Circles of culture and cognition: a sociocognitive study of collaboration within and among academic groups of teachers in a rural school district

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Circles of Culture and Cognition:
A Sociocognitive Study of Collaboration
within and among Academic Groups of Teachers
in a Rural School District

by

Linda L. Baker

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Abstract

This ethnographic case study examined the roles of district and school macro-culture and teacher sub-group micro-culture in influencing the nature and extent of teachers’ professional collaboration. Informed by the sociocognitive theory that learning is rooted in social relationships and develops through interpersonal discourse and activity, the study focused on educators in a middle and high school in one small, rural district. The 41 educators who participated in the study included three administrators, 24 high school faculty members, and 17 middle school teachers. Data collection methods incorporated a general questionnaire, field notes, observations of meetings and gatherings, and extensive interviews. Most of the 21 educators who were interviewed were members of the four sub-groups chosen for in-depth study: the sixth grade and eighth grade teacher teams in the middle school and the English and science departments in the high school. Analysis looked closely at the consistencies and contrasts in the emerging patterns of professional discourse and activity, particularly seeking understanding of the interwoven factors of decision-making and leadership styles, school context dynamics, communication networks and silos, and teacher feelings of professional home.

The findings demonstrated the significance of both the academic climate of the general macro-culture and the particular backgrounds and dynamics of members of grade level and departmental sub-groups in the micro-cultures. Within the macro-culture, the study found that empowering leadership styles, sub-group supportive logistical arrangements, a combination of silo and networking communication patterns, and a strong sense of home in the district and school provided a context encouraging productive
collaborative interactions. Examining the ways in which membership in particular sub-groups influenced collaboration, the study found that sequential skill-building academic domains, shared leadership and solidarity within the sub-group, conversational routines focused on instruction, and a strong sense of home within the sub-group contributed to purposeful, instruction-based professional collaboration in the micro-cultures. Both the macro-culture of school and district and the micro-culture of the peer-based faculty sub-group exerted considerable influence on the nature and extent of teachers’ professional collaboration.
Acknowledgments

Since the interwoven social and cognitive dynamics of school organization have always fascinated me, the underlying ideas for this study have been building in my mind over many years and multiple school experiences. I appreciate the influence of extraordinarily skilled and caring teachers throughout my school years and my professional career, and I recognize their contribution to this work.

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the teachers and administrators in the small, rural school district where I conducted this study. Their actions and insights as they shared their multi-layered professional lives with me were truly inspirational.

My work with two major research projects, Just for the Kids-New York and the National Study of Writing Instruction, provided a foundation for this study. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Arthur Applebee for inviting me to work on these projects, and I greatly appreciate the guidance that both Dr. Applebee and Dr. Judith Langer gave so generously.

This dissertation grew from the thoughtful mentoring of Arthur Applebee, who provided much-needed scaffolding at every step of the way and always asked just the right questions to prompt my thinking. I thank Arthur, Judith, and Dr. Jane Agee for their insightful support throughout the project.

I credit my husband, Charlie Baker, now deceased, for encouraging me not to give up on the dream we shared as undergraduates. My brother, Dick Lasselle, provided the final impetus to transform the dream into reality. I am grateful to my mother, Doris Lasselle, for the inspiration she imparted as she was writing her own book while I was conducting this study. I thank my daughter, Linanne Conroy, and my son, Charlie Baker, for the caring strength they gave so generously and continuously, and for sharing the excitement and challenges at each step of the dissertation journey.
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Chapter One
Introduction

The professional life of a secondary school teacher takes place not only in the classroom and in the school but also in the academic department, grade level team, or other faculty group. Membership or participation in such faculty groups may play a role in determining how individuals view themselves as educators, how they function in their classrooms, and how and to what extent they interact with and within the general school learning culture in which they work.

Over the course of my thought and research about school culture, I have come to realize that all that we know, as individuals and as groups, we have learned within and through the interwoven web of our context. Geertz calls culture “the web of significance in which [a group] is suspended” and suggests that the analysis of culture “is not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (1973, p. 5). The social dynamics of any organization, formal or informal, have far-reaching influences on the meaning making (the cognition) that grows within and builds upon that cultural context.

Any group of people interacting for an extended period of time will create a culture. I use “culture” to include a shared system of customs and traditions, a co-constructed environment, patterns of assumptions and expectations, and, colloquially, “the way we do things around here.” “School cultures,” Bruner says, “are not simply groups of people sharing common traditions. They are formal institutions that specify what roles people play and what status and respect they are accorded” (1999, p. 29).
Those who study culture, whether in schools, businesses, or other social groups, commonly believe that the culture of an organization plays an important role in individual and collective understandings and performance, whether exemplary or otherwise. As Deal and Peterson (1999) tell us, “Highly respected organizations have evolved a shared system of informal folkways and traditions that infuse work with meaning, passion, and purpose” (p. 1). Culture shapes thinking, Bruner asserts, and gives us “the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of ourselves and our powers” (1996, p. x).

Even as high school and middle school teachers establish their individual classroom cultures, they also participate, to varying extents and with varying results, in the culture of faculty groups such as academic departments and grade level teams. Teachers are a part of the culture of the school both as individuals and as members of these sub-groups, although it may be difficult to distinguish between professional identity as individual teacher and as sub-group member. The subject-area department or grade level team may be the “professional home” (Siskin & Little, 1995, p. 7) from which many teachers operate, even if they have never analyzed or articulated the importance of the academic sub-group in their professional lives. Teachers often build, or change, their sense of what it means to be a teacher through their interactions with colleagues in these sub-groups (Ball & Lacey, 1980; Siskin & Little, 1995).

A significant component of the culture of faculty groups may be professional collaboration, which I define as teachers working together to achieve instructional objectives, through sharing resources, expertise, and responsibility with colleagues. Collaboration, of course, can be internet-based and far-flung as well as close and face-to-
face, but the type of professional working together that may take place within a school is of particular interest to the broader study of school culture. Collaboration within and among teacher groups in the same school may vary widely in extent, in purpose, and in form. Current research in school climate and educational improvement suggests that, in recent years, there has been some movement away from the traditional secondary school culture of isolationism and specialization toward more collaboration and community (Newman et al., 2000; Felner et al., 2007; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2007; Kruse & Louis, 2007). High school teachers, in particular, have often experienced a sense of detachment from colleagues as they function mostly independently and separately in facilitating learning for their particular classes. Evolving middle school cultures, in contrast, are often largely collegial, with significant collaboration, particularly among members of grade level teams; in fact, most middle schools now build grade level team meetings into the school day. Running through the professional lives of both middle and high school teachers is membership in academic departments such as English, math, science, or social studies. Collaboration within the department may be strong and frequent, perhaps with significant collegial planning of instruction and review of student work; it may, however, be sporadic and episodic or even largely non-existent.

Collaboration is central to the school improvement movement. Studies of the relationships between academic climate and student performance identify teacher collaboration as a strong positive element. Investigations of successful professional learning communities place great value on teacher collaboration. Researchers have established the importance of collaboration as a part of successful learning culture (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Langer, 2001, 2004; Felner et al., 2003; Goddard et al., 2007).
While there has been considerable study of culture and collaboration at the classroom and at the school level, there has been little examination of collaboration at the level of teacher academic groups, particularly how such collaboration influences and is perceived by individual teachers. This study helps to fill this gap by exploring teacher perceptions of the nature and extent of collaboration within and among teacher groups.

Since the culture of a particular academic department or interdisciplinary grade level team may play a significant role in the learning/teaching experiences of its members and, by extension, in the culture of the school as a whole, there would seem to be value in looking closely at the collaborative patterns within such a culture.

The purpose of this study was to investigate school culture from the perspectives of secondary school teachers within academic departments and interdisciplinary teams in a particular rural school. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the role of teacher professional collaboration in the culture of this district and its middle school and high school?

2. How does participating teachers’ membership in particular subject area departments and inter-disciplinary grade level teams influence the purpose, nature and extent of any professional collaboration and the value ascribed to such collaboration?

Since this study focused on the day-to-day interactions within a particular interwoven web of context, it was ethnographic in nature, developing from repeated in-depth observations and discussions and deriving meaning from the perspective of the participants (Meriam, 1998; Patton, 2001; Maxwell, 2005). A qualitative, ethnographic approach allows the researcher to delve deeply into a culture and analyze patterns of
understanding and behavior as lived and interpreted by those participating in the experience. The case study, through particularism, heuristic complexity, and concreteness (Merriam, 1998), places attitudes and actions in context, and thus seems particularly appropriate for a sociocognitive study of teams of teachers within a particular cultural setting. The study was sociocognitive in that it examined the interwoven factors of how educators’ learning and teaching were rooted in their professional relationships and developed through interpersonal discourse and activity.

The principal participants in the study were teachers who were members of academic departments and grade level teams in a middle school and a high school within the same rural school district. Since I sought to examine the sociocognitive complexities of the interwoven collaborative processes, it seemed fitting to look closely at the consistencies and contrasts within the group attitudes and actions of teacher groups in secondary schools in one school district. I chose a small, rural district since there has been little scholarly examination of professional group dynamics in rural school contexts and since the small number of teachers in a rural context would allow comprehensive examination of diverse grade levels and academic departments.

Faculty completion of an open-ended questionnaire, observations of faculty and small-group meetings, teacher and administrator interviews, field notes, and collection of documents and other artifacts informed the study. This was a process study, presenting detailed descriptions of how people interact with each other over time, recognizing that the interactions are fluid and dynamic, featuring the participants’ own words, and focusing on the participants’ perceptions. As a study of collaboration and a collaborative effort to discover meaning, this research enabled the participants to become co-
investigators to some extent as they reflected on how their ideas about teaching and learning related to their professional discourse and activity.

I did not expect this research to provide all the answers about school culture; it focused on the particular perspectives of particular groups in a particular place at particular moments in time to illuminate the nature of and relationships within this specific culture. The intention was to shed light on the nature, extent, and value attributed to teacher collaboration within and among these teacher academic groups and thus to contribute to the growing body of research on the relationships of culture and cognition, i.e., how educators’ meaning making about their roles as learners and teachers is influenced by the cultures they experience professionally.
In my preliminary examination of the role of collaborative teacher teams in school culture, I became increasingly aware of the interrelationship of culture and cognition as I sought to determine what theory and existing research show us about how both students and teachers learn in social context. While there is an abundance of conceptual scholarship framing the connections of culture and learning, there has been little attention given to researching the complex ways in which the collaboration of grade level and departmental teams of teachers contributes to the interwoven contexts for teacher and student learning.

The literature of school culture and change is anchored in sociocognitive theory and reflects sociocognitive pedagogy. Building on Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986) framework, sociocognitive pedagogical theory extends our understanding not only of how children can be best instructed but also how adult learning can be best facilitated. Such pedagogy provides a means for conceptualizing a culture of thoughtful discourse about student and professional learning anchored in the group’s sense of what is understood and considered important.

**Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

Since culture creates and shapes our thinking. It seems particularly appropriate to place an ethnographic study of school culture in a sociocognitive framework. The premise that learning and teaching are rooted in social relationships and develop through interpersonal discourse and activity informs this conceptual framework.
Roots of the Sociocognitive Theory


Setting out to “describe and specify the development of those forms of practical intelligence that are specifically human,” (1978, p. 23) Vygotsky theorized, experimented, and concluded that intellect develops through the emerging use of tools and signs in socially mediated contexts. His research focused on tracing the history of change in individuals and society to produce both ontogenesis (development of individuals over time) and phylogenesis (development of a society over time). Drawing from the Marx and Engel concept of dialectal materialism, which held that humans are influenced by society and that society changes as individuals influence each other cognitively (Cole & Scribner, 1978), Vygotsky’s studies confirmed that initial learning always originates from outside the individual and is eventually internalized. The individual learns and changes in a social environment.

The process of internalization (learning) consists of a series of transformations, Vygotsky asserts, in which, first, an external operation is reconstructed and begins to occur internally; then, an interpersonal process is changed into an intrapersonal process; and, lastly, a series of external operations exist and change in a long period of development before and during the transformation of an interpersonal process into an
intrapersonal one. Human strategies for thinking and problem solving result from social conditions and cultural constructs. Social innovation, or cultural change, results from ideas that people internalize from external/interpersonal context and then share, to be internalized by others. Ideas beget ideas. Learning begets learning.

Central to Vygotskian concepts of sociocognition is the role of experience. Humans live their culture and learn as they experience it en route. Luria, Vygotsky’s longtime associate, reinforced that idea, contending that the doing comes before the understanding: in initial learning, humans do before they know (Luria, 1976). Related to this idea of doing before understanding is Vygotsky’s idea of a zone of proximal development. Identifying two developmental levels in learners (the actual level of development and the potential level of development), Vygotsky used the term zone of proximal development to describe “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 86). What learners can do with the assistance of others is even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone, Vygotsky asserted. The internalization follows the interaction.

Langer’s presentation of the blended theory she termed “sociocognitive” recognizes learning as mediated by interactions with others, shaped by context, developing through experience, dialogic and intertextual, moving from the tangible to the conceptual and from the external to the internal, and constantly evolving (1984, 1985, 1987, 1995).
Extension of Sociocognition into School Culture

Culture shapes thinking, Bruner (1996) asserts, and gives us “the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of our selves and our powers” (p. x). “Education is not an island but part of the continent of culture” (p. 11). School cultures (not only the institutions but also the less formal systems within them) are all about making meaning, and the interpreted meaning reflects “not only the idiosyncratic histories of individuals, but also the culture’s canonical ways of constructing reality” (p. 14). Life in any culture, Bruner tells us, is an interplay between the versions of the world that people form under its “institutional sway” (p. 14) and the versions produced by individual experience.

As a reminder that all meanings are made within communities, Lemke (1995) used the term social semiotics, which argues that the analysis of meaning cannot be separated from the social, historical, and political dimensions of those communities. Reflecting on the social discourse ideas of a variety of theorists, Lemke concluded that any study of culture needs to focus on what is a typical in a community, particularly the activity formations—the typical doings—and the accompanying language. Understanding a culture requires abandoning the synoptic stance of looking in from outside after the activity has ceased and instead adopting a dynamic, participatory, contemporaneous stance within the context and during the actual interactions. Consistent with Lemke’s thinking and building on an analysis of the ideas of Goethe, Bakhtin (1981, 1986) stresses the importance of particularity and concreteness as well as multi-temporality and multi-voicedness. Culture is a complex, dialogic, multi-voiced, ever-changing rhetoric.
Rogoff (1990) suggested that the nature of social context and interactions differs greatly from culture to culture, which she defined as “the organized and common practices of particular communities” (p. 110). Reinforcing the Vygotskian studies on guided participation and peer interaction (1978) and drawing on recent studies in a variety of cultural contexts, Rogoff judged that the most productive interaction results from situations in which peers participate jointly in decision making. Shared problem-solving builds individual cognition and self-efficacy. “The collaborative process seems to lead to a level of understanding unavailable in solitary endeavor or noncollaborative interaction” (p. 178). For both children and adults, engagement in a joint creative process facilitates internalization of ideas and concepts.

School is a culture in itself, Bruner (1996) reminds us; it is not just a preparation for participation in culture. Bruner emphasized agency, collaboration, and reflection in his discussion of emerging cognition for the participants in school culture (who are all learners, whether they be labeled as students or teachers). Agency and collaboration need to be thought of as interwoven, Bruner said, with attention to the proactive, problem-oriented, decision-making, attention-focused (agency) joined with attention to the negotiated, interactive, and social (collaboration). Bruner described reflection as a continuing process of “making sense, going ‘meta,’ turning around on what one has learned through bare exposure, even thinking about one’s thinking” (p. 88).

School cultures and subgroups within the general culture (academic departments or grade level teams, or example) show what they consider to be important through their displayed artifacts and architecture, their rituals and traditions, their organizational structure, their stories and lore, and their stewardship of elements of represented culture,
Deal and Peterson (1999) tell us. As cognition moves from external interaction to internalization, inclusionary beliefs and practices are crucial if participants are to feel part of the group and learn in that context.

**Literature Review**

Researchers have been linking culture and cognition, although perhaps not in those terms, for at least the last hundred years. Meaning making in schools takes place within unique gatherings of individuals who bring their own personal cultural backgrounds, but who also share a history and culture as a group. Research studying the ubiquitous school transformation efforts of recent times has given attention to the influence of school context on student learning but has rarely focused on the role of teacher groups in establishing that context. There has been little scholarly attention to how collaboration (or lack of collaboration) within and among academic teams of teachers influences the learning culture of a school.

This study of the role of collaborative teacher teams in forming and transforming the learning culture of secondary schools seems to fit into a convergence of the literature on three inter-related topics: academic climate, school improvement, and professional learning communities. I see these three traditions of academia (and of academic research) as informing and influencing each other and as collectively interacting with collaborative teacher teams in continuously interwoven patterns of influence.
An examination of the literature to determine what, if anything, researchers have learned about the contributions of collaborative teacher teams to secondary school culture requires identifying how the social features of education (the interactions built around expectations, goals, policies, and practices) relate to learning and how these social features of academic climate, school improvement, and professional learning communities might be constituted or changed by groups of teachers to support the kinds of cognition that are valued.

In studying research findings related to academic climate, school improvement, and professional learning communities, I have looked carefully at what these research traditions have established, individually and collectively, about the relationships of social interaction and teaching/learning in schools and at what, if anything, these research traditions have established about how collaboration among and between academic groups of teachers influences local learning cultures.

This review of the literature of academic climate, school improvement, and professional learning communities indicated a need for more in-depth exploration of the
particularities of school culture creation and change from the perspective of teachers in potentially collaborative networks.

**Relationships of social interaction and learning**

The literature of educational cognitive culture examines the system of values and beliefs, language and behaviors that shape learning—and the sense of what constitutes learning in schools. The goals and expectations, policies and practices join with the individual and collective attitudes and behaviors to form the culture.

Significant bodies of research on academic climate, school improvement, and professional learning communities have explored the complex relationships between social behaviors and cognitive performance in schools.

**Academic Climate**

Educational scholars distinguish between academic climate and cognitive culture, seeing the former as a description of current moods and attitudes and the latter as the long-term personality or character of the organization. The conversations and actions taking place within a particular, time-based context constitute climate, whereas the underlying, cumulative values and beliefs developed over long periods of time constitute culture.

The social interactions that inform the academic climate of a school reflect the shared priorities and principles of the adults and students in the school. The wording and tenor of the daily discourse and activities provide the context for teaching and learning. Interwoven aspects of school climate include teacher expectations, focus, and nurturing, all of which have been identified by researchers as affecting student motivation and performance.
Among the strongest contributors to educational achievement is the composite quality of climate that Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006) call academic optimism—a cultural construct of cognitive focus, belief in collective and individual efficacy, and trust in each others’ shared goals and support. The Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy study measured teacher attitudes, student achievement, and demographics in a diverse sample of 96 schools. A random sample of teachers from the schools provided data on the school’s academic optimism. Student achievement scores and demographic characteristics were obtained from the state department of education. A confirmatory factor analysis and a test of the hypotheses were done simultaneously using structural equation modeling. Controlling for demographic variables and previous achievement, Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy confirmed the important role of academic optimism in student and school success. The study findings validate the influence of social interaction related to cognitive focus, efficacy beliefs, and trust in enhancing academic performance.

Similarly, the studies of Felner and his associates (1982, 1988) have established the importance of personalizing the school social dynamics to engage students as full and active participants in their own learning. Early Felner studies highlighted the effectiveness of building connections between and among students and teachers (Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982; Felner & Adan, 1988). The three-decades-long Project on High Performance Learning Communities used a core set of assessments to conduct more than 3,000 separate annual studies of schools and analyzed multiple longitudinal data sets in a wide range of schools across 26 states. Many of the studies have included particular emphasis on economically disadvantaged situations. A high level of usefulness of the data by individual schools resulted in high participation levels over the years. Measures
of school and teacher practices, school climate, and other key elements of the school
context were analyzed along with collected assessments of student’s academic
performance drawn from the state and district measures as well as teacher-provided
samples of student work (Felner et al., 2007). The relationship between climate ratings
and students’ adjustment was examined in three increasingly large samples of schools and
students collected during successive years of the Project on High Performance Learning
Communities in a sample of over 105,000 students in 188 schools. (Felner, et. al., 1997;
2000; 2001). The three-part investigation reported in 2003 concluded that ratings of
multiple climate dimensions were associated consistently with indexes of academic,
behavioral, and socio-emotional adjustment. Across all samples, more positive levels of
student performance, teacher expectations, academic aspirations and academic efficacy were
found in schools with higher population mean levels of Teacher Support, Structure, Positive
Peer Interactions, and Instructional Innovation (Felner et al., 2003). Running through the
findings of the various Felner studies is the sense that personalized academic climate is
associated with high levels of teacher expectation as well as student aspiration, as well as
with feelings of self-efficacy on the part of both teachers and students.

Reginald Green (1998) used The Nurturing School Teacher Inventory and The
Nurturing School Student Inventory to assess both teacher and student perceptions of the
existence of nurturing characteristics in their schools and to determine the effect, if any,
that these characteristics have on student attendance, student suspensions, and eighth
grade students' scores on the Ohio Proficiency Test. Green conducted a random sampling
of 20 grade eight students and 20 grade eight teachers in each of 30 schools—10 rural, 10
urban, and 10 suburban. Survey data sufficient to use in the study was received from 21
of the 30 schools. The four themes in the nurturing inventories were (1) Professionalism
Among Administration, Faculty and Staff, (2) Students' Feelings About Themselves, (3) Student/Teacher Relationships and (4) Environment of The School and Classroom. The nurturing characteristics in each instance were perceived to be more important by teachers and students than their existence in schools. The theme "Professionalism Among Administration, Faculty and Staff" was found to be most existent, whereas the theme "Students' Feelings About Themselves" was found to be least existent. To determine differences between the five most nurturing schools and the five least nurturing schools on the variables of student attendance, student suspensions and proficiency test scores, a Wilcoxon Rank-Sum Test and a t-test were conducted. An analysis of the data comparing the five most nurturing schools with the five least nurturing revealed a significant difference between the two groups of schools on proficiency test scores. No significant differences were found between the two groups of schools on the other variables. The final research question was: Is there a correlation between the perceived magnitude of nurturing in schools and student attendance, student suspensions and proficiency test scores? An Overall Nurturing Mean was computed for each of the four themes using teacher ratings, student ratings and the average of the two. A positive correlation was observed between the Overall Nurturing Mean for all themes and proficiency test scores. As schools increased in the magnitude of nurturing, proficiency test scores also increased. Of particular interest was the observation that the greater the perception of nurturing by teachers, the higher the proficiency test scores. It was also revealed that when teachers perceived the environment of the school to be positive, proficiency scores were higher. When the environment of the school was perceived to be positive by both teachers and
students, attendance increased, fewer student suspensions occurred, and proficiency test scores were higher.

Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder (2004) explored the social and academic significance of student-teacher bonding using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, an ongoing nationally representative study of American students in grades 7-12. Approximately 90,000 students in 132 schools completed an In-School Survey, and a subgroup, selected evenly across high school and feeder school pairs, participated in two waves of In-Home Interviews. A total of 14,736 adolescents participated in both waves. The final analytical sample included the 10,991 adolescents (from 126 schools) who had no missing data on study variables. The study examined whether student-teacher relationships predicted student behavioral outcomes (specifically academic achievement and disciplinary problems), whether these within-school intra-generational relationships were predicted by the climate-related characteristics of schools, and how the behavioral and contextual correlates of student-teacher relationships varied by race-ethnicity. Extensive tables show the results of the multi-level statistical models. Findings indicate that stronger intergenerational bonding in school is associated with higher academic achievement, especially for Hispanic American girls, and with a lower likelihood of disciplinary problems, especially for white girls. The authors’ analyses suggest that the more diffuse aspects of school environments, such as academic climate, were more important than were the more concrete features of these environments.

Overall, an extensive body of research supports the conclusion that academic climate is a particularly significant element of school culture. What Felner calls personalized school environment is closely related to what Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy call
academic optimism and what Green calls nurturing characteristics in schools. The importance of high expectations and supportive atmosphere are also commonalities in the findings of Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder. Although the labels and wording of the findings differ, there is consistent evidence for a strong relationship between positive academic climate and school success.

As Felner and his co-researchers point out, “Personalizing the school environment is a central goal of efforts to transform America’s schools” (2007, p. 1). The next section of this review highlights efforts to improve academic climate as well as other aspects of learning culture.

