to “compare differences
of two or more levels of the topic” (L.R. Gay et al., 2006, p. 115). The formal role of
teacher-leaders is governed by a formal job description, negotiated by the Assistant
Superintendent with the President of the Dovington Teachers’ Association. While
document review of revised job-descriptions will provide some input, interviews with the
principal negotiators will provide the researcher with rich data to analyze during the data
analysis portion of this study. Accordingly, the Assistant Superintendent and Dovington Teachers Association President will become the ninth and tenth members of the sample.

Gay et al. (2006) acknowledges that “there are no hard and fast rules for determining the ‘correct’ number of participants.” They indicate that a size is adequate enough when the sample members “represent the range of potential participants in the setting.” They also warn of “data saturation,” where the researcher “begins to hear the same thoughts, perspectives and responses from most or all of the participants” (L.R. Gay et al., 2006, pp. 114-115). Using these criteria as a measure, the researcher has concluded that a sample size of nine is more than adequate to gather the necessary data with which to answer the research questions.

**Pilot Test**

Among the three data collection methods that the researcher will utilize, it is necessary to evaluate the interview questions prior to their use in actual interviews. Merriam (1998) states the need simply: “pilot interviews are crucial for trying out your [interview] questions. Not only do you get some practice in interviewing, you also quickly learn which questions are confusing and need rewording” [pp. 75-6]. Accordingly, Merriam calls for a “ruthless review of your questions” [p. 79] prior to conducting the real, data-gathering interview.

The review of the interview questions took place at three levels: review by the researcher, peer-review and expert review. Before the final draft of interview questions is presented to others for review, Merriam (1998) suggests that the researcher “ask[s] the questions of yourself, challenging yourself to answer as many questions as minimally as possible. Also, note whether you would feel uncomfortable honestly answering any of
the questions” [p. 79]. This last recommendation is particularly important given the researcher’s role in Dovington. The first review of the interview protocol, therefore, will be done by the researcher and questions that may cause concerns for teachers will be reworded or removed.

The next level of review that the interview protocol will see is a peer review. Here fellow researchers will review the protocol and offer suggestions and improvements based on their experience. The researcher will ask fellow practitioners to review the protocol. Since the reviewers understand the researcher’s role in the Dovington Public Schools, they will be asked to be vigilant to issues, wording or questions that may cause discomfort on the part of the participant or may require more courage to answer than the researcher should expect from the participant.

Finally, the protocol will be reviewed by two experts: one a Professor of Education who teaches doctoral classes in Qualitative research and the other an Adjunct Professor of Education who teaches doctoral classes in Statistics and Design of Quantitative Research. Each expert will critique the protocol using their unique perspective. Prior to submitting the protocol for review, the researcher will remind the expert reviewers of the researcher’s role in Dovington so that they can be alert to questions or situations that may cause teachers to be uncomfortable.

Following the three reviews, the interview protocol will be piloted. Here, the researcher will interview two Dovington teacher-leaders not selected as part of the sample and, following the question, engage both mock-participants in a discussion about the questions asked during the interview. During the discussion, several questions will be asked, including: Did any of the questions make you feel uncomfortable? Were any of
the questions difficult to answer given they were being asked by a senior administrator in
the school district? What other suggestions would you offer to improve the protocol that
will help the researcher answer the research questions?

With the research methodology in place and the interview protocol piloted, the
researcher will then turn his attention to the task of gathering the data.

Data Gathering Procedures

Since this project will use a qualitative research design, qualitative methods will
be employed to collect data. “Qualitative data consists of ‘direct quotations from people
about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge’ obtained through interviews;
‘detailed descriptions of people’s activities, behaviors, actions’ recorded in observations;
and ‘excerpts, quotations, or entire passages’ extracted from various types of documents”

In order to discover the answers to the research questions, qualitative data will be
collected using interviews, field notes and document review. Data from these three major
sources will be triangulated in order to enhance the internal validity of the data analysis
(Merriam, 1998).

Interviews with a sample of teacher-leaders (see the previous section for specifics
about the sample and its selection), the school principals and the Assistant Superintendent
for Curriculum and Instruction will be conducted by the researcher prior to the start of the
Professional Learning Community initiative and after it has been established. Interview
questions will be formed to solicit information designed to answer the research questions.
The researcher expects to employ all four major categories of interview questions
described by Merriam (1998): hypothetical, devil’s advocate, ideal position and
interpretive. The researcher will employ a semi-structured interview methodology that will allow for the insertion of additional questions seeking clarification or expansion of thought, allowing the interviewer to extract the maximum information. Interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed and transcripts analyzed by the researcher using the data analysis process described later in this Chapter.

Researcher observation of the variety of activities comprising the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative in Dovington will comprise the next methodology employed by the researcher to answer the research questions. Merriam (1998) reminds us that “observational data represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview” (p. 94). In some activities being observed, the researcher will be a participant-observer while in others, the researcher will simply observe the event and the interaction among the participants. While Merriam (1998) acknowledges that being a participant-observer is a “schizophrenic activity” she maintains the importance and appropriateness of the method as allowing the researcher to “become capable of understanding the program as an insider while describing the program as an outsider” (p. 102).

Finally, data will be obtained from studying artifacts from the Professional Learning Community initiative as well as other documents that more directly relate to the research questions. While it is not difficult to imagine that the Professional Learning Community initiative will yield documents that can be used to describe and document those efforts, additional documents more directly related to the research question will require “the investigator’s ability to think creatively about the problem under study”
Reviewing and analyzing their content and any changes therein might be a helpful source of information for the researcher.

Utilizing interviews, observation and document review “allows for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated” (Merriam, 1998, p. 111). However, she reminds us, “rarely all three strategies used equally. One or two methods of data collection predominate; the other(s) play a support role in gaining an in-depth understanding of the case” (p. 137). In this case, only time will tell the depth of use of each of the research methods to be employed in this study.

With instruments developed and methods established, the researcher will finally turn his attention to gathering the data necessary to answer the research questions. But, before that can begin, the researcher will secure permission to commence the gathering of data. Permission will be sought from the researcher’s sponsoring institution, the place where research will be conducted and the people from whom information will be solicited. Following the peer review of the interview protocols, all research materials and protocols will be submitted to the researcher’s sponsoring institution for Human Subjects Review. The researcher will seek and obtain permission from the Dovington School Committee to conduct the study in their school district. Finally, each teacher-leader and administrator selected to be interviewed will be invited to participate and given a no-fault opportunity to decline the invitation.

**Document Review**

It is expected that critical data that support and document the implementation of the Professional Learning Community as well as artifact documents that describe, directly and indirectly, the role of teacher-leaders in Dovington will serve as important sources of
information to help answer the research questions. All agenda, presentation outlines, Powerpoint presentations, attendance sheets, workshop artifacts, and teacher feedback sheets will be collected, sorted and filed following each Professional Development Day activity. These documents will assist the researcher in describing the activities involved in Dovington’s Professional Learning Community initiative.

The Dovington Public Schools maintains detailed Job Descriptions for all teacher-leaders in its employ. These job descriptions are adjusted periodically as the role of teacher-leader changes during the normal course of events. Job descriptions are developed by the Dovington administration based on any required changes and then submitted to the Teachers’ Association for comment and ultimate approval. Any changes to the role of teacher-leader during the time when the Professional Learning Community initiative is being undertaken may manifest itself into a modified Job description. These “before” and “after” job descriptions, if any, will serve as an important source of information that may describe the changes the role has seen. In order to collect these documents, the researcher will review district archives and copy all teacher-leader job descriptions. Following the initiative, any job descriptions that have been revised will be collected and filed for future review, coding and analysis.

All hard-copy documents collected will be scanned into a computer file and the file placed on the researcher’s computer. All electronic documents will also be stored in the same manner. In addition, all electronic documents will be stored off-line at the researcher’s sponsoring institution in a password-protected directory.
Participant Interviews

Interviews with the selected sample of teacher-leaders, the four principals, the Assistant Superintendent and the President of the Teachers’ Association are expected to provide a rich source of data to assist the researcher in answering the research questions. Interviews will take place before the initiative commences and after the initiative has been in place for several months. Each participant will be interviewed individually, in a private setting of their own choosing – their office, a conference room in their school, or the researcher’s office, whichever makes the participant most comfortable. When the participant does not indicate a preference, the interview will take place at the participant’s school in order to minimize any impact of the researcher’s position in Dovington on the contents of the interview. Once a location has been selected, the researcher will be responsible for securing the location and ensuring there is electricity available to power the digital recorder.

Prior to the beginning of the interview, the participant will be reminded that the interview is to be recorded and will re-offer the participant the opportunity to withdraw if they are uncomfortable in any way. Once the participant agrees to begin the interview, the researcher will start the recorder, introduce the participant and gain recorded permission to record the interview. During the Pre-Intervention interview, the researcher will also read the Informed Consent form out loud, solicit and answer any questions from the participant and have the participant verbally agree to participate and sign the Informed Consent form prior to the formal interview beginning.

Interviews will then be conducted by the researcher using a pre-piloted interview questions. The researcher may add additional clarifying questions during the course of
the interview, designed to solicit further information from the participant. In addition, the interviewer will periodically summarize his understanding of the participant’s responses in order to check for understanding. At the end of the interview, the participant will be reminded that the researcher will make a transcript of the interview and will ask the participant to review the transcript for accuracy.

All digital recordings of the interview will be downloaded from the recorder to the researcher’s computer. Copies of the downloaded digital recordings will be archived off-site at the researcher’s sponsoring institution in a password-protected directory.

The researcher will hire a private individual with no connection to the Dovington Public Schools to transcribe the digital recordings of the interviews. The private transcription service will provide the researcher with a MS Word document of each interview. The document will be shared with the participant and the participant will be asked to note any errors in the transcript. The participant will also be given the opportunity to provide the researcher with written clarification or explanation of comments that the participant feels are unclear. The participant will then be asked to sign the written transcript and attest to its authenticity. The signed transcript will be filed in the researcher’s at-home office. Electronic copies of the authenticated transcript and any accompanying participant clarification will be stored on the researcher’s computer and off-site at the researcher’s sponsoring institution in a password-protected directory.

Researcher Observations

The researcher will have many opportunities to observe a variety of activities and interpersonal interactions during the course of this research. These opportunities will come in both planned and unplanned settings.
In terms of planned observations, the researcher will observe the activities of the Professional Development Days where the Professional Learning Community model is introduced and discussed. During these observations, the researcher will not only note the events that occur, but also record relevant participant behaviors, such as the level of attention the audience is affording the speaker, the “energy” of the group discussions that accompany the professional development and “snippets” of conversations that may identify teacher reaction to the concepts being presented.

The researcher will also be able to take advantage of unplanned opportunities to observe teacher-leaders and principals due to the nature of his position in Dovington. These opportunities are expected to arise out of the normal routine matters that the researcher just happens to notice, such as seeing a hallway conversation between a teacher and a teacher-leader or watching the interaction between a principal and a teacher-leader or observing or participating in a conversation with a principal regarding the PLC initiative or a teacher-leader in their school. These moments are expected to arise during the normal course of school activities and the researcher will be prepared to note and document the event that may provide insight in answering the research questions.

Regardless of the setting, all observations will be recorded in the researcher’s written journal. The researcher will maintain both a hand-written and an on-line journal to allow for maximum flexibility and ease of jotting down observations as close as possible to the event observed. The researcher will strive to note occurrences as they occur, but, may rely on post-event journaling when the event observed does not support the notion of real-time note-taking. All observations will include date and location of the
observation, those present during observation, and general notes to aid the researcher in remembering relevant events or occurrences. All hand-written journals will be scanned into the researcher’s computer and stored along with the on-line journal. All electronic journal images will also be stored off-site at the researcher’s sponsoring institution in a password-protected directory.

Following these procedures will enable the researcher to document events in the Professional Learning Community initiative as well as provide a rich data source for analysis when seeking data that will help the researcher answer this study’s research questions.

Quantitative Data

Two sources of quantitative data will also be used by the researcher. First, the results of the December 6, 2006 Professional Day demonstration of the “Consensogram” technique will be utilized to document: the staff’s generalized beliefs on the importance of collaboration; the current frequency of collaboration among teachers; and the staff’s self assessment of their own level of skills in leading collaborative efforts. Second, the researcher will review and incorporate the results of a state-wide survey given during the month of March 2008. Mass TeLLS, the Teaching, Learning and Leading Survey (TeLLS) assessed whether positive teaching and learning conditions are present in schools across Massachusetts. Specific results from Dovington teachers will be incorporated into the data analysis portion of Chapter 4. Next, we turn our attention to the methods the researcher will employ to analyze the plethora of information that will be gathered as described above.
**Method of Data Analysis**

It is clear from the quantity of data being collected that a significant challenge will quickly arise – developing a “system for organizing and managing data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 164). To accomplish this task, it is necessary to code the data. Codes, according to Miles and Huberman (1994) “are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (p. 56). “Each interview, set of field notes, and document needs identifying notations so that [the researcher] can access them as needed in both the analysis and the write-up of the findings” (Merriam, 1998, p. 164).

The researcher will develop a code scheme that will relate to each individual research question. Each of the three research questions can be identified with a unique noun. Question 1 is about teacher-leader’s ROLE; Question 2 focuses on principal WILLINGNESS; and Question 3 seeks information about teacher-leader’s COMMITMENT. Since the questions also pertain to change over time, the symbol (+) will be used to signify more or an increase of something; (-) will signify less or a decrease of something and (0) will signify no change. So, the researcher will code a passage where a teacher-leader is describing an expansion of their role as (R+) and a passage where a principal is talking about a decrease in their willingness as (W-).

Additional codes will have to be developed during the course of the analysis as significant patterns of information appear. Following the coding of all of the data gathered during the course of the interviews, document reviews and researcher observations, the researcher will invite a peer researcher to conduct a random spot-check of the coding to insure accuracy and help protect against researcher bias.
With the coding completed and checked, the researcher will then begin the challenging process of analyzing the coded data. Here, the researcher will continue the process of looking for patterns and relationships that begin to appear in the various coded sheets reviewed by the researcher. In qualitative research, analysis is not a separate phase. Instead, analysis takes place during the entire data collection and coding process. The researcher will be constantly search of patterns and the analysis of the data will reflect those patterns.

In order to increase the internal validity of this study, Merriam (1998) strongly recommends that a researcher utilize a strategy of triangulation “to confirm the emerging findings” (p. 204). Here it is important to consider the source of information as well as the pattern that result. The researcher will review all sources of information (interviews, researcher observations and document review) to see if all three sources support the same finding. Similarly, it is important to see if the data provided by both the teacher-leaders and the administrators lead to the same or different findings. This process of triangulation is especially important when “using multiple methods of data collection and analysis” as it “strengthens reliability as well as internal validity” (Merriam, 1998, p. 207).

*Format of Data Reporting*

Determining the appropriate method to display and report the data to the reader is the next order of business. Here, an admonition from Miles and Huberman (1994) seems particularly in order. “Extended, unreduced text alone is a weak and cumbersome form of display. It is hard on analysts because it is dispersed over many pages and is not easy to see as a whole” (p. 91). Merriam (1998) agrees and suggests that proper display of
information enables readers to “quickly grasp complexities in the analysis that would take an enormous amount of narrative writing to convey” (p. 233). Consequently, the researcher is charged with utilizing “displays that are focused enough to permit a viewing of a full data set in the same location, and are arranged systemically to answer the research questions at hand” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp. 91-2).

In determining an appropriate way to display the data, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that the data display “format[s] must always be driven by the research questions involved and your [the researcher’s] developing concepts, often in the form of codes” (p. 93). As a result, it is difficult to predict what formats will best display data that has yet to be analyzed. Still, since the research questions are well ensconced in this research, it is likely that data displays that map changes in circumstances over time will be utilized in reporting the data.

The time-ordered matrix offers the researcher the opportunity to “track sequences, processes and flows [that] are not restricted to ‘snapshots’” in order to “display time-linked data to phenomena that are bigger than specific ‘events,’ so as to understand (and perhaps later explain) what is happening” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 119). This display technique will enable the researcher to summarize the three major data elements (role, willingness and commitment) and summarize any changes that takes place over the course of time (before Professional Learning Community initiative, during the initiative and following the implementation of PLCs). Of course, other display techniques will be considered and possibly adopted once a thorough analysis of the actual data has been completed.
**Limitations of the Study**

While this study does offer the opportunity for a better understanding of the impact of a Professional Learning Community initiative on the role of Teacher Leaders, that understanding must be tempered by an objective review of the limitations of the study. It is impossible to eradicate all potential sources of bias and skew so it is important to acknowledge those potential sources that the reader should consider when reviewing this study.

Researcher and participant bias are important considerations when considering limitations of the study. Although the design of the study was developed to reduce the potential of these biases, they must, nonetheless, be considered when identifying limitations. Merriam (1998) acknowledges that all data “have been filtered though [the researcher’s] particular theoretical position and biases” (p. 216). This researcher has approached this study with a belief that Professional Learning Communities represent a significant opportunity for lasting school improvement. Although as a researcher, it will be his job to set those biases aside and objectively view the data, the researcher’s beliefs may cloud his judgment and limit the study’s validity.

Because a significant amount of data for study will be derived from interviews with participants, the pre-existing relationship between the researcher and the participants must be acknowledged. Since the researcher holds a high-level administrative post in Dovington, the potential exists that participants may, intentionally or not, phrase their responses in a way that they feel the researcher would want to hear. While this potential participant bias was also acknowledged and considered in the design of the study, its possible impact should be considered a limitation.
Also, the Hawthorne Effect may come into play when the researcher is observing the behaviors of teacher-leaders. The Hawthorne Effect theorizes that participants modify their behavior simply due to the fact that they are being observed. This self-fulfilling prophecy can be compounded by the researcher’s high-level administrative position in Dovington, resulting in the researcher observing uncharacteristic behavior instead of typical behavior.

In addition to the potential bias on the part of the researcher or participant, other limitations to this study exist. The short time frame involved in the study represents a limitation, particularly since the researcher is considering the potential sustainability of the Professional Learning Community initiative. This study will consider the long-term commitment to change through the lens of the role of teacher leaders. Sustainability is best proven through a long-term study that can look at the impact of an initiative over a long period of time. Since this study is, by design, over the course of a shorter time period, any conclusions drawn by the researcher should be considered in that light.

Finally, any conclusions made through this study are limited to the specific circumstances in Dovington and are not necessarily reproducible in other schools or school districts. Merriam (1998) warns that “achieving reliability in [qualitative studies in education] is not only fanciful but impossible…. That fact, however, does not discredit the results of the original study.” (p. 206). So, while the results of this study may be valid for the work going on in Dovington, this study may or may not apply to other similar situations in other similar communities.
Summary

This chapter has outlined research design that will steer this study. The expertise of Merriam (1998) and Miles and Huberman (1994) has guided the design and supported the decisions of the researcher. Next, Chapter 4 will outline the results of this qualitative study.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This study is an evaluative case study that will evaluate the impact of implementing a Professional Learning Community model on the role of teacher-leaders, involving the researcher as a participant-observer. In this chapter, the findings that resulted from the analysis of the data collected are discussed. Data analysis is conducted using the methodologies outlined in Chapter Three with an eye toward answering the following research questions:

1. How has the role of teacher-leader changed since the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative?
2. What impact has the Professional Learning Community initiative had on Principals’ willingness to distribute leadership responsibilities to teacher-leaders?
3. How has the Professional Learning Community initiative strengthened the teacher-leaders’ commitment to working on the district’s school improvement efforts?

The study seeks to understand how the role of teacher-leader has traditionally been viewed by teachers and administrators and what, if any, changes have occurred in that role since PLCs were first implemented. Finally, the study looks for signs that the initiative may be sustainable over the long-term by examining the changes that the PLC initiative has had on attitudes of both Principals and teacher leaders.

This chapter is divided into five main sections. First, the context of the study is presented, including a description of the school district where the study took place, a
review of the makeup of the teacher leaders in the district and a discussion of the logic and methodology behind the selection of the individual teacher leaders for the study. Next, the history of the study will be presented with specific attention paid to any changes that took place in the study since the original design was developed, along with an analysis of the impact of these changes. Then, the results of the study will be described using each of the four main methods of data gathering: interviews, document review, researcher observation and quantitative data. Finally, the results will be summarized using each of the three research questions as a guide for focusing the analysis. The chapter will end with a summary of the findings presented and prepare the reader for the discussion of the findings in Chapter Five.

**Context of the Study**

**District Description**

The Dovington Public Schools (a pseudonym) is a PreK-12 school system in the metropolitan Boston area located within the I495 belt. Dovington is an upper middle class community known for its high quality schools and innovative practices. Dovington is a community with a strong rural culture despite being located on the outskirts of a major metropolitan area. According to the United States Census Bureau, the median income of a Dovington family in 2000 was $84,878 with over 50.8% of the adults holding at least a Bachelor’s degree and another 28.9% with at least two years of college.

The Dovington Public Schools serves approximately 3100 students using four large schools – a 800-student Grade PreK-2 school; a 750 student Grade 3-5 school; a 750-student Middle School (Grades 6-8); and an 800-student comprehensive high school. Dovington offers all incoming Kindergarten students choice of three programs:
Traditional, French Immersion or Montessori. Dovington is one of two school systems in Massachusetts that offers French Immersion education from grades K-12 and one of two that offers a public school Montessori program to its students from ages 3 to 10.

Because of their large size, each Dovington school is staffed with a minimum of three school administrators – a Principal, an Assistant Principal and a Student Services Administrator. The Student Services Administrator chairs all IEP team meetings for the school, supervises and evaluates Special Education staff and oversees all Special Education programs. Each school team decides how to divide administrative responsibilities among the Principal and Assistant, with the predominant pattern having the Assistant Principal focus on operational details of the school while the Principal focuses primarily on school improvement efforts.

Since Dovington does not utilize a neighborhood school approach, all students in each grade are housed in the same school, with most grades (1-5) having a minimum of ten teachers per grade. The schedules at both elementary schools are developed to ensure that each grade has up to 80 minutes of common planning time per day. This set-up eliminates all of the physical barriers to grade-wide collaboration that most school districts have to overcome and allows for easier sharing of resources.

The middle school is organized by teams, with three teams per grade. Most teams consist of the four major subject teachers (English, math, social studies and science) with Foreign Language and specials (Physical Education, Art, Music, and Technology Education) being taught off team. When students are in their specials, team teachers have 80 minutes of common planning time per day. The nine teacher teams at the middle school are all lead by a team leader.
The high school is scheduled as a four by four block with students taking four courses during the fall and four courses during the spring semester. Teachers are traditionally organized by curriculum area with a department head (who does not have teacher evaluation responsibility) heading each department. Due to the complication of a high school schedule, departments do not have the luxury of common planning time, but there is an opportunity during a daily 30-minute activity block for entire departments to gather and work collaboratively.