School Improvement

How have school-wide improvement efforts been linked to higher achievement in secondary schools? How do improvement initiatives in secondary schools take shape, and how have researchers studied their effectiveness? Although much analysis of learning culture has examined the perceived environment of schooling at the classroom level (a level of analysis appropriate for elementary teaching and learning), study of the cognitive cultures in which secondary students are immersed require a more systemic approach since middle and high school students move from class to class throughout the day and interact with changing sets of peers, have shorter periods of contact with multiple teachers, confront variations in expectations and procedures, and face a wide range of assessment.

The literature of school improvement includes the study of how the social features of education (the interactions built around expectations, goals, policies, and practices) relate to learning and how these social features might be transformed to support the kinds
of cognition that are valued. Studies of school improvement efforts have focused particularly on organizational structure as that structure relates to educator attitudes and interactions and learning environments. Much of the reform effort of the last two decades has sought to move schools toward a stronger sense of community.

Among the researchers studying effects of the wave of school improvement that began in the late 1980’s were Lee and Smith (1995), who assessed the impact on tenth-grade students of attending high schools whose practices were consistent with the school restructuring movement. Using data on a sample of 11,794 sophomores in 830 high schools from the first two waves of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, their study investigated restructuring effects on students’ gains in engagement and achievement in four subjects (history, mathematics, reading and science) and the social distribution of those gains. High schools with several practices consistent with restructuring and those with none of the 30 identified practices were contrasted with schools that engaged in only traditional school improvement. Lee and Smith found that students’ gains in achievement and engagement were significantly higher in schools with restructuring practices and lower in schools without reforms. They identified three domains of practices that shift schools from the bureaucratic toward the communal form: 1) those aimed at reorganizing instruction (such as mixed-ability classes, cooperative learning focus, independent study, and flexibility in class timing), 2) those meant to alter authority and expertise in the school (interdisciplinary teaching teams, students’ evaluations of teachers, and staff solving school problems), and 3) those aimed at personalizing relationships within the school (using parent volunteers, keeping students
in the same homeroom for several years, common planning time for teachers, and schools-within-schools).

On a similar theme, examining the effect of social organization of schools on teachers’ feelings of agency, Lee, Dedrick, and Smith (1991) built upon the layered idea that (1) school organization influences how teachers view their work and how they teach and (2) teachers’ perceptions and practices, in turn, affect students’ learning. The researchers used hierarchal linear modeling techniques to analyze results of the Administrator and Teacher Survey from High School and Beyond for 8,488 full-time teachers in 354 schools (both public and private). HLM allowed the investigation of the nature of school-effects question, which is hierarchal in that variations in organizational practices across schools affect phenomena and relationships within schools. The final step in the researchers’ analysis involved modeling mean efficacy and differentiation by control as a function of both the demographic and social organization characteristics of schools. Overall, these HLM analyses provided considerable empirical support for the initial hypothesis of a substantial impact of school social organization on teachers’ efficacy and satisfaction. Such elements as principal leadership, communal school organization, an orderly environment, and levels of control granted to teachers influence average efficacy. Distinguishing social structure from social process, Lee, Dedrick, and Smith noted that features of social structure operate as a context for social organizational processes in schools and influence outcomes for students.

Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) defined collective teacher efficacy (CTE) as the collective perception that teachers in a school make an educational difference to their students over and above the educational impact of their homes and communities. To
study the relationship between collective teacher efficacy and the achievement of middle school students in the Commonwealth of Virginia, Tschannen-Moran and Barr used a sample of 66 middle schools, measuring collective teacher efficacy through the Collective Teacher Belief Scale and measuring student achievement through the Virginia Standards of Learning tests. The researchers developed the 12-item Collective Belief Scale as an adaptation of the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale developed by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001). Consistent with the findings of previous studies, this investigation showed a significant positive relationship between collective efficacy and student achievement. Significant positive relationships were found between CTE and student performance on the grade 8 math, writing, and English tests.

Numerous reform efforts have focused on restructuring schools to improve the organizational process as a means to boost student achievement. McPartland and James (2001), Viadero (2005), and Kemple, (2005) are among those studying restructuring through the Talent Development Model. Kemple’s five-year study of the Talent Development Model in Philadelphia schools was sponsored by MDRC, a non-partisan research group based in New York City. The school improvement model clusters 9th graders into a separate “Success Academy” to provide extra academic scaffolding during this pivotal year academic year, viewed as making the “make or break” difference in students’ success in high school. Within the 9th grade academy, students take classes in small learning communities of up to 125 students. Students take extended, 80- to 90-minute block classes and “double doses” of courses in mathematics and language arts and reading. Students spend their remaining high school years in small career academies, where they take courses integrating academic content with their career interests.
Kemple’s research team gathered data from the first five schools to use the program in the 190,000-student Philadelphia district. Using baseline data on classes of students passing through the schools three years before the Talent Development model was implemented, they compared the averages with the three to four classes of 9th graders to enter the schools after the implementation of the model. They also tracked the changes against those for six other high schools in the district that had similar demographic compositions and test scores but were not implementing a Talent Development model. The researchers found that the percentage of 9th graders passing algebra increased from an average of 33.1 percent to 61 percent in the Talent Development schools. In comparison, that number grew from 45.2 percent to 48.7 percent in the other district schools. The researchers found comparatively larger improvements for Talent Development schools in attendance and in percentages of students being promoted to the next grade or completing a basic academic curriculum (five credits including math, science, and language arts). The extra attention from teachers and extra time spent in mathematics and language arts in ninth grade were primary factors given credit for the success. McPartland, who reported on his action research participation in a Talent Development model in Baltimore, found that the re-structuring enhanced the school climate: small faculties and active client (parent/student) participation produced favorable conditions for collegial workplace control, notably opportunities for face-to-face interaction throughout the faculty, demand for professionalism in the staff, and a workplace buffered from administrative intervention.

Exploring middle schools’ organizational health from the perspective of twenty-first century reform and accountability efforts, Henderson and others (2005) studied
organizational changes such as teaming of teachers, advisory periods, and exploratory curricula. Their mixed method study focused on three dimensions of organizational health (teacher affiliation, resource support, and academic emphasis) to determine their relationship to academic performance. Using ten middle level schools in six school districts in Tennessee, the researchers collected quantitative data 1) from the Organizational Health Inventory-Middle completed by all teachers and administrators and 2) from demographics and student achievement scores in reading, language, math, science, and social studies compiled by the Tennessee State Department of Education as well as qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with an administrator and at least two teachers at each of the ten schools. Qualitative analysis focused on the interview responses in the two schools with the highest and lowest scores in dimensions of organizational health. The study concluded that the dimension of academic emphasis was particularly important to the organizational health of a school.

Looking at organizational reform associated with improved student success, Sweetland and Hoy (2000) studied the relationship between school climate and teacher empowerment and the relationship between teacher empowerment and school effectiveness in middle schools. Questionnaires were completed by a total of 2,741 teachers from a sample of 86 New Jersey middle schools. The results of the study suggested that teacher empowerment in classroom and instructional decisions can be an important factor enhancing organizational effectiveness and student performance. School climates featuring high degrees of teacher professionalism, a strong internal academic press, and principals with collegial leadership styles were conducive to teacher empowerment. Teacher empowerment was effective when aimed at enhancing teacher
professionalism rather than bureaucratic control and when power was used by teachers to make important classroom and instructional decisions. Collective teacher efficacy was identified as the likely mechanism through which authentic teacher empowerment influenced student performances.

Reform of Chicago public schools has been the subject of several studies analyzing results of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge’s six-year initiative to improve the city’s schools. Between 1995 and 2001, more than 200 schools organized into 45 networks (working with external partners) received Annenberg support to improve in many areas, including strengthening instruction, enhancing student learning climate, and promoting teacher and leadership development. Smylie, Wenzel, and Fendt (2003) reported on the findings of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, which was commissioned to study the Annenberg Challenge and its results. Their analysis focused particularly on school development and lessons for leadership. Their methodology focused first on documenting changes in the essential support for student learning (resulting in a framework for analysis) and then on documenting and analyzing school development processes and factors contributing to or constraining development. Notable among the findings of the detailed analysis was that schools that made the greatest progress were those that cultivated strong distributed leadership. Development was more likely to occur when multiple actors in a school community, including teachers, had active, coordinated, key roles in school leadership. In a related study, Sebring and Bryk (2000) found that principals in the more successful schools in Chicago used an inclusive, facilitative orientation to build distributed school leadership focused on student learning.
Copland (2003) found similar support for shared leadership in his study of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a five-year school improvement effort involving schools throughout the 118-christ district Bay Area region supported by the Hewlett-Annenberg Challenge. BASRC sought to “reculture” schools in ways that support systemic improvement. Findings from two surveys, one completed by principals and the other by teachers in 16 BASRC-participating schools, provided substantial evidence that the reform effort promoted shared decision-making and distributed leadership. Interviews and on-site observations provided strong corresponding qualitative evidence pointing to the development and existence of shared leadership. As a teacher reported, “Every person has some form of leadership role … There are many different leadership roles that function across the school. How do they come about? Well, basically, out of need and … It’s just kind of the culture now” (pp. 167-168).

In general, the research on school reform and restructuring seems to verify scholars’ conclusions that organizational systems that allow personalized facilitation of academic focus and a collegial approach to decision-making support student achievement. Lee and Smith’s three domains of reform—reorganizing instruction, altering authority and expertise, and personalizing relationships—are echoed in the progressivist or collegial control concept identified by Bidwell et al., the importance of teacher perceptions of efficacy established by Lee et al. and by Tschannen-Moran and Barr, the role of collegial workplace control in the Talent Development model studied by Kemple and by McPartland, the determiners of organizational health used by Henderson et al., the role of teacher empowerment established by Sweetland and Hoy, and the building of shared leadership reported by Smylie et al. and by Copland. All of these aspects of school
reform have been linked to improved student achievement. All are instrumental to school reform replacing bureaucracy with communal relationships.

**Professional Learning Communities**

Associated with the literature of school improvement and academic climate has been study of an intensive though spotty effort to establish what some educators call professional learning communities, using a concept of structured educator collaboration to enhance student learning. The emphasis on educators’ professional learning communities has evolved from years of informal teacher collaboration, a systems organizational perspective on learning-based teams, and an increasing body of test-based student performance statistics (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2007). Historically, teachers’ learning communities were informed by the work of Rosenholtz (1989), whose investigation of the social organizational features in 78 elementary schools in eight school districts in Tennessee established that support through teacher networks, cooperation among colleagues, and expanded professional roles increased teacher effectiveness in meeting student needs.

Nested communities of teachers help to create the shared meaning within a school. While grade-level teams of elementary teachers have been a well-examined mainstay of academia for many decades, collaborative teacher teams in secondary schools have been less common and less examined. Recent reform efforts have included establishing school-based teams of academic colleagues specifically charged with inquiry, reflection, and planning to improve student achievement. Foundational work on professional learning communities in the past two decades has highlighted the concept of structured educator collaboration to enhance student learning. Although learning
communities are relatively rare in today's high schools, they constitute productive islands of professional practice important for the lessons they might offer reformers and educators.

Building on the sociocognitive perspective, teachers' learning communities are marked by ongoing, shared, inclusive, reflective discourse and interaction; individual and collective cognition results from the learning-oriented, growth-promoting collaboration focusing on enhancing student learning (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993, 2001, 2006; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; King & Newmann, 2001; Toole & Louis, 2002; Hargreaves, 2003, 2007).

Through the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, founded at Stanford University in 1987, McLaughlin and Talbert (1993, 2001, 2006) conducted groundbreaking research on professional learning communities in a variety of school contexts. Drawing upon their mixed method, four-year study of learning communities in sixteen schools within seven districts in four metropolitan areas in Michigan and California, McLaughlin and Talbert found that working collaboratively with peer teachers in trying new practices helps educators to understand the subjects they teach and the facilitating roles they play in the school. They determined that "participation in a professional community . . . supports the risk-taking and struggle entailed in transforming practice" (p. 15) and that teachers' professional communities "offer the most effective unit of intervention and powerful opportunity for reform" (p. 18). These researchers' 2001 report, Professional Communities and the Work of High School Teaching, used multiple lenses (including institutional environments and social systems contexts) as well as integrated research strategies (variable oriented and case oriented) to examine the
influence of collegial relationships in professional learning communities in the same sixteen schools. Efforts to understand the contexts that matter for teaching and learning resulted in the researchers’ featuring several schools and academic departments that stand out as exemplars of professional communities. McLaughlin and Talbert concluded that building collegial learning communities into the work lives of American high school teachers is fundamentally a matter of “reculturing the profession—changing the ethos of teaching from individualism to collaboration, from conservatism to innovation” (p. 125).

The McLaughlin and Talbert 2006 report on findings of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC, see above) provides extensive evidence of the positive effects of school-based learning communities on student achievement. Phase I of their BASRC study, which took place from 1996 to 2002, focused on 10 case study schools as well as repeated surveys of 86 Leadership Schools, and observations of workshops, institutes, staff meetings, network convenings and other BASRC regional sessions. Looking at what it is that school-based learning communities actually do and how those actions affect student learning, McLaughlin and Talbert identified three types of essential collaborative actions: (1) building and managing knowledge to improve practice; (2) creating shared language, vision, and standards for practice; and (3) sustaining school culture. One case study that illustrates the success of a group of teachers building school culture in a secondary school featured the mathematics department of San Lucio High School. The math department stood out for its highly developed teacher learning and improvement practices; the school’s predominantly Latino and Asian-American students were taking more math classes and had higher levels of achievement than was typical of schools with similar demographics. McLaughlin and Talbert found that the teachers in
this department worked and learned together to improve their students’ achievement through collaboration on mathematics instruction, enforcing norms of professionalism, and organizing for professional learning and equity. A sense of collective responsibility for students’ success was widely shared among teachers in all schools with learning communities described as “advanced” by McLaughlin and Talbert.

Some of the significant research in determining what makes a successful professional learning community has taken place in Canada, Great Britain, and Australia. Sackney, Walker, and Mitchell (2005), for example, report on a three-year multi-phased and multi-method study of 70 schools from each of two Canadian provinces, Saskatchewan and Ontario. Directors and staff members identified each of the 70 schools as exhibiting elements of a learning community. In Phase one, principals provided contextual data on their school, and staff and a random sample of Grade 7 to 12 students completed the “Learning Community Survey.” Using factor analytic techniques, researchers determined that a six-factor solution was the best predictor of individual, interpersonal and organizational capacity. The schools were clustered on the basis of their scores on the six factors. The fifteen schools that scored the highest on these factors were selected for the case studies in Phase two. The case study data were obtained through individual and focus group interviews, observation and documentation. Researchers observed staff meetings, visited classrooms, collected documentation and reflective journals, attended parent council meetings, and visited the halls and staffrooms in the school. They also examined the written comments that staff made on the survey. Data were analyzed by means of analytic induction and unitized into units of common content characteristics. Sackney et al. found that in the high capacity learning communities,
capacity existed at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels. They also concluded that the leadership in the high capacity learning communities was shared (among staff, students, and the community) and was visionary, transformative, and engaging. High capacity learning communities, they found, resulted in improved student performance including a decreased dropout rate, lower rates of absenteeism, increased learning and more equitably distributed learning; larger academic gains in math, science, history, and reading; and smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds.

Hargreaves’ (1994, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007) continuing study of the development and sustainability of professional learning communities has spanned several decades and three continents. His Spencer Foundation-funded study of educational change over time in eight high schools in the US and Canada examined learning communities as seen through the eyes of over 200 teachers and administrators who worked in those high schools in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Based on multiple interviews, supplementary observations, and extensive archival data, the study examined perceptions and experiences of educational change and gave particular focus to sustainable learning communities (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2004). Drawing on his analysis of data from the Spencer study, Hargreaves (2007) identified seven elements of sustainability for professional learning communities: (1) depth—“Strong and sustainable PLCs do not allow themselves to become fixated on raising tested achievement scores, but also develop a strong focus on improving deep … learning beyond the basics” (p. 185); (2) breadth—“Sustainable PLCs are … a way of life that changes the entire school culture as leaders come forward from every part of the school in communities that inquire into
teaching and learning practice, then create improvements which benefit all students” (p. 186); endurance—“They preserve and advance the most valuable aspects of learning and life over time, year after year, from one leader or change champion to the next” (p. 188); (4) justice—“Sustainable professional communities are not luxuries for teachers of the privileged but equal entitlements for all students, teachers and schools” (p. 189); (5) diversity—“Strong and sustainable PLCs thereby abandon singular pedagogical prescriptions and standardized practices in favor of pedagogical diversity that is networked together to develop increased learning, validated by references to collective experience and outside evidence, and organized around a common and shared purpose” (p. 190); (6) resourcefulness—“Sustainable professional learning communities conserve and renew people’s energy and resources. They are prudent and resourceful communities that waste neither their money nor their people” (p. 191); (7) conservation—“Professional learning communities learn from what the most experienced teachers in a school know and believe, even if that is sometimes expressed maladroitly” (p. 192).

As part of an evolving school culture, professional learning communities are rooted in context. McLaughlin and Talbert (2002) specifically pointed out that, while PLCs have been informed by successful teacher networking beyond the school, for example in initiatives such as the National Writing Project, professional learning communities are strongly centered in space and time. They are particular to a specific school environment, influencing and influenced by the values, language, and behavior of school personnel; although they may be “snap-shotted” in a specific time frame, they are actually evolving from day to day over a long period of time. As Kruse and Louis (2007) noted, the concept of professional learning communities has a basis in “deep, cultural
understanding of how schools function” (p. 106), and a true professional learning community cannot be instituted quickly. Since building successful school-based professional learning communities takes sustained effort over a long period of time (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001, 2006; Kruse and Louis, 2007), it seems appropriate that much of the research on learning communities has been longitudinal.

Considerable longitudinal evidence not only points to school-based professional learning communities as providing significant positive influence on student achievement but also establishes the nature or traits of PLCs that contribute to sustained success. Keys to success identified by multiple researchers include philosophical, organizational, and process elements: belief in collective teacher efficacy, expectation for improvement, a sense of shared responsibility, and peer trust; focus on increased achievement for all students; shared leadership; purposeful use of a wide variety of resources including performance data and teacher experience; and logistical support. The collaborative interaction of teachers in professional learning communities has a significant impact on how teachers view their work and how they engage students in learning.

**Linking Academic Climate, School Improvement and Professional Learning Communities**

The studies of academic climate, school improvement and professional learning communities are strongly intermingled. Realizing the importance of academic climate and understanding the role of professional learning communities has helped educators, reformers, and researchers to determine what constitutes effective school reform. Academic climate contributes to and may be built by professional learning communities.
Educational reform based on positive academic climate and strong professional learning communities is more successful and sustainable, researchers have determined.

Particular associations among the three emerging traditions were shown in the three- and four-year longitudinal studies of the work of the Center on Organization and Restructuring in the early 1990s. Researchers used case study and survey methods as well as the collection of student test data for 1,500 throughout the United States, with field research in 44 schools in 16 states. The results showed that comprehensive redesign of schools, including decentralization, shared decision making, schools within schools, teacher teaming, and/or professional communities of staff, can improve student learning (Bryk et al, 1994; Newman & Weblage, 1995; Lynn, 1996). For example, Bryk and his colleagues noted that schools with strong democratic practices and expanded local participation are more likely to undertake fundamental, systemic change. They advised helping schools to become professional learning communities in order to provide learning environments for adults as well as students, so that the full potential of reform may be reached.

In one report on the extensive restructuring studies conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1995) shared findings on the relationships among climate, reform, and professional learning communities. Their analysis of data concerning 11,000 students and 820 secondary schools across the nation showed extensive success in effecting positive change in the schools that were characterized by professional learning communities. As a result of the collaborative effort, teachers engaged students in high intellectual learning tasks, and students achieved greater academic gains in math, science, history and reading than
students in traditionally organized schools. In addition, the achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds were smaller in these schools, and in the smaller high schools, learning was distributed more equitably. The schools in the study were communally organized and promoted a setting in which staff (and students) were committed to the mission of the school and worked together to strengthen that mission. In such schools, "teachers and other staff members experience more satisfaction and higher morale, while students drop out less often and cut fewer classes. And both staff and students post lower rates of absenteeism" (p. 5). Staff members saw themselves as responsible for the total development of the students and shared a collective responsibility for the success of students.

Hargreaves and Goodson’s Spencer Foundation-funded study of the sustainability of secondary school reform over time (2006, see above) found that educational transformation takes place in five change waves: waves of reform, changing student demographics, teacher generations, leadership succession, and school interrelations. Hargreaves and Goodson concluded that professional learning communities and an activist academic climate were instrumental in sustaining reform against the forces which pull innovation back toward the traditional norm in an age of standardization. In a related report, Giles and Hargreaves (2006) explored the impact of the predictable cycle of the attrition of change. Focusing first on the sustainability of change on three of the schools in the initial study, they then zeroed in on one school consciously modeling a strong academic climate and professional learning community. They concluded that a reform model focused on the learning organization (climate) and professional learning
community was able to provide a more robust resistance to conventional processes of the attrition of change.

Among the factors linking the academic climate, the growth of professional learning communities, and the success of school improvement are the emotions of school personnel. Teaching and learning are not only cognitive practices but also emotional practices. In his investigation of what he calls the “emotional geographies” of teaching (title, 2001), Hargreaves states, “[S]tandards-based and largely cognitive-driven reforms do not capture all of what matters most . . . They do not quite get to the heart of it” (p. 1056). This Hargreaves study draws on data on the emotions of teaching and educational change involving interviews with 53 teachers from 15 varied schools in Ontario, Canada. Where possible, the sample at each school included the oldest and youngest teachers in the school, was gender mixed, represented a range of subject specializations, and was ethno-culturally diverse. The 1- to ½-hour interviews used methodological procedures introduced by Hochschild (1983) in her key text on the sociology of emotion, The Managed Heart: 'The Commercialization of Human Feeling. It asked teachers to describe particular episodes of positive and negative emotion with students, colleagues, administrators, and parents. “Emotional geographies” describe “the spatial and experiential patterns of closeness and/or distance in human interactions and relationships that help create, configure and color the feelings and emotions we experience about ourselves, our world and each other” (p. 1061). These emotional geographies of teaching are “active accomplishments by teachers that structure and enculture their work, as much as being structured and encultured by it. Teachers, in other words, make and remake the emotional geographies of their interactions with others but not in circumstances of their
own choosing” (p. 1062). Hargreaves identified five such geographies: sociocultural, moral, professional, physical, and political. Secondary teachers, Hargreaves found, have less emotionally intense relationships with their students, with their students’ parents, and with their colleagues than elementary teachers do. Attending to the five aspects of emotional geography in teaching may help us better understand how to create stronger emotional understanding in teachers' relationships with students, colleagues, parents, and others, as well as how to avert or alleviate threats to that understanding. Hargreaves’ article ended with a reminder that better emotional understanding and the resulting quality of education require a reversal in many educational policies and policy processes (see also Darling-Hammond, 1998). “Policy must refrain from putting teachers back in their classroom boxes by overloading the curriculum, increasing the content focus, creating a profusion of learning standards, limiting teachers' time out of class to interact with others, and standardizing their interactions with those around them” (p. 1076), Hargreaves concluded.

Several of the researchers focusing on academic climate, professional learning communities, and school reform have noted the importance of “letting teachers out of the box” to establish new, more collaborative variations on school culture. “The professional culture of high schools presents the most difficult challenge of all,” noted McLaughlin and Talbert (2007, p. 152), in their discussion of improvement “impediments” such as bureaucratic structural organization, lack of shared decision making, student disrespect for teachers, and high stakes accountability systems. Similarly, Newman et al. (2000) reported that the schools showing the highest levels of student performance, even in areas
of disadvantage, were those with a climate of academic focus, collaborative staff effort, and shared decision-making.

Extensive research supports the conclusion that enhanced student learning is supported by combined aspects of academic climate, school improvement initiatives, and professional learning communities—including developing a school environment that is personalized, nurturing, and academically optimistic; working collegially toward school reform based on communal vision and decision making; and building faculty communities of learning through shared goals, shared resources and processes, and shared leadership evolving over time.

**Collegial Academic Groups in Secondary Schools**

The prevailing culture of secondary schools has sometimes been viewed as isolationist rather than collaborative. Traditional customs and constraints have led high school teachers to do most of their work alone, with little sharing of resources and ideas and little awareness of other teachers’ successful practices. High school teachers have traditionally been organized into academic departments, such as English or science, with minimal interaction between or among subject-area departments. With the structural transformation from junior high school to middle school, some elements of a more collaborative climate have been introduced for teachers of students in grades six through eight; middle school academic teams are now typically composed of grade-level groupings anchored by the teachers of the four core subjects—English, math, science, and social studies. During the recent era of school reform, academic teams in some high schools have also been formed across disciplines and grade levels to engage in the common work of school improvement; these school improvement teams have added an
extra layer of potential collegial interaction. Academic departments continue to be the principal collegial groups in secondary schools, however.

Although research has traditionally framed teaching as generic pedagogical practice and the school as the relevant organizational context, secondary school teachers usually frame their work in terms of the specific subject and their organizational context in terms of academic department (Ball & Lacey, 1980; Siskin & Little, 1995). Ball and Lacey’s 1980 analysis of subject subcultures established that “subjects are not monoliths; rather they are contextual realizations. What counts as English, or math or history, will differ from department to department” (Ball, 1994). The 1980 Ball and Lacey foundational report derived from case studies of departments in four comprehensive schools, referred to as Oak Farm, Furzedown, Handworth, and Beachside. The analysis and discussion of the case studies focused on subject paradigm and subject pedagogy and established a set of key issues, which Ball has re-emphasized over the ensuring years: the subject as the outcome of “ideological and micropolitical” dispute, the department as an organizing principle for “institutional micropolitics,” the “mediation and mutation of planning and prescription in practice,” and the importance of departmental and subject identities in teachers’ self-concepts, commitments, and careers (1995, p. 120).

were among those conducting a 5-year study of the multiple contexts of teaching in 16 secondary schools in the states of California, Illinois, Michigan, and Washington (see also McLaughlin and Talbert, above). Siskin looked particularly at three of the high schools, developing case studies of Oak Valley and Highlander, two highly departmentalized high schools, and Rancho, a school attempting to break down departmental strength and establish house-like systems of advisory units. Using network analysis scatter-grams, Siskin (1995) established that the interacting sub-groups within each of the three schools tended to communicate most heavily along departmental lines, but that the departmental boundaries were marginally less noticeable at Rancho than in the other two schools. Siskin’s detailed analysis of teacher interviews and faculty conversations also found important in-school variations from department to department. For example, at Rancho science department members seemed intensely interconnected: Almost every member talked to every other member, and almost no one talked to anyone from outside the department. In contrast, there was a dense subgroup within the math department, but some department members were noticeably absent from the cluster and were “painfully” (p. 44) isolated within individual classrooms.

Hill’s (1995) in-depth analysis of the evolving strengths of a particular social studies department studied by the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching provided insight into the key elements of a department-based professional learning community. Hill’s action research used his experience as department chair at Camino High School, where he worked as a social studies teacher for 27 years. Involved in many long-term innovative practices, including team-teaching and large-group simulations, this social studies department was selected as “exemplary” by
the National Center on Secondary Schools as part of a study entitled “Higher-order Thinking in the Social Studies” (Newman, 1992). Hill chose the metaphor of a five-cylinder, battery-driven engine as the focal point of his analysis. Each of the cylinders—teacher as learner, collegial collaboration, shared leadership, professional outreach, and reflective practice—had important properties, but no one cylinder could fire independently or run the engine by itself. “When the battery, or ‘core spirit,’ is fully charged and firing with the five cylinders in harmony, the learning community engine hums” (p. 126). Department members endorsed and actively supported the department chair’s leadership role of facilitation and sharing as opposed to authoritarianism and bureaucracy. Even in this context of strong support, Hill found that traditional norms of teacher isolation and private expertise sometimes worked against successful community. Hill’s in-depth reporting on the nuances of departmental images, views, and interactions clearly demonstrated that even as department members collectively achieve goals, the individual members of a department may have very different ideas about teaching and certainly retain their distinctive personalities and styles. Hill identified a need for much more extensive research into the academic department as a primary resource for combating teacher isolation. He noted that few researchers have tried to understand how and why some high school departments develop into strong micro-organizations and what actually goes into the building and sustaining of a collaborative department culture.

Development of collaborative teacher community in secondary schools takes on additional tension in schools that organize academic teams of teachers of more than one subject area. Grossman (1990, 1998, 2000) has been one of few researchers studying both teacher development within a subject area (English and mathematics, separately) and
professional development within interdisciplinary teams. Grossman’s 1990 case study report on six beginning secondary school English teachers, *The Making of a Teacher*, drew on in-depth interviews and classroom observations tracking the progress of individual teachers’ pedagogy and practice. Among the “givens” in the study was the feeling of isolation each of the teachers experienced. In contrast, Grossman and her colleagues (Wineburg & Grossman, 1998; Guy et al., 1998; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 1998) later described the study of a professional-development project designed to establish a community of learners among teachers in a large urban high school. Diverse English and history teachers met twice monthly for an entire day at a time for two-and-a-half years to read and discuss fiction and history, develop an interdisciplinary humanities curriculum, and videotape and view classroom instruction. The monthly meetings were supplemented by after school meetings every other week and by a five-day retreat each summer. General findings included an enhanced collegiality among faculty within and across departments; reduced teacher isolation; and the development of an intellectual community for teachers within the high school. Also interesting was the movement of the group from a pseudo-community, in which participants tried to give the impression of collegiality and consensus, to the ongoing social negotiation of a dynamic learning community, in which participants acknowledged tension and conflict and eventually developed productive norms for discussion.

Development of interdisciplinary teams instead of or in addition to subject area departments has become a common component of school improvement. Contending that existing subject matter divisions contribute to the fragmentation of the school day for both students and teachers, reformers had attempted to institute interdisciplinary curricula
in nearly two-thirds of all American schools by the turn of the millennium (Wineburg & Grossman, 2000).

Interdisciplinary teacher teams at each grade level have become a mainstay of middle schools, and considerable systemic restructuring has supported that effort. The National Middle School Association advocates teaming teachers by grade level or student unit and charging the group with planning, coordinating, and evaluating curriculum and instruction across academic areas. Seventy-nine percent of principals in middle level schools reported that their schools had interdisciplinary teams in 2000, up from 57% in 1992 (Valentine, Clark, Hackman, & Petzko, 2002).

Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall (2003) examined statistical and qualitative data from a decade of nation-wide middle school research and then focused more specifically on data collected from over 2,400 teachers and nearly 30,000 students in 140 Michigan middle schools participating in the Center for Prevention Research and Development’s School Improvement Self-Study to reach several conclusions about middle school collaborative teams: Teachers need to meet for common team planning time at least four times each week for 30 minutes or more per meeting to achieve consistent positive outcomes; teachers who are on interdisciplinary teams instructing fewer numbers of students report that they engage more frequently in best practices at the team level and in the classroom than teachers with larger numbers of students; the positive impact of interdisciplinary teaming on team and classroom “best practices” increases as teams work together longer; team activities are strongly linked to classroom instruction.

Considerable differences in context contribute to the differences in the role and functioning of faculty academic groups in high schools and middle schools. Preliminary
studies, however, suggest commonality in the development of the relationships within the groups. There is also a sense that the academic group, whether it be a subject-area department, a grade level team, or a school improvement council, may provide a feeling of professional home for secondary school teachers, as Siskin and Little suggest. Largely unexamined are the varying roles these professional groups play in shaping the overall learning culture of the school.

**Reflections on Studying Teachers’ Professional Sub-Groups**

There are clearly strong relationships between collegial work groups and the cultural elements of academic climate, school improvement, and professional learning communities. Academic teams of teachers can work to personalize the school climate, emphasizing academic optimism and strong teacher-student bonding. Reform efforts often include organizing teacher groups to share leadership and decision-making. The building of professional learning communities puts in place the philosophical, organizational, and process elements important in developing effective collegial work groups.

Studying the nature and impact of collegial groups of teachers in secondary settings also brings an increased awareness of the tension and balance in the traditional educational dichotomy of individual and group identities as teachers of students or teachers of academic subjects. A long-held belief that elementary school teachers are more student-centered whereas secondary school teachers are more subject-centered comes into play as collegial groups explore their roles. Linguistic logic would tell us that both the direct object (the academic discipline) and the indirect object (the students) are
necessary to complete the “I teach . . .” thought, as illustrated in the Figure 2 sentence diagram. The concept of teaching requires something to be taught as well as someone to be taught. Perhaps the topics chosen for discussion in the evolving dialogue within collegial groups might provide some indication of the balance or priorities—for example, curriculum planning may be more closely related to the “what” and identification of student needs more closely related to the “whom”—although there must surely be an awareness of both elements in the conceptualizing of teaching and learning. Researchers have only begun to study the meaning that subject identity acquires within secondary school cultures. Examination of the influence of grade level taught has been largely tangential rather than a focus of educational research, despite the plethora of middle school studies. There seems to be considerable opportunity for investigation of how and to what extent subject matter and/or grade level control faculty organizational norms of expected or envisioned practice within professional groups, in classrooms, and in the school culture.

Also not fully examined is the role of faculty academic groups in encouraging teachers, individually and collectively, to venture “out of the box” of isolationism to connect the classroom culture they’d like to establish with the overall school culture that would support their vision. What role might the professional team play in establishing teachers’ views or schools’ views about the nature of teaching and learning? How do

**Figure 2.** Sentence Diagram Identifying Roles in the Teaching Process

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  I teach science (to) ninth graders
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faculty interactions within academic groups contribute to individuals’ self-identity as teachers? How do teachers’ levels of experience influence their interactions within faculty groups? How are leadership roles within the group or in the broader school-wide culture established or maintained through collaborative faculty interactions? Literature studying school culture has provided little insight into such questions. The evolving nature of teacher academic groups within particular school contexts is ripe for examination.

The idea for this ethnographic case study began with an awareness of the sociocognitive interactions that make up a school culture and a particular interest in the collegial interactions that define and shape the cultures of professional groups of teachers, particularly those who work together in academic teams.

This review of the literature has explored key research findings related to academic climate, educational improvement, and professional learning communities, looking particularly at what these research traditions have established, individually and collectively, about the relationships of social interaction and teaching/learning in schools. Synthesizing research in the three converging traditions, the review examined what these research traditions have shown about how collaboration within and among academic groups of teachers influences local learning cultures.

There is much that researchers have concluded about the complex relationships of school culture and learning, but there is also much that is unexamined. Research has tended to focus on the bigger or smaller elements of educational culture—the school and its administrative leadership or the classroom and individual teacher practice. There is significant unexplored territory in the group dynamics of teacher colleagues and the web
of co-constructed meaning and influence within grade level, departmental, or other professional groups of teachers working toward improved student learning. Little scholarly attention has been given to the roles of middle and high school academic teams in defining and co-constructing school culture. Researchers have not yet fully explored the particularities of school culture from the perspective of teachers in collaborative networks. This study was designed to help to fill this gap.
Chapter Three
Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of professional collaboration in school culture from the perspectives of secondary school teachers within academic departments and interdisciplinary teams in a rural context. I define professional collaboration as faculty members working together to improve student instruction.

The guiding questions for this investigation were:

1. What is the role of teacher professional collaboration in the culture of this district and its middle school and high school?

2. How does participating teachers’ membership in particular subject area departments and inter-disciplinary grade level teams influence the purpose, nature and extent of any professional collaboration and the value ascribed to such collaboration?

Micro-Ethnographic Case Study Approach

I chose ethnography as an appropriate qualitative research approach for this study, since it is, by definition, the study of a cultural group. Drawing from the writings of Patton (2001), Merriam (1998), Maxwell (2005), Wolcott (2001), Yin (2003), and others, the ethnographic methodology used in this research was based on seeking to understand the meanings people have constructed and implies a direct concern with experience as it is lived or interpreted by those participating in the experience. Qualitative research, as it reveals how all the parts work together to form the whole and emphasizes the
perspectives of those involved, has significant potential for informing educational practitioners (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2001; Maxwell, 2005).

An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, the case study has the advantages of particularism, heuristic complexity, and concreteness (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). A nested or embedded micro-ethnographic case study approach fosters understanding of perspectives within each academic group of teachers as well as in the overall professional culture.

Visiting this district at least one day a week for six months and immersing myself in the school culture throughout each day allowed me to examine the complexities of the differing perspectives and interactions relating to professional collaboration.

**Research Sites**

The research setting consisted of two related sites, the one middle school and the one high school in the rural community of Riverside, a small town with a history of academic pride and recent economic challenges. The middle school (grades 6-8) had approximately 260 students and exactly 22 teachers, and the high school (grades 9-12) had about 360 students and 31 teachers at the time of the study.

Although the district was considered “high need” (with almost half of secondary school students eligible for free or reduced lunch), students consistently scored well on state tests, had high graduation rates (97%), and went on to college. Riverside was a district with a stable staff of educators who prided themselves on their professionalism. Chapter Four provides more information on the district and school context within which these educators functioned professionally.
A district known for its comprehensive initiatives in writing instruction over several decades, Riverside was among the districts examined in the pilot phase of the National Study of Writing Instruction directed by Applebee and Langer (2007). I conducted the NSWI field research in the Riverside district in the 2006-2007 school year.

Riverside schools had a history of teacher collaboration, particularly in across-the-curriculum instruction in writing, as I noted in the Riverside case study prepared for the National Study of Writing Instruction. The notable teacher academic groups were the interdisciplinary teams at grades 6, 7, and 8 and the subject area departments, which extended to both buildings but functioned most obviously at the high school. In 2006-2007, I saw a great deal of collaboration among inter-disciplinary grade level teams in the middle school. In contrast, veteran high school teachers reported that they were experiencing less faculty collaboration than in the past, although reports were mixed; several high school teachers who were relatively new at that time expressed some feeling of isolation in their teaching while noting that professional collaboration was stronger in some subject-area departments than in others.

The study was designed as nested, to allow me to examine the customs and habits of both the macro-culture (i.e. the district and the two schools) and the micro-cultures (the small sub-groups of grade level teams and academic departments) inhabiting, supporting, and being supported by the macro-culture.

Participants

Participants in the research included all faculty members who agreed to be a part of the study, a total of 41 educators, including three administrators, 24 (of 31) high school faculty members, and 17 (of 22) middle school faculty members.
Of the 41 participants, a total of 26 provided information on an initial questionnaire. These individuals included all administrators and teachers from every grade level and academic department.

Of the 41 participants, a total of 21 people were interviewed in depth, most on multiple occasions. Those interviewed included three (all) administrators and teachers from every grade level and major academic department; however, multiple participants from four faculty sub-groups were the principal interviewees. Educators interviewed had a wide range of experience, from first year teachers to those with three or more decades of teaching experience.

The study gave particular focus to the perspectives of teachers in two core academic departments (English and science) in the high school and two grade level teams (6th and 8th) in the middle school. Selection of the particular teacher groups to be studied was based largely on information from the questionnaire, particularly questions 4 through 6, which asked participants to describe collaboration they experienced within their subject area and grade level and to identify groups of teachers that they considered to be particularly collaborative. Selection of the sub-groups was also informed by my previous research in the school district and by suggestions offered by administrators and others in informal conversations as the study began. I chose focal academic departments and grade level teams with perceived contrasts in the extent and nature of collaboration, contrasts in views of the potential advantages or disadvantages of collaboration, and contrasts in the influence of “home” identity on professionally supportive interactions.

It should be noted that although there was considerable overlap in those Riverside educators participating in this study and those participating in the much larger, multi-year
National Study of Writing Instruction, the nature of the participation differed because of the quite different purposes of the two studies. Notably, there were no student participants in this study of professional collaboration among teacher academic groups.

Instrumentation

Instrumentation for data collection was of four types: a questionnaire, field notes on school visits and observations of meetings/gatherings, administrator and teacher interview protocols, and artifacts such as documents and displays.

Questionnaire. The preliminary questionnaire (see Appendix Table B), given to all consenting faculty members, was completed on paper. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gain an overview of participant educator demographics and to gather initial, general perceptions about the nature and extent of collaboration within sub-groups of teachers. As noted above, the selection of focal sub-groups was based mostly on information provided by questionnaire answers.

The questionnaire had six parts. The first three were fill-the-blank questions relating to identification of teacher characteristics, and the final three were open-ended prompts relating to teacher collaboration. The initial questions asked participants to identify academic department; grade level(s) of teaching assignments; total years taught, years taught in the subject area, years in the current academic department, and years as part of a grade level team. Questions four and five asked participants to describe the purpose, extent and nature of their working together with other teachers in their subject area and with other faculty members teaching the same grade level(s) and to comment on whether, how, and to what extent that collaboration is valuable to them as teachers. The last question asked for suggestions of groups of teachers that respondents thought
engaged in particularly effective collaboration and asked respondents to indicate why they would describe this collaboration as successful. The responses to questions four through six, particularly question six, informed the identification of the focal sub-groups.

**Field notes.** Field notes based on my informal observation of the school environment and professional interactions were an important part of the data. By watching and listening to casual day-to-day discussions as well as large- and small-group get-togethers I hoped to gain a more complete sense of the district and school culture as well as the patterns of communication. I looked particularly for evidence of instructional collaboration but also noted the nature of other topics discussed and the roles the networking seemed to play in teachers’ establishing of their sense of professional home.

Gatherings observed included 16 meetings, 32 lunch periods, and countless faculty-room, hallway, and office conversations. For this study I defined gatherings as groups of people assembling, usually as part of the day-to-day ritual of professional life. In many cases, the get-togethers were dependent on daily class schedules and assigned planning and lunch times. I chose to observe only teachers’ professional time outside of classes, since the focus of the study was on collaborative support for instruction rather than on the instruction itself. I observed and took notes on Superintendent’s Conference Day faculty meetings, sixth and eighth grade team meetings, and English department meetings associated with a presentation at a national conference. More informally, I observed faculty interactions at lunch gatherings (in the high school faculty room and middle school classrooms) and during teacher preparation periods (in faculty rooms, at copy machines, and in central offices in both buildings).
Observational note taking began on the first visits to the schools, and memos describing the atmosphere and group dynamics continued throughout the study. Notes on the school environment highlighted the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning contexts I discovered, the evidence of how each school functioned as educators worked, collaboratively or otherwise, to present instruction.

For example, visiting opening-day faculty meetings provided an opportunity to note the rituals and routines as well as some of the group dynamics of instructional leadership and networking. In continuing visits, I built on and revised those impressions, noting how and to what extent I saw administrators and faculty work together to build instructional strategies and how and to what extent groups of faculty seemed to be interacting for that purpose. Topics of conversation in the day-to-day school routines as well as informal actions over time cumulatively informed these notes. Through gradual additions to the field notes, I was eventually able to develop a textured portrait of the types of professional interactions that a close observer would see, hear, and feel on typical days in each school.

During these observations (and also during interviews), I explored what Reeves (2006) called the hubs and bridges of the collaborative network. The study of educational culture, Reeves asserted, requires removing assumptions of linear or hierarchal paths of primary communication or influence, and substituting an alternative, networking framework. Reeves’ networking framework suggests that influence occurs through hubs, which are points of multiple contact for individuals and groups, and bridges, which connect hubs (groups and individuals) and thereby disperse communication and
influence. Noting the paths of communication and influence helped me to develop a picture of the nature and extent of the collaborative support educators gave to each other.

As I listened to the discourse, I took particular note of the topics of discussion and their relationship to student learning (e.g., discussion of curriculum planning, student assessment, or instructional strategies) as well as the nature of the interactions among faculty members. Observations of the groups in action, whether in informal groups or scheduled meetings, used Patton’s (2002) recommendation of noting the patterns and frequencies of individuals’ communication, the roles people assumed, and the decision-making processes used. As Patton suggests, I tried to be as aware of what did not happen as of what did happen. For example, I noted when discourse did not involve instruction as well as when it did; I noted when discussion seemed to be “small talk” or superficial pleasantries as well as when it became deep, intense, or caring.

**Interviews.** Semi-structured interview protocols (see Appendix Table C) were similar for teachers and administrators. Each had twelve open-ended, sometimes multi-part questions related to the role of professional collaboration in the school in general and within and among the academic departments and interdisciplinary grade level teams. The opening set of questions explored teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of the change processes in the school and looked specifically at any recent school improvements or initiatives, including the nature of the initiative (i.e. policy or day-to-day procedural), how it was started and developed, who was involved and how (if at all) others were brought into the process, how changes were ensured or enforced, and any results of the initiative. Question set two dealt with the individuals’ attitudes toward professional collaboration, focusing on beliefs relating to types of initiatives that might benefit from
teacher collaboration vs. types that probably would not benefit from collaboration. 
Questions three and four inquired about the general role of any collaboration in the school and the purposes and extent of any joint administrator-teacher collaboration. Each protocol then asked about the role of school administrators in fostering or facilitating collaboration. Both protocols asked about new teacher mentoring, with the administrator interview highlighting the mentoring procedures that have been put into place and the teacher interview asking about any role the teacher had had in mentoring practices.

Questions about teacher groups sought to establish differences among professional groups, particularly how and to what extent participating teachers felt a sense of “professional home” in a particular academic group and how membership in an academic group might influence collaboration. Subject area and interdisciplinary grade level team questions asked about general value and/or drawbacks of collaboration and specific expectations or perceived value of collaboration within each group. Question eight asked administrators which groups of teachers they saw collaborating most often and asked teachers how and with whom they collaborated, if at all. Question nine focused on the format or venue of teachers working together, exploring the nature and extent of formal collaboration through structured meetings in contrast with informal, less structured partnerships or team efforts. Question ten asked about the topics on which teachers were most likely to collaborate, and question eleven inquired about whether and how faculty members perceived collaboration as benefiting their teaching. The closing question sought to determine the general role of teachers working together in the school and the possible influence that collaboration had on the school learning environment.
Follow-up questions elicited specific examples, evidence, or clarification for the general ideas and/or examination of attitudes exhibited by and roles played by individuals or groups (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998). For example, as I explored both cooperative and autocratic strands of school initiatives, I sought to disentangle collaboration and command, to see where and to what extent teachers and teacher groups set direction in contrast to being required to implement processes established by others. I looked for situations where there was little collaboration to try to learn why it was not happening as well as situations where there was considerable collaboration to examine how and why that collaboration was occurring. Wording of follow-up questions was somewhat spontaneous although always based on previous responses. An example of a typical set of follow-up prompts was: “What was the extent of your involvement in determining the policies and procedures for across-the-curriculum student writing in the district? How have you been involved in implementing the writing initiative? Have there been opportunities for collaboration in establishing or implementing the initiative? How did this work?” to establish the details of particular instances of collaborative or non-collaborative elements of the culture. Other examples of follow-up questions included: “If I were a new teacher in this department, what would you tell me about what to expect?” (to learn about mentoring as well as subject area influence), and “How, specifically, does this example of collaboration help you to feel more effective in classroom instruction?” (to identify detail of the perceived value or benefit of collaboration).

Both the protocol questions and follow-up prompts sought to probe into the detail of differing perspectives on professional collaboration among differing teacher groups.
Artifacts. During the study I collected documents and other artifacts that helped
to inform the school culture as well as prompt or illustrate group collaboration. I gathered
data on community history and demographics as well as school context and student
performance partly from electronic means, including websites, partly from illustrative
displays in hallways and offices and classrooms, and partly from printed information
given to me by teachers or administrators.

I noted evidence of professional collaboration in instructional artifacts on display
or in classroom use. Although I did not collect any student work or observe any classes, I
looked at the evidence of student work in classroom and hallway displays as well as
references to student work in any instructional materials prepared or used collaboratively.
Meeting agendas and minutes helped to establish the roles of particular academic groups.
Plans or data developed by academic departments or grade level teams included planning
materials, notes, assignments, and lessons related to grade level interdisciplinary units as
well as departmental curricula and jointly developed instructional materials. Varied
artifacts contributed evidence of the nature of the context and professional cultures and
gave glimpses into the processes and results of the professional work within and among
sub-groups.

Collectively, the data sets of questionnaire answers, field notes, interviews, and
artifacts provided interwoven, triangulated information on the role of professional
collaboration in the culture and showing the varying nature and extent of instructional
collaboration within and among academic departments and grade level teams.
Data Collection Procedures

All teachers and administrators in both schools were invited to complete consent forms (see Appendix A) and to participate in the collection of data. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was protected. I assigned pseudonyms to all participants.

I collected data throughout a six-month period, distributing questionnaires to all administrators and faculty members at the beginning of the school year and recording field notes, conducting interviews, and noting artifacts from September through February (see Appendix D).

I gathered most evidence through face-to-face communication as described in the preceding section. In a few cases, Riverside educators and I exchanged emails on topics of discussion before or after meetings or interviews.