In addition to the grade, team and department teacher leader structure, Dovington also employs curriculum specialist teacher leaders who are responsible for coordinating curriculum improvements and insuring inter-grade and intra-grade consistency and coordination. These curriculum specialist teacher leaders are responsible for: Reading/Social Studies (K-2), Reading/Social Studies (3-5), Mathematics/Science (K-5), English/Social Studies (6-8), Mathematics/Science (6-8), Foreign Language (K-12), Art/Music (K-12), Health/Physical Education (K-12), and a Montessori Specialist (K-4).

Description and Selection of Teacher Leaders

The total population of teacher-leaders in the Dovington Public Schools is 37, distributed as outlined in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 – Number of Teacher-Leaders by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher-Leader Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Specialists</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Grade Leaders</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Team Leaders</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Department Heads</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Teacher-Leaders</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to reduce the likelihood that the researcher’s senior administrative position might adversely impact the veracity of the interview data collected as part of this research study, the researcher purposefully selected teacher-leaders who are more accustomed with interacting with senior administrators. In order to develop an assessment of each teacher-leader’s level of interaction with senior administration, the researcher, based on his observations and experience in Dovington, assigned a numerical indicator to reflect the level of interaction that each teacher-leader has had to Central Office personnel. Each individual teacher leader was assigned a number from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest (little if no interaction) and 5 being the highest (high number of interactions). The personnel records of all teacher leaders in Dovington were reviewed to ascertain the number of years of teaching and teacher-leadership experience. Experience in Dovington as well as other school districts was counted so that an accurate total experience level could be distinguished. Finally, all teacher leaders were grouped according to their category and averages calculated for all four categories.

Table 4.2 describes the average number of years of teaching experience and teacher-leader experience as well as the average level of interaction each teacher-leader has had with Central Office issues and high ranking district administrators.
Table 4.2 – Summary of Teacher-Leader Experience by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Average Total Years Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Average Total Years Teacher-Leader Experience</th>
<th>Average Level of Exposure to Central Office Administrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Specialists</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Grade Leaders</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Team Leaders</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Department Heads</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For this study, teacher-leaders who are higher in seniority and who have extensive experience in dealing with Central Office administrators on a day-to-day basis were selected for interviews. As the data in Table 4.2 indicates, teacher-leaders who fall in the Curriculum Specialist category are most senior (an average seniority of 17.5 years, the highest among the four categories of teacher-leader) and also have had the most interaction with Central Office administrators (significantly higher than the other three categories of teacher-leaders. Accordingly, teacher-leaders from the Curriculum Specialist category were sampled from the total population of teacher-leaders.

A purposeful sample of Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders was interviewed, in order to assure that all types of Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders in Dovington will be interviewed and their data analyzed. Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders from all three levels (elementary, middle and high) will comprise the purposeful sample. The following Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders were selected as the sample: District World Language Curriculum Specialist (K-12); Mathematics/Science Curriculum
Specialist (K-5); Literacy/Social Studies Curriculum Specialist (PreK-2); and Literacy/Social Studies Curriculum Specialist (6-8).

These four teacher-leaders are able to provide detailed, in-depth, experiential, first-person information on their roles as teacher-leaders in Dovington as well as what changes, if any, have taken place in their roles since the Professional Learning Community initiative began.

*History of the Study*

Dovington’s exploration of the concepts of Professional Learning Communities began in June 2005 when the researcher, Assistant Superintendent, all four Principals and several selected Curriculum Specialist team leaders attended a two-day seminar held in Plymouth Massachusetts on the subject of PLCs. Led by John D’Auria, Matt King and Jon Saphier from Teachers21, the seminar focused on the three elements of successful schools: academic focus, shared beliefs and values, and productive professional relationships. At a dinner between the first and second night of the seminar, the Dovington team expressed support of the concepts presented and the opportunity that PLCs offered to drive school improvement efforts. The team decided to formally kick-off Dovington’s PLC initiative at the August 2005 Back-to-School opening event.

Matt King, then-Superintendent of Schools in Wellesley and co-author of “Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures,” (Saphier & King, 1985) was the keynote speaker at the Teacher Opening Day Professional Day held in late August 2005. Dr. King spent much of his address focusing on the cultural aspects of Professional Learning Communities and emphasized the concepts of Open and Honest Communication as a vehicle to begin to discuss the collective responsibility held by all members of the Dovington community to
foster and encourage improved student learning. During the course of the day, teachers, teacher leaders and building administrators were given opportunities to practice their new open communication skills, modeling the new skills in discussions about impediments to student growth. This kickoff represented a new focus on the two Professional Learning Community concepts that would drive Dovington’s school improvement efforts over the next several years: collaboration and a focus on student learning.

In the months that followed the introduction of the PLC concepts by Matt King, K-5 grade level teams and grade 6-8 teams were asked to begin to work on developing a culture that focused much of the collaborative discussion on students and their progress, rather than on operational issues such as recess duty or planning for field trips or preparing for parent teacher conferences. Principals were also asked to re-vamp the agendas of their monthly faculty meetings, reducing the focus on operational issues and increasing the focus on items directly related to student learning. For example, all operational discussions concerning issues such as recess-duty or planning for a school-wide assembly or other event were removed from the agenda and relegated to discussion through electronic mail. Also, teacher-led discussions were purposefully added to the agenda to develop more ownership and improve the value to the faculty of these meetings. Over the next academic year, teams and collective faculties began the difficult work of transforming Dovington’s culture from a congenial one to a collegial one.

During the second year of transition, teachers and teacher teams were seeking some advice and support in the use of tools to analyze assessment results, allowing teams to focus better on hard data rather than soft information. In December 2006, Dovington invited Nancy Love, from TERC’s Using Data Project to present to the school-wide
faculty on the topic of Unleashing the Power of Collaborative Inquiry: Connecting Data to Results (Love, December 8, 2006). Prior to the start of Ms. Love’s keynote address, Dovington’s Superintendent wanted to refocus teachers on the context of their work, reminding them that this discussion of data was directly related to their on-going work on Professional Learning Communities. To illustrate his point, the Superintendent devised the picture seen in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 – The Dovington Arch

“All of Dovington’s schools,” the Superintendent explained to the 300-plus teachers assembled in the High School auditorium, “have the same architectural feature – this arch. On their first day of school, Kindergarten students walk under this arch to begin their time with us. On their last day of school, High School seniors leave our High School passing under a similar arch. The Professional Learning Community in Dovington is similarly constructed. It is built on a foundation of collaboration, it has a focus on students and a focus on results as its pillars and its overarching goal is the
success of all students.” The Dovington Arch became the symbol of the PLC work being done in the four schools and its use has continued to today.

Following the Superintendent’s introduction and setting the context for the presentation, Nancy Love discussed and demonstrated a variety of data analysis tools that teachers can use to review student performance and facilitate a common discussion about that performance. At one point in the morning presentation, several faculty members related their frustration that the size of the teacher teams in K-5 (10 or more teachers) made facilitating discussion and developing a consensus difficult. In response to this concern, Ms. Love introduced the concept of a consensogram, a tool designed to visually aid large groups in the development of a consensus. To illustrate the concept, Ms. Love asked the 300-plus teachers assembled four questions regarding their beliefs about collaboration. The results of this consensogram are presented later in this chapter.

For the remainder of the day, teachers met in their grade level teams and practiced the techniques introduced by Ms. Love during the morning session using their schools’ MCAS data. Teacher reaction to these techniques was very positive and teachers exhibited a real excitement at the possibility of being able to begin the process of collaboratively reviewing and analyzing student data.

Only a few month’s after the very successful presentation by Ms. Love, teacher teams across Dovington were becoming stymied and mired due to a lack of available data. Efforts to analyze MCAS data had been successful, but as teachers turned to focusing on teacher and classroom generated data, they quickly came to a stark realization – they needed to use common assessments in order to be able to have useful data to analyze and diagnose student learning difficulties. Immediately, teachers
collaboratively began the process of developing common formative assessments but were again stymied – they found they lacked a common understanding of what they were trying to teach.

Dovington’s curriculum is in complete alignment with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, but within those Frameworks, there is ample opportunity for individual teachers to emphasize different things. The teachers’ efforts to correlate test data between and among classroom teachers illustrated that fact clearly. As this concern began to surface across Dovington, the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, several school principals and several curriculum specialists convened a day-long meeting to discuss how to overcome these obstacles and continue Dovington’s focus on data analysis to facilitate student achievement.

Following extensive research and collaborative discussion, Dovington decided to place their focus on assessment and data analysis on hold and refocus their efforts on getting agreement on the essential knowledge that students need to have by grade level and curriculum area. To accomplish this goal, Dovington turned to the work of Dr. Doug Reeves and the Leadership and Learning Center. Reeves (2007) uses the concepts of Power Standards to help teams of teachers focus on what is essential knowledge that students need to have at the end of the course or school year. Reeves’ concept centers on the assumption that all standards are not equal in importance and that teachers need to narrow the grade-specific standards by distinguishing the “essentials” from the “supporting” (Reeves, October 19, 2007). This work is currently on-going in Dovington.

A new Middle School principal was hired on July 1, 2006 and resigned effective June 30, 2008. During the first month of her tenure, she lobbied for and was successful
in garnering, a two-year pilot change to the job description for the Middle School Team Leader position. This event served to spotlight many of the positive and negative aspects of the impact of the Professional Learning Community initiative on the role of Teacher Leaders and, as such, will offer the researcher significant opportunity to describe that impact. These unexpected series of events will be described and highlighted in detail later in this Chapter.

As this study concludes, Dovington has embraced the concepts associated with building a Professional Learning Community and understands that PLCs represent more a journey than a destination. Dovington’s journey has taken a few detours along the way, but the essential ingredients (collaboration, focus on learning and focus on results) along with their team leader structure have remained essentially in place since the program’s inception over four years ago. This analysis will focus on the changing role of the teacher leader during the implementation of the PLC initiative as just described.

**Study Results**

**Interviews**

The researcher conducted 14 separate one-on-one interviews with various teacher leaders, building administrators and central office administrators during the course of this study. Seven interviews were designed to elicit information about the culture and commitment to change and improvement present in Dovington prior to the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative. Six interviews were conducted at the end of the study to offer a view of Dovington after the implementation of the initiative. One interview of the Assistant Superintendent took place and covered the times before and after the Professional Learning Community initiative took place.
The former President of the Dovington Federation of Teachers at the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative retired and moved prior to the beginning of this study and, in spite of initially agreeing to be interviewed for this project, later recanted. The current President of the Dovington Federation of Teachers at the end of the Professional Learning Community initiative declined the researcher’s invitation to be interviewed. She explained that she felt uncomfortable being interviewed during the time when the administration and Federation were negotiating an extension to the two-year pilot program for the revised Middle School team leader job descriptions that will be described in detail later in this Chapter.

Finally, the High School Principal retired during the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative and was not available for a post-implementation interview.

A brief summary of each interviewee follows:

Table 4.3 – List of Interviews and Pseudonyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position Description</th>
<th>Separate Pre-Interview?</th>
<th>Separate Post-Interview?</th>
<th>Combined Pre and Post-Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. A.</td>
<td>Curriculum Specialist – Foreign Language K-12; High School Department Head</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. B.</td>
<td>High School Principal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. C.</td>
<td>Curriculum Specialist – Middle School English/Social Studies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. D.</td>
<td>Curriculum Specialist – K-2 Literacy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. E.</td>
<td>Curriculum Specialist – K-5 Mathematics/Science</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Mr. F.</td>
<td>Principal – Grade 3-5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Ms. G.</td>
<td>Principal – Grade K-2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. H.</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
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Seven 45-minute-long free-flowing interviews were conducted by the researcher to document the role of the teacher-leader in the Dovington Public Schools prior to the formal beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative. At the end of the study period, the researcher interviewed six of the original interviewees and conducted an extensive interview of the Assistant Superintendent at the end of the study covering both the beginning and the end of the initiative. Each interviewee served as either teacher-leader or administrator both prior to and immediately after the kick-off of the initiative. Each interview provided the researcher with rich narrative insights into the atmosphere and culture of Dovington before and after the Professional Learning Community initiative. A review of the significant contents of each interview, focusing on the qualitative data that will assist the researcher in answering the three research questions, follows.

Ms. A.

Ms. A. serves two roles in Dovington. She serves as the K-12 Curriculum Specialist for the districts K-12 Foreign Language program as well as the Foreign Language Department Head at Dovington High School. Ms. A. is a senior member of the teaching staff and has served as the coordinator of the district’s French Immersion program since its inception over 25 years ago.

Teacher-Leader Role. In her initial interview, Ms. A. quickly focused on the NEASC accreditation process that Dovington High School had just completed and offered many examples of how the preparation for and follow-up from the accreditation highlighted the role of the teacher-leader prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative. “Department leaders during NEASC met on a regular basis, but they did not
have an active role at all in making presentations. The faculty meetings were very much run by the administration with a focus on business.”

From her unique position both as a High School Department Head as well as a K-12 Curriculum Specialist, Ms. A. was also responsible for curriculum coordination among the Elementary Foreign Language teachers. Still, when she conducted meetings with the K-5 Foreign Language teachers, they focused primarily on “day-to-day” issues like “presentations to parents and [supply] orders we needed to process. While at the elementary schools, Ms. A. was also able to observe the activities of elementary grade leaders and noted that their role before the Professional Learning Community initiative was to act as “conduits” between the administration and the grade. The grade meetings they held focused exclusively on the “business-type agenda handed down from the administration.”

Ms. A’s unique role as a Foreign Language Curriculum Specialist and her personal approach to education was also reflected in her comments describing her role as a teacher leader prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative. She reported that she played a unique role during the hiring process of new Foreign Language teachers, “interviewing new people and testing their proficiency.” Finally, she described the top-down tendency of Dovington administrators before the initiative equating the principals with a famous star-ship captain – “a Principal says we want this done, make it happen like Captain Pickard, ‘make it so.’ Then I do everything I can to make it so.”

Following the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. A. noted a significant shift in the role of high school department heads. “Department leaders took on a more active role, being asked to actually be part and parcel of
developing agendas for faculty meetings.” She also noted that “faculty meeting are much more substance of learning oriented and not business oriented.” She observed that this same shift also took place at the K-5 Foreign Language meetings that she ran in her role as curriculum specialist. “Now, those meetings are not only focused on discussions of individual children but they also are about things the I had always wanted to do as a coordinator in bringing people together to set common goals.”

Finally, Ms. A. noted that while her role as a teacher-leader grew as a result of the Professional Learning Community initiatives, some areas of responsibility remained the same, notably her role in testing the language proficiency of any Foreign Language teacher applicants. She suggested, however, that in recent years, she has adopted a “stricter” rubric for proficiency and now tests proficiency “by making them [job applicants] teach a class in the target language rather than simply engaging the candidate in conversation.” She noted that she made this shift “by myself” and “never asked permission” to make the change.

Principal Willingness to Distribute Leadership. Ms. A. offered a harsh description of building principals during the time prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative. Her view of Principals is that they “have more of a tendency to see budget[s], because their role is numbers and moving and budgets and what we can afford. Principals don’t always have the time to talk to coordinators about the work that is being coordinated. I think there has always been a little breakdown between the work coordinators do with their staff and what administrators know about what coordinators do.” She summed up her analysis of the Principals’ commitment to and belief in the need for teacher-leaders prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative. “Before the
PLC model, there would have been a much greater tendency for an administrator to say ‘Ya, I know, I think we could find some money by cutting these positions.’”

Yet, after the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. A. offered a significantly more positive insight. “I think after the institution of the PLC where there has been much greater collaboration and cooperation between the team leader, department leader and administrators. I think they’re [administrators] becoming more aware of the work with coordinators do do with the staff and the value of that.” While her remarks do not speak specifically to the Principal’s willingness to delegate leadership to teacher-leaders following the Professional Learning Community initiative, it can be inferred from her remarks.

*Teachers’ Commitment to Work toward Change.* Prior to the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. A. reported that the high school, “even in the NEASC accreditation [follow-up], the culture of the high school was pretty much marked by people who said that this will go away. ‘We’ve seen initiatives come and go and this too shall pass’ was kind of the thinking.” She reported that during the development of the NEASC follow-up report, the predominate feeling among high school staff was “we have to respond to these areas and there was definitely thought on the part of the staff in general that this was something that we have to do. It was not necessarily something a lot of people bought into. It was that we had to have this paper done.”

Ms. A. reported a similar feeling of non-commitment before the initiative among the elementary staff she observed during regular faculty meetings. “If someone wanted to take a leadership role within the faculty, it was almost like ‘why is this person speaking?’ It was almost like children waiting for permission from mom or dad to say something.
Who gave this person the right to speak? In that culture, why would faculty members ever get up and do anything?”

In her post-initiative interview, Ms. A. noted that faculty members recognized that the Professional Learning Community initiative was a long-term commitment on the part of the administration. “After a while, it solidified in the minds of people in general teaching and maybe sometimes even from the department leader people who thought that this would go away; that this would be a phase; it’s been incrementally building this base of culture in which people now know that this is pretty much here to stay.”

As a result, teachers are now active participants in discussions on student work and taking an active role in improving student learning. Ms. A. described her work with the elementary foreign language teachers. “During our PLC meetings, we focused on our SMART goal for improving writing in French Immersion. We had beautiful meetings where K-5 we looked at writing samples at the same table at the same meetings and everyone was able to say, ‘Wow! They really do progress K-5.’ Before they would never look at what another teacher was doing in another grade, let alone work collaboratively as a group to improve everyone’s writing.” She concluded that “having the PLC model and the focus of having goals that are both language-specific and grade-specific, revalidated the reason for having these meetings. Working around SMART goals, the whole idea is to have everyone be a leader. Now, people are owning the goal.”

Ms. B.

Ms. B. was the senior principal in Dovington, having served as Principal of Dovington High School for the past seven years. She has a total of over 15 years administrative experience in Dovington and other school district following a 20-plus
successful career as a high school English teacher. At the outset of the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. B. expressed privately to the researcher that she was planning on working “3 or 4 more years.” One year later, Ms. B. abruptly announced her retirement. Ms. B’s data is limited to her observations of Dovington before the Professional Learning Community initiative kicked off. No post-initiative description is available.

**Teacher-Leader Role.** Ms. B described the roles of teacher-leaders at Dovington High School as evolving at the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative. Two years before the PLC initiative began, “department heads were primarily seen as paper-pushers. They did the ordering and PO’s and checked up on supplies. They did perfunctory types of things, but they weren’t seen as school leaders.” Following a NEASC accreditation report that “really slammed them on the whole issue of teaching and learning,” Mrs. B. “asked all the department leaders to be the NEASC Follow-up Team.” Mrs. B. “would start to meet with them as a group and we would discuss some of those issues [instruction and differentiation].” She concluded that “NEASC allowed us to look at those issues that nobody wanted to talk about.”

Ms. B. also described the department head teacher-leader as “someone who is at the same level within a discipline and that a teacher feels comfortable going to and talking about problems with classroom management.” Dovington High School department heads also were someone “who can feel comfortable in a meeting with a new parent or an aggressive parent” instead of an administrator. That way an unsure teacher won’t feel like ‘my supervisor’s in the meeting.’ In short, Ms. B concluded, a good
teacher-leader department head at the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative is a “good mentor.”

Following the kickoff to the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. B. was able to “use NEASC as a lever to get the department heads to focus more of their time on issues of curriculum and instruction.” Here, their first major task was to work as a “cross functional team” and “create a school-wide writing rubric.” Here again their function was also to act as a communications conduit between administration and teachers but also to help teachers in their departments “look at lessons to see if there was any real critical thinking and writing in them.”

Department head teacher-leaders at Dovington High School, at least prior to the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative seem to exhibit very little independent leadership and required the NEASC accreditation process or what Ms. B. called “the ultimate top-down initiative” to drive their behavior.

Principal Willingness to Distribute Leadership. Throughout her interview, Ms. B. described several examples of her efforts to distribute leadership to her teacher-leaders. Ms. B. reported having proactively trying to change the job description of the high school department heads to have them formally named as a part of the NEASC Follow-up Team. “That allowed me to have a dialogue with everybody about ‘Here’s what I’m looking for from a department leaders and if you’re still willing to do this, I’m going to be asking more from you.’” This proactive approach to expanding the department leader’s job description shows a high willingness on the part of this Principal to distribute leadership to her teacher-leaders.
Ms. B. also reported that her vision of the role of department leaders was part of her make-up and not at all the result of the district’s Professional Learning Community initiative. “I came from a system, several systems, where department heads really were teacher-leaders and that’s how I saw it. For me, I thought it was a really important aspect of creating a really good school.” She further explained that her “vision of what a department head should be” was an advocate for and soldier in the fight for “school improvement.”

Finally, Ms. B’s willingness to distribute leadership is illustrated in her efforts to secure training for her department heads after initial attempts to have them perform as curriculum leaders was rebuffed by the faculty. “I also proposed to [Dovington’s former Superintendent] at one point that the department heads have some sort of real leadership training…. They didn’t have any training on how to be a leader and they hadn’t had any real training on school improvement and what that process looks like.”

*Teachers’ Commitment to Work toward Change.* Finally, Ms. B. reported a mixed picture of the interest that teachers exhibited in working toward school change prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative. At first, Ms. B. described a “hesitancy” on the part of teachers and teacher-leaders to commit to school improvement “because they felt that their allegiance was mostly to each other, not to the kids, and also there were two camps, management and teachers.” In addition, Ms. B. hypothesized that “they were hesitant to come forward with something because there had been, previous to that, a house cleaning of some really bad teachers.” As a result, “they felt that if you came forward and you didn’t have Professional Status that you could be in trouble.”
While teacher-leaders, who all had Professional Status, were probably not affected by this phenomenon, Ms. B. felt that department heads were not interested in working on school improvement efforts because they showed resistance to her efforts to “move us to a discussion of curriculum and instruction. I feel department heads feel more comfortable looking at curriculum because it’s a safe area. But, it’s looking at the instruction [of your peers] is where it gets dicey.” Later in her interview, Ms. B. offered another possible explanation for why department heads at Dovington did not embrace school improvement – “there were some departments who thought they were just doing a dynamite job of educating kids, [while I thought that] their curriculum was dead and their instruction was flat and boring.”