I kept a continuing record of the study. Taking notes on a laptop computer during interviews not only helped with ensuring the accuracy of the written record but also provided in-process affirmation of the importance of what participants were saying. I took observational, reflective notes on a laptop computer at the end of each visit to the site. I also saved any electronic communication.

Analysis

All analysis of data was tied to the research questions and to the sociocognitive framework. Analysis and interpretation, based on “thick” description, was ongoing throughout the study.

Analytical approaches relied heavily on coding, a form of content analysis based on chunking data into categories to identify core consistencies and contrasts. Organizing and tentative coding of the data began as soon as the completed questionnaires were
submitted. Appropriate data from field notes, interviews, and artifacts were also
organized/coded. I began with coding into categories related to my research questions
and instrumentation—for example, sub-groups seen as most collaborative, processes for
school improvement, initiatives benefiting from teacher collaboration, administrator role
in fostering teacher collaboration, feeling of professional home, examples of
collaboration for instruction, positive/negative effects of collaboration,
groups/individuals with whom a teacher collaborates, impact of school arrangements on
collaboration, types of topics most likely to be addressed by sub-groups, influence of
writing curricula, etc. Constructing categories and sub-categories was largely intuitive
but also systematic, based on the study’s purpose and “the meanings made explicit by the
participants themselves” (Merriam, 1998, p. 179). Gradually, I added a variety of sub-
categories such as influence of principal Mason, high school librarian networking,
English department presentations, grade eight unit on mid-century civil rights, vestiges of
“old” writing curriculum collaboration, etc.

In the data analysis, I examined the relationships among the themes of school
culture, collaboration, professional home, and subject area and grade level influence,
which were the major, inter-related ideas I used to guide the instrumentation.
Contributing to and emerging from the data analysis was a series of interwoven patterns
linking these elements of the study. Like most qualitative research, the analysis was
largely inductive in the early stages, as I sought to discover patterns and themes. As the
interpretation continued, the process became more deductive, as consistent or contrasting
relationships were examined and confirmed (Wolcott, 2001; Patton, 2002).
Much of the analysis of collaboration within the macro-culture of Riverside schools centered on seeking understanding of decision-making and leadership styles (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969; Blanchard, Guest, and Hersey, 1985; Blanchard, 2006); contrasts between middle school and high school environmental dynamics (Lee & Smith, 1995; Bidwell et al, 1997; Anfara et al., 2003; Kemple, 2005; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000); communication patterns, including silo effects (Lencioni, 2006; Richard, 2010) and networking hubs and bridges (Barabasi, 2003; Reeves, 2006), and teachers’ feelings of professional home (Ball & Lacey, 1980; Siskin & Little, 1995; Robinson, 2009). Analysis of the influence of sub-group micro-cultures on teacher collaboration built upon the themes in the analysis of the macro-culture, focusing particularly on student-centered/subject-centered approaches, varied group dynamics, purpose and content of sub-group discussions, and teachers’ feelings of professional home within the sub-groups.

Identifying the collaborative patterns within and among academic groups of teachers required exploring the consistencies and contrasts in the rich, triangulated data from questionnaires, interviews, and field notes. As I studied the emerging patterns, I visualized the relationships among the themes and within the themes to prepare and revise conceptual maps. Part of the interpretation took the form of graphic representations of the decision-making and leadership styles, group dynamics, and communication networks and their interwoven paths of influence (see Chapters Five and Six.).

Ensuring authenticity involved not only conducting the investigation in an ethical, thoughtful manner but also analyzing and interpreting the data carefully. As I continued to substantiate themes and identify patterns, I sought internal validity by using multiple sources and multiple methods over an extended period of observation and discussion.
Triangulation of data from multiple participants and varying methods helped in determining the consistency and contrasts in what participants said and the evidence of what they did. In keeping with the view of several recent qualitative research theorists, who suggest that validity be shifted from a technological solution to a holistic understanding, I have aimed for dependability, determining that the results are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, I have been particularly careful to ensure that findings and conclusions were well substantiated by analysis of the ideas of multiple participants through the data sets of the questionnaire, interviews, artifacts, and field notes. In situations where there were inconsistencies in data, I have noted the differing perspectives.

**Presentation**

I have sought to create a report that is rich in the detail of the professional culture, told from the multi-voiced perspective of the participants, and meaningful in its findings. Purposeful thought, attention to detail, and concern for both human relationships and cognitive connections have guided this research. All that we know we learn within the web of our context.

My intention is that the learning I have constructed within this particular sociocognitive context will help to inform the scholarly community of variations in the roles of academic groups of teachers in influencing teachers’ views and practices related to professional collaboration. By highlighting the varying nature and extent of teacher collaboration in this particular rural setting, with all its contextual complexity, the interpretations of this study should help to shed light on the question of the varied roles, if any, played by teachers’ sub-groups in shaping and assessing professional interactions.
Chapter Four

Context: District and School Macro-Culture

The study showed that Riverside teachers were enveloped in a district-wide macro-culture sharing core beliefs and expectations. Teachers and administrators had internalized a sense of purpose and pride based on high expectations and individual and collective responsibility for contributing to the positive school and community environment.

Although faculty members were not without worries for their students and their community, each person I interviewed expressed a feeling of being professionally “at home” in Riverside and a strong sense of being “in the right place” as an educator: “I am absolutely in my element here. Teaching here is a very big part of who I am,” said a veteran high school teacher (male); “I love it here,” said a new middle school teacher (female).

School and Community Dynamics

At the time of the study, Riverside was a cohesive rural community with deep historical roots and pride of place. The rich respect for heritage recognized the area’s days as the western frontier and theater of war in colonial and revolutionary times, as a bustling and invention-rich stop on the route to the west, as part of the rolling farmlands and forests immortalized by nineteenth century authors, and as home to one of the first modern corporations. Scenic views surrounded the two hamlets, one on each side of the river, at the center of the Riverside community. Nearby was rich, fertile farmland, said to have been the breadbasket for General Washington’s troops and now home to a thriving Amish community as well as descendants of the Swiss and German settlers of two
centuries ago. Many current residents had deep roots in the community, extending back multiple generations.

A sense of “small town America” pervaded the village of Riverside (population 2,257), which took pride in its historic sites, memorial structures, parks, and trails. Tree-lined streets, well-kept lawns, traditional one-family homes, and a variety of small businesses as well as one large factory combined to project an image of stability and serenity. A visitor driving into the village was likely to see a rich intermingling of past and present cultural elements, noting an old-fashioned tire swing in the yard of a nineteenth century home next door to a new apartment complex, encountering horse-drawn wagons and large commercial vehicles mixing with the pick-up trucks and family SUV’s on town roads, and seeing occasional boats and trains next to the steady thruway traffic along the river.

School and community came together in arts appreciation and recognition. In the heart of Riverside’s downtown was an impressive stone building housing a library and internationally recognized art offerings, among several notable gifts to the community from an early resident who made his fortune starting there. Local philanthropists had continued to endow the school and community with an array of cultural facilities, and the schools had received state and national recognition for their music and arts programs.

With a 2007 median household income of just over $38,000, compared to over $50,000 for state and $49,000 for national median incomes, town residents had been struggling financially for many years, but community members maintained a sense of independence as well as personal and collective responsibility. As the large factory that had been the economic mainstay for the area prepared to move to another town, Riverside
residents sought to be proactive, preparing a new community comprehensive plan outlining a vision for the future while preserving the heritage.

Evidenced partly by the “Blue Ribbon School of Excellence” designation, Riverside education was regarded as uncommonly successful by both the community and outside agencies. Over the years, it had received a great deal of legislative “member item” support, including the donation of computers, a grant for a new high school physics lab, and “bullet aid” to ease the district’s financial challenges. District administrators described a feeling of partnership with community leaders, including those in state and national positions.

**Academic Achievements**

High expectations, access to resources, and teacher experience combined to produce academic success at Riverside schools.

Riverside student scores on state tests were above the state average on all assessments in 2009. High school students did particularly well on science and math exams, especially chemistry and algebra, where 100% completed the exams successfully. Middle school exam performance not only ranked well above state averages but also showed improvement over previous years at every grade level.

Both Riverside High School and Riverside Middle School had received the “Blue Ribbon School of Excellence” awarded to schools judged “academically superior” in their states. Fewer than 300 schools nationwide are recognized as “Blue Ribbon” schools each year.

State standards guided the curricula in both schools, but teachers had considerable local control in planning and implementing programs and instructional approaches.
Teachers accessed online resources for course and lesson ideas, and several had established electronic partnerships with university or academic groups in their fields. Faculty members were knowledgeable about state assessments but attributed their students’ test success to engagement with their subjects rather than practicing for exams. Analysis of student test data informed some of the emphases and instructional approaches, particularly in math classes.

Riverside schools continued a culture of emphasizing and valuing writing. A long-time across-the-curriculum writing program had left a major legacy, and a more recently established informative writing program was an important curricular emphasis. For long-time faculty members at Riverside, extensive classroom writing was a deeply rooted, universal expectation and a natural link to thinking in every subject area. A long-time English teacher at Riverside had authored several publications on “thinking and writing across the curriculum” and developed detailed resources to help teachers of all subject areas empower students to use writing as a means of learning more effectively in each academic discipline. Faculty members referred to this era nostalgically as “the golden age of writing” at Riverside, a time when writing was a school-wide initiative and mandatory in every class. Mr. Catone, the now-retired English teacher, was “a tremendous impetus” for writing, the superintendent stressed: “He went right down to kindergarten. He would model lessons.” Because of the long-time work of Mr. Catone, “Writing is not isolated, or reserved for a few subjects; it’s emphasized across the subject areas,” a teacher emphasized in 2006 (Baker, 2008).

A newer writing initiative, developed by the recently retired high school principal, a former English teacher, was currently used by the English department and was being
extended to other departments. Sequential in nature, the “new” writing curriculum
provided explicit guidance for informative writing, beginning with paragraph
development. As students mastered composing paragraphs, they moved on to writing
multi-paragraph essays, focusing on articulated thesis statements and reverse summary
concluding statements, introductions with an evolution of thesis, and conclusions with an
extension of thesis. “Writing is the golden thread that should tie together all the subject
areas,” (now retired) principal Dr. Mason asserted in 2006 (Baker, 2008).

Riverside High School offered what it described in its student handbook as a
“wide range of Advanced Placement (AP) and other college-level courses (A-level).”
Teachers and administrators reported that, in recent years, students had done especially
well in earning college credit for AP courses and for courses offered in conjunction with
a nearby university.

Administrators and faculty members had regularly earned recognition for their
accomplishments. Most recently, a member of the English department was honored as an
Educator of Excellence at a statewide gathering.

School Environment

The three Riverside public schools were in the residential neighborhood “on the
hill” overlooking downtown, the river, and rolling countryside. Riverside Middle School
was in a traditional older structure attached to the elementary school. The stately new
Riverside High School stood apart, across the athletic fields but on adjoining property.
Both the middle school and the high school were welcoming, well maintained, and
friendly spaces.
**Middle school warmth.** Entering Riverside Middle School felt almost like being transported back into an idyllic, non-threatening time. The entrance everyone used took a visitor into the sixth grade wing, an area of quiet hallways displaying student art work, classrooms with friendly voices and laughter, and warm welcomes by students and staff (who kept close watch on anyone entering or exiting, not with a sense of maintaining security but with a feeling of interest and helpfulness).

The atmosphere was relaxed and caring. Teachers popped into each other’s rooms or made quick trips to the office at the other end of the hall. There were no bells, but students moved in semi-quiet groups from one room to the next on a schedule that everyone seemed to have internalized. Faculty members frequently adapted the flexible schedule to accommodate school- or grade-wide assemblies and special programs, often stressing the arts or character education. The idea of helping each other permeated the school atmosphere, with teachers and students quickly assisting whenever they thought they might be of help to anyone. “We want everyone to succeed and be happy here,” said one middle school teacher.

Despite the occasional feeling of visiting another era, the school atmosphere included many elements of 21st century technology. Every classroom had a telephone; classes were using laptop computers, projection systems, and other electronic aids to instruction. Clothing, activities, and conversation showed that the latest fads and innovations had made their way to Riverside Middle School, even in the midst of the close-knit school community sometimes reminiscent of a 1950’s TV sitcom.

**High school professionalism.** The new Riverside High School felt grand and expansive. Entering the large, open foyer, visitors were greeted with a sign-in book on a
desk, behind which usually sat two student greeters, respectfully overseen by office personnel a few yards away. Spacious hallways and common areas, a two-story atrium and grand staircase beyond the front entrance, window walls in offices, and high ceilings gave an impression of openness and accessibility. The high school’s performing arts center, library, fitness center, and pool were part of community life as well as school programming. “I’m so excited to have my friends and family come in to see my school and classroom. It’s pretty self-explanatory when they walk up to this beautiful building. They can immediately see part of why I’m so happy here,” exclaimed a new high school teacher.

Classrooms on two floors were attractive, well equipped, and overflowing with the artifacts of student work and instruction. Each teacher “owned” a classroom and transformed the space into a subject-specific learning center. Partly because teachers had their own classrooms, most of the day the faculty room on the second floor was used only for photocopying and grabbing quick cups of coffee (provided freely to staff and visitors—“one of the great things about working here,” a Social Studies teacher noted). The faculty room became a hub of hospitable activity during lunch periods, when teachers gathered there to eat amid friendly conversations about families, school, and community.

An atmosphere of purpose, professionalism, and respect pervaded. Faculty members dressed professionally, with men often wearing ties and women often wearing skirts and heels; the professional attire, I was told, was part of the way teachers viewed their role, not the result of a dress code. Hallways were quiet. Glimpses into classrooms and offices showed teenagers and adults on task, learning and working together in an
active, friendly, low-key manner. Teachers praised the calm, effective discipline system (established by the previous principal and continued by the new administrator), which echoed the caring and respect felt throughout the school. A sense of school and personal pride accompanied the quiet, friendly but persistent focus on academic learning: students and faculty were proud of themselves and each other.

**Organizational Interactions**

As a small school district, Riverside had a close-knit network of educators. A district superintendent, two building principals, 31 high school teachers, and 22 middle school teachers served approximately 360 high school students and 260 middle school students. The faculty was experienced, with only 2% of teachers having fewer than three years of teaching.

The district’s long-time superintendent, Mr. Sloan, had a front office in a wing of the high school building and a presence throughout the district. The middle school principal, in his fourth year as a building administrator, maintained the collegiality, low-key friendliness, and interest in data analysis that he had exhibited as a math teacher in the same building; faculty members praised his efforts. A new high school principal had started work in the district as the study began; he was personable and professional and was taking a listening, encouraging approach rather than making sweeping changes.

The new principal followed in the large footsteps of a high-profile administrator who had instituted a great many changes, received state and national accolades, and was revered by many, but by no means all, faculty members. Dr. Mason, recently retired, had been a “commanding” presence—high energy, expecting/demanding everyone’s best performance, instructionally concerned, and micro-managing. Many teachers saw him as
“the reason for our exceptional success” while a few were outspoken in describing his leadership style as an impediment to teacher initiative and collaboration. Later chapters of this report present more detail about Dr. Mason’s influence and the new principal’s differing leadership style.

The middle school, which comprised grades 6 through 8, was organized around grade level teams. The daily schedule allowed grade level teachers to meet for 40 minutes each day. Academic departments within the middle school were loosely organized and met infrequently (in most cases only on occasional conference days). Most teachers ate lunch in their classrooms, often with a colleague or two, although the sixth grade team ate lunch together every day.

The high school was organized into subject area departments, notably English, math, science, and social studies. Department chairs, who received no extra pay for their leadership, varied in the responsibilities they undertook. No time for teacher collaboration or department meetings was built into the schedule. Teachers interacted mostly with fellow department members whose classrooms were nearby and with teachers who shared the same lunch period in the faculty room.

Riverside had no formal mentoring program for new teachers. Whereas Superintendent Sloan described a mentoring initiative involving retired teachers, current faculty members seemed unaware of any district plan for mentoring. New teachers received informal help from colleagues but found that there was little time for in-depth planning or reflection with more experienced faculty members. In the middle school, mentoring seemed to occur naturally within the grade level teams. Since the one new teacher in the middle school this year was in the English department, she received
mentoring not only from her grade level team but also from other English department members. The one new teacher at the high school said that he “expected a lot more looking over my shoulder” but appreciated the trust others had in him: “It’s really made me grow.”

Sports and extra-curricular activities were important at Riverside, and most teachers found themselves serving as coaches or club advisors. Both positions were paid. Students participated actively in swim teams, basketball and other sports, in dramatic productions, in art shows, and in a myriad of other interests beyond the school day, although no late buses were provided for students who stayed after school to be part of these activities.

Changes over Time

As a year-long frequent visitor to the Riverside schools for a previous research project, the National Study of Writing Instruction, I saw evidence of both stability and change over the years. The number of children in the district continued on a gradual decline. As mentioned above and detailed in subsequent chapters, an administrative transition in the high school had been greeted with a curious mixture of sadness and relief. Several long-time teachers had retired, and two new teachers were part of this new study. Technology use had strengthened. The curriculum was much the same, although teachers had been innovative in their efforts to bring in all the resources they could find. The informational writing initiative had become entrenched, and fewer traces of the writing-across-the-curriculum program were immediately apparent.

Although the culture at Riverside schools had maintained the academic emphasis and rooted stability, the current socioeconomic climate in both the community and the
schools had elements of fear and anxiety. The anticipated loss of the headquarters of the
town’s one major corporation compelled the economic concern. School personnel
worried that students’ parents would lose their jobs and that the town and school would
lose population. Almost every teacher I interviewed, even those who felt somewhat
isolated academically, expressed pride in faculty initiatives to provide well-organized,
personal, behind-the-scenes assistance to struggling families. Perhaps even stronger than
the economic worry was the optimistic, “can-do” attitude of the school and community.
As one staff member noted, “We’ve faced other crises in the past. Maybe the
headquarters move won’t be as bad as everyone thinks. I keep remembering the
downtown flood a few years ago. Everyone pulled together, and downtown was rebuilt—
better than ever.”

Ironically, despite the widespread community support educators had enjoyed over
the years, there was now a sense that some residents might resent “high” teachers’
salaries during the tough economic times. Lack of a current teachers’ contract contributed
to the general unease; the previous professional agreement had ended in June of 2009,
although provisions of the old contract continued in place until a new agreement could be
reached. As teachers and administrators discussed the stalemate in negotiations, there was
fear of long-term negative impact on the culture: there might be curtailment of the
generous volunteerism for which Riverside teachers were noted, or, even worse, faculty
factions might develop supporting or opposing “work-to-rule” or other union tactics in
stalled negotiations. There was an occasional undercurrent of anxiety that the positive,
encouraging culture enjoyed for so long might be in jeopardy, although no one wanted to
voice that fear “out loud.”
The most obvious change in school atmosphere occurred in January of 2010, near the end of my dissertation research at Riverside, when a security system was installed in both buildings. Doors were now locked and access granted only after a visitor was identified. Educators who commented on the change attributed it vaguely to a risk management decision to align the district with other schools’ security processes; no one seemed aware of any incident provoking the change. The new process surely added to the safety and security of the students and staff, although members of the school community expressed a twinge of sadness to see the end of the long-time assumption of trustworthiness: entering Riverside schools no longer felt as much like a return to a simpler era.

Educators worked hard to maintain the positive, successful macro-culture of the Riverside school system. They continued to feel a deep personal responsibility for the learning and well-being of all students. Teachers expressed a strong feeling of belonging to this academic and caring community. Although twinges of worry lurked in the background of the current climate, they took pride in their individual and collective accomplishments: “As the slogan says, ‘We can’t hide our Riverside pride!’” said a high school teacher.

The next section will describe the major findings of this study. In Chapter Five I present my findings the role of teacher professional collaboration in the macro-culture of the district and schools. Chapter Six analyzes factors associated with the nature, extent, and perceived value of collaboration in the academic sub-groups. Finally, Chapter Seven discusses implications of these findings and suggests avenues of further study of teachers’ professional collaboration within and among academic groups.
Chapter Five

Findings: The Role of Collaboration in the General Culture

Chapter Five analyzes the role of professional collaboration in the macro-culture of this district and its middle and high schools. Chapter Six examines the collaboration within and among the micro-cultures of academic departments and grade level teams.

This chapter looks particularly at four major factors that seemed to influence the general collaborative culture at Riverside:

- the organizational approaches and styles of school leaders;
- arrangements and attitudes underlying the contrasts at the middle and high school;
- the structures of communication patterns that had developed;
- characteristics of teachers’ ideas of professional home.

I define professional collaboration as educators working together to achieve instructional objectives; the process involves sharing resources, expertise, and responsibility with colleagues. Educators’ professional collaboration may be as specific as developing lesson plans and evaluating student work or as general as developing/maintaining a school environment that fosters student learning. It is more general interaction that might be expected in the collaboration in the macro-culture of districts and schools. District and school based collaboration involves group dynamics that have evolved over time, channels of communication that form and re-form, a context of professional attitudes and arrangements, and teachers’ feelings of trust and caring.
Decision-Making and Leadership Styles

The first factor analyzed was how, if at all, the organizational attitudes and styles of school leaders influenced the professional interactions of faculty members. This factor was suggested by my review of the literature, particularly studies establishing the importance of shared leadership and development of teacher agency. The abundance of data that emerged on this theme demanded analysis in the study.

Sustaining a collaborative culture requires active professional dialogue and a sense of individual and collective agency on the part of participants in the culture (Bruner, 1999; Deal and Peterson, 1999; Rogoff, 1990). In identifying the influence of decision-making and leadership styles, I looked at how communication patterns flowed up and down the decision-making structure, and how, if at all, teachers felt a sense of agency at Riverside High School and Middle School; how communicative and decision-making interactions and philosophies revolved around the professional relationships between administrators and teachers; and how school leaders, whether administrators or faculty members, used differing organizational styles influencing the nature and extent of collaboration at Riverside schools. I identified these organizational approaches by analyzing interviews with teachers and administrators and field notes on observed group dynamics in meetings and other interactions.

Little District-Wide Collaboration

Although faculty members said they valued opportunities for input and feedback to the central administration, few teachers recalled opportunities for direct collaboration on district-wide initiatives. Of the 21 faculty members interviewed, only four (19%) mentioned any role they had experienced in district-wide planning and decision-making,
while 13 (over 60%) noted that they considered it important for teachers to have a voice in district-wide school improvement. No teachers indicated that district-wide collaboration was unimportant.

One initiative that several faculty members said gave them a significant voice across the chains of command was the building project a few years ago, an undertaking that resulted in the “beautiful” new high school and the renovation and reorganization of the space that now comprised the middle school. High school science teachers expressed pride in their role in designing the science classrooms with “great lab features and storage space” as well as the latest technology. Middle school teachers helped to plan the renovation they now enjoyed: “Our wing is pretty new. We got to design this wing for 6th grade. This room [a small area tucked between the science room and a regular classroom] is here because we needed a separate room for projects and conferences.” Those teachers who reported being a part of the facilities improvement initiatives said that they felt valued for their expertise and that their teaching had been more effective because of the facilities they helped to design.

Two district-wide initiatives were mentioned as examples of “top-down” decisions that had both positive and negative aspects—negative in that there was no teacher voice in the decision-making and positive in that teachers saw academic value to the undertaking. One of those endeavors was the now abandoned across-the-curriculum student writing initiative that was required under the instructional leadership of English teacher Mr. Catone over a period of many years. Mr. Catone (and the district) provided staff development and required student writing at all grade levels and in all academic areas. Only the most experienced current faculty members remembered how all of that
got started, however, and some newer teachers (mistakenly) said that they thought it was actually initiated by the former high school principal. Those who mentioned the initiative were unanimous in reporting that they had “no say” in the project although they saw benefit to it.

The other initiative noted by several teachers as “top-down but valuable” was the curriculum review and writing that occurred a few years ago. As a high school faculty member explained, “The superintendent and high school principal saw a need for curriculum mapping. There was no consultation with faculty. ‘This is something we need to do,’ they said, and they provided training.” Almost every teacher noted that departments were responsible for using state standards to develop curriculum, although most added that the work had been completed some time ago and now was something to implement and build on rather than a current initiative.

In contrast to the design of the new building, both of these initiatives represented major changes undertaken without collaboration between teachers and administrators. Several interviews and faculty room conversations provided evidence that the curriculum initiative did involve considerable collaboration among teachers themselves, particularly in the initial phases as teachers identified content gaps and redundancies by working with colleagues across grade levels and within academic departments.