Ms. B. suggests that reluctance ended as a result of the Professional Learning Community initiative. Ms. B. reported that the department heads were “excited to be invited to attend [the two day training on Professional Learning Communities].” It “fired them up” and made them feel “valuable” as the initiative was kicked off. “They thought that the two day training was wonderful.”

Ms. C.

Ms. C. is a middle school curriculum specialist. In that role, Ms. C. does not have any assigned teaching duties and is instead responsible for working with the administration and teachers on improving instruction and curriculum in the Language Arts and Social Studies curriculum areas. Her pre-initiative interview took place at her home while she was recovering from abdominal surgery and the post-intervention interview took place in the researcher’s office.
Teacher-Leaders’ Role. Prior to the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. C. describes her role as a teacher-leader as a modern-day Sisyphus, “the one who keeps pushing the rock up the hill. He pushes it up, it falls down. Get it up, it comes down.” She used this analogy because “there was an incompatibility between the vision the Central Office has of my role as teacher-leader and how the teachers viewed my role.” Teachers, she felt, enjoyed a “strong culture of autonomy” and “didn’t understand why everyone wanted to change it.”

Ms. C. however, had strong beliefs about the importance of teacher-leaders. “They are the people who are going to create change…. They’re going to mediate between the directives that come from the top (and they’re not always the most sound directives) and the people in the classroom.” Teacher-leaders “are the ones who are going to be the implementers. They’re the ones who are going to come down and say ‘we’ll meet, we’ll set up study groups, we’ll do whatever it takes to get to done.’”

Ms. C. believed that teachers had a different view of the role of teacher-leaders prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative. “Teachers believe that the teacher-leader’s job is to tell the principal when the door doesn’t open and close properly. They believe we need to have someone who will call a meeting for the teachers and maybe someone who write a few things down on a piece of paper to indicate what we may want to order next year.” Ms. C. complained that teachers wanted team-leaders to “write the memos about the work order so they would fix the rug that the kids trip on when they come into school. Evidently there wasn’t the mindset that it is OK to get on your own phone and call the office and tell them about the rug.”
Following the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. C. felt that some things changed while others remained the same. Specifically, the role of teacher-leaders began to see an expansion while objections and obstacles were still offered by some teachers to a new leadership role of the teacher-leaders.

Ms. C. specifically noted the role she played in developing a new protocol for “discussing student learning and teacher work.” “We looked at protocols for about 5 years and the team leaders said repeatedly ‘we’re not ready for that.’” Now, “the team leaders were developing some projects and they were coming to the entire group and recognized the need for a protocol to facilitate that discussion.” After agreement by the team leaders on the new school-wide protocol, “we sent the protocol out via email to the teachers. We asked for feedback. Nothing came back.” During the presentation to the faculty, however, one teacher “began the meeting by saying [yelling], ‘I am outraged that you think that we can’t have a conversation about this without a protocol!’” And then she attacked [the principal].” Ms. C. explained to the teacher that “it wasn’t [the principal], it was… me!” who offered the protocol. Ms. C. felt that while the objecting teacher was a clear, but vocal, minority of the teaching staff, she represented “the last dying breaths of the ‘us versus them’ mentality” because “with retirements, I think there’s more hope that some of that will go.”

Ms. C. described a significant project that she directed during the period following the Professional Learning Community initiative. Her assignment was to move “the English and Social Studies departments through the Power Standards process in a way that made sense for them and in a way that allowed us to map our units to the Power Standards…. Just having standards that are Powered up but not necessarily integrated
into the fabric of the classroom was less useful than spending the time really plotting our way through the Power Standards as part of units and as part of the work they do everyday…. I spent a lot of energy on and certainly time in dealing one-on-one and by grade level and departments in talking about the whole notion of what the learning should look like.” This description of her post-initiative activities clearly is different from the pre-initiative expectations of teachers to have a teacher-leader call the office when a door needs repair or a piece of carpet becomes a trip-hazard.

While Ms. C. reported an expansion of her role to include the facilitation of discussions among teachers about students and their learning, “you have to always defend whatever was brought forward to move us forward in terms of the learning process for both teachers and students. You had to defend it. You had to fight for it and sometimes go down dying in order to move things forward.” While this information points to a clear change in the role of teacher-leaders the challenges they continue to face suggest that the initiative has not reached the sustained stage.

Principal Willingness to Distribute Leadership. Ms. C’s perspective may be somewhat skewed on this aspect of the study due to the fact that there was one Principal at Dovington Middle School during the pre-intervention period and another one during the post-intervention period. Accordingly, any difference between the principals’ during both periods may be attributed to differences in personal style and not related to the Professional Learning Community initiative. However, since this data is not being considered independent of all of the other data, it is still useful to review and analyze it.

Ms. C. reported that the Principal during the time prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative was very “top-down” who believed that teachers should
follow administrative directives because “we’ll tell them to do it.” She described the
time when teachers were asked to “establish protocols and guidelines for putting kids in
honors classes.” Ms. C., as the teacher-leader, led a group of teachers in the development
process, but the results did not meet the Principal’s standards. “So she would kind of get
mad at them and say, ‘I’m dissatisfied with their work… This is disgraceful.’ I would
find out the part that needed to change, but she’d never give me any more time with
them, so then I had to do it piecemeal.” The Principal, before the initiative, was willing
to delegate tasks to the teachers and teacher-leaders, but wanted to control the results of
those tasks.

Ms. C. also described the involvement of the principal in the formation of study
groups, a precursor to the Professional Learning Community initiative. In response to a
question regarding the principal’s role, Ms. C. stated, “The Principal had no role.
Whatever we affected was because Julie and I worked with those teachers.” In fact, the
principal’s sole role, Ms. C. noted was that when it came time for the study groups to
present their finding to the whole faculty, “she eliminated one group because she didn’t
like what they had to say.”

Following the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative
(and under a different Principal), the approach still remains top-down, but with a more
subtle way of controlling behavior. Ms. C. described an instance where the 6th grade
team wanted to talk about developing a new 6th grade schedule. The attempt to develop
the new schedule failed because the Principal “did not support their vision.” As a result,
their collaboratively developed change had “no support, no plan and no structure.”
The Principal did, however, want to implement a new reading program in the 6th grade where reading becomes a new class, independent of the four core subjects. “We hire in August, we have a reading program when the teachers come back in September… Boom, we have a reading program. Surprise! Unfortunately, we then have [the principal’s] vision of a reading program, the reading teacher’s vision of the reading program and the teacher-leader’s vision of the reading program, none of which were really discussed. Nor could you because the [reading] teacher now had kids.”

Ultimately, the principal’s program failed, “not because kids at this level can’t use direct instruction in reading, but because the program was thrust onto the teachers with no discussion or input. They [the sixth grade teachers] noticed that their idea [the new schedule] didn’t receive any support from [the principal] while she felt completely comfortable developing her own new reading program without consulting the 6th grade team at all.” Ms. C. did note, however, that the “PLC work we had done gave the teachers [6th grade team] the tools to see that [the principal’s] approach was top-down and not collegial.”

Ms. C. described her meetings with the new Principal using similar language. Although she maintained that she met with the new, post-PLC Principal for “three to four hours twice a week.” The purpose of the meetings, however, did not reflect the values of the Professional Learning Community that Dovington was looking to develop. “I think [the Principal] viewed those meeting as her opportunity to air her ideas which we then had to battle over. I think a real collegial community would have allowed that to occur among a bigger group and, more importantly, would have allowed others to propose solutions or new programs to improve our school.”
Finally, Ms. C. described a significant difference between the role she played in the school after the Professional Learning Community initiative (described in the section immediately preceding this one) and the role the new Principal wanted her to play. “She saw me as an arm of the administration. She prevented me from functioning in a way that my working style performs best because I had to carry her message. ‘You have to do what I want you to do.’”

Here, Ms. C. seems to be suggesting that the new, post-PLC Principal at the Middle School was not at all willing to distribute leadership among even her most trusted and senior teacher-leaders or teachers.

*Teachers Commitment to Work toward Change.* Ms. C. described the culture at the middle school prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative as “toxic muck. The loud leaders told the others ‘don’t cooperate.’ That was both covertly and overtly indicated to anybody who was new to the building. As a result, nobody wanted to stick their necks out into the Toxic Muck.”

In spite of that perception, Ms. C. and another colleague participated in the genesis of Dovington’s Professional Learning Community initiative. “Julie and I created study groups and we did this entirely on our own and apart from the principal because when we asked her if we could have some protected time on alternating Tuesdays, we were told no.” Still they persisted and ultimately, “we had 18 teachers in 3 study groups, 6 members per group. We had two groups looking at non-academic achievement factors and what does that look like in a standards-based classroom and we had one doing backwards curriculum design – because that’s the other foundation in a standards-based classroom, what you are teaching.”
These study groups are now commonly accepted in Dovington as representative of the first steps in the development of the Professional Learning Community initiative that was soon to be expanded to all schools in the district. As such, their presence does suggest that teachers and teacher-leaders were willing to get involved prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative, but had neither the tools nor the encouragement to bring forward a project focused on school improvement. Ms. C. agrees. “The middle school staff was very energetic and very receptive to good ideas and people who were willing to work together with them. Quite frankly, I think they were starving for that.”

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. C. reports that teachers’ willingness to work on school improvement was strong. “In consort with the teacher-leaders, you’d have little groups of them [teachers] coming up to me or [the other Curriculum Specialist] and say ‘what about this? Can we move in this direction?’ I think the 6th grade team was the strongest in that regard. Currently, Ms. C. reports that “at least a third of the teachers were involved in school improvement projects – a significant improvement from the handful of teachers” before the initiative.

Still, pockets of resistance persist. “There are definitely some heir apparents [to the oppositional teachers]. They were strident in their opposition to teachers working on school improvement projects at the beginning, but have turned their strategy to more subtle forms of resistance. Today, they drag their feet or resist when we want to form a committee or study group, arguing that they want the teachers to be paid for every minute their studying school improvement.” Ms. C. reports that this opposition will begin to fade “with retirements. I think there’s more hope that some of that will go.”
Ms. D.

Ms. D. is the full-time Literacy Curriculum Specialist teacher-leader at the Dovington Primary Elementary School. She has been a teacher-leader for the past 4 years and served as a first and second grade teacher prior to her assuming her teacher-leadership position. As a Curriculum Specialist, Ms. D. no longer has a formal teaching assignment.

Teacher-Leaders’ Role. While a teacher at her school, Ms. D. had the opportunity to observe and interact with her predecessor. “She would belittle her colleagues, tell them that they don’t know what they’re doing. ‘Look,’ she’d say, ‘these kids aren’t making any progress.’ Teachers were threatened by her and really looked at her as an administrator – a very tyrannical administrator, that if you don’t whine and complain, then you don’t have to deal with her.”

Realizing the challenge she faced when taking over from her predecessor, Ms. D. “did an awful lot of decorating of the atrium with poems to try to get the teachers on board to see the school beyond their grade or their four walls. I had an awful lot of energy at that time to try and just do things that had never been done before. But, they [her efforts] were all focused on awareness, increasing awareness of Literacy, and letting people know that I wasn’t [her predecessor]. There was nothing about working with teachers to improve the quality of their Literacy instruction.”

During that time, “teachers didn’t have any input, unless they signed up for ‘summer’ – to do curriculum work – or were part of a Committee. But then the Committees were just formed to come up with product – to implement a decision that the administration had made. When I walked into the Literacy Specialist position, there was
a lot of negativity and there was a lot of top-down. Every time the administration used the term ‘pilot’ everyone laughed. We knew a pilot was just a phased-in implementation. We never had any discussion following the pilot. No one ever asked ‘Did it work? Do you like it?’ There was never any of that involved.”

Finally, Ms. D., in the time before the Professional Learning Community initiative, “I had no authority. I can say ‘you need to do this,’ but I can’t go into the classroom to see if they’re doing it. It was like you have this position to help, to put things in to help students, but the position ended up being really empty. I was an empty threat, because I could never follow through on anything.”

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. D. continued to express frustration at what she felt were obstacles getting in the way of her doing her job, but those obstacles changed significantly. Now they were the newly-empowered grade leaders at Dovington Primary Elementary School. “Now there’s another barrier that I need to cross to get through. It is almost as if I have to check with the grade leaders to see if it’s OK if we can move forward with something. Before [the initiative] I would say ‘OK, we’re going to do this and this and this and let’s work together to get it done.’ Now, I need to ask their permission to move forward.”

Their resistance, she acknowledges, is not just for the sake of resistance, but grade leaders now act as gatekeepers, protecting their teacher-colleagues from too many initiatives. “They see themselves as a check and balance system. I feel like it’s a constant struggle. It’s about capacity and I have a different view of what the teachers’ capacity for change is than the grade leader. I feel that the pendulum has swung too far because there are certain things that just shouldn’t be negotiable.”
Still, Ms. D. reports that there are times when the role of the grade leader has not changed much from before the initiative began. “They [the grade leaders] meet with their grades once a week and they talk about things, but we’re still meeting on clerical things. We’re still spending our time on field trips or on scheduling recess duty or do we want the boots inside the room or out in the hall? They need to work to spend less time on those things and more time answering questions like: How are your kids doing? What worked for you? What can you show me?”

*Principal Willingness to Distribute Leadership.* Ms. D. reported feeling limited by her Principal prior to the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative. “Early on in my position, [Ms. D’s principal] was very closed and everything had to go through her first. She had to check everything, she had to edit everything. I had to get everything approved before I sent it out to teachers, even memos, even emails. Before [the Professional Learning Community initiative], I had to ask her if it was OK if I could go to Grade Leader meeting and we’d go over any presentation before I did it. She had to check everything [emphasis].”

Ms. D. believed that before the Professional Learning Community initiative, the Dovington Primary Elementary School principal did not even consider her to be a teacher-leader. “She only saw me in my instructional role – as a curriculum expert that had the information that she didn’t have. She saw me as almost a resource to pick my brain for her answer.” She offered examples of things that the Principal was apparently willing to involve her in. “I have to talk to you about this. A parent needs this. Can you test this child? Or, Dr. Suess’ birthday is coming up, what do you have, what are you
doing?” When asked to describe her role at Dovington Primary, her answer was quick and to the point – “gopher.”

While Ms. D. was quick to point out that the Dovington Primary Elementary School principal was not very willing to delegate leadership tasks to her, her “curriculum expertise was very important.” At the same time, she recognized that her “leadership expertise was very vague.” In her pre-initiative interview, Ms. D. clearly described a “control freak” Principal who “wanted me to increase teachers’ focus on Literacy” but wasn’t interested in “listening to any of my ideas.”

Following the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. D. noted a significant difference in the same Dovington Primary Elementary School principal’s willingness to distribute responsibility to teacher-leaders. “Her willingness has increased about 100%.... The PLC has allowed [the principal] to open up and she doesn’t have to take the burden of everything. She can now use her resources to the best of their abilities, where she would have to do everything, before.”

Ms. D. described a group process that was recently used to develop a “new lunch schedule. We have a different strength in that meeting and [the Principal] is starting to use all of our strengths. I saw that at least for SPED students, students are losing time because they all have the same common planning time, they all have the same lunch and they all have the same recess. But, if you stagger the first grade lunches, and have that SPED teacher working [assigned] by hall, now you’ve just gained 55 minutes of student-teacher time with that SPED teacher. Before, [the principal] would never have even discussed the school schedule with me.”
Ms. D. also describes a significant shift in her role as a teacher-leader and attributes it to an increase in the Principal’s willingness to include her. “Three years ago, it was more like ‘OK, how’s it going? This was our new program. Report to me on how it’s progressing.’ Now, we’re talking about trends that we’re both seeing in the classrooms that we visit together and separately. Together, we’re deciding how to provide extra support to help students who are having trouble. [The Principal] has set the focus of our work on the bottom 25% of the children we serve, but I am now seen as an instructional leader in addition to my curriculum knowledge.”

The shift that Ms. D. reports appear significant. Data from the researcher’s interviews with the Dovington Primary Elementary School Principal (Ms. G.), described later in Chapter 4, are an opportunity to validate and confirm Ms. D’s perceptions of any changes that took place.

*Teachers Commitment to Work toward Change.* Ms. D. paints a stark picture of teachers’ role in school improvement efforts prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative. “There wasn’t an opportunity for input at all. And if there was input and [the Principal] didn’t like it or if there was a decision made and the teachers didn’t like it, then they’d shut their door. They’d do what they had to do to pass it in for no other reason but to pass it in. Then they just continued to do their own thing.”

Ms. D. described the use of a teacher committee to implement a new spelling program. “I need to be clear, this was not a committee that was tasked to select a new spelling program. The selection had already been made [by the Assistant Superintendent]. This committee got to sit and look at some videos and do some Professional Development on [the new Spelling Program] and then create it in [Dovington].” This
administrative attitude led to the teacher apathy and lack of involvement in or commitment to new initiatives designed to foster school improvement.

Again, following the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. D. paints a decidedly different picture. She describes the grade leaders in her school having “a very, very strong role. I see them working very well together making change. I see their willingness to volunteer for anything and their willingness to do stuff and make change. There is some frustration among grade leaders, though, that not everyone is onboard with working toward change.” She described an individual Kindergarten teacher as a “poison penny” who “purposefully works to undermine other teachers.” “The grade-leaders know [the Kindergarten teacher] is a bully, but no one has taken him on.” While the role of grade leaders has apparently grown at Dovington Primary Elementary School, more work still seems ahead.

When describing her own role as a teacher-leader, Ms. D. suggests it’s the limits of her capacity that is restricting her ability to get more involved, not a lack of willingness. “I am to the point of being so overly committed to things, that I had [a colleague] in my office today about another issue, telling me ‘don’t volunteer for one more thing.’ Because I am so far into everything, I need to step back and make sure that the things I’m already in, I’m giving 150%.”

As for the teachers at Dovington Primary Elementary School, Ms. D. describes their involvement in a “new pilot” program for a new spelling program. The Dovington Intermediate Elementary School had piloted and selected a new program. “They did it the right way. Had a couple of teachers pilot one program for six weeks. Had another couple of teachers pilot another program for another six weeks. And then they voted and
they discussed what they wanted. Unfortunately, they [the Intermediate School teachers] never considered how it would impact [the Primary School teachers].” Despite that lack of consideration, the Primary School teachers took it in stride. “I went to the first and second grade teachers and explained to them that this is what happened, we had a knee-jerk reaction, but we did pilot this appropriately at [the Intermediate School] and we’d like to pilot it here [at the Primary School] in the fall with all of us. Our first and second grade teachers were thrilled and said ‘why do we have to pilot anything? We trust our colleagues. They did the pilot. Let’s just go ahead.’ Instead of saying, which I think would have been the old way, ‘oh, they decided with no input from us and therefore we HAVE to do it.’ Instead, they decided to go with the same program, but “with the newest version, not the version that [the Intermediate School] had originally recommended, because we felt the newer version had better material for early elementary students.”

Notably absent from Ms. D’s description of what could have been an unsuccessful and dividing moment between the Intermediate and Primary Elementary Schools is any discussion of the role of the two principals in brokering this compromise. The compromise was negotiated by the two curriculum specialists, working with the grade leaders and individual teachers, from both schools, who had “expressed an interest in looking at other spelling programs after their MCAS scores showed a weakness in Spelling.” This story represents an excellent example of the level of willingness that teacher-leaders and teachers had to work toward school improvement following the implementation of the Professional Learning Community effort.
Ms. E.

Ms. E.’s role evolved during the course of this Professional Learning Community initiative. At the beginning of this initiative, Ms. E. was the Mathematics Curriculum Specialist for Grades PreK through 8. At the end of the initiative, Ms. E’s role had been reduced to just Grades PreK through 5 but her focus expanded to include Mathematics and Science. This change was made as a result of an administrative decision to focus on the specific Mathematics and Science needs in Grades 6-8 through the use of an experienced Middle School Mathematics and Science teacher as well as a district-wide decision to increase the focus on Science education. Ms. E’s teaching background was primarily K-5. In addition to her history as an elementary Mathematics and Science teacher, Ms. E. has extensive experience working for a noted local textbook publisher, both as a field tester and later as a full-time employee who assisted local school districts who were adopting the publisher’s elementary Mathematics or Science texts.

Teacher-Leader Role. Prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. E. describes a high level of autonomy among Dovington’s teachers. “This was very much a school system of choice, so that teachers within their classrooms chose what they wanted to do and what they didn’t want to do. So, there was inconsistency in terms of what was going on and there was independence. There was a feeling that teachers should be able to teach the way they wanted to teach and do whatever they wanted to do.”

When Ms. E arrived in Dovington, just prior to the start of the Professional Learning Community initiative, she was asked by the Principals to try to get teachers more focused on teaching the same thing. But, there was a problem. “I had no authority. I had responsibility and there was a lot of working with the teachers in order to listen and
then convince them that bringing things together would be better for the students in the school. So, it was an influential kind of position back then, a negotiation-type position rather than a power-type position.”

But, Ms. E. felt she had two significant advantages: her experience and her age. “Most of the teachers knew I’d been there and done that. I was a Math Specialist in [another school district]. I’ve had 20-plus years of Mathematics education so I’m able to tap a lot of resources…. The other thing that played in my favor, I believe, and I’ve talked to other teacher-leaders, was my age. Certain teachers would give younger specialists a much harder time than they gave me. I don’t know if it was respect for my age, or respect for what I knew, or respect for my experience. Either way, I still felt, in those first years, that I had to fight for everything. The teachers gave me nothing.” Ms. E’s description of her having to negotiate everything and rely on her experience and age to develop influence among teachers reflects a traditional role of teacher-leader as expert as also described by Ms. D.

Following the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative, things looks quite different. “Today, it’s like let’s [emphasis] look at where we’re going versus I’d like you to look there. We’ve come more to terms with ‘there has to be more consistency’ versus ‘the right thing is autonomy.’” Again, like Ms. D, Ms. E attributes much of the change in her role to a change in the role of the grade leaders. “I think with the growth of the grade leaders, my role has changed from a leader to a coach in that I’m able to, I don’t want to say delegate, but influence the grade leaders to carry our some of the responsibilities that I may have done in the past, so that I can go out and do new things. For example, in working with assessments, both fall assessment, the formative
assessments and mid-year, both summative and formative, I used to be the one that said ‘now is the time to do the assessments. Give me your data.’ And then I’d do the analysis. Now, I’ve created the monster of ‘we’re ready to do the assessments now, can you get us the spreadsheets? Can we move forward? What do you think about the assessment and how do we change that?’”

Ms. E also described her role in bringing a new textbook series to Dovington. Ms. E was instrumental in having Dovington selected as one of ten locations around the country to participate in a school-wide research study into the effectiveness of a new 2009-copyright Math series. “Every second and fourth grade child took four different tests at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year. Then they’ll take them in third and fifth grades. We’re following students for two years. The program is on the cutting edge and very much involved in the technical aspects of elementary mathematics curriculum and instruction. I knew it was going to be a learning experience and I was looking forward to learning how they did it. It was much more work than I anticipated, and I had committed the district to this work before I was dubbed Science Specialist to go along with being Math Specialist.”

Not only is Ms. E’s role in the research project significant, it has assured Dovington of having the latest elementary mathematics curriculum available. Notable again, is the lack of discussion of the role of administration, specifically school principals, in the decision to become a research site.

Principal Willingness to Distribute Leadership. Since Ms. E’s initial job description required her to interact with three out of four Dovington Principals prior to the initiation of the Professional Learning Community initiative, her descriptions offer a
unique opportunity to study a significant number of Principals at one time. “I was referred to [Dovington] by a parent who is a Principal in [another local school system] who [two principals] knew very well. So there was a trust before I even got here with the connections that we had. All of them would often say, ‘we hired you because you know what you’re doing. Go do it. Whatever you think is broken, tell us about it, and we’ll fix it.’ However, there were some things that the Principals absolutely wanted which was consistency among the grade level which hadn’t necessarily happened because of the autonomy of the teachers and the perception of the union people was that autonomy was what they deserved.”

The Principals did listen to some of Ms. E’s recommendations even prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative. “I can remember the first year when someone had presented a list of where teachers had gone, outside of the system, for Professional Development. I looked at the spreadsheets and I said ‘Is there a page missing?’ because there wasn’t any Math. No one had gone to any Math seminar or conference or anything. Those were some of the things I brought up.”

Following the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. E reported that “there is no lasting resistance to Principals wanting teacher-leaders to lead in their own school. That being said, I wouldn’t call what there was as resistance. There was an awareness that they had to change what was expected of them and that comes a lot from [the Superintendent] in the sense that this is how it used to be – you are in charge and you are in control. Now, the expectation of the top administration has changed in the sense that ‘you need to pay more attention to these other things’ therefore you need to get some of the curriculum off of your plate in order to have room for this
other stuff. I’ve witnessed that changed. That’s changed dramatically. I wouldn’t say that there was a resistance to it. It was a ‘how do I cope? How do I make this happen?’"

Ms. E seems to be implying here that the increase in the principals’ willingness to distribute leadership to their teacher-leaders is in response to a top-down edict from the Superintendent to do just that. If that is so, it could have a significant impact on the long-term sustainability of the Professional Learning Community initiative in Dovington.

*Teachers’ Commitment to Work toward Change.* Prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative in Dovington, Ms. E reports that “there was a lot of ‘we’re not doing any more.’ There was pressure from strong union advocates to limit people to what they do. ‘Don’t do that!’ If it’s a rainy or snowy day, some teachers will put on a raincoat and go outside [and do bus duty] because they feel there is a safety issue. They’ve had union people come up to them and say ‘don’t do that because we spent so much time negotiating bus duty out of the contract.’"

Ms. E also described instances where teachers were pressured to not take on other instruction or curriculum-related tasks, more directly related to what goes on in the classroom. “There are a number of people who will say ‘Don’t do this specific task’ and that something is what I would now consider to be a Professional Learning Community task.” Ms. E. summarized the teachers’ commitment to change and improvement as “inconsistent among different teachers – some teachers wanting to do more, but afraid to step up to the plate,” apparently bowing to pressures to “influence what teachers and teacher-leaders do or don’t do…. There really was a culture of go in the room in the morning, close the door and do your thing. There was not a lot of accountability in terms
of ‘is the thing you’re doing significantly different from the thing the teacher next door is doing?’”

After the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. E describes a different Dovington. She now describes grade leaders as “facilitators of change within their group, whereas four years ago, I was the instigator of change. I was the one who had to do most of the work, too, to get them going. People have stepped up to the table a lot more. There has been a major change in culture at both schools from being within your own classroom and you’re in your own environment to working better as a team.”

Ms. E offers a “major example” of the new role that teachers and teacher-leaders have assumed at the Dovington Primary Elementary School. “The first grade really understand assessing for the purpose of reporting to parents versus assessing for placement versus assessing a student against the curriculum standards. So they talked about how they’re going to use data to report to parents and is there also a way to use data in order to help with the placement process. They came up with a brilliant solution – the teachers themselves. In the past, it was ‘tell me how to do this’ whereas now it is ‘this is what we want to do, what do you think?’ The solution they developed “satisfied them, satisfied me and satisfied the kids.”

The first grade team has also taken on the task of data analysis as well. “They bring the information to their grade meetings and talk about it. They’ve all started to specialize as well. [Teacher’s name] is the website guru. If you want something from the web, she’s the one. [Other teacher’s name] is really stronger with the technology so she’ll help people with assessments, with the spreadsheets. [Another teacher] is the ‘center’ person. She can come up with the very creative learning centers and they duplicate them
for everyone in the grade to use. This is very, very, very different from where we were four years ago.”

Overall, “teachers are taking more responsibility not only for what goes on in their classroom but also for working with their peers, for a combination of reasons: understanding that it’s expected in our school system where historically it was OK to close your door. Now it’s not. You have planning time, it’s expected that you share information and that’s a top-down kind of expectation.” While Ms. E still feels that collaboration is, in part, practiced because it is expected, “the enormous amount of standards and curriculum that has been added has really caused people to understand that they can’t do it on their own.”

While Ms. E seems to indicate that teachers and teacher-leaders are more connected and committed to participating in school improvement efforts since the Professional Learning Community began, pockets of resistance remain. Last year, a grade leader at Dovington Primary Elementary School resigned his position as grade leader citing his perception that the qualities of a Professional Learning Community were not being followed. Subsequent to his resignation as a formal teacher-leader, Ms. E. reports that “we got an email from one of the former grade-leaders saying ‘don’t go to this grade-leader meeting, because it’s voluntary.’ He sent that to all of the teacher-leaders.” Although all the remaining teacher-leaders reportedly did attend the meeting, his bold and borderline insubordinate message serves as a reminder that not all of Dovington’s teachers are at the same place on the willingness-to-work-toward-improvement continuum.
Mr. F

Mr. F is the Principal of the Dovington Intermediate Elementary School and has held that position for the past 6 years, having previously served as Assistant Principal for three years prior. Mr. F. is considered a popular leader by staff and parents alike. He is a resident of Dovington and his only child is a student at the school. Dovington Intermediate Elementary School serves all of Dovington’s students in grades 3, 4 and 5 and is physically connected to the Dovington Primary Elementary School through a common cafeteria and gymnasium.

Teacher-Leader Role. Prior to the initiation of the Professional Learning Community initiative in Dovington, Mr. F reports that “if you look back to those years before we had gotten started with the Professional Learning Communities, I think you would see a lot of things, not on purpose, were where people thought it was top-down. If you look at the meetings, they were more information meetings versus information where teachers were collaborating and actually doing, moving towards certain goals.” When describing the role of the grade leaders, Mr. F suggested that grade leaders “were coming to a meeting once a month, but looking for the guidance of our [Curriculum Specialist Teacher-Leaders]. They were doing the leading of the meeting, versus the grade leaders doing the leading of the meeting.”

Mr. F described his meeting with grade leaders as “complaining sessions. They were bringing the concerns of the grade to me and they wanted answers immediately, versus us talking about the needs of the school and going back and working on issues that we saw from the school and moving forward with things.” And even when the meetings weren’t complaint-focused, grade-leader meetings would focus on issues “ranging from
‘can we get the blacktop at recess swept off?’ to looking at when field trips were going to take place. Very surface-type information. They also looked at budget stuff on what they wanted to order for their grade level. Lot’s of running-the-building-type things.”

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, the role of teacher-leaders in the Dovington Intermediate Elementary School has changed. Now, grade leaders run twice-monthly grade-level meetings where they are “looking at curriculum issues that we’ve started on a curriculum afternoon or taking a look at some of the summer curriculum and where we are in a progression or along a timeline. They set their own agenda. They’ve got 45 minutes because the meetings happen during their common planning time. They may be looking at how they did on a math common assessment – looking for areas that were weak. Or, there may be a discussion on what worked and what didn’t work and is the assessment OK or do we need to change it?”

Mr. F described the school’s most significant accomplishment during the most recent school year and the role that teacher-leaders played in that success. “This year we moved to a full inclusion model. We spent the previous year surveying teachers and having those discussions on what would it look like if every classroom had students that needed some sort of support. I think the biggest shift was that Special Education teachers would need to go between more than just two classrooms and teachers could not see how that could work. We [the grade leaders and administration] learned that in other school systems Special Education teachers were going between 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 classrooms. So with that knowledge, we moved forward with the changes, providing support for the teachers and time so they could plan with each other. The grade-leaders insisted on the time piece and I think that was a big step. Our teacher-leaders had a big part in that success.”
Principals’ Willingness to Distribute Leadership. When faced with the prospect of beginning the Professional Learning Community initiative, Mr. F felt more than his share of apprehension. “Any new initiative can make you anxious on how the rest of the staff sees this going. I think that hearing the phrase ‘open and honest communication’ is always a scary thing without having norms in place, but that was scheduled to be part of our Professional Learning Community work. I think that people are very capable of being ‘open and honest’ to a fault sometimes without being constructive about what they’re being ‘open and honest’ about or without being able to come up with solutions, just complaints.”

In spite of his initial hesitation, Mr. F decided to support the creation of Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders in the Dovington Intermediate Elementary School. “I was pushing for those positions. I felt that they were the instructional go-to’s and I felt that teachers were looking for someday to help them in each of those curriculum areas, particularly help dealing with parents who would ask a lot of questions about their high-end kids. And they were at that time a great resource for us on those. Also, they were able to look at the results of our standardized tests and tell us what we needed to do in certain curriculum areas.” Judging from this description, it appears that Mr. F was supportive, albeit apprehensive of the concept of teacher-leadership but viewed their role in a traditional way, as curriculum specialists, rather than as teacher-leaders.

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, Mr. F appears more willing to distribute leadership tasks to his teacher-leaders. “They are a part of our school leadership team. They will meet with teachers and use the stop-light method we had for Professional Development with Nancy Love a year and a half ago and they’ll walk
teachers through that versus me walking teachers through that. Or they’ll meet with
teachers themselves after the teachers have done it because they’ve all been trained in the
method. They look at the data and at the kids who may be struggling and make sure that
we’ve got some sort of interventions that we’re doing with those kids.”

Mr. F sounds convinced that teacher-leaders are an asset to his building and that it
makes sense to delegate leadership responsibilities to them. “I think they need to have
this kind of responsibility. If you want a good school and you want it to run well, I think
that you need to have as many teachers on your side leading things because you don’t
want to hear me day-in and day-out. They would rather hear from their colleagues. Plus
there’s not enough time in the day for an individual administrator to do it. We’ve got a
lot of smart people out there. We’ve got to use them.”

There’s an excitement and a level of pride in his voice as he describes the changes
that have taken place since the Professional Learning Community initiative has started.
“Over the course of the past four years, they’ve [teacher-leaders] become more leaders
and less paper-pushers. In the end, that’s a good thing. I strongly believe that you’re
only as good as your grade leaders too, and you’ve got to get the right people in there to
do that. I think we’ve been fortunate to have very, very good grade leaders. I’ve got
three new ones this year and I think they’re all going to be dynamite.”

Teachers’ Commitment to Work toward Change. Mr. F reports that there was
wide-spread skepticism among staff members during the time preceding the Professional
Learning Community initiative, and this doubt manifested itself in a reluctance on the
part of teachers to take on additional responsibilities. “There was concern about the new
job description when it came out -- the number of meetings and the amount of work that
was described in the description. They thought it was different from what was previously asked of them to do – and it was. There was an underlying current that there was a lack of trust when the initial job description came out because they felt that administration was going to be asking them to do work beyond what they should have to do. It was that way until some training was done and they realized we were trying to bring them to a working partnership versus a top-down, you’re-going-to-have-to-do-all-this type of arrangement.”

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, though, that lack of trust seems to have diminished significantly. During the time when the school was considering becoming a fully-inclusive school, grade leaders played an integral role in moving the school in that direction and bridged any of the remnants of distrust that may have remained. “Their role was taking part in the discussions in staff meetings, showing the different models and showing the pros and cons, because we showed both sides. Because the teacher-leaders could see the big picture, they were advocates for this change and they were able to talk to the teachers and encourage them and let them know that this could work, but that it was going to be a change.”

More importantly, their role was not limited to being the implementation arm of an administrative decision, the teacher-leaders “were part of the decision. One of the teacher-leaders was also doing an administrative internship so this was part of her internship. Moving to a fully inclusive school was one of the things for her Master’s paper as well. I had another teacher in 5th grade, one of the teacher-leaders, who also wrote a paper on moving towards a fully-inclusive school. So, having them do outside research also helped because they could see the necessity for doing something like that.”
Finally, Mr. F described a circumstance where teachers, not teacher-leaders, but teachers, developed a new student assistance team process. “The teachers’ goal was to get more teachers on the team and training those teachers in a process so that teachers are trying more ways to help a child learn and documenting those pieces before coming to the SAT [Student Assistance Team] process. The teachers set up training sessions over the summer and asked if we could use one of our Professional Development Days to train the staff and model its use for the faculty. Through that modeling and through some revamping and reworking, we’ve now got a process down that we feel is not just sending kids to be tested. We’re trying to look at the specific needs of the kids and do they really need this testing or do they just need the material taught to them in a different way. What was really helpful is that because this was teacher-initiated, albeit mostly from Special Education teachers, but it encouraged teachers to talk about their craft in a kid-specific way.”

Apparently, not only are Dovington Intermediate Elementary School teacher-leaders becoming more committed to working toward school improvement, but the individual teachers appear to share that commitment. Mr. F was prompt to point out that the changes to the SAT process were “entirely teacher generated” since “the teacher-leaders were pretty well tied up with the inclusion project.” This teacher-generated effort suggests that the teacher empowerment that comes with a well-implemented Professional Learning Community is beginning to take root in Dovington Intermediate Elementary School – an indication that the initiative might be showing signs of sustainability.
Ms. G

Ms. G is the Principal of the Dovington Primary Elementary School and has held that position for the past 6 years, having served as Assistant Principal for the three years previous. Ms. G is a strong, early-childhood expert who strives to “put students first” in everything she does. Dovington Primary Elementary School serves almost 900 students from grades PreK through 2 and is physically connected to the Dovington Intermediate Elementary School through a common cafeteria and gymnasium.

Teacher-Leader Role. Prior to the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative, and prior to Ms. G becoming the Principal of Dovington Primary Elementary School, Ms. G described a “top-down, exclusive kind of culture” where “most of the decisions were made right inside the Principal’s office and then were taken out to the staff.” As a result, “the staff just felt that they would be told what to do and very much when to do it.”

Following her ascension to the Principalship, Ms. G did begin to use her teacher-leaders in school leadership roles, with mixed and limited results. The existing Literacy Specialist “was a very difficult person for members of the staff to feel comfortable with – extremely [emphasis] knowledgeable in her field, but in personal interactions, she quickly fell apart. So, there was a lot of push-back whenever she came around. This made it very hard because some of our initiatives from that time like guided reading and the literacy block were all part of that time. They were both great ideas but we didn’t have a person, I felt, who could really get the classroom teachers to optimize the possibilities and the amount of time that the initiative required. In the end, we ended up working around her more than through her to get those initiatives jump-started.”
Grade leaders also had limited impact on the school. Grade leaders “were the voice for their grade. But, there was nothing going on between grades. So, first grade would only talk about first grade things, and second grade would only talk about second grade things. There was no connectedness. Everything was happening in isolation.” Ms. G believed that their role was so un-important that the positions could have been cut. “I could have gotten the same information from Grade 1 if I had gone to any of the teachers and asked the question. There was no real cohesiveness in the grades in coming together to do the work that grades can do and I certainly didn’t see that as a group, the grade leaders were making any ground in terms of effective change or increase collaboration.”

This bleak and dismal description of the role of teacher-leaders prior to the Professional Learning Community is in stark contrast to Ms. G’s assessment of their role following the implementation. As evidence, she offered her analysis of the monthly meetings that took place between the Principal, the Grade Leaders and the Curriculum Specialists. “After we started to talk about Professional Learning Communities, we really opened ourselves up to a change that invited more voices to the table. Before then, the meetings were very much nuts and bolts kind of agendas. Now there is a lot more discussion and there’s disagreement. There’s an opportunity to talk about best practices. There’s an opportunity to discuss what we all feel would be best across the school. I think we’ve gotten to a different level of how the time is used. The meetings I attended when I was Assistant Principal were very much information from the Principal down to the grade leaders. There was never any discussion at those meetings.”
Ms. G describes a very important role that teacher-leaders play at Dovington Primary – advocate. She cites a recent example where changes were made to the Math support structure. “Taking that change to a group of teachers who sometimes expect support to last for a whole year – that’s where the grade leaders have been a great vehicle for understanding those changes and then communicating them to the grade level. They took a decision that we had made as a group and they took it back to the grade, as they often do, and advocated for it. The teachers automatically trust a peer more and the teacher-leaders were able to describe why there had to be less support and the teachers understood and accepted it.”

Finally, the teacher-leaders developed a new student placement process driven by data. Previously all students had been ranked, using various objective criteria, from 1 to 4 with 1 being the most gifted and 4 the least gifted. “Last year, we limited classes to 1 through 3’s or 2 through 4’s so that there wasn’t a 1-4 class, reducing the amount of differentiation that the teacher had to do. We went to a heterogeneous 1 through 4 grouping this year. We’re doing it because the research shows that grouping kids heterogeneously this way is healthy for all kids. The Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders recommended the change and advocated for it. We’ve been doing so much work with differentiation that I feel that the teachers really need to put some of that work to good use.”

*Principals’ Willingness to Distribute Leadership.* Prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative, and even before Ms. G’s appointment as Principal, the Principal showed little interest in empowering teachers. “School Improvement Plans were directed by the Principal and they were written by the Curriculum Specialists. The
Principal would tell the Specialist what goal to write about and then brought it back to the School Council, but without any real discussion with the staff as a whole or the community as a whole. So, it was not a culture that was very much directed towards certain goals that had been set by the Principal and there was not much of a voice from the other parts of the community.”

Following her appointment as Principal, Ms. G showed some signs of wanting to empower her teacher-leaders and being willing to distribute some leadership responsibilities to them. “As Assistant Principal, I was always very frustrated at what I saw happening and that so many decisions were not being made by the staff as a group, but rather by the Principal. So I began to make some changes. The changes I made were more to try to connect the staff. They were grass roots kind of things – simple things like making sure the staff had snacks at faculty meetings. Then the School Council became a much more interactive group – slowly, because I was still getting the feel for the school.”

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, Ms. G reports having developed a new respect and admiration for what teacher-leaders can accomplish if given the opportunity. “I have over the last couple of years developed a heightened respect for what they know and what they can bring to our school. They have been instrumental in opening my eyes to possibilities that I never, ever thought existed.”

Specifically, Ms. G described the curriculum and instruction role that Curriculum Specialist played in her school and how curriculum consistency, a goal of hers, was being developed. “Classroom teachers do a great job of teaching the material, but they need to have a channel, they need to have a clearinghouse, so we don’t go back to where we were and teacher A is teaching this that way and teacher B is going to be teaching completely
different. We are reaching a point where I’m actively seeing consistency of curriculum in the classroom, and a continuity that reflects what we want – that each child is getting the same learning experience. It doesn’t even matter if you’re in French Immersion, Montessori or traditional. This accomplishment is almost exclusively due to the coordination and clearinghouse work that these two people [the Curriculum Specialists] do.”

As far as future work is concerned, Ms. G seems more than willing to include teacher-leaders in the process of achieving their next major goal. “I think that grade leaders have become a very strong and clear voice for their grades and that’s good. Now, I think our grades need to learn how to use their common planning time more effectively. I can’t emphasize enough the importance and effectiveness of the grade leader in facilitating the improved use of common planning time.”

*Teachers’ Commitment to Work toward Change.* Prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative in Dovington, teachers and teacher-leaders did not exhibit a strong commitment to working toward change. Ms. G. did not mention or report on any teacher-dissatisfaction with her predecessor’s top-down Draconian style. They just seemed to think they weren’t supposed to be involved. “All of the meetings had very broad, building-based agendas. I would turn to each member of the group and say what’s going on in first grade, and then I’d move to the second and Kindergarten and that was it. I would take those issues, myself, and try to take care of the problems. By problems, I mean ‘we have an upcoming field trip and we need one more bus,’ or ‘it’s too noisy in the cafeteria.’ The issue were predominantly operational with few educational issues every discussed.”
After some more reflection, though, Ms. G wasn’t so sure if the teachers were unwilling to work on school improvement efforts prior to the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative, or if it was other factors at work. “They didn’t have a model to follow. They didn’t know what the possibilities were. They were used to a particular format and they figured that’s what they continue to deal with. We were on the edge. We have these really good, smart people. They weren’t being allowed opportunities to express that in terms of what they could as a grade, as a person, as a professional, what they could give to the rest of the building.”

Ms. G concluded her pre-initiative interview with a conclusion that the timing of the Professional Learning Community program was ripe. “We were right on the edge of feeling this impatience and readiness to move forward and expose, and it really was exposure, some of the possibilities that existed within the resources of our own staff. So it was a very exciting time. We came from a time that was very closed to sensing that we could create something very exciting and open and then Professional Learning Communities as an initiative pushed us ahead to really move in that direction.”

But, did the initiative live up to its promise and impact the teachers’ willingness to work on school improvement efforts? Ms. G. offers a dramatic story of how teachers at her school made a major change to the process of placing students in classrooms for the next academic year as evidence that, following the Professional Learning Community initiative, teachers were willing to work, in this case without administrative prodding, on an area that they thought would improve their school. “The shift came after the Professional Learning Community came, when we brought the teachers themselves directly into the placement process and gave them time to [do it].”
“Everyone’s voice was welcomed and the teachers formed classes using … data of course. We had assessment information as well as other data. It was all put on the table and the classes were formed. No moves were made without the consensus of the group. There was total investment.” The teachers also created some internal balances to assure that the process wasn’t dominated by a small group of teachers. “Teachers were not assigned to the classroom list. These were all just groups of children who the teachers felt would work and learn well together in classrooms. So they designed generic classrooms and not Miss Smith’s class and Mrs. Jones’ class. They tried to create classes in which children need specialist instructions; they cluster two or three of the children together. In general, the classes were created from student information and then assigned a teacher, but the assignments were not teacher-driven by Miss Smith who only likes brighter students.”