Role of the Superintendent

In an interview, district superintendent Mr. Sloan described his responsibility as determining what needs to be done to meet high academic standards, putting the right people in position to reach the goals, and helping educators realize that “we have not reached our full potential.” He said that he strived to develop “a climate where people
feel there’s more out there to learn” and “find what’s working well for really successful teachers.” Mr. Sloan credited the Effective Schools movement with energizing the faculty as they re-worked their mission and established priorities year after year in the 1990s. “We called the high school (7-12 at the time) ‘a community of learners’ although we were still not sure what that meant in terms of what we should do.” Then along came state standards: “Standards changed everything. Wow, that was neat!” Suddenly, he said, teachers were working collaboratively to determine exactly what should be taught, including alignment of topics to prevent gaps and repetition. “We convinced the union to trade funding of sabbatical leaves for funding of summer curriculum work. We went to a focus on successful methods of teaching.”

Emphasizing that he was always trying to identify keys to successful instruction, Mr. Sloan said that he saw teachers’ working together as important to professional capacity building. “We have to look for people who are cooperative, open minded, humble, don’t put themselves on a pedestal.” In contrast, he said, it’s a problem to “have people who are such independent thinkers that they cannot collaborate, that they cannot appreciate the gifts of someone else. . . . ‘He who cannot follow cannot lead,’ Winston Churchill said, and he had a good point.”

While affirming that he valued teacher-to-teacher collaboration to build stronger instruction, the superintendent suggested that he saw little purpose to collaborative planning across the chains of command and was disdainful of the mandated shared decision-making initiative that accompanied the new standards (and was an outgrowth of the Effective Schools movement).
All faculty members who mentioned the superintendent did so with respect, regarding the long-tenured Mr. Sloan as one of the keys to Riverside’s success. A high degree of deference to the superintendent was very much a part of the culture. I heard no criticism of Mr. Sloan in any of the interviews or in any of the faculty room or small group conversations. A common refrain was: “Mr. Sloan comes up with what he thinks is important and tells us about it at a Superintendent’s Conference Day. Then we all work on doing our part to implement the idea.”

**Superintendent’s leadership styles.** A great many people described Mr. Sloan’s leadership style as “top down” while one teacher saw the style as “trickling down” through other administrative layers. With apologies to Blanchard et al. (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969; Blanchard, Guest, and Hersey, 1985; Blanchard, 2006), whose situational leadership ideas started my thinking in this direction, I’ve developed the following visual representation of Mr. Sloan’s main leadership style, which I call *directing*.

**Figure 3.** Diagram of “Directing” Leadership Style Used by Mr. Sloan

![Diagram of Directing Leadership Style](image)

Mr. Sloan, the *L* in the Figure 3 diagram, stands at the top of the group, faces group members (the *Ms* in the diagram), and tells them what needs to be done. The arrow faces toward the members, in the pointing mode, as the leader gives direction and expects others to listen and act. The *directing* leadership style involves no shared planning or
decision-making. *Directing* leaders know what they want to have accomplished and why it should be done; they *tell* others what to do; they have authority; they command respect. Faculty members viewed this style as appropriate for Mr. Sloan, since he was the “top boss,” the “one in charge.” “He knows what he wants to see done, and he directs the action,” one staff member said.

Building administrators and a few teachers pointed out, however, that Mr. Sloan was also good at what they called *delegating*, enabling building administrators and teachers to implement initiatives he had chosen. In the *empowering* or *delegating* phase of the situational leadership model (see Figure 4), the leader, the $L$ in the diagram, sits outside the circle and lets others do the implementing. The leader is available for consultation but delegates the day-to-day decision-making to the members, $M$s in the diagram.

Both principals noted that Mr. Sloan expected them to “run our buildings” in accordance with his educational ideas. A teacher explained that Mr. Sloan, as the instructional leader, would start an initiative and provide information to the faculty, expecting that teachers would implement the ideas in their classrooms. “Lately, we’ve been working with *Focus on the Product*. I’ve now read it more than once. We had a
project on *Essential Questions*. We came up with templates for our own units. . . .

Initiatives are focused on outcomes. Gets people to focus and make it their own.”

Building principals and a few teachers expressed satisfaction in being considered capable of following through on their own.

As may be typical in a small, rural district, Mr. Sloan had also been known to take other leadership roles. Interviewees reported that, in working with new staff members, Mr. Sloan occasionally assumed the role of coach. In *Coaching*, leaders define roles and tasks but move to the center of the group, fostering more two-way communication: “OK,

**Figure 5.** Diagram of “Coaching” Leadership Style Used by Mr. Sloan

![Diagram of Coaching Leadership Style](image)

L = Leader of the group; M = Member of the group

team, what strategies can you use to accomplish what you’d like to do?” Mr. Sloan also used personal coaching techniques, meeting one-on-one with principals and teachers to give encouragement and support. The new high school principal praised Mr. Sloan’s “pep talks” and willingness to listen and make suggestions: “The superintendent doesn’t want big changes. There’s a sense of ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’” A new high school teacher stressed that he was encouraged by Mr. Sloan’s active mentoring: “Mr. Sloan stops in to my classroom once a week or every other week. He’s really good for the teachers. He listens. I constantly ask questions.” A few veteran teachers described the superintendent as approachable and caring, happy to give advice when asked. I witnessed one telephone
conversation in which a teacher who also serves as a sports coach called Mr. Sloan to be sure that he was aware of an incident at a recent basketball game. Feeling a responsibility to communicate directly with Mr. Sloan, this teacher also appreciated Mr. Sloan’s assurance that she had done the right thing and welcomed his counsel about how to handle future situations; that interaction seemed typical of the coaching relationship style.

Superintendent Sloan’s combination of directing, empowering, and coaching leadership styles had led to little teacher collaboration in district-wide decision-making but had fostered periodic collaboration among teachers as they worked to implement initiatives introduced by Mr. Sloan. While distinctly hierarchical and top-down, Mr. Sloan’s leadership had been instrumental in providing the solid educational context in which teacher-to-teacher collaboration might flourish. Other parts of this analysis return to the idea of the culture of success associated with Mr. Sloan and his district leadership.

**Influence of Mr. Catone and the Writing Initiative**

As an author and professional developer respected within and beyond the Riverside educational community, former English department chair Mr. Catone enjoyed status on a par with Mr. Sloan’s. Mr. Catone’s instructional leadership was mostly of the style I call modeling. Modeling, as I define it, involves setting an example and inspiring (sometimes requiring) others to echo the actions. The leader, L in the Figure 6 diagram, faces forward and expects group members, the Ms, to follow his example; the arrow faces up, in the “follow me” mode. Writing guru Mr. Catone modeled lessons and techniques
for engaging students as he taught faculty members how to use writing to build student learning. “He knew how to teach kids to write well, and we learned from his example,” one teacher said. “Teachers had assignments. We ultimately had a binder at each grade level,” she added.

Coaching (see Figure 7) was also a part of Mr. Catone’s leadership style. He worked directly with teachers of all grade levels and subject areas, in groups and as individuals. “He would sit down with all of the teachers at our grade and show us and talk us through the process. Then he’d watch us teach and help us evaluate the student work.” He also coached English teachers to work with colleagues in other academic areas. “There was one summer I worked with a business teacher as part of Writing Across the
Curriculum. Each English teacher worked with someone from a different department. I found it satisfying to work together on developing assignments and activities, but she didn’t have the time for real follow-through,” one English teacher reported. The coaching Mr. Catone provided also served as modeling for the English teachers who became instructional coaches themselves. “I’m still using the writing initiative,” a middle school teacher noted, “and I’m still coaching my colleagues in how to use creative writing in their classes.”

Like Mr. Sloan’s management style, Mr. Catone’s modeling and coaching did not foster level-to-level collaboration but did help to establish a district-wide learning environment in which teachers could share ideas, expertise, and resources in teacher-to-teacher collaboration.

Decision-Making in the High School Culture

High school faculty participants in the study differed in the extent of level-to-level collaboration they described in their building, perhaps partly because of the transition in building administrators. Of the 12 high school faculty members interviewed, seven (58%) described a system allowing some teacher input for school-wide decisions, and four (33%) criticized the hierarchal nature of the previous high school administration. Faculty meetings constructed around sharing information allowed teacher suggestions, but teachers introduced no initiatives during the time of the study. High school faculty room conversations did not focus on school decision-making, and I saw no evidence of teacher involvement in building-wide planning.

Several faculty members described a tradition of faculty agency in planning and problem solving in the high school. One science teacher outlined a process wherein a
teacher or group would have an idea or identify a problem and would mention it at a faculty meeting. “The administration has been very open to our ideas and would make up a committee of teachers along with administration to plan what needs to change.” No interviewed teachers identified any specific initiative in which they felt personally involved in school-based decision making.

**Legacy of Dr. Mason.** Particularly divergent were the views faculty members presented on school-wide collaborative agency under the administration of Dr. Mason, the now retired high school principal who received state and national recognition and developed the sequential informative writing program. Dr. Mason’s “I’m in charge” attitude elicited comments from all interviewees who had worked with him.

“Dr. Mason was a great administrator,” said one veteran teacher. “He cemented our successful culture for such a long time. When I first started, there was a disconnect between teachers and administration. People always felt kind of depressed and angry. Dr. Mason changed all that. He contributed greatly to the overall feeling of success and happiness we now enjoy.” “When I first started,” another staff member said, “the old guard believed that if you don’t get your way, you throw a temper tantrum, scream at people. Doc was puzzled by that and eventually changed the dynamic, particularly as older teachers moved on.”

Several interviewed teachers described Dr. Mason as “a one-man show” and essentially non-collaborative. “For Dr. Mason, collaboration was not a priority. That’s the big reason why we didn’t have a lot of it,” one teacher stated. Another described how Dr. Mason became proficient at anticipating and solving problems one-on-one with teachers: “He realized it’s a mistake to ignore issues until someone started screaming at a faculty
meeting. It lowers morale.” While some teachers reported that they took comfort in knowing that Dr. Mason “had a handle on everything,” other faculty members viewed Dr. Mason’s authoritative approach as undermining teachers’ ideas and preventing real collaboration or school improvement.

In contrast, discussions with current high school English teachers suggested that they regarded Dr. Mason as almost god-like. Department members said that his instructional leadership was “incredible” as they praised the “smooth, calm way he ran the building” and described the successes of the sequential informative writing program that Dr. Mason instituted. I found it interesting that English teachers were now in complete support of the informative writing program and did not even recall the tension and reluctance that existed when the program was first introduced (Baker, 2008). The English department chair reported that she stayed in close contact with Dr. Mason despite his retirement and his move away from the area. She credited him with the department’s opportunities to present their writing program to other educators at state and national meetings; “He was/is my mentor. He inspired me to step up and become the leader of the department. He arranged for and encouraged us to make presentations to other educators. He’s been a constant inspiration.”

**Dr. Mason’s leadership style.** Several staff members described the high school culture as a “top-down” decision-making model. Like Mr. Sloan, Dr. Mason used a directing style most of the time. According to staff members interviewed, Dr. Mason “managed his school” by telling others what he wanted to see done. He commanded
Figure 8. Diagram of “Directing” Leadership Style Used by Dr. Mason

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
  & L & \\
  \downarrow & M & M \\
  M & M & M \\
  M & M & M \\
  M & M & M \\
\end{array}
\]

L = Leader of the group; M = Member of the group

respect and expected teachers to follow his direction. The directing leadership style (Figure 8) involves no level-to-level shared planning or decision-making. Expectations are clear, but there is usually little feeling of personal agency. “The sense was ‘Don’t bother coming up with new ideas. Nobody wants to hear it. We’ll tell you what to do,’” one high school faculty member said. Another veteran high school teacher explained the result for him personally: “I just stopped being involved. I just teach my classes. When I was a young teacher, an older teacher said, ‘It feels so good to stop banging your head against the wall.’ The past administration did what it wanted to do regardless of what teachers wanted. . . . I’m not banging my head against the wall anymore.”

Although directing in most of his interactions with “his” faculty, Dr. Mason utilized a second leadership style in coaching the English department to use the new writing program and to communicate the processes and successes of the program to other educators at Riverside and beyond. In Coaching, leaders make the decisions but move to the center of the group, fostering more two-way communication as they teach and encourage. In interviews with English department members, I heard “Dr. Mason said . . .” at least a dozen times. He taught English teachers not only how to provide writing
Figure 9. Diagram of “Coaching” Leadership Style Used by Dr. Mason

L = Leader of the group; M = Member of the group

instruction (“We follow his guidelines.”) but also how to communicate the purposes and processes to others (“He helped us to work with other departments. Later, he gave suggestions for how to present the program to larger audiences of teachers.”). Now that he had retired and moved away, Dr. Mason still gave “pep talks” on the phone, particularly in preparing the English department for “big games” like the national presentation they delivered during the study.

Among those interviewed, there was total faculty unanimity on the “huge influence” Dr. Mason had on the high school culture at Riverside. Although not collaborative in his personal interactions with teachers, the former principal fostered a culture of order and success. His leadership styles encouraged collaboration within the English department as they worked to implement the writing program Dr. Mason had developed. Dr. Mason’s authoritative style seems to have presented a barrier to level-to-level collaboration, such as might occur among teachers and administrators, however.

Transition at the High School

In his first year at Riverside, Mr. Cramer, the new high school principal, told me in an interview that the main charge he had been given was to maintain the status quo:
“My model this year is to listen and learn,” he said. “They don’t want big changes here. The staff, the superintendent, the community all think we have a good school and want to keep it that way.” Following in the footsteps of a “strong principal” provided a solid base on which to build, he said, and perhaps a contrast in approach, at least initially: “[The former principal] ran the show and told me as much. This was his building.” Mr. Cramer was still in the process of establishing his own leadership style, using modeling from his previous experience and from the middle school principal as well as encouragement from the central administration: “The superintendent supports top down. He told me, ‘You’re the principal!’”

A teacher who was part of the interview committee for the principal position noted that candidates “stressed the importance of collaboration.” She could see the difference in style between Mr. Cramer and Dr. Mason, she said, and gave an example: “At our last faculty meeting, he asked teachers what we would like to keep the same and what we would like to change. Collaboration was mentioned, I know, by a lot of teachers. . . . Mr. Cramer seems to want our input and feedback. That’s a change. And I think he would be very open to more collaboration.” Another faculty member provided a complementary reflection: “The real strength of Mr. Cramer may be his collaborative stance.”

In his first few months, Mr. Cramer had introduced new ideas to the faculty mainly by distributing articles on educational research and philosophies: “action research, critical friends, data analysis, journaling, lesson studies, a slew of topics.” He said that he saw himself as a resource and support for teachers. When asked about the school’s
arrangements for mentors, Mr. Cramer laughingly replied, “Mentors? You’re looking at
him.”

The time period of the study seemed too early to identify a definitive leadership
style for Mr. Cramer. As one faculty member said, “The new principal is still finding his
way. He’s still learning what we do here.” In some ways, Mr. Cramer seemed torn
between the superintendent’s expectations for top-down, directive leadership and his own
instincts to be more collaborative and give teachers more voice in school decision-
making.

**Middle School Teamwork**

Participating middle school faculty members indicated no disagreement or
tentativeness about the collaborative dialogue and agency facilitated by the middle school
administration in recent years. All of the middle school teachers interviewed described a
system encouraging teacher input for school-wide decisions. Team meetings and faculty
meetings during the study provided a structure for proposing ideas, solving problems, and
sharing perspectives. Informal conversations observed in the middle school often focused
on collaborative planning.

Middle school principal Mr. Tomkinson was viewed as a peer, a colleague, “one
of us.” Before he became principal, Mr. Tomkinson was a middle school math teacher in
the district, described as “gifted” not only by the district superintendent but also by three
middle school teachers, all of whom noted that Mr. T’s skills extended beyond the
classroom and included a particular talent for analyzing test data to assist in planning
instruction. When asked how the middle school determined needed changes or
improvements, Mr. T said, “We rely on the data, state assessment data. And we rely on
Teachers—listen to what they have to say, go out and look and see what we can change, listen to teachers a lot.”

Teachers in the middle school said that they felt free to suggest school improvement ideas to Mr. Tomkinson and that they were encouraged to work collaboratively with other members of their grade level teams to develop specific recommendations for change, which would then be presented to the entire middle school faculty for discussion.

One recent shared decision-making initiative involved moving from an eight period day to a seven period day, adding ten minutes to each class and eliminating study halls. Both the principal and teachers reported that the idea came from teachers, who suggested it at faculty meetings and then developed a specific proposal to present to the entire faculty. There were differing philosophies and faculty viewpoints at first, study participants said, but once the needs and options were thoroughly discussed, “we moved forward, and it’s been a huge improvement.” The principal credited the new schedule with producing more academic focus, (“not a single student failed last year”) as well as fewer disciplinary problems (“went from 616 discipline referrals to 308”). Both faculty and administrators were proud of being able to achieve meaningful school improvement through collaboration.

A proposed initiative being discussed during the study was new cell phone technology to be supplied to every student for quick phone and internet communication. The idea was repeatedly mentioned in interviews and meetings and was always attributed to an eighth grade teacher. Another teacher described the “exciting” new technology: “Each kid will have a cell phone for calls between them and teachers and for internet
access. Someone absent can access information about homework. We’ll start in March with 6th grade, and the process will continue with new sixth graders being added every year. It will go with those kids.” By the time this study was completed, however, plans had been abandoned after further investigation revealed that the equipment would be more expensive than originally thought. It was interesting to observe the final conversations about the proposed initiative: I saw no evidence of blame or deep discouragement; the philosophy that I heard expressed several times in casual conversations was “It was worth pursuing, and maybe we can do something like this another time.”

Interviews and observations at meetings gave a general impression of a school bubbling over with ideas, most initiated by teachers.

**Leadership styles of the middle school principal.** Interviews and observations clearly indicated that middle school principal Mr. Tomkinson used a combination of *sharing* and *empowering* leadership styles. “He’s never authoritarian,” one teacher emphasized. In *sharing* (see Figure 10), the leader is part of the group making joint decisions.

**Figure 10.** Diagram of “Sharing” Leadership Style Used by Mr. Tomkinson

![Diagram of “Sharing” Leadership Style Used by Mr. Tomkinson](image)

*L = Leader of the group; M = Member of the group*
decisions. Anyone can introduce an idea, and everyone discusses possibilities. Decisions are usually made through consensus. “As we discuss what to change, he’ll give us data that relates, so that everyone can make informed decisions,” one teacher said. Several faculty members stressed that Mr. Tomkinson used a team approach whenever possible. “He’ll have us go back and work with our (grade level) team to come up with a more specific proposal.” When a team had an idea members wanted to implement for their own grade level, Mr. T switched to the *empowering* (see Figure 11) leadership style. As an *empowering* leader, he stayed outside group decision-making but was available for consultation or support.

**Figure 11.** Diagram of “Empowering” Leadership Style Used by Mr. Tomkinson

![Diagram of “Empowering” Leadership Style](image)

Middle school teachers reported that their principal encouraged them to make their decisions and then provided assistance in implementing the plan: “He helped us out with logistical arrangements and the communication. He’ll help with re-arranging and making things work."

Faculty members saw Mr. Tomkinson’s leadership styles as strongly supportive of professional dialogue and agency. Everyone interviewed praised the team spirit engendered by the middle school principal. The combination of *sharing* and *empowering* fostered collaboration in eliciting ideas, planning, solving problems, and sharing school-wide decision-making.
Overview of Organizational Styles

Understanding leadership styles of key players in a school or district is requisite to examining any collaborative networks and any barriers to collaboration. The interwoven organizational direction given by administrators and other instructional leaders provides the context in which professional collaboration may flourish or wane and in which the purposes, topics, and linkages of any collaboration may be determined.

Based loosely on the situational leadership concept developed by Blanchard et al. (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969; Blanchard, Guest, and Hersey, 1985; Blanchard, 2006), the preceding discussion and visual representations (see Figures 3 through 11 and Appendix E) depicted the leadership styles used by instructional leaders at Riverside middle and high school. Part of the philosophy of developing high performance teams, whether in schools or other organizations, is that a leader should use the style appropriate to the situation and the capabilities of the team members, with a steady progression toward a less directive, more empowering approach. In real-life educational settings, administrators and other leaders may adopt a particular stance or combination of stances and continue to use the same styles throughout their careers rather than moving toward more collaborative agency.

Instructional leaders at Riverside schools had utilized each of these styles. Both Mr. Sloan and Dr. Mason used the directing approach extensively. Mr. Catone relied on modeling. Elements of coaching could be seen occasionally in the styles of Mr. Sloan, Mr. Catone, and Dr. Mason. Only Mr. Tomkinson had moved to a dominant approach of sharing and empowering.
As a middle school teacher explained, “Who your boss is makes a big difference. Everything is a lot more easy-going now, more laid back. We’re pretty good about taking care of things. We don’t need to be told what to do.” This sixth grade teacher seemed to speak for many not only in her building but also in the high school. Teacher after teacher reported that he or she valued the self-efficacy and sense of professional agency that accompanies a leadership style that shares or empowers rather than dictates.

Rogoff (1990) concluded that the most productive interaction results from situations in which peers participate jointly in decision-making. Shared planning and problem solving build individual and collective cognition and efficacy. The nature and extent of professional collaboration are heavily influenced by the organizational styles of administrators and other instructional leaders.

Among the findings of this study of professional collaboration at Riverside Middle and High School is that increased teacher collaboration and stronger feelings of collaborative agency are fostered by leadership styles that are more open and collegial and less directive and authoritarian.

**Collaborative Contrasts in the Two Buildings**

The second factor analyzed in determining the role of collaboration in the district and school macro-cultures involved those aspects of arrangement and attitude that underlie the contrasts at the middle and high school in this rural district.

Much of the educational reform effort of the last two decades has sought to move schools toward a stronger sense of community in contrast to the bureaucracy that is thought to have dominated since early in the twentieth century (Lee & Smith, 1995). The middle school concept, begun in part as a response to the traditional “bureaucratic” high
school, is a structural reform effort intended to foster a more student-centered, collaborative environment for young adolescents even as high schools themselves have struggled to create more caring, cooperative environments for older teens (Bidwell et al., 1997; Anfara et al., 2003; Kemple, 2005; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000).

In identifying the underlying factors of attitude or arrangement that might guide the contrasts in professional collaboration in the middle school and high school at Riverside, I looked particularly at the differences in collaborative contexts, including educator philosophies and typical practices, daily schedules, and physical arrangements. In examining how these differences might contribute to contrasts in the nature and extent of professional collaboration, I analyzed observed organizational patterns and group dynamics as well as information from interviews with teachers and administrators at Riverside. Evidence for the contrasts in context included scrutiny of physical and time-oriented arrangements in the two buildings as well as observations of communication at 16 meetings, 32 lunch gatherings, and countless informal conversations.

**Opening Day Faculty Meetings**

The two disparate sets of group and logistical dynamics were apparent on the very first day of the study, when I attended opening day faculty meetings in both buildings. Laughter and a variety of voices echoed from the library as I approached the middle school meeting already in progress. In contrast, one steady, continuing voice could be heard from the auditorium as my footsteps resounded in the otherwise quiet, long hallway as I approached the high school faculty meeting. Middle school faculty members were seated around tables in the small school library at the center of the building. High school faculty members were seated theater style in a large, multi-leveled auditorium on the far
edge of their large building. Middle school teachers responded to my research
information with multiple friendly questions, completed consent forms with enthusiasm,
and then suggested that they’d like to complete the questionnaire immediately if I didn’t
mind waiting. High school teachers listened politely to the information about the project,
completed consent forms quietly, and set the questionnaires aside to be completed
another time. At the end of the middle school meeting, teachers gathered around to let me
know what had happened since I had last visited the school, even sharing photos of new
babies. High school teachers, while not the least bit rude or unwelcoming, gave the
impression that they had been sitting for a very long time and were feeling restless and
eager to move on to their individual classrooms; there was no informal conversation with
high school faculty that day.

Opening day faculty meetings set the tone for the collaborative contrasts in the
two buildings. Middle school teachers and their administrator seemed close knit,
interdependent, and relaxed. High school faculty members seemed hard working, caring,
and independent. Teachers in the two buildings seemed to have much in common in their
professional effort, high expectations, and concern for their students, but, from the very
beginning of the study, there were notable contextual differences in the logistics and
attitudes related to working together professionally.