Changing the student assignment process required that the administration alter some of their expectations and traditions regarding student placement. “We’d always tried to get our teacher assignments out at the last day of school. Now we said, ‘That won’t work.’ That rushes it. We slowed the process down a bit by not sending home the placement letter until after the school year and we took it out of the guidance counselors list of responsibilities, not because they weren’t doing the very best job they could, but because this made so much more sense.”

Another teacher initiated change, a change to the District School Calendar to include Baseline Kindergarten assessment days, was directly observed by the researcher and will be described in the Researcher Observations section of this Chapter.
Mr. H.

Mr. H. is a thirty-plus year veteran of the Dovington Public Schools and currently serves as the Assistant Superintendent in charge of Curriculum and Instruction. Mr. H. began his career as an elementary teacher and has served Dovington as teacher, guidance counselor, Assistant Principal, Elementary School Principal and now Assistant Superintendent. He can provide a rich history of both the pre-initiative Dovington as well as how Dovington is currently working. Moreover, his PreK-12 perspective offers the researcher to see an outsider’s perspective on how the schools operate.

*Teacher-Leader Role.* Prior to the initiation of the Professional Learning Community initiative in Dovington, Ms. H reports that High School Department Heads focused primarily on “their courses, deciding whether or not they were meeting the needs of the students and whether or not they needed to add, delete or modify courses… Their role was really around making sure that the right people were in front of the right students and [the individual teachers] had whatever they needed, in terms of supplies, to be successful in their classroom.”

Mr. H’s view of middle school team leaders was sharply different, however. “The team leader role, in my opinion, was more of handling a lot of parent communication and they were the representative around scheduling, looking at putting in dibs for a certain schedule. They represented their team for any kind of field trip or assembly or occasionally dealing with issues with Guidance about certain students on the team that needed assistance. Their leadership role had very little to do with curriculum.”

The role of elementary grade leaders, the third of four categories of teacher-leaders in Dovington, “was strictly management – more about making sure that everyone
had enough supplies – and communication – making sure that the people in the grade knew what the Principal was doing.” It was all about “nuts and bolts. Grade leaders passed out things; distributed things; collected things; organized things and was [sic] the person who met with the Principal and other people and disseminated the information out.”

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, Mr. H shared his belief that the role of teacher-leaders had “changed somewhat. What I see is that they run their meeting differently. There is a sense of even though they may not have formal norms, there is better meeting behavior around norms where all members that I see feel better about speaking up and I feel that the lead there was to promote that and to be receptive of all and seek additional opinions.”

At the High School, Mr. H reported some change, though not substantial. “I think the High School Department Leaders haven’t changed much. They may have changed a little bit around their meetings, but I think they were always, maybe not talking about instruction, but they remain talking about courses and content of courses and whether or not we need to look at the sequencing of courses. I still think they focus on those things.”

Mr. H offered that one of the four teacher-leader groups in Dovington (Elementary Grade Leaders, Middle School Team Leaders, High School Department Heads and Curriculum Specialists) has seen more growth in their role than the other three. “As far as Curriculum Specialists, I think there is the biggest change. They’ve really grabbed hold of the responsibility of professional development. They have been in on the planning and the actual implementation of the professional development and then taken a lot of personal commitment and pride in the quality of those days, to the point
where they’re as nervous as I am on those days. I think that’s a part of their understanding of their role as a leader in that area.”

In conclusion, Mr. H, while acknowledging growth, concedes that Dovington still has some way to go. “I don’t think we’re there yet in our goal to make conversations more effective, talking about instruction, but they [teacher-leaders] do see themselves more in the role of facilitating instructional discussions than they did in the past. I see them as questioning more of the curriculum decisions than they did in the past. I think they feel more comfortable questioning that… I think they feel more like a leader.”

Principal’s Willingness to Distribute Leadership. Since only two of the Principals in Dovington were on-board prior to and after the Professional Learning Community initiative, Mr. H focused most of his thoughts on them. The Elementary Principals had just been appointed permanent Principals of their schools just prior to the outset of the initiative and their teacher empowerment showed it. “They were new Principals and there was some anxiety about letting too much go without their knowledge because they knew they would be held accountable. Part of this was because [the previous Superintendent] had them on a short leash with them only having an 18 month contract. So, in their early stages and in the beginning of our Professional Learning Community initiative, there was a tremendous amount of emphasis on details to the point where everything had to be managed by them. The idea of being at every meeting was very, very important to them.”

The leadership style of the High School Principal was completely different, both before and after the Professional Learning Community initiative. Mr. H felt it was important to recognize that each Principal started the initiative in a different place, so
where they ended could be better appreciated and understood. Mr. H noted that even before the initiative, the High School Principal “was a big delegator. I think her style was more ‘John, take care of this. Mark, take care of this. Department Leaders, take care of this. I think [she] was more checking in with people. [She] spent a lot of her time around some of the social issues around her staff and their relationships with her or each other. She also focused on NEASC. As far as the day-to-day stuff, she pretty much delegated everything and floated around to check in.”

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, the Elementary Principal’s willingness to delegate leadership had expanded significantly. “Since we’ve instituted Professional Learning Communities, I think the biggest thing that has changed for the both of them is that Professional Development is an area where their staff can have more involvement. They are more comfortable because they know that it isn’t exclusively up to them to put together the day by themselves. They trust their teacher-leaders to design and execute the Professional Development Day plan.

While Mr. H acknowledges and credits the Dovington Primary Elementary School Principal (Ms. G) with significant growth, there remain pockets of area where she continues to hold tight to the reins. “Special Education is one area where little improvement has been made. She has a strong base of knowledge and a love for it. I think that’s why [she] doesn’t like to delegate out in that area.”

Mr. H believes the Principal with the most willingness to delegate leadership is the Principal of the Dovington Intermediate Elementary School, Mr. F. “I think that [he] has been somebody who would like to trust that if someone is doing something, it’ll get
done. He has a strong trust in his teacher-leaders. He talks about them very highly about their ability to communicate. I think there’s much less of a micromanagement approach.”

Mr. H uses the process of hiring new teachers to illustrate that some Principals remain more willing to delegate leadership than others and, at the same time, he acknowledges the need to do more in this area. “[Mr. F] completely delegates the screening process to teachers and teacher-leaders where [Ms. G] does not. Where there is a difference in style, I think that in a Professional Learning Community, when you have leaders, you have to give those leaders the opportunity to lead. All of the High School Department Heads, for example, do all of the screening interviews for example. I think that’s a great way to say that ‘I trust you. You know what the culture is here. You know the curriculum. You know what we’re looking for and you can help me find it.’”

Teachers’ Commitment to Work towards Change. Prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative, Mr. H reported little commitment on the part of teachers or teacher-leaders to engage in the process of improving Dovington’s schools. High School Department Heads “were driven by SAT scores and perhaps by the number of kids taking Honors and AP courses. But, the strive [sic] to do well never went beyond the walls of their department.”

At the Middle School, team leaders “were more focused on getting from September to June and getting all the things done, done. It was more mechanical. ‘When’s Nature’s Classroom? When’s the awards ceremony? When are parent conferences? When is the magazine drive?’ They were more interested in those kind of things and less interested in moving the school forward.” The Elementary Grade leaders “were pretty similar to the Middle School team leaders. ‘What does the Principal want
me to do? Does everyone have their Math manipulatives? Are there enough books?

Enough desks?” It had a very operational focus before the PLC.”

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, teacher-leaders were beginning to exhibit a commitment to working toward school improvement by moving away from their “operational” focus and focusing on efforts designed to improve student learning at their schools. “Department Heads at the High School are willingly working with the Principal to design and implement Professional Development Days. Where before they were passive, now they are assuming an active role to improve student learning. They sit with the Principal and advocate for training that they feel their teachers need to improve instruction for our students.”

Middle School Team Leaders and Elementary Grade Leaders have also begun to exhibit interest in moving beyond the “nuts and bolts” of operations and are beginning to take some of the Professional Development they received from Nancy Love and apply it to embrace the notion of working toward school improvement. “They are now talking about an item analysis that might be a problem area and they’ll voice to their teachers or to their team about a particular skill that we’re having particular difficulty with and leading a discussion about who has good lessons or ideas to build that skill amongst all of our nth graders.”

But, Mr. H believes that one critical area still needs significant work – having teachers and teacher-leaders utilize their common-planning time more effectively. “The history is that originally planning time was called ‘free time’ and teachers balked for years at our attempts to influence how they spent that time. At least we’re making inroads and beginning to see significant improvements not only in the way that common
planning time is being implemented, but also in the frequency. I think we’re getting there. We’ll know we’ve made more improvement when you hear conversations in the teachers’ room with one teacher admitting, ‘I have no clue how to help this kid,’ and other teachers don’t respond with judgment, but with suggestions and assistance. I believe we’re seeing more of that than we’ve ever seen before. Not enough, but more.”

Document Review

Traditionally, the Dovington Public Schools and the Dovington Teachers’ Association have worked diligently to write detailed job descriptions for all positions recognized by the collective bargaining agreement. All of the positions being studied as part of this project have had their written job descriptions revised during and following the Professional Learning Community initiative. These revisions offer the researcher a rich source of additional objective data to review to help answer this study’s first research question – whether or not a change in the role of the teacher-leaders took place following the Professional Learning Community initiative. A narrative account and analysis of changes in job descriptions follows.

Teacher-Leaders’ Role. There are a number of relevant teacher-leader job descriptions that offer an additional view of how the role of teacher-leader was viewed in Dovington before and after the Professional Learning Community initiative.

Elementary Grade Leaders. The Job Description for Elementary Grade Leaders, approved by the Dovington School Committee on August 19, 1999 focused the role on primarily operational issues, such as: “assist[ing] the Principal in developing and communicating budget requests; assist[ing] in the inventory and allocation of grade supplies; promot[ing] communication – serving as a link among staff, teachers and
administration; and organizing and facilitating operations issues, e.g. scheduling recess or coordinating activities and assemblies that are common to the grade.”

The most recent Job Description for Elementary Grade Leaders was approved by the Dovington School Committee almost 6 years later, on June 16, 2005. This job description is precisely the same as the one approved in August 1999, with one additional articulated role – “a Principal/Curriculum Director may request these school-based leaders to facilitate communication and coordinate and monitor the delivery and attainment of goals set forth by the district’s strategic plan, professional development plan, and building-based school improvement plan.” These changes, which take place simultaneously with the Matt King Kick-off of the Professional Learning Community initiative in August 2005 signals the district’s shift in thought regarding these positions. First, the district specifically states it’s expectation that those who are assigned Grade Leader positions are considered to be “school-based leaders.” Finally, the new role of the Grade Leader to “coordinate and monitor the delivery and attainment of… goals” is a significant move to expand the role of grade-leaders toward school leadership, while maintaining the old functions. There are no other changes to this Job Description after June 2005.

Middle School Team Leaders. Of the four different types of teacher-leaders in Dovington, the role of the Middle School Team Leader has seen the most focus and controversy. There appears to be a confluence of circumstances that led to that state. First, Dovington Middle School has experienced significant turnover in leadership at the same time as the Professional Learning Community initiative was underway. Also, the leadership of the Dovington Teachers’ Association all resides at the Middle School and
the role of the Middle School Team Leader has always been a source of irritation for a small but vocal subset of the Middle School staff.

From September 1997 to June 2005, the Middle School Team Leader Job Description focused exclusively on assisting in running the operations of the Middle School. Team Leaders were expected to “serve as a link between staff, teachers and the administration; ensure that teachers participate in the requisitioning, inventorying, and allocating of supplies, equipment and other material; assist substitute teachers; and facilitate responsibility for storage areas, mail, teacher centers, corridors, bulletin boards, and recess duties.” As evidence of the strictly operational focus of the position, the only thing changed from the earlier (pre-1997) job description, the job goal to “promote collegiality and a positive school climate” was removed and was not part of the Job Description from 1997-2005.

At the end of the 2005 School Year, the Job Description of the Middle School Team Leader was upgraded along with all of the other teacher-leader job descriptions. The upgrade was similar to the upgrade that all of the teacher-leader job descriptions received just at the start of the Professional Learning Community initiative. The phrase “team leader will ensure collegiality and a positive school spirit” had returned. At the same time, this teacher-leader was also expected to “coordinate and monitor the delivery and attainment of goals set forth by the district’s strategic plan, professional development plan, and building-based school improvement plans” just like all of the other teacher-leader job descriptions that were amended in June 2005. Finally, the job description added an instructional leadership task. Middle School Team Leaders were now expected to “coordinate consistent homework expectations, scheduling projects and long-term
assignments in a balanced way, and develop units which are thematic, integrated, and/or establish the link between subject areas.”

In July 2006, a new Principal was hired to lead Dovington Middle School, due to the retirement of the sitting Principal. The new Principal, hired in March 2006, spent much of her time prior to her official start date, working to re-design all of the teacher-leadership positions at Dovington Middle School. The work was completed on May 9, 2006, almost two months before the new Principal started. The changes to the Middle School Team Leader Job Description were so significant that the Dovington Teachers’ Association would only agree to a “two-year pilot program for shared leadership” in their Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Association on June 23, 2006, one week prior to the new Principal’s first day.

In her proposal to the Dovington Superintendent, the Principal-elect advised that the revised Job Description shifted the Team Leader roles and responsibilities “from the dual-role of curriculum and instruction leader and team/building-based manager, to a more specified role team/building based facilitator of whole faculty shared leadership and action orientation, with some minor team management functions…. In the spirit of developing into a true professional learning community, the organization, facilitation, management, and communication of these leadership groups will be the primary function of the building-based team leaders.” In addition to meeting with their teams each week, Team Leaders were now responsible for “thirty-nine (39) team leader meetings per year with the principal’s leadership team to meet the overarching goal of continuous school improvement with a focus on results at [Dovington Middle School].”
The Principal responsible for making these changes to the Job Description in March 2006 left the employ of the Dovington Public Schools effective June 2008 in what the Dovington Superintendent remarked was a “mutual parting of the ways.”

The sitting Middle School Assistant Principal was appointed Interim Principal for the 2008-09 school year and immediately was faced with the expired two-year pilot program and the Association’s refusal to extend the pilot for a third year to allow for a well-paced transition. The Association advocated for a return to the 2005 Job Description while the Interim Principal refused, offering to modify the 2006-08 Description to include some lessons learned from the two-year pilot.

On the day before school opened in August 2008, the Dovington Teachers’ Association agreed to a new one-year pilot with a newly revised Job Description. The job requirements had been lowered from 39 meetings a year to 3 meetings per month. The essence of the job responsibilities remain the same. “Team Leaders will partner with formal school leadership in the shared goal of improving teaching and learning for all students…. These teacher-leaders will examine our current practice and engage in professional learning that will guide decision-making… Team Leaders will work collaboratively to model and influence those practices that will improve student learning for all learners in the spirit of building a true Professional Learning Community.”

*High School Department Leaders*. In June 2005, at the outset of the Professional Learning Community initiative, the Job Description of the High School Department Leaders already had a much stronger curriculum and leadership flavor than any of the other formal teacher-leader positions. Their job goal was clear and broad. “Department Leaders will assist the High School Administration and provide departmental leadership
for implementation of a standards-based curriculum, authentic assessment and modeling of standards-based instructional practices. They will form the NEASC follow-up team to work with the Principal to develop a schedule for implementation of the NEASC recommendations. Department Leaders will be responsible for developing collaborative departmental practices and programs that improve student learning and support the goals of the school.” These Job Descriptions included 13 separate performance responsibilities using active verbs such as “leads,” “coordinates,” “assists,” “collaborates,” “works,” “collects,” and “facilitates.”

In June 2007, the Dovington School Committee approved several minor changes to the High School Department Leader Job Description. These changes include a change in the final change of the Job Goal to include a specific reference to the fact that High School Department Leaders are now “responsible for supporting the attributes of a Professional Learning Community.” Also, the High School Department Leader was now required to “participate as a member of the district’s Curriculum Council” – a 20-plus member Committee that is responsible for overseeing the continuous improvement of Dovington’s various K-12 curriculum areas. These minor changes in responsibility are not, in and of themselves, significant. However, given the extensive Job Description of the High School Department Heads at the outset of the Professional Learning Community initiative, it is not surprising that more changes were not forthcoming.

**Curriculum Specialists.** Dovington has a long history of funding teacher-leadership positions that provide oversight and support of a core curriculum area. During the late 1990’s these positions provided a primarily K-12 focus. As resources became more available in the early 2000’s, these positions became more school or grade-level
focused. As funds became less available in the late ‘00’s, these positions remained
grade-level focused but curriculum specialists began to support more than one core
curriculum area, with Math/Science being paired up, along with Language Arts/Social
Studies. Throughout all of these changes, Curriculum Specialists remained non-
supervisory positions although all Specialists were excused from formal teaching duties
to focus full-time on their curriculum area.

A thorough review of written job descriptions of these positions from 1999 to the
present shows that the written job description has changed very little during that period.
In 1999, for example, the Elementary Literacy Coordinator was responsible for
“providing leadership for the development, assessment, maintenance and revision of the
Language Arts curriculum, to ensure a high-level of literacy across the grades.” The
current Job Description for the Elementary Literacy and Social Studies Curriculum
Specialist contains the exact same language, although the last phrase has been modified
to “ensure continuity [author’s emphasis] and a high level of literacy across the grades.”
Despite this change, this curriculum leadership role of the Curriculum Specialist has
remained relatively unchanged since before the Professional Learning Community.

In fact, all of the major job responsibilities of the Curriculum Specialists have
remained relatively unchanged for the past 8 years. In both cases, Curriculum Specialists
are responsible for “managing all reading programs in the [target grade level], e.g.
Reading Recovery and Wilson Reading, and training all reading tutors.” This
responsibility is unchanged from 1999 to the present. Finally, the requirement to
“provide direction and support in the planning of workshops, in-service programs,
professional development, and parent and community forums” has also remained untouched since 1999.

While the Job Description of the Curriculum Specialists that was in effect prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative has not changed, the Job Descriptions for the other three categories of teacher-leaders (Elementary Grade Leader, Middle School Team Leader, and High School Department Leader) has seen significant changes since the beginning of the Professional Learning Community project. Next, a review of researcher-observed staff interactions will offer an opportunity to consider another source of data in an attempt to answer this study’s three research questions.

**Researcher Observation**

*Kindergarten Baseline Assessment Days*

Four months after the kick-off of the district-wide Professional Learning Community initiative, Dovington’s Kindergarten teachers contacted the Superintendent of Schools requesting a meeting with him and the Principal of the Dovington Primary Elementary School to discuss an educational issue that they needed help resolving. This is a narrative description of the events leading up to the inclusion by the Dovington School Committee of three early-release days in the School Calendar to allow Kindergarten teachers to conduct individual assessments of each of their Kindergarten students.

On January 26, 2006, less than 5 months after the entire Dovington teaching staff attended the Opening Day event kicking off the Professional Learning Community initiative, the Superintendent and Ms. G. (the Principal of the Dovington Primary Elementary School) met with the entire Kindergarten teaching staff at 11:00 a.m., during
their common planning time. The staff shared their extensive baseline assessment tool that they had developed over the course of the past several years and expressed their concern that they had been unable to complete the assessments of their students until late October or early November. By then, they feared, they had already lost several weeks of quality instructional time and had defeated the purpose of using data to inform their instruction. Encouraged by the concepts of teacher empowerment and “open and honest communication” that were highlighted by the Opening Day speaker, the teachers decided to recommend to the Superintendent that three days in September be set aside in the school calendar where Kindergarten students would attend school on a limited basis in order for teachers to be able to conduct these assessments. They felt that this plan would address their concern that they were not completing assessing their entire class of students until late October.

The Superintendent shared his concerns with the proposal, highlighting how parents loathed days such as these as they imposed significantly on families who thought they would no longer have to worry about daycare after their child started full-day Kindergarten. He probed for other options, including hiring additional paraprofessionals during the day to allow teachers the time to conduct the assessments without affecting the schedule. He asked the teachers to consider his concerns and objections and reconsider their recommendation. He scheduled another meeting in a week and told the teachers that he would support their final recommendation but trusted them that they would fully consider his concerns and objections before coming up with a final recommendation.

The Superintendent and Principal met with the teachers one week later and reiterated their initial recommendation. They told the Superintendent that they
considered his objections and decided that their plan allowed teachers to get the Baseline Assessments done quicker and enabled them to use the data earlier in the school year to inform their instruction. True to his word, the Superintendent presented the plan to the Dovington School Committee, informing them that he and the Principal had “met several times with the Kindergarten team to brainstorm ideas for providing more time to conduct these assessments. The result of these collaborative sessions is a recommendation to include three dates in the School Calendar during the month of September when only a portion of the Kindergarten students would attend school each day.” Following five minutes of discussion, the Committee unanimously accepted the Superintendent’s recommendation.

This event will now be reviewed against the study’s three research questions using the researcher’s observations, a review of the Superintendent’s memorandum to the School Committee, and an interview with the Principal and Superintendent as data.

Teacher-Leader Role. According to Ms. G, the Kindergarten Grade leader had little role in the effort to solve the teachers’ concern regarding the delay in completing Kindergarten Baseline Assessments. “The need for more time to conduct Baseline Kindergarten Assessments came from the teachers. The Kindergarten Grade Leader was about to keep them on target and keep their goal clearly articulated so they didn’t get random. She kept them on track. They [the Kindergarten teachers] came up with the proposal, including making the calendar shift in order to facilitate the change.”

Principals’ Willingness to Distribute Leadership. Ms. G. described the long-time efforts on the part of the Kindergarten teachers to get this issue addressed. “Initially [prior to the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative], it came
through the School Improvement Plan process. It finally got some visibility when it became part of the School Improvement Plan from the Kindergarten teacher on the School Improvement Committee. It was part of the Plan for a couple of years and we just couldn’t see a way of getting it. Nothing seemed to work. There was a level of frustration on the part of the Kindergarten team that it had gotten to the point of being in the School Improvement Plan and it appeared that I was not moving on it at all and my excuses largely were that I didn’t see how it might work.”

Following the initial Professional Learning Community presentation, the Kindergarten teachers saw an opportunity to jump-start the discussions. Ms. G reported that “the decision was made to have the Kindergarten team come up with a proposal for [the Superintendent]. At that point, it became a process that was no longer my responsibility alone, but rather theirs. I gave the Kindergarten teachers time to meet together to really hammer it you that come up with a proposal. They then moved to the step that the proposal needed to go to [the Superintendent] as well as to me.” In this description, Ms. G describes her efforts using passive verbs and the passive voice (“the decision was made” rather than “I decided,” for example). This suggests that early in the initiative, Ms. G remained reluctant (or unwilling) to distribute leadership to the Kindergarten team.