**Daily Schedules**

Among the major contrasts were the daily schedules in the two buildings at
Riverside. Although the length of the school day (approximately 7:50 a.m. to
approximately 3:00 p.m.) and the length of class periods were about the same in the
middle school and the high school, time and logistical arrangements for teachers differed
considerably. The high school schedule was “carved in stone,” with bells marking the beginning and end of each period. Middle school timing was more flexible, with no bells and with adjustments for special programs as determined appropriate based on teacher collaboration. High school students were scheduled individually for classes. Middle school students were scheduled as groups (“home bases”), so that teachers shared all of the same students and students moved from room to room with the same group of classmates. Although high school teachers had completely individualized schedules, middle school teachers had lunch, prep, and team meeting periods at the same time as other members of their grade level faculty teams.

From the standpoint of teachers, the biggest difference was that middle school teachers had designated time to meet together, in the form of a team planning period. “They have an extra period to work together,” two high school teachers noted. “At the high school, we never have time together during the school day,” one of these teachers added; “we only see the people who happen to have the same lunch period.” “Time is the biggest factor,” reported a teacher who had moved from one building to the other: “The middle school builds in time to work together. The high school isolates you with the time constraints.”

The combination of scheduling differences resulted in high school teachers experiencing isolation and barriers to collaboration whereas middle school teachers had a common, group-based schedule supporting collaboration. Throughout the day, middle school teachers worked closely with other teachers of the same grade level: they checked in with each other at the beginning of the day; they shared notes during their individual planning periods; they ate lunch together; and, most importantly, in the unanimous view
of all who commented, middle school teachers had dedicated team planning time built into each day. Because they shared all of the same students, and those students were with the same group of classmates all day, middle school teachers had built-in commonality of focus. High school teachers had none of those collaborative scheduling advantages.

**Physical Arrangements**

Similarly, spatial issues supported collaboration in the middle school and presented barriers to collaboration in the high school. The middle school was a close, cozy place with clustered classrooms, narrow hallways and a small footprint. Because teachers of the same grade level had classrooms right next to each other or right across the hall, it was natural and convenient to interact continuously.

The high school, on the other hand, was wonderfully spacious, with huge open areas, wide hallways, high ceilings, far-flung wings, and a large overall footprint. Central areas were devoted to public space (with a wide variety of facilities open to the community), and classroom wings were organized by department along one side of the hallway only. As several high school teachers pointed out, it was a long walk to visit someone in another department. “Because this school is so physically big, I can go weeks without seeing some people whose classrooms are in other wings,” one teacher commented. “The building is not laid out for collaboration,” the librarian added.

**Philosophy and Practice**

Middle school teachers expect to work with other teachers. High school teachers expect to be autonomous. At least that was the perception of administrators at Riverside. As superintendent Sloan put it, “High school teachers can be very independent, especially if they have a Regents exam. They stay away from me. They are the least collaborative.”
Teachers themselves did not see their attitudes and behaviors in quite the same way, however. All high school faculty members interviewed said that they valued collaboration and felt that they were as collaborative as possible given the constraints of the logistical arrangements in their building. Several also expressed a belief that they feel greater personal responsibility for their students’ academic achievement than middle school teachers might: “We teach very specialized, tough academic subjects, with high stakes testing. The time and effort that we have to give to our classes doesn’t allow for much work with colleagues, and high school arrangements don’t foster collaboration,” explained one high school teacher. Several of those interviewed had had experience teaching in both Riverside Middle School and Riverside High School. “High school teaching is definitely more work with less time to consult with others,” one such teacher asserted. Another high school teacher put it this way: “This is my reality. In a small school you have only one teacher per subject. I don’t have colleagues to fall back on. I’m responsible for developing my course. I’m on my own.”

Middle school teachers interviewed recognized the advantages they had. “We are always collaborating” was the unanimous view of teachers in grades 6-8. “We talk before school, between classes, at lunch, during prep period, during team meeting, after school,” said more than one person. “Our team members are used to working together. We are totally interdependent, and that’s a good thing,” one teacher noted. “We are so fortunate!” was a judgment tucked into multiple conversations.

Whereas middle school teachers in the study tended to collaborate closely within their grade level teams, high school teachers claimed a high level of collegiality school wide. Part of that sense of community seemed to be fostered by teachers of diverse grade
levels and departments eating lunch together every day. “Over the years, you get to know a lot of people well, and you continue to care about them even as your schedules change from year to year,” one teacher observed. “Lunch together is valuable,” another teacher said; “it’s positive collaboration, overwhelmingly positive. Even if addressing something that went wrong, people work together to help. It’s like a meeting time, a chance for connection with the extended school community.” Middle school teachers, on the other hand, ate lunch with team members or with only one or two colleagues. Very few middle school teachers ate together in the faculty room. Both groups claimed a sense of “family”—with middle school teachers interacting daily with “close” family and high school teachers feeling kinship with “extended” family. The familial gatherings among middle school teachers were much like “family meetings” where members planned what they would do together and addressed issues they were facing as a group. In this case, middle school team members were planning instructional activities and strategies for meeting student needs. Among high school teachers, the gatherings were more like family dinner table conversation, where members shared experiences and ideas from their separate lives beyond the family, with other family members encouraging and discussing the stories, thoughts, problems, or adventures. Unlike middle school teachers, high school teachers spent little of their collegial gathering time on collaboration related to specific instructional planning. While part of the lunch time dialogue was purely social, high school faculty members also discussed new educational ideas, provided encouragement and mentoring for each other, and brainstormed thoughts for improving school environment, helping to foster the sense of academic optimism identified by Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006) as essential to a school’s success.
High school teachers were more likely than middle school teachers to mention close friendships with colleagues. “We’re really close knit,” one veteran high school teacher said; “we socialize together and feel part of a collegial community.” A member of another high school department explained, “Being a small school we all know one another. Friends from the faculty were at my wedding. I think there is more sense of community at the high school than at the middle school or elementary school.” No middle school teachers mentioned close friendships with fellow teachers. One middle school teacher said, “I don’t think any of us really see each other outside of school hours.” Like the lunchtime sociability, high school faculty friendships rarely focused on specific curricular planning, teachers reported, although the sociability did contribute to a feeling of supporting each other professionally and creating a positive environment for student learning. “Even when we get together socially, we talk about school. I guess that’s only natural,” one high school teacher said.

Teachers in both buildings said that they felt connected to the larger community beyond the school, worrying particularly about the poverty in the district. “We do everything we can to support our students’ families.” Even a teacher who described himself as “probably the least collaborative (because of what I teach)” stressed that high school faculty members worked with colleagues in “caring about the kids. We buy kids clothes and sneakers anonymously. We’re a caring group of people.” Three of the high school teachers interviewed mentioned the extra behind-the-scenes philanthropy of their colleagues and themselves. “We supply pencils and paper and prom dresses.” “We give clothes and winter coats. The kids are very accepting.” Teachers viewed this pastoral
stewardship as important to building an atmosphere in which students could focus on academics.

Influencing student behavior was viewed as important by both faculties, although with somewhat different approaches. “We work hard to be consistent and talk over strategies for dealing with students every day,” a middle school teacher reported. “Teachers want more collaboration in dealing with student discipline and in helping students in general,” noted one high school teacher; others added that they were trying to have more sharing of information about student problems so that they could act collaboratively in working with students: “If something happens to a student, even outside of school, we feel that we are the ones that can help, and we should all know about it.” Middle school faculty developed a Character Education program that they were constantly revisiting and revising. Teachers in both buildings saw building positive student attitudes and behaviors as requisite to building academic cognition.

High school faculty members attributed some of the feeling of community and some of the opportunity for student character-building to extra-curricular activities, especially sports. “That’s where we teach kids about life, about honesty and responsibility,” said one teacher. “Actually, coaching gives me more feeling of collaboration than I have otherwise. Coaches meet after practice or games and reflect on how we are teaching values. There’s a great deal of support from fellow coaches,” another high school teacher noted. Whereas many middle school teachers reported valuing “consistency of message” to students in their classes, high school teachers who mentioned consistency reported valuing it in athletics and school-wide codes of conduct.
While teachers in both buildings reported strong personal agency in planning curriculum and instruction, middle school teachers said that they did much of their planning as a team; whereas almost all high school teachers said that they did their planning independently, following state and departmental guidelines. The new high school teacher noted that he expected to see much more “looking over each others’ shoulders” but felt “validated by the trust they put in me.” “Some schools are overbearing in terms of overseeing teaching,” he said. “I like this style. It’s really made me grow.” In contrast, the new middle school teacher reported “constant collaboration” in “fitting into the culture” and “developing new ideas that would merge with what has been done before.”

In general, the data showed that middle school arrangements provided increased opportunity for instructional collaboration. Differences in teacher participation in collaborative relationships were influenced by scheduling and school layout but also by specialization of subject matter. Lack of commonality in courses taught resulted in limited instructional collaboration for high school teachers. School arrangements were also a factor in the differing approaches teachers took to building positive school environment. Whereas middle school teachers’ sense of agency was focused on building the grade level learning environment, high school teachers claimed a school-wide influence on building students’ readiness to learn and providing professional encouragement and support for colleagues. Despite the contrasts, the study found commonality of purpose and caring in the group dynamics of middle and high school teachers.
Communication Patterns

The third factor analyzed was the patterns of communication links or channels within the system and how those patterns influenced and reflected the nature and extent of professional collaboration in the Riverside district and its middle and high school.

Communication patterns in schools are often organized through a combination of vertical channels of insulated, enclosed communities, which I call silos (Lencioni, 2006; Richard, 2010), and of cross-linear paths of linked contacts, which I call networks (Barabasi, 2003; Reeves, 2006). I looked closely at the patterns of silos or networks that had developed in the macro-culture at Riverside, seeking to understand how and why they had developed, what factors influenced any fluidity of the patterns, and how these patterns related to professional collaboration. Analysis focused on observed group dynamics and discussions in meetings and other interactions as well as on data collected from interviews with teachers and administrators at Riverside.

Observations of communication at meetings, lunch periods, and informal gatherings provided strong evidence that although teachers functioned quite independently at Riverside, they were connected to other educators through patterns of instructional commonality, relationships built over time, and logistical dynamics. Much of the communication involved interactions among and within academic departments and grade level teams. I examine the specifics of communication within the micro-cultures of teacher groups in Chapter Six. The analyses in this chapter focus on the general communication patterns within the larger macro-cultures of the district and the middle and high school.
Silos

The “silo effect” is used in business and organizational analysis to describe systems in which members communicate only within a particular group or channel. The concept takes its name from the farm storage silo; each tall, self-contained silo is designated for one specific grain, and mixing or intermingling never occurs. The professional lives of educators may exist primarily within separate silos; i.e., they work in parallel grades or departments with no sharing of information or resources. In “Tilting at Silos,” Richard suggested that the benefits of working in silos include the ability to progress quickly in one direction, facilitated by a common language and perspective (2010). Lencioni (2006), in Silos, Politics, and Turf Wars, asserted that any organizing unit can become a silo if it represents the only way people gather, interact, share information, and collaborate. Although silos promote strong team attitudes and behaviors within the group or channel, they can interfere with the overall team spirit of an organization and are often viewed as a negative communication structure: “Silos are nothing more than the barriers that exist between departments within an organization, causing people who are supposed to be on the same team to work against one another. And whether we call this phenomenon departmental politics, divisional rivalry, or turf warfare, it is one of the most frustrating aspects of life in any sizable organization” (Lencioni, p. 175).

Riverside group dynamics reflected some aspects of silo-style communication within grade levels in the middle school and academic departments at the high school. All middle school classrooms and most professional interactions were grouped according to the three grade levels, creating grade-level silos (see Figure 12) so that teachers of each
grade had little interaction with teachers of other grades. “We meet with our grade level colleagues throughout the day but really don’t interact with members of other teams,” a middle school teacher said. “Beyond my own team, I don’t have much communication with other faculty members,” another teacher explained. Working so closely within grade level teams increased intra-grade professional collaboration but discouraged inter-team communication, according to most interviewees. Similarly, high school teachers seemed both physically and professionally isolated into academic departments. “We have no opportunity to collaborate with people from other departments,” one high school teacher said. “A lot of teachers feel isolated because they communicate with so few people during the school day.” a teacher from another department lamented. The high school seemed to have less silo effect than the middle school, however, partly because teachers had less intense small group (departmental) communication and partly because high
school teachers did communicate with teachers from other departments at lunchtime. The bold outlines of the silos in the middle school diagram indicate the more obvious silo effect in the middle school. Note also that silos, by their nature, are self-contained with little penetration from outside communication sources, even administrators in the case of schools. At Riverside, the silos in the middle school were much less penetrable than those in the high school.

Although interviews and observations provided considerable evidence of the silo effect, I saw and heard no indication of the negative group dynamics often associated with silos. There seemed to be no “battles” between or among silos and none of the ruthless, rivalry-based behaviors that sometimes lead to diminishing productivity and jeopardizing of broad systemic goals (Lencioni, 2006). No one mentioned stress or disagreements related to communication being channeled primarily within middle school grade level teams or high school departments. Instead, the different teams and departments seemed to be aware of and heading toward the same goals and expectations within the macro-culture of each school and the district in general.

The parallel, self-contained nature of the communicative silo effect seemed to foster increased, close collaboration within each group, particularly in the middle school.

**Networks and Super-hubs**

In contrast, the emerging science of networks identifies a framework for communication and collaboration in which ideas spread through the system over (usually non-linear) paths of linked nodes, hubs, and super-hubs. A node is an individual or single point of contact; a hub is a node with links to other nodes; a super-hub is the rare individual to whom an exceptionally large number of other nodes and hubs are linked.
Barabasi, Reeves, and others contend that “real” organizations function not primarily as hierarchies but instead as less formal networks. Barabasi describes such a network as a “web without a spider,” having “no meticulous design” but instead being “self-organized” (Barabasi, 2003, p. 221).

The communication among educators at Riverside took place through both personal dialogue and written discourse. Although following the paper trail revealed a heavy top-down flow of typical administrative information as well as occasional sharing of ideas and resources among other staff, the person-to-person dialogic links seemed much less administratively driven. It is this pattern of personal professional contacts that the study examined.

Links went in several directions, and there were multiple hubs connecting diverse grade levels and subject areas, particularly in the high school. It is the super-hubs, however, the people who provide information and counsel to countless others each day, who are at the crux of any network and who have the most pervasive and lasting influence on those with whom they communicate.

Given the enduring influence of Riverside’s historical systems, it seemed wise to explore the networks of two long-time super-hubs before examining the current networking system. Mr. Catone and Dr. Mason were both rare individuals to whom an unusually large number of other nodes and hubs were linked. Their legacies continued to influence communication.

At the time of this study, the Riverside culture still included vestiges of the Writing Across the Curriculum program inspired and implemented by English teacher
Mr. Catone many years ago. Mr. Catone, though now long retired, was the prime example of a super-hub at Riverside (see Figure 15). He linked to teachers of all grade levels and subject areas as he taught them how to use writing in their classrooms. Teachers of math, science, social studies, and English all reported communicating closely with Mr. Catone on classroom ideas. “He helped us all. I still use activities he suggested,” one staff member said. Anecdotal evidence indicated that there was a great deal of two-way communication between Mr. Catone and individual faculty members. In the diagram, all of the linking lines flow directly between Mr. Catone and teachers. Although the writing program was supported and mandated by school administrators, it appeared that they were not directly linked to the network(s) that developed. As current teachers and administrators described Mr. Catone’s communication network, it seemed that he interacted with every teacher in the district at the time—an extremely rare situation.

Also retired at the time of this study was super-hub Dr. Mason (see Figure 15), the high school principal who instituted the new sequential informative writing program.

Figure 14. The Network of Mr. Catone, Historical Super-Hub
currently used by the English department (and to some extent by other departments).

“Doc talked with us all the time, but he influenced the English department the most,” a teacher from another department said. “He was an English teacher himself, a great communicator. Everyone always understood exactly what he wanted done,” said another teacher. Despite his retirement, Dr. Mason’s influence continued throughout the building but lingered most strongly in the intense English teacher (and librarian) work on the sequential informative writing program. In the diagram in Figure 15, note that Dr. Mason’s largest link was with the English department although he linked directly as well as indirectly to other departments during his long tenure. All of the links from Dr. Mason are depicted as one-way; avenues of communication led from or out of the hub but were apparently not typically multi-directional. Although a major force behind the collaboration within the English department (see Chapter Six), Dr. Mason built a network that was largely hierarchal in nature.

**Figure 15.** The Network of Dr. Mason, Historical Super-Hub
The one identifiable super-hub in either school during the study was Mrs. Craig, high school librarian (media specialist), who linked people and concepts as she assisted teachers from a variety of departments in planning and implementing student instruction in Internet data gathering, drafting/organizing research reports, and using citations. “Our librarian is a great collaborator—helping students with formatting and finding things, making sure the links I want are there, anticipating resources we can use,” a science teacher said. An example of a network developing spontaneously without administrative direction or intervention, this library-based collaboration included a great many teachers, particularly those from the English, social studies, and science departments but also including math and special areas. “I’m one of the few people in the building who gets to play with everybody,” the librarian joked.

In Figure 16, links travel in both directions, as teachers and librarian share resources and develop instructional plans. The English department circle and arrow are in bolder print because that department provided much of the research and writing

**Figure 16.** The Network of Mrs. Craig, Current Super-Hub
philosophy and process and because that department communicated most closely with the librarian. As part of the team communicating the strategies of the informative writing program, Mrs. Craig deftly “pulled it together” for students and faculty. “She also pulls us together so that we are all on the same page with student writing and research,” a science teacher said. “She’s phenomenal,” said a social studies teacher. “She helps students find great, credible sources in databases and books and periodicals. She shows and reinforces what I try to teach about the credibility of sources.” English teachers credited Mrs. Craig with “spreading the word” on how to use the informative writing process as well as how to conduct research. The one new teacher in the high school said, “I’ve been in the library almost every day. The librarian has helped me immensely.”

Although an energetic and assertive individual, Mrs. Craig represented a model of super-hub differing markedly from the models of Mr. Catone and Dr. Mason. Hers was not a dictated network and not a network built into the organizational infrastructure. It was much more low-key and fluid. Interestingly, the library’s placement right next to the faculty room in the central area of the second floor of the building probably contributed to the ease and fluidity of the communication links the librarian provided. My observations of group dynamics during my visits to the school provided frequent evidence of faculty members stopping in to chat briefly with the librarian whenever they had a lunch or preparation period. These short collaborative conversations revolved around planning for and reflecting on instruction—the goals of a research project, suggestions for databases and other types of sources, how to help students determine source credibility and give credit to sources, using the steps of the informative writing program to prepare reports, sharing of student progress. The collegial communication
links of super-hub Mrs. Craig were site-based and spontaneous, casual and low-key, and almost always instructionally focused.

“Collaboration is the only way I know how to do it,” Mrs. Craig said. “It’s the only way my curriculum gets taught. I work with everybody.” All departments used the library, Mrs. Craig noted as she told of projects at differing grade levels and in multiple subject areas. Interviewed teachers and the librarian referred to 9th grade research papers in Social Studies, 10th grade debate projects and “I-Search” projects for English, a math project where students set up a business (and the librarian taught them to use spreadsheets), use of online science data bases at multiple levels, help for students creating power points for a variety of course presentations, 12th grade research papers in English, an interdisciplinary project for 12th grade AP students after the AP exams. “I’ve had up to three classes in the library at once,” Mrs. Craig said, “but students also come in a lot on their own and ask for help with finding information for assignments or checking on how to use or cite a source.” “The posters on the walls get used a lot, too, as students and teachers make sure they are following the best process for accessing information and for using informative writing. . . . Over there I have the English formats we use on the board. A Social Studies teacher came in the other day, saw them, took them, and said, ‘Is it okay if I use them?’ It’s nice to see these resources used by everyone.” “My job is to share information,” Mrs. Craig stated.

The diagrams presented in Figures 14 through 16 show the differences in the ways the three super-hubs operated. Mr. Catone was right in the middle of the action all over the district, dispensing ideas and advice to teachers and helping them to evaluate the resulting student work. Dr. Mason was off to the side, and above, presenting his initiative
mostly to and through the English department and then on to other departments and individuals. Mrs. Craig’s influence is depicted as an overlay coordinating expectations and ideas for several high school departments. While both Mr. Catone and Dr. Mason were always notable, independent, high profile presences, Mrs. Craig worked from within the faculty structure.

A 2004 Gallup survey found that “The majority of employees take their cues from a trusted colleague rather than from the boss, the employee manual, or a silver-tongued trainer” (Reeves, 2006, p. 2). A true super-hub can “powerfully share information, squelch negative rumors, teach key skills, and model values consistent with the improvements we seek” (p. 5). Mrs. Craig did all that. I saw as much evidence of deep school-wide change through the librarian’s collaborative approach to instructional research and writing as through the hierarchal imposition of the new writing program. Whereas Dr. Mason instituted the program, Mrs. Craig made it a part of the fabric of the instructional macro-culture. Multiple observations and interviews showed that collaboration with Mrs. Craig on research and informative writing was an integral part of the day-to-day communication patterns for multiple teachers in many departments.

Before leaving the examination of the influence of super-hubs, it is important to note that this study elicited no evidence of what Reeves called “toxic hubs” (2006). Part of what made the Riverside networking culture strong and positive was that there were no obvious hubs of discord, no faculty members seemingly intent on heightening frustration, lowering morale, or attacking other educators. The networks were similar to the silos in this regard, with no evidence of negativity in either case.
During the time of the study, the silos seemed to be rigid; whereas the networks showed signs of fluidity. The emerging network linked to super-hub Mrs. Craig was considerably more fluid than the previous super-hub networks of Mr. Catone or Dr. Mason. Of course, at Riverside, as at many schools, the spontaneous networks that developed were seldom school-wide or district-wide. The silos and the networks within and among departmental and grade level academic groups will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Overall, the study found that the communication patterns at Riverside included elements of the silo effect of self-contained collegial groups, particularly within the middle school, and elements of spontaneous linked networks, particularly at the high school. Both communication patterns fostered and reflected positive collaboration at Riverside—the silo effect intensifying collaboration among members of the self-contained group and the network linking instructional support among members of diverse groups. The key finding related to the network of hubs and links in the macro-culture is that the most effective collaborative networking grew naturally from a low-key, peer-to-peer sharing of resources and expertise centered on instructional needs and lesson planning. The key finding related to the silo effect in the macro-culture is that the focus provided by insulated, channeled communication encouraged constant collaboration concerning the specifics of day-to-day instruction.

**Professional Home—The Power of Place**

The final factor analyzed for this chapter was how teachers’ sense of professional home in the Riverside macro-culture influenced the nature and extent of faculty collaboration.
“[In] the educational cultures in which we live, we create expanded conceptions of home. We make new spaces, spin new webs of meaning, and make ‘the imagined world . . . the actual world’” (Rushdie, 1992, p. 57). Teachers build, or change, their sense of what it means to be a teacher partly through their interactions with colleagues in the contexts where they teach (Ball & Lacey, 1980; Siskin & Little, 1995). Teachers experience feelings of professional identity both as individuals within the macro-culture and as members of faculty micro-cultures such as grade level teams and academic departments. In Chapter Six, I analyze Riverside teachers’ professional identity as subgroup members. In this chapter, I look at how teachers’ sense of professional home is centered on the general academic culture that has developed at Riverside.

How did the feeling of professional home teachers experienced at Riverside underlie the nature and extent of faculty collaboration at Riverside schools? How and to what extent was it satisfying and professionally rewarding to be a faculty member at Riverside? How and to what extent did teachers feel a kinship with other faculty members? What challenges or constraints contributed to potential difficulties in teachers’ sense of identity or foster potential divisions among teachers?

These questions were addressed through analyses of interviews with teachers and administrators, and through examination of observed group dynamics in meetings and other interactions.

**In Their Element**

Comments of teachers at Riverside reminded me of Robinson’s description of what it means to feel in the right place at the right time, or “in The Element” (2009): “If you find a place where everybody else likes the same things you do, it really becomes
fun” (p. 84). “When we are in our Element, we feel we are doing what we are meant to be doing and being who we’re meant to be” (p. 90). Interviews and conversations at Riverside provided overwhelming evidence that teachers felt in their element in this macro-culture. “This is exactly what I was meant to do,” said a veteran high school teacher. “I enjoy it. I have fun every day,” commented another. “I feel that this is where I was meant to be. I have so much to offer and so much opportunity to contribute,” a middle school teacher said. “It’s my dream job,” said another veteran teacher. “There’s no place else where I’d find such support and such reward and such a feeling that we’re all on the same page,” a teacher attested. “I love this school” was a common refrain from both middle and high school teachers.