But what about the Superintendent? Surely his willingness to assure the Kindergarten team that he would bring forward whatever they finally recommended as a solution to this issue is evidence that he was willing to distribute leadership to the teachers, especially after he had indicated his unhappiness with their original main proposal. Could it be that the Superintendent wasn’t clear? Ms. G doesn’t think so, as
she describes her memory of the first meeting. “[The Superintendent] provided them with feedback, talked about the impact on families of having days off so early in the school year, and they [the teachers] went in the direction that [the Superintendent] clearly didn’t want them to go in.”

A discussion with the Superintendent revealed that he wasn’t as willing as the facts may lead one to believe. “I felt cornered. I felt like I was being tested – that my commitment to teacher empowerment was being tested. Here it was the first time I had acted on the empowerment that we talked about and how could I reject their recommendation? I was clear that I didn’t like it, and honestly, I thought that they would have backed down once I let them know my concerns. In the end, I decided to honor my commitment and get the School Committee to approve the calendar change, figuring that it might build some future momentum.”

*Teachers’ Commitment to Work toward Change.* This episode does offer evidence that the teachers were willing to work with administration to improve and change schools. Their commitment is illustrated by the tenacity with which they held on to their original recommendation for a calendar change in spite of the fact that they were moving in a “direction that [the Superintendent] clearly didn’t want them to go in.”

While the Superintendent’s claim that the teachers’ tenacity was motivated more by a desire to “test” the limits of their new-found empowerment, Ms. G sees their motivation in a more reasonable light. “In my opinion, they [the teachers] saw the opportunity that the Professional Learning Community offered them and decided to try to get this issue resolved. They are quite proud of their home-grown assessment system and were frustrated by the system’s inability to help them do it [the assessment] in a more timely
manner. They stuck to their guns because they felt it was in the best interest of the students.”

Administrative Discussion about the Middle School Team Leader Job Description

The other significant event that the researcher was able to observe (and record) was a meeting that took place on May 13, 2008 to discuss a plan to adjust the Job Description of Middle School Team Leaders following the end of the two-year pilot program on June 30, 2008. Attending the meeting were the Dovington Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent (Mr. H) and the then-current Principal of Dovington Middle School. This meeting took place 6 weeks before the Principal’s abrupt departure from Dovington.

The discussion that took place at the meeting offers the researcher with a unique opportunity to “get inside the head” of three of Dovington’s highest-level leaders. Much of the brainstorming that took place at this 90-minute meeting was never implemented due, in large part, to the change in building leadership that took place shortly after the meeting was held. Nonetheless, through their conversation and strategizing, each leader indirectly offered evidence that can be used as data in the quest to answer this study’s three research questions.

Teacher-Leader Role. During the conversation, the Dovington Middle School Principal offered her view of the role of teacher-leaders in her school prior to the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative. “Up until this past year, the teacher-leader group has been more of a Principal-buddy group. It’s not like there aren’t other teachers who are leaders but they never get the opportunity to step into this formal role because there are these people who have always done it. No one is going to
challenge [long-time Team Leader] for a teacher-leader position. That was part of the culture.” The Principal describes the effort to expand the role of teacher-leaders as “very slow going. We’re still developing leadership capacity – making that transfer from teacher-manager to teacher-leader and redefining what leadership is.”

The Superintendent seemed troubled by the Principal’s characterization of the changes that had taken place over the course of the two-year pilot. “You’re not honoring the work and the progress we’ve made. There are some people who are slugs, don’t get me wrong, but you’re not honoring the work that you and the majority of the teacher-leaders have done in the past two years to move the function forward at least to a better place. I know it’s not where you want it to be, but it’s a hell-of-a-lot better. They are more than managers now. They are reading. They are talking.”

Looking at the role of teacher-leaders in the present, the three leaders turned their attention to the Principal’s recommendation to divide the group of teacher-leaders in two groups: a management team and a leadership team. “Give them $1,000 and I’ll meet with them once a month and we can deal with all of the ‘nuts and bolts’ issues. Let me focus my energies on where I need to focus them and that’s on teaching and learning. ‘Nuts and bolts’ I can take care of in a monthly meeting. I’ll give them their schedule for supplementaries and when report cards go out and all of that stuff and let them do their little management thing.”

While not hiding her distain for the necessary coordination work that needs to go on in effective schools, the Principal zeroed in on where she wanted to spend her time. “In terms of where I put my energy and focus, let me work with a group of people who are going to help me move this building forward, and who are more formal leaders in the
proper areas. It’s really just a choice into where we want to put our time and resources. Is it management or is it teaching and learning? I’d rather focus on teaching and learning.”

Without disagreeing with the Principal on the importance of focusing on improving teaching and learning, the Superintendent appeared to bristle at the low level of importance the Principal placed on coordination items. “One of my major expectations of middle school teams is that they sit down and talk about kids as a group. They talk about Billy, about the fact that his grandmother recently passed away and this is what we’re going to do. He’s going to be behind on his homework for a week. Let’s all get together on that, so there is a consistency of support and expectations for a student. Or, ‘have you noticed that Sarah is falling behind?’ ‘Now that you mention it, I have noticed that.’ ‘OK, let’s figure out as a group, what are we going to do to support Sarah. You know, the classic Carnegie approach.”

The Superintendent concluded his remarks in this area with a clear expectation and a suggestion. “Every team needs to meet, they need to talk about kids, and they need to coordinate their instruction. Whatever structure you recommend, my only non-negotiable here is that that HAS to happen. So if you want to have a 6th grade ‘teacher-liaison,’ probably a better word than ‘teacher-leader’ because it’s more passive than ‘leader’ which is an active verb, then fine. I just don’t want to lose what a team needs to do to coordinate its instruction and talk about each kid served by the team and their individual, unique needs.”

**Principals’ Willingness to Distribute Leadership.** The 90-minute conversation that this researcher observed and recorded did not contain any reference to the former
Principal’s willingness to distribute leadership to teachers and teacher leaders. However, the current Principal did refer once to a staff survey she conducted at the beginning of her tenure in Dovington. She suggested that the culture that existed before she took over as Principal was “if you speak up, administrations going to get you. That existed long before I got there. I have the surveys from prior to my administration to prove it.”

However, there was a lot of discussion that offers relevant data concerning the current Principal’s willingness to distribute leadership to her teachers and teacher-leaders. Initially in the meeting, she touts a new and innovative role for teacher-leaders as instructional leaders. “True teacher-leadership really is leaders of learning and those are the people that, if we’re going to take this school to the next level, we need to start creating leaders of learning.” She also praises that “teachers who have embraced being reflective practitioners and who have embraced looking at status quo and concluding ‘maybe we can do things better.’ It’s creating a totally uncomfortable position for veteran teachers.”

The Superintendent, though, does not appear convinced that the Principal is truly willing to distribute leadership – and with it control. When discussing the union opposition to keeping the two-year pilot going, he attributes its reluctance to “your [the Middle School Principal’s] efforts to direct teacher-leadership. Teacher-leadership doesn’t necessarily have to be directed. It’s undirected if you have a teacher-leader who’s an instructional expert who people go to for instructional support or for the latest curriculum or their influence their peers to create a new Humanities unit. That kind of unstructured, informal teacher-leadership takes its own path. But in your case, when you start requiring a fixed number of meetings and you set all of the agenda for those
meetings, you start putting a management stamp on teacher-leadership. You’re telling your teacher-leaders ‘this is the direction I want you to lead your teachers in.’ That gives it a different flavor.”

The Principal acknowledges she is directing all of the school improvement efforts in her school in her response to the Superintendent. “The hope is that, one day, it’s not going to be me setting the direction of teaching and learning in the building. The hope is that it’s going to be them. When I put out – ‘OK, let’s do peer observations and give each other feedback,’ that worked for about 2 or 3 times. Then people said ‘oh, I’ve already done the required visits, so I’m done.’ They didn’t get the idea that this was a constant thing where we’re continually going into each other classrooms and observing each other and giving feedback.”

While one can debate the merits of requiring peer observations versus modeling its effectiveness so that teachers want to observe their peers, it is clear that the Principal, in spite of her “textbook” responses, was not yet at a point where she was willing to distribute any leadership to her teacher-leaders. Whether she felt them unready or was unwilling to cede control is irrelevant. Through this discussion, this principal demonstrated her unwillingness to distribute leadership to her teacher-leaders at this time.

*Teachers’ Commitment to Work toward Change.* Portions of this conversation among the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent and Middle School Principal offer a glimpse into the participants’ view of teachers and teacher-leaders and their perception of their commitment to work toward change. While the conversation did not help the researcher understand what the teachers’ commitment level was prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative, there was a lot of data offered to suggest that there were
“camps being formed” – one camp led by union stalwarts and the other by “the younger teachers and the middle of the road-age teachers.”

The three leaders discussed a recently-filed union grievance, protesting an assignment that the Principal gave the teacher-leaders – to read a short book prior to their next meeting and be prepared to discuss it. “The union wanted us to agree to never assign readings to team leaders and we would not agree to that. We agreed that we would be more cognizant of the length of professional readings and also the timeframe in which we asked them to read. We also acknowledged that we would attempt to gather their input in choosing professional readings. But we did not agree to let them choose the professional reading.”

[The grievance was officially denied by the Building Principal at Level I and the Superintendent at Level II. The union did not pursue the grievance to the School Committee level, but did try to incorporate language into the new, fall 2008 team leader job description (negotiated by the new building principal and the Superintendent) limiting the amount of required reading Middle School Team Leaders would be required to do. The union proposal was rejected by the administration.]

Still, pockets of resistance to union attempts to de-professionalize the position of Middle School Team Leader have formed. During the discussion, the Principal reported that “yesterday, at our team meeting, one of the team leaders said to the group, ‘Our attitudes here are just wrong and I don’t want to be associated with them.’ Just having them speak out – that’s leadership. It’s really beginning to make a mark in this very unionized, very status-quo mentality.”
The Principal summed up her assessment of the current conflict among Middle School staff around accountability and being willing to work toward school change. Unfortunately, she puts the battle among her teachers in a context of herself, but the data is still relevant. “It’s kind of like the story in The Bible about Gideon. Gideon went into this massive battle with these massive giants – 132,000 of them – and they absolutely slaughtered them all with 300 men. I feel like that’s where I’m at. Either the union is going to regain their stronghold and they’re going to say ‘this is who we are and this is what we want’ or we’re going to have a huge victory and with a few young people who are going to change the tone and the culture forever. I’m holding out hope that we’re going to have that little victory. This is about the teachers and a battle they’re having with themselves.”

Postscript – Three weeks after this meeting took place, the Principal announced to her staff that she had accepted a Principal’s position in another community – just two years after her arrival in Dovington. The Superintendent declined to cite the reasons for the abrupt departure, citing “personnel matters.” Conjecture among teacher-leaders interviewed for this project was that the Principal “felt more comfortable in a school where she was the absolute leader and didn’t have to negotiate with teachers on what should be done to improve the school.” The researcher observed no adverse staff or community reaction to the Principals announced departure.

Quantitative Data

*Professional Day Collaboration Survey.* As part of her December 6, 2006, Professional Day presentation, speaker Nancy Love demonstrated a technique to gauge the feeling of a group (regardless of size) on an important topic or topics. The speaker
distributed four blank Post-It Note sheets to each member of the group (one blue, one pink, one yellow and one white one). The speaker then introduced a question or questions to the group, offering a 10 to 1 scale for each question with 10 being highest and 1 being lowest. Each participant was asked to write their answer to each of the questions on separate Post-It Notes, with answers to question #1 written on the blue Post-It, question #2 on the pink, question #3 on the yellow and question #4 on the white. Large chart papers were posted in the auditorium with each question and the numbers 10 through 1 written along the bottom of the sheets. All participants were invited to come up to the chart and place their answers to each of the four questions on the appropriate area of the chart. This process yielded a physical display of the answers of the audience that looked like a frequency bar chart. From this display, the consensus of the group was visually apparent.
The first question asked to all of Dovington’s teachers was “to what degree do you believe in the need for collaborative inquiry?” Teachers were invited to answer that question using a scale from 10 to 1 with 10 meaning “highest degree of belief” and 1 meaning “lowest degree of belief.” The responses of 232 teachers are visually displayed in Figure 4.2. The most frequent (mode) score was 10, with 37.5% of Dovington teachers reporting the highest belief in the need for collaboration. Over 93.5% of Dovington’s teachers have a strong belief in the need for collaboration (rating their belief between 7 and 10). The weighted average of these scores (8.69) clearly supports the conclusions that Dovington teachers strongly believe in the need for collaborative inquiry.

Next, Dovington teachers were asked to assess how frequently Dovington teachers work together to examine common assessments and reflect together about
teaching and learning. Here respondent answers were more broadly distributed between 10 (highest frequency) and 1 (lowest frequency), with a mode of 5 and weighted average of 5.73. Over 38% of the respondents indicated a high (10-7) frequency of collaboration, 44% a moderate frequency (6-4), and 18% a low (3-1) frequency. Results of this question can be seen in Figure 4.3.

**Figure 4.3 – Frequency of Collaboration**

Finally, Dovington teachers were asked to rate their own skills in leading collaborative inquiry, using the same 10 to 1 scale, with 10 being the highest level of leadership skills and 1 being the lowest. Again, answers were broadly distributed across the span with a higher frequency distributed around the mean (5.34) and mode (5). This closer distribution is seen in the categorical distribution as well, with 31.2% of the
respondents rating their skills high (10 to 7), 46.7% rating their skills in the middle (6-4) and 22.1% rating their skills at the lower level. These answers are depicted in Figure 4.4.

In essence, Dovington teachers strongly support and believe in the concept and practice of collaborative inquiry. That belief, however, is not reflected in their practice. The results of the question regarding skills suggests the reason why their practice has not changed – the teachers feel that they are lacking the skills necessary to lead collaborative discussions and efforts. These conclusions helped focus the professional development efforts that drove Dovington’s Professional Learning Community in 2007 and 2008.

**Figure 4.4 – Skills in Leading Collaboration**

Mass TeLLS. Mass TeLLS is a state-wide, on-line survey to which every public educator was invited to respond in the spring of 2008. The survey focused on state-wide teaching and learning conditions in all of the schools across the Commonwealth.
Individual teachers were guaranteed anonymity although they were required to identify their home district and school. District-wide results, along with school-by-school breakdowns and state-wide results, were provided to Superintendents on May 28, 2008.

Response rates to the Mass TeLLS survey were consistent and high with 49.48% of the teachers in Dovington responding. Response rates ran from a high of 61.19% at the Dovington Primary Elementary School to a low of 42.22% at Dovington High School. The survey consisted of 7 questions around the responders’ demographics, 22 questions regarding the variable of time, 10 questions about facilities and resources, 18 questions on empowerment, 13 questions covering the variable of leadership, 13 questions on Professional Development, and 5 questions about Curriculum and Development. Specific answers to the survey questions will be presented in the context of the three research questions and the data that supports the researcher’s efforts to answer the study’s three research questions. Since this survey was given after the Professional Learning Community initiative had begun, the data will be used to document the after-conditions of the study.

Teacher-Leader Role. The researcher identified 13 specific survey questions that address the issue of teacher and teacher-leader role in the school community. These questions vary from the basic involvement in decision making to the specific areas where teachers are involved. Throughout this analysis, the percent that report a condition to be true are calculated by adding the percentage of respondents who answered that they either Agreed or Strongly Agreed with the item presented in the survey. The following survey results show Dovington’s teacher’s assessment of their role as teacher-leaders:
Table 4.4 – Teacher Leader Role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher-Leader Role</th>
<th>Dovington % Agree</th>
<th>State % Agree</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involved in Decision-Making</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trusted to Make Good Decisions</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>-12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Process for Group Decision-Making</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>-16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Recognized As Ed. Experts</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>-19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in School Improvement Planning</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in Shaping School Schedule</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in Spending Decisions</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>-6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in Student Discipline</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in Teacher Hiring</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in Planning Professional Development</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>-18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in Setting Assessment Practices</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in Devising Teaching Techniques</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in Selecting Instructional Materials</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since comparative data is not available from before the Professional Learning Community initiative in Dovington, this data in isolation offers little to the study at hand, other than as an opportunity to gauge the Dovington results against state-wide averages. For example, since Dovington teachers assess their involvement in decision making at 10% lower than the state-average, this suggests that Dovington teachers are still not as involved in decision making as the average community. It does not, however, imply whether or not the involvement has increased or decreased since the Professional Learning Community initiative began.

Still some of the data is useful in analyzing the effectiveness of the initiative. For example, it is significant that only 39% of Dovington teachers feel that their community recognizes them as an Educational Expert, while state-wide 58% of teachers feel their community recognizes them as such. Moreover, since Dovington teachers describe their leadership role as less than their state counterparts, the researcher needs to consider this data in his analysis of all of the available data described in this Chapter.
**Principal’s Willingness to Distribute Leadership.** Nine (9) questions on the MassTeLLS survey offer data to help understand the willingness of Principals to Distribute Leadership to teachers. For example, in Dovington, 63% of the teachers agreed with the statement that there was enough time available to collaborate with colleagues. This is significantly more than the 39% of the teachers state-wide who agreed with the same statement. In fact, of the nine questions linked to Principal’s willingness, Dovington teachers were most positive about the availability of time while state-wide teachers were the least positive about this same condition. However, only 29% of Dovington teachers reported feeling empowered as teachers as compared with 46% state-wide. Apparently, while time does not appear to be a constraint to distributing leadership, Dovington teachers still do not feel as empowered as their colleagues across the state. Detailed results for all nine questions follow:

**Table 4.5 – Principals’ Willingness to Distribute Leadership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Willingness to Distribute Leadership</th>
<th>Dovington % Agree</th>
<th>State % Agree</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Available to Collaborate w/ Colleagues</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage teacher participation in leadership</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses Teaching and Learning Issue Concerns</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>-7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses Leadership Issue Concerns</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>-9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses Resource Issue Concerns</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses Use of Time Concerns</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses Professional Development Concerns</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>-13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowers Teachers</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>-17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports New Teachers</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teachers’ Commitment to Work towards Change.** Only 4 questions on the MassTeLLS survey related to the research question on teachers’ commitment to work towards change. Here, the most significant condition present is the indication that only 45% of Dovington teachers feel they raise important issues compared with 59% state-
wide. This 14% point difference shows that Dovington teachers are less likely than their state counterparts to raise a concern should they find one.

Table 4.6 Teachers’ Commitment to Work Toward Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers' Commitment to Work toward Change</th>
<th>Dovington % Agree</th>
<th>State % Agree</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-plus hours spent after school per week</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers work to Solve Problems</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>-12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Raise Important Issues</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>-14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Committed Helping EVERY Student Learn</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of Major Findings

The findings presented provide answers to the research questions posed by this study. The summary offered below represents the researcher’s effort to summarize data that has been offered from more than one of the four research methods (interviews, document review, researcher observation and qualitative data). Although these summarized findings are triangulated, it is important to note that the findings are relevant to this unique case. Still, the findings may have implications regarding practice in other settings. These implications will be discussed in Chapter 5. Here, the findings are summarized according to their relevance to each individual research question.

How has the role of teacher-leader changed since the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative?

The findings suggest that the role of teacher-leader has changed since the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative. Prior to the initiative’s kickoff, both teacher-leaders and administrative leaders describe the teacher-leader role as perfunctory and task-oriented. Many interviews and observations suggest that teacher-
When teachers did approach teacher-leaders for assistance, it was almost always around issues of classroom management and hardly ever about substantive instructional questions. Interviews with Curriculum Specialist teacher-leaders suggest that they sought more than their current role but were rebuffed by both teachers and administrators. The image offered by one teacher-leader, equating her role to that of Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill offered the most graphic visual image – one of frustration and inadequacy.

Following the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative, the findings suggest that the role of teacher-leaders in Dovington has migrated toward one of instructional leadership. Teacher-leaders are now described as leading discussions about learning, looking at lessons for examples of critical thinking and developing a protocol for discussing student work. Several teacher-leaders and administrators describe an active role for teacher-leaders in Dovington’s current efforts to develop Power Standards for each of their major curriculum content areas. Finally, several of those interviewed describe the role of teacher-leader as that of “coach” – a far cry from their role as “paper-pushers” prior to the initiative. Each of these examples suggest that teacher-leaders are playing a more influential and important role in Dovington’s efforts to improve student learning.

Unexpectedly, teacher-leaders also described frustration at the significant change in the role of grade and team leaders following the Professional Learning Community initiative. In fact, several Curriculum Specialists commented on the emergence of the
role of grade and team leaders and even suggested that their increased strength was acting as an impediment to the Curriculum Specialist’s instructional improvement role. Curriculum Specialists never suggested that grade and team leaders were obstructing efforts to improve instruction, but were a new force to be reckoned with when working on instructional improvements. Again, this hardly matches the “nuts and bolts” reputation that teacher-leaders had prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative, further supporting the finding that the role of teacher leaders has had a significant change.

What impact has the Professional Learning Community initiative had on Principals’ willingness to distribute leadership responsibilities to teacher-leaders?

The findings suggest that the impact of the Professional Learning Community initiative on Principals’ willingness to distribute leadership responsibilities to teacher-leaders is much less pronounced. Prior to the initiative, most Principals saw teacher-leaders as tools and conduits between themselves and their teachers. Some even suggested that their position was unnecessary and offered that they would have recommended cutting the position should the financial outlook for the district called for a consideration of budget cuts. The High School Principal suggested that her efforts to change the Department Head Job Description to formally make Department Heads part of the NEASC Response Team was evidence of her willingness to distribute leadership responsibilities to her teacher-leaders. This suggestion is corroborated by the interview from the High School Foreign Language Department Head who highlighted her role in developing the NEASC response as significant. What is not clear from any of the information presented is what specific role High School Department Heads played in developing the NEASC response.
Still, the findings imply that not all Principals were willing to delegate leadership before the Professional Learning Community initiative. Several interviews underline the notion that the Dovington Primary Elementary Principal held the teacher-leaders on a very tight leash even requiring that she approve all of the work done by teacher-leaders prior to it being distributed among staff. This behavior clearly suggests that this one Principal was not willing to distribute any leadership responsibilities to teacher-leaders prior to the initiative.