Although I heard occasional nostalgia for the “good old days” of the collaborative cross-curricular writing program, many teachers suggested that, overall, the time period of this study was “the very best” in terms of positive school culture and professional home. “Maybe it’s just me, but when I reflect on the 26 years I’ve been teaching, I see such a positive growth in the culture and professional feeling. Partly it’s because I know so much more and realize now that I have so much to offer,” said one faculty member. Every veteran teacher expressed a similar satisfaction with the current culture and his/her role in that culture.

A strong sense of being “in the right place at the right time” professionally seemed to set the scene for collaboration at Riverside schools.
Creativity and Peak Performance

In interviews, teachers at Riverside claimed that the culture brought out the best in them, fostered their creativity, and helped them to build success. Every faculty member interviewed noted a feeling of fulfillment with the intellectual challenge of teaching at Riverside and seemed excited to talk about details of classroom instruction as well as the overall learning environment. Riverside schools were described as providing the type of context “that transforms our experience of the Element. We become focused and intent. We live in the moment. We become lost in the experience and perform at our peak. Our breathing changes, our minds merge with our bodies, and we feel ourselves drawn effortlessly into the heart of the Element” (Robinson, p. 87). “The high expectations in our culture are just what I need to encourage me to do my best,” one high school teacher said. “I love being part of a group of people who work so hard and have such great ideas,” exclaimed a middle school teacher. “We’re really happy with the way we’re always enhancing what our students experience,” another middle school teacher said; “We’ve never done anything the same way any year.”

Part of the excitement derived from the encouragement to keep up with educational innovation beyond the Riverside community. Almost every teacher mentioned attending professional development conferences, and many had experienced “the thrill of being a presenter, sharing ideas with other educators” at conferences, as one teacher put it. I heard a great many details of particular classroom ideas from conferences; many were told to me during interviews, but I also heard concepts shared at team meetings and lunch time gatherings. Sometimes the ideas focused on content and sometimes on presentation strategies. “We all buy into an exciting new way to do
something in our classroom,” a high school teacher asserted. “We talk about preparation for workshops and explain ideas we’ve learned either at workshops or online. We also share ideas from professional readings that we try in our classrooms,” another teacher explained.

The creative synergy of the professional home at Riverside contributed to the context for collaborative success.

**Sense of Belonging and Emotional Support**

Part of the role of the teacher is to “move across cultures . . . attempting to help students feel at home with unfamiliar concepts and cultures” partly by providing the “emotional support needed in times of change” (McClay, 2000, p. 413). As continuing learners, teachers also need support as they navigate through “learning by doing” in unfamiliar territory. “We’re always trying new things, and we couldn’t do that if we didn’t feel that sense of confidence that comes from having the support of our colleagues,” a middle school teacher commented. “It’s like a family here,” another teacher said, “a professional family. People encourage each other. They make you feel that you belong and they’re proud of you.” Teachers in both buildings stressed the importance of belonging and emotional support. “Lunch time is so valuable for high school teachers. We get such positive collaboration there. Even if we’re addressing something that went wrong, people work together to help and make you feel that you can accomplish what you want to do.” Similarly, a middle school teacher noted that being part of a grade level team “reduces anxiety for a lot of people. You’re a work in progress. People aren’t there to criticize. They’re there to encourage and help.”
Establishing a sense of belonging is especially important for new teachers, interviewees noted. Many of those interviewed referred to the support they received when they were “new, young, and inexperienced.” Several looked back in gratitude to now retired colleagues who helped them to develop their confidence. Others referred to the continuing guidance of current department or team members. Since it was rare for a teacher to leave Riverside before retirement, many faculty members noted the family feeling of being among professionals of varied ages and life experiences. “I’m still the youngest in my department (after 13 years of teaching),” one high school teacher said, “but I feel a synergy with other faculty members. We all support each other, regardless of age.” Despite the feeling of community, several faculty members expressed chagrin that the district had no formal mentoring program for new teachers, “even though it’s mandated (by the state). It’s an area that needs to be addressed. Teachers want to address it.”

Although there was no formal faculty mentoring system, teachers in both buildings referred to a strong informal support system for new teachers. Teachers credited middle school grade level team members and high school department members with providing ongoing professional guidance. The two new teachers, one in the middle school and one in the high school, both said they felt strongly welcomed by their colleagues. “It’s great to be a new teacher in this building. The teachers are absolutely wonderful, so helpful. . . . They’ve definitely taken me under their wing,” said the new middle school teacher. While most of her day-to-day support came from her grade level team, she said that she also received a great deal of curriculum help from her department. The new teacher in the high school said that the faculty in general had been very
supportive and “helped me control the frustration of feeling that I’m never doing enough.” “The guys in this wing [members of his department] have made sure I’m connected to the school culture,” he said. The one colleague teaching a similar course had provided “great guidance” on curriculum and lesson planning, he commented. Faculty members in both buildings noted that the new teachers are “working really hard” and “putting in a lot of extra time and effort.” “She’s the first one here in the morning and the last to leave each night,” one faculty member said of the new middle school teacher. “His hard work and eagerness to keep learning and improving is an inspiration to me,” a colleague said of the new high school teacher.

Although there was very little turnover among teachers at Riverside, several teachers mentioned changes in assignments over the years. “We haven’t always had people in the right place—in their professional homes,” one teacher reflected; “we have sometimes had people with clashing personalities who didn’t belong together. Sometimes people were better suited to working with a different age level of kids. Now we seem to have found the right niche for everyone. We have a total sense of belonging. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t feel in the right spot, like they totally belong right now.” Some teachers moved from high school to middle school or vice versa; others changed grade levels or academic focus. Several who have moved from one building to another mentioned that they maintain relationships with colleagues from the past, particularly if they moved from high school to middle school.

**Challenge and Constraint**

While all faculty members interviewed reported a strong sense of professional home at Riverside schools, several also pointed out tension for teachers in a small, rural
town experiencing financial difficulties. “I don’t really feel at home in the community anymore, even though I both live and work here,” one teacher said. “I’ve seen how the town has changed,” another teacher explained: “Moving the company headquarters [of the town’s largest employer] means that there are very few white collar workers here any more. The blue collar workers are resentful of teachers. They think we make too much money for too little work. I don’t advertise that I’m a teacher when I go to the local coffee shop.” In contrast, several teachers said they felt a particular responsibility to be “out there” representing the school and showing the community how much they care.

Both administrators and teachers mentioned the difficulties associated with not having a current teacher contract. “I’m still proud of this school and I’m still proud of my colleagues,” one teacher said, “but it’s very frustrating not to have a contract. I don’t know how much longer we can keep pretending that everything is okay.” A few teachers candidly worried that teachers might end up split into factions “as has happened in so many other schools with failed negotiations.” Teachers have been extraordinarily professional, administrators remarked, but no one discounted the possibility that some teachers might feel that they needed to be more aggressive in demanding a settlement. A few teachers, on the other hand, said that they respected the professional approach of administrators and knew that administrators were being pressured by a community “that is hurting financially.” The issues of community economy and failed contract negotiations suggested that pressures from both within and outside of the professional home can threaten its stability.

In general, the study found that strong identification with the Riverside macro-culture, i.e. feeling a sense of fulfillment, pride, and belonging, was associated with
fostering an environment supporting professional collaboration. The Riverside macro-culture reflected the time-honored idea that the role of home is to give family members both roots and wings: the “roots” of strong basic values and acceptance and the “wings” of encouragement to set lofty goals and try new ideas. The strong roots and wings developed in their professional home gave teachers the confidence to collaborate to achieve instructional goals.

**Overview of Factors**

In this chapter, I looked closely at four major factors that emerged from my analysis as seeming to influence the general collaborative culture at Riverside: the organizational approaches and styles of school leaders; arrangements or attitudes underlying the contrasts at the middle and high school; the network of communication patterns that had evolved; and teachers’ ideas of professional home.

In examining at the impact of these factors, I found that:

- Increased teacher collaboration and stronger feelings of collaborative agency were fostered by leadership styles that were more open and collegial and less directive and authoritarian.

- Arrangements such as scheduling and school layout joined with commonality versus specialization of subject matter to provide increased opportunity for instructional collaboration in the middle school and decreased opportunity for collaboration in the high school.

- Both the silo effect and linked networks characterized communication patterns, with the insulated, channeled communication of the silo effect
encouraging constant collaboration concerning day-to-day instruction within
certain professional groups, and the network of hubs and links functioning
most effectively when growing spontaneously from peer-to-peer sharing of
resources and expertise across diverse subjects and grade levels.

- A strong sense of professional home in the macro-culture, supported by
  feelings of fulfillment, pride, and belonging, fostered a collaborative spirit in
  which teachers supported each other professionally while exhibiting both
  individual and collective confidence.

In Chapter Six, I present factors that emerged from my analysis as associated with
the differing collaborative patterns within and among academic groups of teachers.
Chapter Six

Findings: Sub-Group Factors Influencing Professional Collaboration

Chapter Six focuses on the nature and extent of the collaboration within and among the micro-cultures of the sub-groups at Riverside Middle School and High School, specifically academic departments and grade level teams.

In examining how and to what extent teachers’ membership in departments or grade level teams influenced professional collaboration, I looked closely at the following factors:

- Student-centered and subject-centered approaches in the sub-groups
- Varied group dynamics within four sub-groups
- Purpose and content of sub-group discussions
- Teachers’ feelings of professional home

In contrast to but within the framework of professional collaboration at the macro-culture level, any collaboration within and among the sub-group micro-cultures might be expected to involve quite specific sharing of resources, expertise, and responsibility with departmental and/or grade level colleagues working together to achieve instructional objectives. Like the more general sharing in the macro-culture, any collaboration at the sub-group level would be expected to have evolved over time, to involve group relationships that have formed and re-formed, to take place within a context of professional attitudes and arrangements, and to be associated with teachers’ feelings of trust and identification.

My analysis of collaboration within and among sub-groups at Riverside focused particularly on two grade level teams in the middle school and two departments in the
high school. The grade-six team and the English department were chosen for close study because educators completing initial questionnaires unanimously described them as the most collaborative groups in their respective schools. Questionnaires completed by eighth grade team members and high school science teachers indicated that teachers in those sub-groups felt that interactions within their sub-groups were markedly less collaborative than the interactions of the sixth grade team or the English department. Early interviews with administrators and casual remarks by teachers confirmed the initial impressions during the first weeks of the study, leading to the decision to examine the eighth grade team and the science department to provide contrast and context for the easily chosen grade six team and English department. My close look at factors affecting collaboration in these four sub-groups formed the basis for the results presented in this chapter.

**Student-Centered/Subject-Centered Approaches**

Analysis of the organizational attitudes and styles of student-centered and/or subject-centered instruction showed that this factor had considerable influence on the professional interactions of Riverside faculty members within and among sub-groups.

Educational scholars have established that a tension between focus on learner needs and attention to curriculum demands has been a part of school culture for as long as anyone can remember (Atwell, 1987; Resnick, 1987; Rogoff, 1990; Altan & Trombly, 2001). In today’s pedagogy, learner-centered approaches are often seen as influenced by constructivist philosophy, which holds that prior knowledge forms the foundation on which new learning occurs and fosters attention to what the student already knows or wants to know as a means toward active student involvement in “constructing” new
meanings (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Recent reform focusing on educational standards has contributed to a renewed emphasis on curriculum, with efforts to ensure that all students are taught the same body of knowledge and can demonstrate that learning through standardized assessment.

The question of how student-centered or subject-centered approaches contribute to differences in professional collaboration among the sub-groups at these two Riverside schools will be addressed through analyses of interviews with teachers and administrators, and through examination of observed group dynamics in meetings and other interactions.

**Balancing Acts**

As mentioned in Chapter Two, linguistic logic shows that both the direct object (the academic discipline) and the indirect object (the students) are necessary to complete the “I teach . . . ” thought in the sentence diagram in Figure 17.

**Figure 17. Sentence Diagram of the Concept of Teaching**

![Sentence Diagram of the Concept of Teaching](image)

The concept of teaching requires something to be taught as well as someone to be taught. When the emphasis goes to the “something” to be taught, instruction is considered subject-centered. When the emphasis is on the “someone” to be taught, instruction is considered student-centered. Teaching cannot take place without some attention to both.
The sentence diagram in Figure 17 looks at instruction from the standpoint of the teacher, the “I” who is the subject of the sentence. The verb “teach” suggests action on the part of the instructor. Indeed, decades (even centuries) of pedagogy have placed the responsibility on the teacher and have assumed the teacher to be the provider of knowledge, the instructor. Even the word “instructor” suggests telling others what to do.

Recent paradigm shifts in pedagogical thought present an alternative, less teacher-directed approach. The teacher has become the “facilitator” of student learning rather than the presenter of knowledge. The sentence diagram in Figure 18 attempts to capture this idea. In this diagram, the student is the subject of the sentence, and the teacher is part of a modifying prepositional phrase. The verb “learn” suggests a more active role for the student, who is presumably in charge of his or her own cognition. Even in student-focused classrooms and educational cultures, however, the teacher continues to have the major responsibility for facilitating the learning in which the student actually engages.

Riverside teachers in all four of the sub-groups studied noted that they try to “balance” the priorities, recognizing the demands of the curriculum while maintaining awareness of the needs of individual students and the group as a whole. “We have tough standards to meet,” one high school science teacher said, “but I have to personalize the content and help students to connect with it if they’re going to be successful.” An
English teacher colleague agreed: “It’s about focusing on students as much as it is about focusing on literature. They don’t learn if they’re not engaged.” A sixth grade special education teacher praised the way her team members work with all of the students to ensure understanding: “The sixth grade teachers are phenomenal. They make accommodations automatically. They seem to know immediately when any child isn’t getting a concept, not just Special Ed kids.” “It’s not just about covering material. It’s about being sure all kids are learning,” an eighth grade teacher agreed.

Teachers in each of the four sub-groups mentioned collaboration around strategies for personalizing instruction to meet student needs despite the demands of (or within the context of) curriculum. Differences in subject versus student centered approaches from sub-group to sub-group will be examined in more detail in the next few sections.

Educational Background

Interviewees teaching grades seven through twelve all reported that their professional development as educators focused on academic disciplines such as English, math, science, or social studies. “My college courses and even the conferences I’ve attended as a teacher center on subject matter only,” one teacher explained. Others noted similar educational backgrounds and continuing development experiences. Teachers in all sub-groups described recent professional development conferences focusing on specialized academic content.

In this study in a small rural district, the exception to the specialized educational background was the sub-group of sixth grade teachers. All sixth grade faculty members had previously been elementary teachers rather than subject area specialists. Their instructional approach seemed to correlate with the prevalent idea that elementary school
teachers are more student-centered whereas secondary school teachers are more subject-centered (McLaughlin & Talbot, 2001). Sixth grade teachers had taught multiple subjects and were experienced at working together to prepare joint curriculum. “Because we’ve taught other areas, we don’t zero in so much on science or math or any particular subject,” a sixth grade teacher said. “My training is in elementary,” more than one sixth grade teacher noted, often adding that the professional development experienced in preparing for and teaching at the elementary level gave a broader perspective in terms of subject matter.

While having surface similarity to the sixth grade team, the eighth grade faculty sub-group differed from the sixth grade team in that the eighth grade teachers representing particular subjects were domain specific specialists rather than generalists. Each of the eighth grade team members was certified to teach only a specific academic subject. Eighth grade teachers reported that their professional development focused on their specific academic disciplines, i.e., English, math, science, or social studies. Several commented that their role in the team was to provide perspective and expertise on a particular academic domain, which differed from the domains of all other team members.

Members of the high school sub-groups studied all had educational backgrounds and continuing staff development focused on the subject taught—in this case, either English or science. High school science teachers reported that their training and continuing development was even more specialized, usually focused on a field within the science spectrum, such as chemistry, physics, biology, or geology. The factor of specialization will be examined in more detail below.
It was interesting to see that the faculty team unanimously identified in the questionnaires as having the highest level of collaboration was the one sub-group whose members came from a less subject-oriented educational background. The strength of the grade 6 team and the nature and the extent of the team’s seamless collaboration might lie partly in the student-centered elementary school background of the team members.

**Specialization of Subject Matter**

Interviewees in the four sub-groups suggested that the extent of instructional support they shared with colleagues was associated with the degree of specialization of their academic subject areas. In this small rural district, some academic disciplines were perceived as focusing on separate and discrete parts of a subject, while others were perceived as having a common, sequential skill base. In general, Riverside teachers identified math and English as skill building subject areas and described science and social studies as subjects dealing with discrete content. Interestingly, science teachers were the ones most likely to view math and English as skill based and sequential. Even for those subjects viewed as skill building, teachers within the subject areas reported that “content becomes more specialized as you move into the higher grade levels.”

Science was widely perceived as the most specialized and content specific subject. In this rural setting, each high school science course—Earth Science, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, for example—was described as having a separate set of state-mandated standards with little relationship to other courses. Teachers explained that middle school science courses set the foundation for and provided introduction to the specialized high school courses. Each state science course had its own, very specific, mandated curriculum, several science teachers stressed. “We are not building on concepts
from previous years. Science courses are ‘stand-alone’—unrelated to other courses,” a colleague pointed out. “It’s not like anyone else here is teaching Geology (a twelfth grade elective). There really isn’t anyone to consult with,” one science teacher said. Science teachers were most likely to say that the specific nature of their course content meant that Riverside colleagues could not help with curriculum planning, lesson strategies, or student evaluation. “It’s all very fragmented,” one teacher said; “no one else knows my course content.” “This is my reality,” said another; “in a small school you have only one teacher per subject. We don’t have colleagues to fall back on.” Much of the perception of isolated specialization among science teachers seemed related to the rural school context in which there was usually only one teacher per science course.

English was frequently identified as the subject area with the highest degree of progressive skill building as well as the department with the highest level of teacher collaboration. Much of that perception seemed related to the student writing initiatives that had dominated district-wide academic focus or many years. Members of other departments noted that English teachers focused on improving students’ communication skills, especially reading and writing. English teachers described state standards designed to build skills: “The standards are pretty vague. They don’t really tell us what to teach from year to year, but they do emphasize skills progression,” one English teacher explained. Almost every teacher in every department mentioned Riverside’s sequential informative writing program as an example of the kind of skill building accomplished in English classes. “We follow the guidelines,” explained an English teacher, “focusing first on articulated thesis statements, then body paragraphs, then conclusions, putting it all together gradually, knowing what to reinforce and what to add.” “We also work hard to
identify a progression of reading difficulty for literature we teach,” another teacher
stressed. While viewing English as content based (especially in studying literature) as
well as skill based, English teachers gave importance to enhancing students’ ability to
communicate: “They’ll use that skill forever.”

Evidence from interviews and observations strongly affirmed that teachers in this
rural district viewed specialization of subject area as preventing or inhibiting instructional
collaboration and saw both more opportunity and more purpose for instructional
collaboration in academic domains they regarded as building skills progressively.

In most of the sub-groups studied, Riverside teachers considered themselves more
collaborative in student-centered initiatives than in subject-centered initiatives. In
general, more student-centered sub-group culture and identification seemed to provide a
stronger base for helping teachers to feel connected with each other as they collaborated
to identify student needs, build excitement for learning, and personalize instruction. The
strong student-centered culture of the sixth grade team contributed to the team’s
collaborative success, while the more subject-centered focus of eighth grade teachers
made collaboration more difficult. Subject-centered collaboration seemed strongest in
those high school departments where concepts and skills were progressive, building upon
each other over time; conversely, teacher autonomy was strongest in subject areas where
concepts and skills were seen as specialized or discrete. The perceived progressive skill
development in English courses contributed to subject matter collaboration among
members of the English department; whereas the specialization of science courses
fostered autonomy rather than collaboration within the science department sub-group.
Varied Group Dynamics within Four Sub-Groups

Analysis of the second factor, the group dynamics within sub-groups, focused on the combination of decision-making styles and communication patterns informing the nature and extent of the collaboration. The factor of varied decision-making and communication systems within sub-groups was addressed through analyses of observed group dynamics and dialogue in meetings and other interactions within sub-groups as well as through analyses of related interview discussions with teachers at Riverside middle and high schools.

Grade Six Cohesiveness

Each visited sixth grade team meeting was held in a classroom during the assigned team meeting time and included four or five faculty members—four teachers of core subjects (English, math, science, and social studies) and sometimes a special education teacher. The sixth grade team met every day for team planning and consulted/socialized with each other at lunch (eating together in a classroom—not the same as the one used for team meetings), during individual planning periods, and in the shared hallway outside their classrooms throughout the day.

Although there was a designated team leader, Mrs. Finian, and the team meetings were held at a corner table in her classroom, group interactions were inclusive and equal rather than dominated by one teacher. The group used the leadership style I call sharing (see Figure 19), in which the leader is part of the group, facilitating discussion among
peers. Over the course of several meetings, I noted the length and frequency of teacher contributions to the discussion. For one sixth grade team meeting, where there were five members present for the 40 minutes, the number of contributions per person averaged 10.5, with a range of 7 to 12. Although I did not track the length of talking time for all participants during all dialogue at any meeting, I noted that many snippets of discourse were about 30 seconds in length, with an observed range of 15 seconds to about 2 1/2 minutes. No one dominated the conversation, either in frequency or length of discourse.

Teachers consistently built on each other’s ideas and each volunteered to help with a specific part of any initiative, ranging from preparing a project rubric to ordering supplies to drafting a script for a teacher skit. “We have a chair, but she doesn’t have to keep us on task. We’re pretty focused,” one member said. “Becky takes the lead in conducting the meeting, but we’re all really involved,” one teacher said. Both the Tuckman (1965) and the Hersey/Blanchard (1977) organizational models include a progression that moves the group to less directive organizational styles as the group develops its collaborative capacity.
Communication moved in all directions among the members of the group. There was no obvious “hub” coordinating communication. Instead “bridges” linked all members. The diagram in Figure 20 looks very busy as I attempted to capture the constant interaction among all members of the group. “We all communicate with everyone else all day long,” several teachers said. “Communication is very important to us,” one team member stressed; “it’s a priority.”

**Figure 20.** Diagram of “Bridges” Linking Sixth Grade Team Members

Each circle represents a teacher; each arrow represents a “bridge” for communication.

Sixth grade teachers agreed that they reach a quick consensus “99% of the time” (100% of the time during meetings observed as part of the study). When asked about any difference of opinion, team members found it difficult to remember an example; eventually one teacher mentioned that they didn’t all agree on the vendor for ordering student pocket organizers but that she didn’t have a problem going along with the majority and didn’t have any hard feelings about the group decision.

The diagram in Figure 21 illustrates the “silo effect” within which the grade six team operated. The heavy line encircling the group provides a barrier that encloses

**Figure 21.** Diagram of the Strong “Silo” Enclosing the Grade Six Team
those within (making a tight-knit group) and keeps others out (isolating the group).

Almost all communication in which sixth grade team members engaged occurred within the insulated group. The team seemed to reap the benefits of working in a “silo”—i.e., shared goals, the ability to progress quickly in a unified direction, common language and understanding (Richard, 2010). “We don’t really need to go beyond our group for anything,” one team member said. Group members saw the cohesiveness as an overwhelming asset and did not worry that they had little contact with colleagues in other sub-groups or that there might be disadvantages to the “silo” culture.

Team development theories suggest that ongoing groups progress through stages of growth that may lead to optimum performance. Study of the sixth grade faculty team provided strong evidence that it had progressed well beyond the first three stages of team dynamics (forming, storming, norming) initially identified by Tuckman (1965) and was firmly situated in the performing stage. “None of us can even remember a time when we weren’t all working toward the same goals. We know each other so well and we work together so well,” a team member said. In the performing stage of team development, team members have both high morale and high quality results. “We just know that we are highly effective as a team. We wouldn’t have it any other way,” one teacher commented. “We really do get along and enjoy working together. We’re a really productive group,” another explained. Team members unanimously reported a sense of agency and success.

“This team is just different,” a colleague said; “I’ve been part of other schools, other grades. I’ve never experienced anything like this before. I wish the kids could pick up on how we work together. I’m hoping they are.” “It’s fun to work together. You’ll hear a lot of laughter at our meetings,” a fellow teacher noted. “We do laugh a lot,” a
colleague added, “but we’re really focused and accomplish a lot. There’s a lot of camaraderie and back-and-forth helping each other.”