For this one Principal, though, there was a significant change following the Professional Learning Community initiative. She showed this in her willingness to allow the Kindergarten teachers to lead the effort to change the school calendar to add Kindergarten Baseline Assessment Days. She also showed her willingness in encouraging and supporting the school-wide efforts to expand the role of teachers in the student placement process. Both of these efforts are clear evidence of growth in this Principal’s willingness to distribute leadership. The same appears true for the other Elementary Principal whose willingness is illustrated in his admonition that “you’re only as good as your grade leaders.”

The evidence is less-clear for the secondary principals. The Middle School principal was described as being “subtly top-down” a suggestion that she was not willing to distribute leadership. In fact, her statements during the discussion that took place between her and her Superintendent regarding the proposed changes to the team leader job description show her efforts to control the work of her teachers and teacher-leaders, a strong indication that, despite the Professional Learning Community initiative, she is unwilling to distribute leadership to her teacher-leaders. The same is true of the High
School Principal who continues to see teacher-leaders as an “arm of the administration.” The MASS TeLLS data that shows that only 29% of the teachers in Dovington feel empowered to make their own decisions is further evidence that the Professional Learning Community effort had only marginal impact on the willingness of Principals to distribute leadership to teacher-leaders.

It’s ironic to note, that both Principals who exhibited a lack of willingness to distribute leadership to their teacher-leaders are no longer part of the Dovington administrative team, having departed Dovington unexpectedly – the Middle School Principal following just two years, and the High School Principal retiring earlier than conventionally expected. Perhaps these changes represent an interest on the part of Dovington’s Superintendent to work with Principals who are perceived as embracing teacher empowerment. This speculation could be explored in future research.

*How has the Professional Learning Community initiative strengthened the teacher-leaders’ commitment to working on the district’s school improvement efforts?*

The findings suggest that the Professional Learning Community initiative had a significant impact on the teacher-leaders commitment to work on school improvement efforts. Prior to the initiative, the findings suggest that there was spotty commitment on the part of teachers to work on school improvement efforts. In interviews and document reviews, teachers showed a propensity toward hesitance and apathy and were characterized as being more comfortable going in their room, closing their door, and just teaching. One interview suggested that the culture resembled “toxic muck” – a clear implication that teachers were not encouraged to work on school improvement efforts.

Predominant in the interviews and researcher observation sessions was the expression “us versus them” to describe the customary behavior of the schools prior to
the Professional Learning Community initiative. This expression was used over and over again and suggests that the teachers (“us”) are responsible for teaching, while the administration (“them”) remain responsible for school improvement. The prevalence of this expression throughout the interviews suggests that prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative most teachers were not interested in working on school improvement efforts.

The findings suggest, however, that this belief changed significantly following the initiative. Teachers were described as “embracing” the concept of SMART goals, “willing” to examine student work and “eager” to volunteer for anything. The interviews and researcher observation uncovered several significant examples of teacher-initiated school improvement efforts: changes to the student placement process; introduction of the new Kindergarten Baseline Assessment Day; and changes to Dovington Intermediate’s Student Assistance Team process. Despite the union’s apparent unwillingness to embrace the changes brought about by the Professional Learning Community initiative, the evidence shows that the “rank and file” showed no such behavior. The findings suggest that teachers’ commitment to work on school improvement efforts increased significantly following the Professional Learning Community initiative.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a detailed description of the Dovington Public Schools and the Professional Learning Community initiative that took began in August 2005. Following a recap of the sampling and data gathering procedures, the findings were described using four different data sources (interviews, document review, researcher
observation and quantitative data). These findings were organized according to the three research questions that this study is seeking to answer. Finally, the findings were summarized, offering the researcher’s perspective on what the data suggests is the response to the three questions.

Chapter Five will review the study’s major findings and examine the implications for educational leadership. It will also suggest areas where further research would be useful. The chapter will conclude with a reflective analysis of how the researcher’s beliefs about effective school leadership have been impacted as a result of this study.
CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION and IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

This study examined and evaluated the impact of implementing a Professional Learning Community model on the role of teacher-leaders. Specifically, the study sought to understand how the role of teacher-leader was traditionally viewed by teachers and administrators in the community where the researcher, acting as participant-observer, is a district-level administrator. The traditional view was then reviewed against the current view of the role to ascertain if the Professional Learning Community initiative had any effect on teacher-leader role. Finally, the study sought signs of long-term sustainability of the new teacher-leader roles by examining the changes that the Professional Learning Community initiative had on the attitudes of both Principals and teacher-leaders.

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How has the role of teacher-leader changed since the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative?

2. What impact has the Professional Learning Community initiative had on Principals’ willingness to distribute leadership responsibilities to teacher-leaders?

3. How has the Professional Learning Community initiative strengthened the teacher-leaders’ commitment to working on the district’s school improvement efforts?

Chapter Four presented the findings of the study from a variety of data sources, including: personal interviews with teacher-leaders and school administrators before and after the Professional Learning Community initiative; a thorough review of teacher-leader
job descriptions from before and after the Professional Learning Community initiative; researcher observation of two important meetings where the role of teacher-leaders was discussed; and two significant pieces of qualitative data that unexpectedly arose during the course of the study. While Chapter Four focused on reporting the data, Chapter Five will present an analysis of the study’s major themes through the lens of the three research questions. To achieve this goal, this Chapter will include:

- A summary of the findings, where the findings are correlated to the research questions;
- A discussion of the findings, where the findings are related to the current research described in Chapter Two;
- The limitations of the study, where the potential limitations of the reliability and validity of the findings are discussed;
- The implications for practice, where the findings are interpreted to connect to their potential application to practice;
- The recommendations for further research, where the researcher suggests possible future studies to pursue;
- The leadership lessons, where the researcher offers his thoughts and reflections on the impact that this study has had on his own leadership; and
- The conclusion, where the study finishes and the researcher summarizes the impact of the study.
Summary of Major Findings

The Changing Role of the Teacher-Leader

The findings suggest that the role of teacher-leader has changed since the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative. Data gathered prior to the initiative indicate that the role of teacher-leader was strongly functional and focused on the task of keeping the “trains running on time” and making sure that the tasks of running a team or department were coordinated and not overlapping. Prior to the initiative, there was no indication that teacher-leaders performed any “instructional leadership” although in the case of Curriculum Specialists, they were called on as subject area experts in areas in which they specialized, such as Reading or Foreign Language. There is, however, no data to indicate that the role ever spilled over into the classroom; prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative, teacher-leaders were never teachers and leaders simultaneously.

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, the data supports a conclusion that the role of teacher-leader did undergo some sort of metamorphosis, with teacher-leaders increasingly acting in the role of instructional leader within their groups. Several teacher-leaders and administrators described an active role for teacher-leaders in Dovington’s current efforts to develop Power Standards for each of the major curriculum content areas. Moreover, interviewees frequently described the post-initiative role of teacher-leaders as “coach,” indicating significant growth from the role of “paper-pushers” that teacher-leaders played prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative. Finally, the teacher-leaders’ current role in developing a group protocol for discussing student work supports the conclusion of a significant change in the role.
Principal Willingness to Distribute Leadership

The findings suggest that the impact of the Professional Learning Community initiative on the Principals’ willingness to distribute leadership responsibilities to teacher-leaders, while positive, is much less pronounced. Prior to the initiative, all four Principals saw teacher-leaders primarily as communications conduits between themselves and teachers. While this conduit worked in both directions, oftentimes, Principals expressed frustration that the communications emanating from teacher-leader-led teams were almost exclusively focused on operational issues or areas where teachers habitually complained, such as student behavior in hallways or at recess. Still, none of the Principals used this frustration as an opportunity to push-back and attempt to hold teachers jointly accountable for unruly student behavior in common areas. This lost opportunity is perhaps the clearest indicator of the Principals’ unwillingness to distribute leadership to teachers or teacher-leaders.

Following the Professional Learning Community initiative, there were pockets of willingness beginning to sprout among Dovington’s Principals. Unfortunately, 50% of the Principals (2 out of 4) left Dovington during the implementation phase of the Professional Learning Community initiative leaving an even smaller sample to study. However, within the two remaining Principals, there were indications that their willingness to distribute leadership was growing. The Principal of the Dovington Primary Elementary School, for example, has showed significant growth in delegating responsibility to teacher-leaders and allowing them independence when determining their own course of action to accomplish the task. The Principal of the Dovington Intermediate Elementary School, who expressed the belief that a school is “only as good
as its grade leaders,” has also showed significant growth in his willingness to distribute leadership to his teacher-leaders. These are signs that the Principals’ willingness to distribute leadership to teacher-leaders had emerged over the time period when the Professional Learning Community was taking place.

Teacher-Leaders’ Commitment to Work on School Improvement Efforts

The findings suggest that the Professional Learning Community initiative had a significant impact on the teacher-leaders’ commitment to work on school improvement efforts. Prior to the initiative, teachers and teacher-leaders showed a propensity toward hesitancy and apathy and were characterized as being most comfortable going in their classroom, closing the door and “just teaching.” The “toxic muck” that pervaded the culture prior to the initiative is indicative that there were active efforts among the teachers and teacher-leaders to resist school improvement efforts and discourage colleagues from participating in them.

The phrase “us versus them” was predominant throughout the interviews with teachers and administrators prior to the Professional Learning Community initiative. This phrase indicates the common belief that the teachers (“us”) are responsible for teaching and the administration (“them”) is responsible for school improvement efforts. When used by administrators, the phrase implies that the efforts toward school improvement initiated by administrators (“us”), would be successful if not for the teachers’ (“them”) refusal to follow our reform initiatives. Regardless of who is the “us” and who is the “them,” it was clear that there was little or no “we” in Dovington before the Professional Learning Community initiative.
Following the initiative, however, the data is rich with examples of areas where teachers and teacher-leaders both participated in and, in some cases, led school improvement efforts. Teachers were described as “embracing” the concept of SMART goals, “willing” to examine student work and “eager” to participate in school improvement efforts. The research uncovered several significant examples of teacher-initiated school improvement efforts including: changes to the student placement process in early elementary grades; introduction of the new Kindergarten Baseline Assessment Days; and changes to the makeup of the Student Assistance Team at Dovington Intermediate Elementary School. This data clearly shows a significant increase in teachers’ and teacher-leaders’ commitment to school improvement efforts following the Professional Learning Community initiative.

**Discussion of the Findings**

This study is grounded by the following theoretical framework:

**Figure 5.1 – Study-specific Theoretical Framework**
The study is being driven by two major theories: Adult Learning Theory and Distributed Leadership Theory. Adult Learning Theory forms the basis for the general concepts of Professional Learning Communities and the implementation of the Professional Learning Community practices in this study. The practice of Teacher Leadership is informed by the theories of Distributed Leadership offered by noted researchers including James Spillane and Alma Harris. At the apex of the study is the connection of the practices of Professional Learning Communities and Teacher Leadership and whether or not that connection yields sustained change. The three research questions were designed to search for indications of sustainability that this study’s Professional Learning Community initiative may have left within the changing role of Dovington’s teacher-leaders.

Is it a Professional Learning Community?

DuFour (2004) reminds us that educators use the term Professional Learning Community to describe “every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education…. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning” (DuFour, 2004, p. 6). Therefore, before this analysis can begin, it is important to compare Dovington’s Professional Learning Community work against the research standard, to ensure that it meets the common criteria of a PLC.

Dovington’s Professional Learning Community initiative was designed to develop the three general features of a Professional Learning Community described by Newman and Wehlage (1995): “(1) teachers pursue a clear, shared purpose for all students’ learning; (2) teachers engage in collaborative activity to achieve the purpose; and (3) teachers take collective responsibility for student learning” (Newmann & Wehlage,
The Professional Development work of Nancy Love to work with teachers and develop a common set of tools and vocabulary for joint data analysis provides a concrete example of activities that meet criterion 1 and 2. Judging from the fact that, in the recent TeLLS survey, 91% of Dovington teachers indicated that they are committed to helping every student learn suggests that the third criteria is satisfied as well.

The Search for Signs of Sustainability

Implied in this research is the notion that, in order for the Professional Learning Community initiative to be sustained, it needs to be able to withstand the departure of its most senior advocate. In Dovington’s case, the Superintendent brought the concept of Professional Learning Communities with him as part of his entry plan, convinced that it offered a unique opportunity to involve teachers in school improvement efforts. Since the same Superintendent has remained in Dovington throughout this years-long initiative, other signs of sustainability were sought, including a change in the role of teacher-leaders, a change in the willingness of principals to distribute leadership and a willingness on the part of teachers to work for school improvement efforts. Each of these signs will be discussed in the following section.

The Role of Teacher-Leaders

At the end of this study, teacher-leaders reported a significant change in their role, with example after example to back-up their contention that they now played a major role in school improvement efforts in each of Dovington’s schools. Upon reflection, the post-initiative role described by Dovington’s teacher-leaders parallels the heroic description of successful teacher-leadership described by Ackerman and MacKenzie (2006). “The quieter bravery of teacher-leaders is reflected in new patterns of relating to peers and
deeper understanding of fellow teachers, suggesting that teachers themselves are becoming more at ease with the genuine complexities of leadership” (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006, p. 69).

The parallels continue when considering the specific new roles that Dovington’s teacher-leaders have assumed since the beginning of the Professional Learning Community initiative including: initiating changes to the student placement process in early elementary grades; introducing the new Kindergarten Baseline Assessment Days; and changing the makeup of the Student Assistance Team at Dovington Intermediate Elementary School. Here again Dovington teacher-leaders are assuming what Ackerman and MacKenzie call the most effective roles of teacher-leaders – “teachers lead[ing] informally by revealing their classroom practice, sharing their expertise, asking questions of colleagues and modeling how teachers collaborate on issues of practice” (p. 66).

Additionally, Dovington’s efforts to empower teacher-leaders to develop, with classroom teachers, the Power Standards for their grade or grade span is also supported by a noted expert in the area of Distributed Leadership and Teacher-Leadership, Alma Harris. She reminds us that developing effective teacher-leaders requires “empowering teachers and giving them some ownership of a particular change or development” (Harris, 2002a, p. 23).

Harris (2003b) contends that “if we are serious about building Professional Learning Communities with and between schools, then we need forms of leadership that support and nourish meaningful collaboration among teachers. This will not be achieved by clinging to models of leadership that, by default rather than by design, delimits the possibilities to lead development work in schools” (Harris, 2003, p. 322).
Lambert (2003) agrees, calling learning communities and high leadership capacity schools “parallel constructs” (Lambert, 2003, p. 426). Harris (2005c) reiterates her belief in the connection stating that Professional Learning Communities “embrace the notion of teacher leadership as it is assumed that teachers will be the catalysts for change and development within a PLC” (Harris, 2005, p. 207). In her step-by-step guide to building a Professional Learning Community, Joyce (2004) instructs “central office folks… to create structures that small teams of teachers” lead by teachers (Joyce, 2004, p. 81). Fullan (2006) also makes the connection – “the spread of Professional Learning Communities is about the proliferation of leadership. Leadership is not about making clever decisions…. It’s about energizing other people to make good decisions and do better things” (Fullan, 2006, p. 14). Dovington’s increasing and expanding role of teacher-leadership is an indication that the Professional Learning Community initiative may be sustainable.

**Principals’ Willingness to Distribute Leadership**

Although the small sample size and sizable turnover of Dovington Principals during the course of this study makes drawing conclusions potentially hazardous, there is evidence to suggest that Dovington Principals did become more willing to distribute leadership to teacher-leaders during and after the Professional Learning Community initiative. This willingness, noted-author Michael Fullan suggests, is a key component to attaining sustainable change. Fullan (2002, 2003) suggests that “developing leaders at many levels, not depending on charismatic leaders but fostering a pipeline of leaders at all levels, including teacher-leaders” is one of the four conditions that support the sustainability of reforms (Fullan, 2002, 2003).
“The key to sustainability is capacity-building. Capacity-building consists of developments that increase the collective power in the school in terms of new knowledge and competencies, increased motivation to engage in improvement actions, and additional resources” (Fullan, 2005, p. 175). The willingness of Principals to distribute leadership to their teacher-leaders is a prerequisite for the capacity-building that Fullan believes is key to the issue of sustainability. One of the seven principles of sustainable leadership articulated by Hargreaves and Fink (2004) is directly applicable in this case as well. “Sustainable leadership distributes leadership throughout the schools’ professional community so other can carry the torch when the principal is gone” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004, pp. 10-11).

The suggestion that distributed leadership is a necessary component in order for change to be sustained is not a belief that is held only by experts on educational leadership. Noted business author Ken Blanchard (2007) writes, “The best way to initiate, implement, and sustain change is to increase the level of influence and involvement from the people being asked to change, surfacing and resolving concerns along the way. Without this strategy, you cannot achieve the cooperation and buy-in you need from those responsible for making the changes you’ve proposed” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 225). In Dovington, Principals have exhibited an increase in their willingness to distribute leadership to teacher-leaders in their school and the noted authors cited above agree that distributing leadership is a necessary prerequisite in order for sustainable change to take place. The Principal’s new-found willingness, therefore, is an indication that the Professional Learning Community initiative in Dovington is starting to exhibit signs of sustainability that may possibly carry the initiative beyond its current stages.
Teachers’ Commitment to Work toward Change

But, a willingness on the part of the Principal to delegate or distribute leadership is not enough, unless the teachers and teacher-leaders are interested in committing to school improvement efforts. The third sign of sustainability being sought in this study is a review of the teacher’s and teacher-leader’s commitment to work toward change with the hypothesis being that an increased commitment on the part of teachers and teacher-leaders is a sign that the Professional Learning Community initiative may be sustainable over the long-run.

The research on sustainability is clear – teachers must be committed and involved in the change process in order for sustainability to be a viable possibility. Chrisman (2005) writes that “when asked which changes contributed to sustained increases in student achievement, teachers at the successful schools cited… teacher-initiated changes in teaching and learning” (Chrisman, 2005, p. 17). Alma Harris (2002b) agrees. “If sustained school improvement is to be achieved, teacher partnerships and other forms of collaboration should be encouraged” (Harris, 2002b, p. 23). McREL (2003) believes that the strategy that is “most likely to sustain improvement [is when] most teachers act as leaders in some area and are routinely involved in school-wide decision-making” (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2003, p. 3).

But it is Charlotte Danielson (2006) who offers the clearest and most logical explanation as to why it is imperative for teachers to be committed to the change if it is to have any chance for sustainability. “The concept of teacher leadership recognizes that teachers’ tenure in a school is normally longer than that of the administrator who are nominally in charge (20 to 30 years for many teachers, as compared with the typical 3 to
5 years for a principal)” (Danielson, 2006, p. 36). Dovington’s teachers appear to have responded strongly to the Professional Learning Community initiative as evidenced by the number and importance of the change initiatives they have initiated, including: changes to the student placement process in early elementary grades; introduction of the new Kindergarten Baseline Assessment Days; and changes to the makeup of the Student Assistance Team at Dovington Intermediate Elementary School. These teacher-initiated change initiatives are evidence that Dovington’s teachers are showing a new-found commitment to work toward change – evidence also that the Professional Learning Community initiative is showing indications of possible long-term sustainability.

Does Dovington’s Professional Learning Community Represent Sustained Change?

Researchers believe that Professional Learning Communities represent a meaningful opportunity to install a sustained change among education’s “initiative-du-jour” landscape. Michael Schmoker (2004) sees Professional Learning Communities as an opportunity to “break free from our addiction to strategic planning and large-scale reform” and “a powerful alternative to conventional improvement efforts” (Schmoker, 2004, p. 430). Giles and Hargreaves (2006) offer that Professional Learning Communities “seem to have the capacity to offset two of the three change forces that threaten the sustainability of innovative efforts. They can learn how to halt the evolutionary attrition of change by renewing their teacher cultures, distributing leadership and planning for leadership succession” (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 35). Finally, Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) conclude their “Change over Time?” study with the assertion that “securing truly sustainable improvement for all students that matters,
spreads and lasts [requires] turning schools into more activist Professional Learning Communities” (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006, p. 35).

Dovington’s Professional Learning Community initiative is showing signs that it may, one day, lead to sustained change – the role of teacher-leaders has changed, Principals are more willing to distribute leadership to teachers, and teachers are more committed to work toward school improvement than they were before the initiative began. While it is much too early in the change process to draw any meaningful conclusions about the long-term sustainability of the Professional Learning Community initiative in Dovington, this study of the initial phases of the long-term journey toward becoming a Professional Learning Community support the conclusions of Schmoker (2004), Giles and Hargreaves (2006) and Hargreaves and Goodson (2006).

*Limitations of the Study*

While the findings in the case study are supported by the theoretical rationale and the review of the literature, there are multiple areas where the internal and external validity of the research could potentially have been influenced the outcomes and findings of this study. This section acknowledges those limitations.

As described in Chapter Three, a major potential source of bias comes from researcher and participant bias. The researcher acknowledged his existing belief that Professional Learning Communities represent a significant opportunity for lasting school improvement. Although Merriam (1998) reminds us that all data “have been filtered through [the researcher’s] particular theoretical position and biases” (Merriam, 1998, p. 216), the potential for bias still exists and must be acknowledged.
Participant bias also represents a significant possibility for potential limitations to the study. Since the researcher holds a high-level administrative post in Dovington, the potential exists that participants may, intentionally or unintentionally, phrase their responses in a way that they feel the researcher would want to hear. The researcher’s purposeful decision to interview only teacher-leaders with a history of previous interactions with high-level administrators was designed to limit the opportunity for participant-bias to appear. Nonetheless, it does potentially exist.

The relatively short time-frame in which this study was conducted represents another potential limitation that must be considered. While the study is clear in its analysis that it is only seeking signs of sustainability rather than looking for sustained change, it is still an area where potential misunderstanding exists. Sustainability can only be proven through repeated, long-term studies that can look at the impact of an initiative over a continuous period of time. Since this study is, by design, over the course of a shorter time period, any conclusions drawn by the researcher should be made and considered in that light.

Finally, any conclusions made through this study are limited to the specific circumstances in Dovington and are not necessarily reproducible in other schools or school districts. Merriam (1998) warns that “achieving reliability in [qualitative studies in education] is not only fanciful but impossible…. That fact, however, does not discredit the results of the original study.” (p. 206). So, while the results of this study may be valid for the work going on in Dovington, this study may or may not apply to other similar situations in other similar communities.
While the above four limitations were acknowledged in Chapter Three, additional limitations have revealed themselves over the natural course of this study. Dovington only has 4 schools with 4 principals – making a relatively small sample of building administrators to interview. During the course of the study, 50% of the principals left Dovington, leaving only 2 out of the 4 original Principals available for comparative pre and post initiative study. While the turnover was not directly related to the study, the resultant small sample size may pose a limitation on the replication of the study.

Finally, while the study implies that the expansion of the role of teacher leaders, the increase in the Principals’ willingness to distribute leadership and the increase in the teachers commitment to work toward change are all a result of the Professional Learning Community initiative, there is no such proof available. This study did not take place in a laboratory with a carefully-observed control group and only one changing variable. While there were no other specific education improvement efforts on-going in Dovington during the time of the study, there were country-wide and state-wide efforts to increase teacher and school accountability through the provisions of No Child Left Behind. Since the researcher was not able to rule out that other factors caused the three changes described in the case study, it is impossible to conclude that the Professional Learning Community initiative alone caused them as well.

**Implications for Practice**

While the jury is still out on whether or not Dovington’s Professional Learning Community initiative will be ultimately sustained, there are, nonetheless, several tangible areas where information learned from this study could be used to improve the practice of educational leadership in other communities.
Start with Teacher-Leaders

Well-read educational leaders seeking advice for their next school improvement efforts have undoubtedly encountered slews of articles and books touting the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities as a school improvement tool. The literature is less robust when it comes to helping the practitioner implement a Professional Learning Community and downright sparse when it comes to enhancing or expanding teacher-leadership through the implementation of a PLC. It is in this specific and finite context that the implications for practice are most pronounced.

A 3000-student school system like Dovington has well over 250 teachers and in excess of 400 total employees. Cultural changes in districts of this size are complicated and complex and require intermediate steps if success is to be achieved. Implementing a new concept like a Professional Learning Community is complicated further when one considers that teachers hold a natural distrust of new and untested initiatives. When these untested initiatives are championed by an upper-level administration, the level of suspicion only grows. More often than not, these obstacles alone can derail a promising improvement before it ever gets a chance for survival.

Having the teacher-leaders serve as intermediaries and advocates for the proposed change seems to have had a positive and lasting impact on the implementation effort. By having a small team of teacher-leaders attend the two-day training in Plymouth before the start of the initiative, a core team of advocates was established even before the initiative officially got underway. Interviews with teacher-leaders pointed repeatedly to the significant amount of goodwill and feelings of inclusion that the investment in Professional Development yielded. Several people even remembered that the
Superintendent bought everyone dinner after the first day of the event and those who commented remembered the feelings of inclusion and collegiality that resulted from the two-day event.

Teacher-leaders translated those feelings of importance and value into a concerted effort to assist in the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative. Teacher-leaders advocated for the PLC concept with their peer teachers and since there is a stronger, more natural sense of trust between teachers, the obstacles to successful implementation were lower and easier to overcome. Moreover, the closeness and immediacy in the relationship between teacher and teacher-leader allowed quicker and more personal responses when any trouble began to brew. The two-phase implementation process, first focusing on teacher-leaders and then allowing teacher-leaders to advocate at the teacher-to-teacher level was key to successfully implementing the Professional Learning Community initiative.

Not all school districts, however, are fortunate enough to have formal teacher-leaders who, in some cases, have a significantly reduced teaching workload to allow more time for executing leadership responsibilities. But teacher-leadership is not limited to only those with formal leadership responsibilities. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) suggest that “teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders and influence others towards improved educational practice” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 5). Every school district should be able to identify one or more teachers who meet this definition of teacher-leader. The results of this study suggest that a successful implementation of a Professional Learning Community initiative should begin with them.
Hone the Message

Because implementing a Professional Learning Community initiative can take some time, it is important to continuously remind staff about the purpose and expected outcomes of the initiative. This is the reason behind the Dovington Arch – the visual reminder that is used to introduce every Professional Development Day. The Arch is an image that illustrates the four facets of the Professional Learning Community in Dovington: a foundation of collaborative culture, a focus on learning, a focus on results and the overarching goal of all students achieving at high levels. This visual reminder refocuses and reminds staff members regarding the overarching purpose of the work we’re doing together and also serves to ensure teachers and teacher-leaders that the administration remains committed to the Professional Learning Community initiative.

Despite these efforts to continually remind teachers of the main purposes behind the Professional Learning Community initiative, there were several instances where teachers were not clear about the purpose and extent of Dovington’s reform efforts. During the initial kickoff of the Professional Learning Community initiative, Dr. Matt King’s discussion about PLCs and School Culture focused much of its time on the concept of Open and Honest Communication. Unfortunately, many teachers began to think the terms PLC and Open and Honest Communication were synonymous and began to use them interchangeably. In fact, the Dovington Arch was actually developed to refute this erroneous belief.

Finally, over the course of the two-plus year effort to begin Dovington’s journey down the path of becoming a Professional Learning Community, it became clear that Dovington had ignored teachers and other staff members who had joined Dovington’s
team after the Professional Learning Community initiative kickoff. Consequently, they
did not have the same foundation knowledge that the rest of the staff had and could not
relate to much of the initial work. While the Dovington Arch helped provide some
familiarity with the basic concepts and purpose of a Professional Learning Community, it
became necessary to modify the district’s teacher initiation program to include a synopsis
of information that others had already received.

In essence, implementing a Professional Learning Community requires constant
attention to detail and a focus on the message. Current research and the limited number
of how-to manuals essentially ignore the complexities associated with implementation
and the issues associated with the passage of time during that long process. This dearth
of information has significant implications for practice as ignoring or not recognizing the
constant dilution of the message over time will cause confusion and eventual collapse of
the initiative.

Accept Casualties

Not all administrators are cut-out to work in a district or school where top-down
leadership is discouraged and teacher empowerment encouraged. Perhaps this is a
contributing reason why two out of four Dovington Principals left their jobs unexpectedly
during the course of this study (one Principal left for another Principalship after two years
in Dovington, the other retired early). Both Principals appeared more comfortable in a
top-down style of school leadership where they set the tone and expectations and
expected others to meet those expectations. They also expressed some discomfort with
the notion of teacher empowerment, one now-former Principal equating it to “the inmates
running the asylum.”
Both outgoing Principals, however, were replaced with new Principals, both of whom appeared more comfortable with the notion of teacher-empowerment and Professional Learning Communities. In fact, both advertisements run by the Dovington School District announcing the openings were clear from the start about their commitment to PLC’s – the headline of each advertisement was an invitation to candidates to “Come Join Our Professional Learning Community.” In this way, Dovington made its expectations and commitment to the PLC initiative clear to potential candidates. Moreover, the interview questions selected and the inclusive makeup of the interview committee allowed for any candidate would clearly understand Dovington’s strong belief in concepts of Professional Learning Communities. Successful candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of the complexities of teacher empowerment (particularly at the secondary level), a personal belief system that reflected a commitment to collaboration, strong interpersonal and communication skills and the confidence to accept the notion that others may have a better answer to problem. This approach helped ensure that the successful candidates would, by default, succeed in a collaborative culture designed to foster a focus on learning and a focus on results and to attain the overarching goal of all students achieving at high levels.

The other two Principals who remained in Dovington throughout the entire study period, did express some reluctance at first with the notion of distributing leadership to teacher-leaders, but became more comfortable with the concept over time. The point is that being a Principal in a Professional Learning Community takes a different kind of leader – one that is confident in one’s own skills as a leader and strong in one’s
conviction that change is best accomplished when done collaboratively – not by proclamation or management edict.

The same is undoubtedly true about teachers – not every teacher is comfortable with the notion of teacher empowerment, particularly in today’s age of accountability. This may be the case with either teachers or formal teacher-leaders. While none of the formal teacher-leaders that were interviewed as part of this study expressed doubt about the new responsibilities that they assumed during the implementation of the Professional Learning Community initiative, they did report having to overcome misgivings emanating from certain teachers. Those misgivings centered around the notion that “administration is responsible for improving this school and I’m responsible for teaching here.” This notion should fade with time as teachers, seeking to be included in important discussions and decision-making, become the rule rather than the exception.

The implications for leadership practice here is that not everyone is comfortable with a district’s decision to move in the direction of becoming a Professional Learning Community and that simple resistance may not be the only reaction to that discomfort. Turnover among administrators (as experienced in Dovington) or among teacher-leaders (not reported in Dovington) could result. More importantly, district administrators must accept that there may be “casualties” and recognize that this turnover can be seen as an opportunity to advance the effort forward by replacing a reluctant participant with one more committed to the cause and willing to support the initiative.

**Continuing to Build a Professional Learning Community in Dovington**

Dovington has invested a significant amount of time and effort into the initial leg of their journey toward becoming a Professional Learning Community. Some frustration
has been expressed by those who feel discouraged by the fact that this initiative isn’t “over yet.” The next phase of Dovington’s Professional Learning Community work needs to focus on three main goals: supporting the on-going collaborative work of teachers, convincing the staff that the work to become a Professional Learning Community is never really “done” and building the infrastructure to support the PLC work already completed.

While the initial work to build a Professional Learning Community structure and culture centered around the Professional Development Days that were used to kick-off the initiative and provide teachers with the tools to analyze student work, the collaborative efforts of teachers to analyze the results of student work and use that analysis as an opportunity to critically examine individual teacher’s instruction is the essential work that needs to be encouraged, supported and expanded. The real work of Professional Learning Communities takes place between and among teachers who, together, critically examine student work and use the results of that analysis to inform and improve their own instruction. This work occurs in formal Team and Grade meetings and informally in planned and chance exchanges in teachers’ rooms and during common planning time. Dovington’s on-going efforts to continue to build a Professional Learning Community culture must center on improving the quality and quantity of those critical conversations. While changing roles of teacher-leaders are important, in the end, whether these crucial exchanges are occurring three or four years from now is the true test of the sustainability of this Professional Learning Community initiative.

Perhaps in response to the “initiative du jour” mentality that permeates the educational landscape, Dovington teachers are beginning to wonder “if we’ll ever really
become a PLC.” This frustration indicates that the district’s PLC initiative is at a critical juncture, one that will either propel it forward or allow it to whither and die on the vine. District administrators, building administrators and teacher-leaders must send clear messages to the entire staff that Dovington’s Professional Learning Community is alive and well and equate the effort toward becoming a PLC with a long journey rather than a short trip. But this phenomenon is not unique to school districts trying to become PLCs – it is common in everyday business as well. Jim Collins’ (2001) epic book reminds us the “good to great transformations never happen in one fell swoop. There was no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, and no wrenching revolution. Good to great comes by a cumulative process – step by step, action by action, decision by decision, turn by turn of the flywheel – that adds up to sustained and spectacular results” (Collins, 2001, p. 165).

While it is somewhat comforting to know that other organizations have experienced the same frustration and impatience that Dovington has, some action needs to intervene to help build and maintain momentum. Intermediate goals need to be jointly established that can help guide Dovington along this long road. This way, Dovington teachers will get a sense of accomplishment and moving forward. For assistance with this work, Dovington can turn to the writings of PLC-gurus Robert Eaker and Rick and Becky DuFour, who advocate for the use of SMART goals to maintain momentum and focus. SMART goals (Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results oriented and Time-bound) (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002, p. 44) should be collaboratively established by each Dovington school to guide and focus their Professional Learning Community work over the next year. Once established and subsequently achieved, these SMART goals
will serve to document the growth and accomplishment that each school has experienced, leaving a sense of positive movement and momentum that can drive future growth.

**Implications for Further Research**

Clearly, a study such as this one that searches for signs of sustainability of a district-wide school improvement initiative offers a future researcher the opportunity to revisit Dovington some time in the future in order to determine if the initiative proved to be truly sustained. This re-visit can take place at a randomly selected time in the future, or, more importantly, following the departure of the current Superintendent of Schools in Dovington.

Sustaining school improvement efforts while the leadership who is driving the effort is still in power can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. An initiative’s true sustainability can only be judged after the person who was driving the improvement efforts has left the organization. As Hargreaves (2005) reminds us, “sustainable leadership distributes leadership throughout the schools’ professional community so others can carry the torch when the [initiative’s driving force] is gone” [p. 10]. Revisiting Dovington will allow future researchers to determine if the signs of sustainability found as part of this study were true indicators of long-term sustainability or merely naturally occurring phenomenon that are not indicative of an initiatives future sustainability.

Researchers might consider reviewing the sustainability of Dovington’s Professional Learning Community initiative in a broader context among other schools that have implemented PLCs. An independent return visit to DuFour’s Adlai Stevenson High School, where many of the PLC attributes were first introduced, would offer a
future researcher with additional instances with which to test the viability and sustainability of Professional Learning Communities as a long-term school improvement model.

An additional opportunity for future research lies in a deeper exploration of the relative effectiveness of Dovington’s decision to utilize teacher-leaders as an intermediary step in the introduction of the Professional Learning Community concept. Little research exists on the effectiveness of different techniques or approaches to implementing Professional Learning Communities in schools or school districts and this study would offer future researchers with an opportunity to review the data with an eye toward evaluating the effectiveness of utilizing teacher-leaders in the way that Dovington did. This information could be used as part of a broader research study designed to evaluate different implementation techniques. While it is unlikely that any research would result in a one-size-fits-all cookbook approach to the implementation of Professional Learning Communities in a district or school, it would be helpful to establish a database of effective techniques that could be called upon in different circumstances. An evaluation of the effectiveness of Dovington’s implementation decisions could add to the knowledge base.

Also, other researchers could return to Dovington and explore the impact of the Professional Learning Community initiative on classroom teachers. While this study focused all of its review on the role of teacher-leaders, true sustainability will never be possible unless the behavior of individual classroom teachers has been impacted and changed. Any new study along these lines could utilize the three research questions that drove this study, only substituting the words “teacher leader” with “teacher.” In this way,
changes in behavior of individual teachers can be identified and considered in the broader attempt to seek to determine if the Professional Learning Community initiative represents sustained change in Dovington.

A final and perhaps more controversial opportunity for future research lies in an analysis of the role that a teachers’ union plays in the efforts to establish a Professional Learning Community. Many of the interviews and other data sources associated with this study are filled with individual’s perceptions regarding the level of support that the teachers’ union offered Dovington’s PLC efforts. Since this data was not needed to answer this study’s three research questions, it was not included in this report. There were, however, reports from both within the teaching ranks and from administrators that there was pressure put on local teachers by the local teacher union to resist the administration’s efforts to implement Professional Learning Communities in Dovington. Since the researcher in this study is a high-ranking administrator in Dovington, it was not appropriate to explore this information in greater detail. The opportunity, nonetheless, does exist for an outside researcher to explore and document the teachers’ union’s response to this initiative in order to better understand institutional responses to new and innovative ideas in education.

_Leadership Lessons_

Leading a district-wide effort toward becoming a Professional Learning Community offered this researcher-practitioner with many opportunities to grow both personally and professionally. These opportunities arose both from good decisions and not-so-good decisions made during the course of the initiative as well as general lessons learned just by observing the professionals of Dovington traverse the path toward
becoming a Professional Learning Community. It is difficult to separate lessons learned from simply surviving one’s first assignment as a senior administrative official from the lessons learned directly from this initiative – at times they overlap. Nevertheless, they do represent lessons learned – regardless of their source – and they will be described here.

The first and strongest lesson that the researcher-practitioner learned is to trust one’s own instincts. The decision to place Dovington on the path toward becoming a Professional Learning Community was made by the researcher-practitioner after reading a four page article in Educational Leadership on the subject. There was no in depth research – no deep discussion among Dovington’s administrative team. It was a decision made by one leader that has impacted the Professional Development path in Dovington for the past four years. In the opinion of the researcher-practitioner, it was the right decision, not because it yielded this study or became the researcher’s leadership project, but because it was right for Dovington. Dovington had been led by a top-down leader who had been unable to engage the teaching staff in any efforts to improve instruction. Dovington’s teachers were initially intrigued with the “Open and Honest Communication” that the initial presentation emphasized. Apparently that was the “hook” that was needed to get enough staff willing to learn more. No gimmick would have been enough, though, to move the project so deeply into the implementation phase as it currently exists, unless the Professional Learning Community concept was right for Dovington. The researcher-practitioner’s original instinct to embrace PLC’s as a model for school improvement that would resonate with Dovington’s teachers has proved to be accurate.
The second lesson learned can be summarized in the phrase “too much of a good thing is never a good thing.” This researcher-practitioner believes strongly in the concept of teacher-empowerment. In fact, during his initial interview in Dovington now six years ago, the researcher-practitioner described his leadership philosophy using the phrase “upside-down org. chart” with students at the top, being served by teachers at the next level, being served by building administrators at the next lower level, with the Superintendent and Central Office staff at the bottom of the organizational chart with the responsibility of serving all of those above them on the chart. The researcher-practitioner borrowed many of his beliefs from Robert Greenleaf’s book on Servant-Leadership (Greenleaf, 1970).

During the course of implementing the Professional Learning Community initiative, though, the researcher-practitioner forgot that the concept is servant leadership and that leadership is an important part of the equation. During the time when the Kindergarten team was petitioning to have Baseline Assessment Days included in the calendar, the researcher-practitioner ended up supporting a concept that, now institutionalized, is not serving Dovington well. Understanding that the Kindergarten teachers were testing the limits of their empowerment, the researcher-practitioner pushed back on their original proposal but, in the end, agreed to support it. Following the decision, though, the first-grade team expressed their frustration that they had never been given the opportunity to have time early in the school year to do their own base-line assessment of the incoming first graders. Also, the fact that the Kindergarten students had two days off while other older siblings were still in school made it difficult for working parents to arrange for supervision. So, while in the short-term this was a good
decision to maintain the momentum of the Professional Learning Community initiative, in the long-run Dovington is stuck with a new tradition that does not serve all of its students well.

Teacher empowerment is a complex concept. While it’s important for teachers to feel they have the opportunity to participate in and influence a district’s direction, teacher empowerment is not a substitute for democracy or, worse yet, anarchy. The researcher-practitioner has to find a good balance between teacher empowerment and abdication of responsibilities. This journey toward this balance is a challenging one as a teacher’s individual expectation of what empowerment is may differ from an administrator’s. Now that the researcher-practitioner has been in Dovington for almost six years, there is a track-record that teachers can look to when judging whether or not the district leadership team is genuinely interested in supporting teacher empowerment or just paying lip-service to it.

In this regard, the researcher-practitioner has turned to the concepts of SMART goals to drive team and school behavior. It is crucial, however, that all of the SMART goals be aligned to support the School Improvement Plan which is in support and aligned to the District-wide Strategic Plan. The researcher-practitioner reviews and approves SMART goals, assuring their alignment with district goals and then empowers the schools or teacher teams or grades to implement practices that achieve the goals. This infrastructure has been in place in Dovington for the 2008-09 school year and initial indications are that it is successful. The key for administrators is to not delegate or abdicate the responsibility to review and even reject proposed SMART goals as being un-aligned with district or school goals. However, once approved, the administrator then
shifts responsibility to that of servant – supporting and assisting teachers as they work to achieve their goals.

This balance is a more sophisticated view of the organization chart than the researcher-practitioner originally presented during the interview process. During the development and negotiation of the SMART goals, the organizational chart looks traditional with administration leading growth efforts and rejecting team proposals that do not support district efforts or are not aggressive enough. Once the SMART goals are approved however, the organization chart flips and administrators actively serve the needs of the teachers as they work to achieve their SMART goals. This revised view of the role of top leadership in a school district is a direct result of the experience that the researcher-practitioner received during the implementation of Dovington’s Professional Learning Community initiative.

The third leadership lesson that resulted from this project is that there is considerable resistance and fear among some teachers to the concept of teacher empowerment. While teachers who have “grown up” in the era of increased accountability appear less resistant to teacher empowerment, veteran teachers appear more reluctant to embrace the concept. In Dovington, this phenomenon manifested itself in the almost-militant manner that the Dovington Teachers’ Association resisted changing the various teacher leader job descriptions. Each incumbent teacher-leader embraced the proposed changes, but it appeared that the DTA felt it necessary to “protect” those teachers from their own enthusiasm. This researcher-practitioner believes that teacher unions see teacher empowerment as a direct threat on their own importance. If teachers feel comfortable working directly with administration and empowered to identify issues
and concerns, the need for a union may be significantly reduced. As teacher empowerment becomes more commonplace and accepted among teachers, teacher unions will have to adapt their role to compensate for this change.

The final leadership lesson learned through this leadership project is also about the necessity to read and write about the practice of school leadership. The researcher-practitioner’s default approach to decision-making is instinctual and seat-of-the-pants. Perhaps that is because, before this leadership project, the researcher-practitioner had no other reliable sources of information available. Prior to this project, the researcher-practitioner rarely engaged in substantive discussions and debates with other top school leaders about items of educational relevance, instead centering most of the peer-to-peer discussions on the political frame of educational leadership. This project, and program, has given this researcher-practitioner the confidence to be a full-participant in discussions about the technical aspects of educational and instructional leadership. Armed with the confidence in the ability to critically examine current research in all areas of educational research, this researcher-practitioner has shifted the approach to decision-making from instinctual to research-based. While this research project is completed, the habits of critical analysis of current and future educational research and intellectual discussion of applicable techniques will remain. These new skills form the basis of a new, better-informed and more confident leader with the confidence to lead a school, a district or a community.

Throughout this section, the term researcher-practitioner was used to refer to the author of this study. The use of this term is purposeful, as it reflects the duality of role with which the author has emerged from this leadership project. While I have always
been a practitioner, and occasionally a researcher, now, my approach to leadership will be that of an active researcher-practitioner, dealing with the practicalities of everyday leadership not just as a leader, but as a scholar.

**Conclusion**

This study examined the efforts required to implement a Professional Learning Community in a suburban Massachusetts community, searching for signs of sustainability of the initiative during its initial phases. The study concluded that the role of teacher-leaders changed during the course of the implementation with teacher-leaders becoming more active in school improvement efforts. The study also found that Principals were more willing to distribute leadership to teachers and teacher-leaders after the Professional Learning Community initiative and teachers and teacher-leaders became more committed to working on school improvement efforts as well. Using current research into the topic of sustainable change, the study suggests that these three findings are indicators that Professional Learning Communities may represent a sustainable concept to drive educational improvement efforts over the long-term. The conclusions are limited by the short-term nature of the study, but further future research is suggested to test this study’s conclusions.

This study began with the admonition that the history and landscape of educational change is littered with rusting hulks of failed initiatives. To be effective over the long-term, educational improvement initiatives must not only be well-designed and effective, they must also be able to survive the inevitable change in leadership that the school/district/state/region/country will experience. Does the immensely popular concept of Professional Learning Communities represent a real opportunity to improve education
in a meaningful way for a sustainable period of time, or will it become just another
rusting hulk alongside other promising ideas such as the “open campus,” Junior High
Schools, bilingual education, Open Classroom design, or “New” Math? The results of
this study suggest that, while further research is warranted, Professional Learning
Communities may be around for some time, driving the educational improvement efforts
of Dovington and other communities.
References


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