The dynamics of the sixth grade team included interdependence, intense communication, shared leadership, high productivity, and camaraderie—all qualities fostering successful collaboration and collegial agency.

**Eighth Grade Teacher Independence**

Eighth grade team members were more independent and less interdependent than sixth grade team members. The eighth grade team met less frequently than the sixth grade team (two or three times a week rather than every day), and eighth grade teachers functioned much more autonomously than sixth grade teachers did. The physical layout of eighth grade classrooms, on one side of the busy main hall, was less conducive to faculty interaction and feeling of grade-level community. Although they shared a lunch period, eighth grade teachers did not eat together as a group. Team meetings were held in the conference room off the main office rather than in the eighth grade classroom area.

Teachers were academically specialized, with certification in their respective subject areas. No members of the eighth grade team had taught the curriculum of any other team member. Eighth grade courses included advanced (high school level) sections of science and math, for which students took high-stakes end-of-year state exams.

The diagram in Figure 22 represents the group structure seen at the eighth grade team meetings. English teacher Mrs. Thompson, the L in the diagram, was obviously

**Figure 22.** Diagram of an Eighth Grade Team Meeting
the group leader, introducing topics of discussion and soliciting comments and ideas from other group members. Also playing a dominant role in the discussion was science teacher Mr. Norris, the A in the diagram, who provided continuing links to the larger school community in his role as an assistant administrator during part of the day. A math teacher and a social studies teacher were the other two participants in the meetings. “It’s just the four of us,” the team leader told me in an interview. “When you get too many on a team, it’s difficult. It causes problems. We’re more focused on academics with just the core teachers working together.”

Over the course of several meetings, I noted the length and frequency of teacher contributions to the discussion. For one eighth grade team meeting attended by the four teachers, the number of contributions during the 30 minutes averaged 8.5, with individuals contributing 4, 7, 10 and 15 incidents of discourse. Although I did not track the length of talking time for participants during all discussion, I noted that discourse snippets tended to be lengthier than those at the sixth grade meeting, with Mr. Norris’s contagiously enthusiastic contributions notably longer than those of his colleagues. Mrs. Thompson, the group leader, was the most frequent speaker. There was a great deal of give and take as teachers shared details of plans for inter-disciplinary activities and thoughts about personalizing instruction for at-risk students. The discussions I observed all seemed purposeful and organized. In an interview, one eighth grade teacher (not the team leader) said, “I think the important thing [for our team meetings] is to be organized ahead of time, have goals set. We don’t always have them written down because we have them internalized.” In another interview, another member of the team said, “Our eighth
grade team is a little random sometimes. Sometimes it’s hard for me to adjust to that. I guess I’m too sequential.”

Observed decision-making within the eighth grade team showed a strong sense of collective agency, particularly in planning inter-disciplinary activities. Although several teachers mentioned (casually) that they didn’t always agree on details of instructional strategy (for example, on whether and how much homework to give), they also emphasized that they respected each other tremendously and that “you couldn’t ask for a more caring group of people—or more hard-working teachers.” The group interactions I observed all involved planning, with reports on the action steps members had taken, with some brainstorming and building on others’ ideas, and with consensus quickly reached on each element of planning.

Holding the team meetings in the office conference room rather than in an eighth grade classroom seemed in keeping with the team dynamic—looser connections within the team and more connection to other parts of the school community. During eighth grade team meetings, Mr. Norris would occasionally access the computer in the conference room to input or print data for the group. Occasionally Mr. Tomkinson, the middle school principal, would be invited to join the discussion for a few minutes. Teachers would run out to ask a secretary a question or to retrieve copies of documents Mr. Norris had printed. Mrs. Thompson noted in an interview that she made a particular effort to keep in touch with all special area teachers who teach eighth graders: “I send info out to all 8th grade teachers once the team has made a decision. I know that they feel a sense of isolation from us. Sometimes one of them will respond with an idea to bring up a team meeting, too.” Since Mr. Norris assisted the entire faculty with technology and
also with monitoring student behavior, several teachers commented that he had become something of an emissary for the eighth grade team. All in all, the study showed much less silo–style communication among eighth grade team members than within the sixth grade team. There was also less evidence of the related effects of intense solidarity and unity in the team or limited communication outside the team.

Although eighth grade teachers claimed, “Our team is the strongest it’s ever been right now,” there had been struggles over the years, faculty members reported. Several teachers who had changed positions noted that they remembered times when eighth grade group members did not work well together and were at odds with each other. One teacher who no longer worked in the middle school said that the team leader was “difficult to get along with” although I heard that from no one else and saw no evidence of that being the case. During times when the team was re-forming, it seemed to have experienced the typical angst of the stages identified by Tuckman (1965). Faculty members’ remarks suggested that the team had experienced several episodes of the second stage, storming, in which competing ideas and perspectives struggle against each other as team members maintain independence and are not yet functioning as a unified group. During reiterations of the norming stage, the team had focused on developing processes and respect for each other’s opinions while resolving issues and conflict as a group. Current team members seemed to feel that they had reached the performing stage, although many teams stop at stage 3—norming. “Our team is highly motivated and results driven now,” one member said. “Right now we are a team,” a colleague said.

While communication at eighth grade team meetings tended to flow in all directions, eighth grade teachers indicated that they didn’t interact much with each other
beyond the team meetings. Only the English and science teachers were close colleagues doing significant instructional planning and reflection together. “For me, personally, the collaboration I do is mostly just next door. I’m always talking with the science teacher. We collaborate constantly,” Mrs. Thompson said. During my visits to the school, I noted the frequency of the interaction between science and English teacher colleagues, very like the constant collegial conversations in the sixth grade wing. The two other team members, however, noted that “We each do our own thing” except for the interdisciplinary planning at team meetings.

Eighth grade team members often compared themselves to the sixth grade team, which they saw as setting the standard. “The sixth grade team is an amazing team. They work together like you wouldn’t believe. They’re a phenomenal team,” one eighth grade teacher said. I found that the dynamics of the eighth grade team featured individual teacher autonomy compared to the sixth grade interdependence, limited communication compared to the sixth grade intensity of communication, more structured leadership compared to the sixth grade community of equals, emerging productivity compared to the sixth grade long-term productivity, and pleasant but limited social interaction compared to the sixth grade team camaraderie.

**English Department Unity**

Identified by all high school respondents as the “most collaborative” group in their building, the English department worked together to determine curriculum, share instructional ideas, and evaluate student work.

English was the only high school department that sometimes met for planning and reflection, although there were no regularly scheduled meetings. The daily schedule and
school layout did not facilitate either formal meetings or frequent interactions during the school day, teachers said. Unlike both sixth and eighth grade teams, English department members did not all share the same planning period or lunch period. No time was set aside for team/department planning. “Even among our department we don’t have schedules that permit collaboration [during the school day],” one English teacher said. “We don’t have regular department meetings,” more than one teacher noted. “It’s difficult to meet after school because everyone has family and/or coaching obligations,” the department chair clarified. “It’s hard to ask people to meet after school. It has to be planned well ahead of time,” a colleague added. Unlike the sixth grade faculty sub-group but like the eighth grade sub-group, English department faculty had classrooms lined up on one side of a wide, busy hallway. “They’re right down the hall, but the way our set-up is, we have to make it a point to consult with each other and then keep it quick.” Teachers felt peripherally rather than closely connected spatially.

The high school English department in place at the time of the study was very much the result of orchestration by former high school principal Dr. Mason and was assembled, according to Dr. Mason, to support the implementation of his sequential informative writing program. In my very first meeting with Dr. Mason, in the summer of 2006, as part of the National Study of Writing Instruction, then principal Dr. Mason explained that he had waited for several English teachers to retire (and the accompanying opportunity to hire new faculty) before instituting the new writing curriculum since he thought that newer teachers might adapt more easily to the expectation for explicit instruction and emphasis on informative writing. “I’m hoping to groom them [emphasis mine] to a resurgence of writing as curriculum,” he stressed. Several of the English
teachers instituting the sequential writing program three or four years ago had serious reservations about the initiative at that time (Baker, 2008). One of those teachers had now left the district, and the remaining English department members did not recall that they had been anything but thrilled with the exclusive use of the step-by-step expository approach. All current high school English department members were put in place by Dr. Mason, most as new hires. The current English department chair was teaching in the middle school when Dr. Mason recruited her to move to the high school and then appointed her to the position of lead teacher. There was a strong sense of unity among English department members, much of it centered on implementing the writing program instituted by Dr. Mason.

Significant evidence suggested that implementing the sequenced informative writing program had brought English department members closer together professionally. Over the previous four years, English department members had collaborated in the planning and actualizing of the program as well as presenting the concept and processes to regional, state, and national groups of teachers, most recently at the National Council Teachers of English conference in Philadelphia in November of 2009. The initiative actually began with a workshop in the summer of 2006 to provide orientation on the new writing curriculum to all English teachers in grades six through twelve. Department personnel changed over the four years, and the creator of the program retired. However, the writing initiative continued to be a compelling force behind the collaboration within the high school department (and continued to be regarded as the “new” writing program). In fact, the high school English department seemed to have rallied around the program
more strongly in recent times than was the case several years ago when I first interviewed them for the National Study of Writing Instruction (Baker, 2008).

The two informal English department meetings I observed were content driven and intensely focused. English department chair Mrs. Taylor set the agenda and led the discussion. Both meetings centered on a conference presentation showcasing the sequential informative writing initiative—one prior to the presentation and one immediately following the presentation. Meeting participants consisted of the four English department members and the librarian, all of whom were part of the presentation and all of whom played a major role in the continuing implementation of the writing program at Riverside. The two meetings I observed showed coaching style leadership

Figure 23. Diagram of “Coaching” Leadership Style in the English Department

![Diagram of Coaching Leadership Style]

(L = Leader of the group; M = Member of the group)

(see Figure 23) on the part of the department chair, with occasional coaching assistance from the librarian. The pre-presentation meeting was essentially a “pep talk” and quick review of the “game plays” similar to a pre-game coaching session in sports. The post-presentation meeting featured “game well played” congratulations and reflections on the successes and challenges of the presentation. “[Mrs. Taylor] is a good organizer and sees the big picture,” one English teacher said; “She keeps us on task and encourages us to work together.” Describing her style as “concrete sequential based on a differentiated
learning style program Dr. Mason had us do,” Mrs. Taylor indicated that she thought her main role as department chair should be “keeping everything organized and encouraging other department members.” The coaching dynamic of the English department was reminiscent of the leadership style Dr. Mason employed in working with the relatively new English faculty he assembled, what he called “grooming” in that first interview. In fact, although retired, Dr. Mason was still communicating regularly with the English faculty, through the department chair, who credited Dr. Mason with arranging the state and national presentations and relayed Dr. Mason’s suggestions for strategy as well as his “pep talk” encouragement and questions for reflection.

Although English teachers from grades 6 through 12 had collaborated as a cohesive group a few years ago and were still building upon the curriculum developed collaboratively, middle and high school English teachers met separately at the time of this study. The reason for the separate meetings was partly logistical (there was little opportunity for collaboration during the school day) but perhaps also a matter of choice (particularly on superintendents’ conference days). Both the official English department chair in the high school and the informal English department chair in the middle school were individuals with strong personalities who exerted considerable instructional leadership within their respective teams. Philosophies about teaching English, particularly writing, differed considerably in the two sub-groups. By the time of this study, current high school teachers, hired and mentored by Dr. Mason, showed total “buy-in” to the informational writing program. Middle school teachers, although part of the implementation of the new program a few years ago, now regarded it as something that “happens at the high school level” and said they were relieved to be able to focus on
more variety in students’ writing assignments, particularly imaginative writing. The English department chair commented that Dr. Mason decided not to worry about middle school teachers’ using the sequential writing program and suggested that “middle school was a good place for a creative writing outlet.” Several middle school teachers reported that their classroom and collegial dynamics were still heavily influenced by former English department chair Mr. Catone. “I still use activities and approaches Mr. Catone taught years ago. They encourage much more student engagement. I also try to help teachers in other departments use writing in their classrooms as Mr. C. taught us to do.”

The legacy of former writing guru Mr. Catone continued as a point of reference for high school English department members, who emphasized the very different instructional approach they were now using compared to what they remembered or understood took place during the time some veteran teachers referred to as the “golden age” of writing at Riverside schools. Ironically, instead of crediting Mr. Catone with the strong emphasis on writing in the district, recent high school English teachers seemed to view Mr. Catone as a rival of Dr. Mason and offered occasional negative comments on what they had “heard” about Mr. Catone’s role as a writing coach and model.

Although relatively new as a team, the current high school English department gave the appearance of having progressed directly from the forming (actually re-forming) stage to the norming stage of team development, with little storming along the way. Perhaps the directive and coaching styles of leadership exhibited by Dr. Mason and Mrs. Taylor provided the sense of purpose and unity to avoid tension within the group. The current group cohesiveness stood in contrast to the occasional tension I saw in the department a few years ago. Functioning well in the norming stage at the time of this
study, the department seemed to be well on its way to developing the processes and productivity needed to move into the performing stage. In fact, there were times, such as the department’s showcasing of the writing initiative, when it seemed to have ventured briefly into that final stage. The infrequency of department meetings was probably a factor contributing to the department’s not having achieved the final stage of team development overall.

The high school English department exhibited occasional traces of the “silo effect” in some curriculum-related interactions although not in interactions related to instructional delivery. I interpreted the department’s fierce loyalty to Dr. Mason and his writing initiative as a type of “circling the wagons” as members established the unity of their group and disassociated themselves from middle school English teachers and from the previous high school English department. As with the sixth grade team, the silo effect produced a tight-knit group with shared goals, common language and understanding, and the ability to progress quickly in a unified direction (Richard, 2010). Sometimes, however, the silo erected by the high school English department created barriers with middle school colleagues and gave the impression of political rivalry. On the other hand, English department members interacted daily with colleagues in other departments in discussing overall instructional strategies and meeting student needs, particularly during lunchtime conversations. In addition, Mrs. Craig, the high school librarian, provided an important link between the English department and other faculty members in promoting and facilitating the informative writing initiative.

English teachers indicated that their instructional collaboration was a source of pride and satisfaction, built upon feelings of effective agency. “We feel that we are doing
the right things in our classrooms because we’ve developed our plan consistently.” “It’s nice for students to know that teachers work together, that the curriculum has been set.” “We feel in control of our teaching as a program.” All high school interviewees indicated that the English department was a unified collaborative sub-group—“on the same page” and “consistent” and “organized” in the eyes of both department members and colleagues from other departments.

In general, the observed dynamics of the English department included unity of focus and purpose, team loyalty, a coaching style of organization, and instructional interdependence. These dynamics contributed to a strong collaborative spirit and feeling of collective agency.

**Science Teacher Individualism**

In contrast, science teachers operated autonomously, seeing little reason or opportunity to collaborate for instructional purposes. Science teachers said that they never met as a department. “There’s no reason to do so,” said one teacher, “because our courses are so different from everyone else’s.” “The only time we have for discussions is at conference days, maybe for an hour a year. We never have after school meetings.” Each of the five science teachers developed his or her own curriculum independently and rarely communicated with other science department members on instructional topics. The one exception was the partnership developed between Mr. Trenton and Mrs. Rivers, who both taught biology.

The separateness of the circles in Figure 24 illustrates the group dynamics

**Figure 24.** Diagram of “Scattered” Group Dynamics of the Science Department

![Diagram of Scattered Group Dynamics of the Science Department]
within the science department. Only teachers D and E worked closely together. The lack of an overall frame for the segments of the diagram illustrates the lack of cohesiveness and unity among science department members. The dynamics of this lack of unity might be described as scattered, with each entity separately boxed and not in close contact with others. Two members of the department independently described science teachers as “outliers” (“outliers when it comes to collaboration” and “outliers in a culture that values collaboration”) although they saw themselves and their colleagues as contributors to the overall feeling of community among staff members. Use of the term “outliers” (now often associated with Gladwell’s 2008 book with that title) reflected science faculty members’ philosophical emphasis on research although they might have been using the term more in the Gladwell sense of unusual circumstances than in the statistical sense of observations lying well outside the overall pattern of distribution. In either case, use of the term seemed consistent with science department members’ describing themselves as “the exception that proves the rule” of collaboration in the Riverside culture.

Science teachers occasionally indicated that they would like to develop instructional dialogue with other teachers but that said they saw collaboration as more of a challenge than a reality in this small, rural district. They reported that the specialized nature of their courses, the physical layout of the building, and the intensive time constraints of teaching science were among the factors leading to more isolationism among members of the science department. Specialists in geology (earth science), biology (living environment), chemistry, or physics, science teachers reported that they had little commonality with other science teachers (because each was typically the only
teacher of a particular science course in this rural context) and that they thus saw little purpose to collaboration with science department colleagues. As mentioned in the previous section on the impact of degree of specialization, science teachers were most likely to “go it alone” and “do my own thing” rather than to consult with colleagues on instructional topics.

The new high school building, while “a blessing in many ways” according to science department faculty members, also “isolates teachers more, particularly science teachers. The science department has not been able to work on things together since the new school. We used to collaborate more.” Science rooms were now spread out at one end of the second floor main corridor, but, except for the rooms of Mr. Trenton and Mrs. Rivers, were not close together, being separated by physical barriers such as stairwells and rest rooms. Except for the two biology teachers, stepping into the hall did not put science teachers in close contact with, or even within sight of, other science teachers.

In contrast to other department members, Mrs. Rivers and Mr. Trenton shared both physical space and course content. Their rooms were right next to each other, off a large alcove between the stairs and the restrooms. They shared an office/storage area located between the two rooms, and the doors to their classrooms were close together. Both described a close collaborative relationship. “We help each other,” Mrs. Rivers said. “Every time I have something new, I give it to him. If he has something new, he gives it to me.” Both mentioned that they share ideas, materials, and equipment extensively. “There’s a great deal of sharing. … We keep changing how we do things. I like the fact that we’re in step with each other. We have consistency but it’s also nice that [our materials and approaches] are not exactly the same,” Mr. Trenton noted.
“I’m here all the time in this room, usually trying to catch up,” said one science teacher. Science teachers noted that their courses required more physical set-up than teachers of other academic areas experienced, and that the set-up and take-down of labs and demonstrations were very time intensive and meant that less time was available for gathering with other teachers in the faculty room or other venues of discussion. Science teachers insisted that they spent much more time in their classrooms than other teachers did, and that they liked it that way. “I’m in my classroom and in my safe place. It’s a dream job because everything is self-contained. I’m king of the castle. I do what I want. I feel like I’m working hard and being effective. I don’t need more to do beyond helping kids to learn.”

Science teachers repeatedly reinforced the idea that their professional lives were in the classroom, not in meetings with other science teachers. Science teachers seemed to feel more isolated and independent than their colleagues in other studied groups did. “My teaching life is here in this classroom.” “I don’t have time to do much talking with other teachers. I focus on my classes.” “Dealing with the kids is easy. . . . I don’t need to deal with other adults.” “I just help the kids in front of me. I’m not sticking my neck out.” Science teachers did not view their department as a vehicle for sharing ideas either within their own department or with other educators in the school. “Teachers go directly to the principal if we have an idea,” one person stated. “We connect with people over lunch, but meeting with other science department members is just not our thing.”

The nature of the high-stakes testing their students experienced also led to decreased collaboration, several science teachers noted. High school science teachers identified testing as a main focus of every course, with no sharing of test prep among
department members since each test was different and discrete and there was no carry-over or perceived skill building from one course to another. Students were preparing for state tests in Earth Science, Living Environment, Chemistry, and Physics, as well as Advanced Placement exams in Biology and college standing tests in Geology. “Our course is defined by that (the test),” one science teacher reported. “All of our science teachers have become very familiar with the material to be tested, over many years,” he added. “We know what we need to cover, and we keep working on variations on our presentation—strategies that will involve our students more,” a colleague noted. “I put so much work into preparing students for tests that I actually feel withdrawal symptoms during test week at the end of the year. That week of testing is tough. I feel anxious, less purposeful. It’s like I miss the preparation, that part of my professional life has been taken away,” explained a third science teacher. The intense focus on testing seemed associated with the science teachers’ professional attitude of “going it alone” and “focusing on my own course.”

The lack of dialogue among science teachers extended to those new to the profession. There had been no mentoring of new science teachers within anyone’s memory. As one teacher explained, “There was no mentoring when I was new either. I was on my own—still am.” “While I can see value to formal mentoring,” he and his colleagues had not experienced it, another science teacher said: “I’m still the youngest in the department here, but I understand that everyone is busy all the time.”

Although not unified as a department, science teachers stressed that they were active participants in school-wide pastoral initiatives—“the closest we get to
collaboration.” “We’re a very caring staff.” “For most it’s a lifestyle. The biggest problem in these poor communities is no support from the parents.”

Science teachers were also more likely than others to mention the problems of being without a professional teaching contract during this school year. “It does make a difference. Mostly, it encourages us to just focus on the kids.”

In strong contrast to observed interactions within the grade level teams and the English department, the dynamics within the science department in this rural district showed general tendencies of individual autonomy, academic specialization, and focus on course specific professionalism, with very little instructional collaboration.

Members of three of the four sub-groups experienced significant group identity and strong inter-relational dynamics. The “amazing” sixth grade team, judged the “most collaborative” of any sub-group, achieved unity and cohesiveness through constant communication and interdependence. The eighth grade team, while enjoying frequent communication and structured leadership, was in the process of developing unity but interacted more as representatives of differing academic disciplines. Both middle school grade level teams found it much easier to collaborate during the school day than did their colleagues at the high school. The high school English department, although meeting infrequently, functioned with unity of focus and purpose, building upon the skill development encouraged in their academic discipline. Only the science department functioned as a “scattered” group with little or no feeling of group identity or collaborative purpose.
Purpose and Content of Sub-group Interactions

Just as important as the instructional approaches and organizational dynamics were the topics frequently addressed within group discussions and the possible underlying reasons and results of those choices of discourse content. Analysis of content and purpose focused on the nature of discussion topics observed in meetings and other interactions within sub-groups and referenced in interviews with teachers at Riverside middle and high schools.

Attention to Instructional Practice in the Sixth Grade Team

Building upon a collectively developed academic curriculum and values-centered delivery structure, the sixth grade team was able to devote most of its considerable daily meeting time (both formally and informally) to helping each other with instructional practice, in keeping with the finding of Horn and Little (2010) that “workplace groups are more likely to prove generative for learning if they develop a capacity for talk that centers on dilemmas and problems of practice” (p. 183).

Team meeting time was devoted to planning of overall activities for sixth graders (about 30% of observed discussion time), providing scaffolding and instructional support for individual students or groups of students (about 30% of observed discussion time), and supporting each other with ideas and strategies for specific instructional situations (about 40% of observed meeting discussion time and about 50% of observed lunch time conversation).

Although most of the group’s planning for curriculum and scheduling had occurred before the start of the school year, one September meeting focused initially on how to use the 20 “unassigned” minutes in the new school schedule. Starting with the
premise that all team members wanted to use that time to enhance and/or supplement instruction (and with a shared concept for the types of activities that each member would lead), the group quickly formulated a plan, with everyone participating in a seamless building of ideas:

Cathy: We don’t want this to be just recess.

Sandra: … rotate kids through our rooms.

Matt: … with four activity groups and one changing group of kids who need extra help.

Sandra (laughing): … call the extra help section NA--for Noontime Assistance, not No Activity.

Erica: We can base the four groups on their Social Studies class.

Matt: I like Erica’s idea.

Sandra: Say week 1 Cathy has NA all week. Everybody else will have 1 of 4 activities all week.

Matt: The kids will rotate.

Cathy: Then week 2 Matt will have NA, etc.

Erica: Each of us will have NA all week every five weeks.

Matt: That’ll work well because we’ll each plan activities for 4 weeks, then have a week off—not really off but focusing on support rather than a new activity.

Sandra: When we set up our activity schedule, let’s not put Cathy and Matt back to back because their activities are somewhat similar.

Erica: I’ll make up a calendar and post it in my room by the door.
Cathy: I’ll have one kid be responsible for getting everyone organized to go to the scheduled spot.

Erica: I’ll be doing role-playing activities, like what is honesty.

Sandra: Mine will be based on current issues, like what is going on. If they don’t have a topic to discuss, I’ll have something to discuss.

Cathy: Matt and I both have active, move-around activities.

Sandra: Let’s include the quote of the day from the bulletin somehow.

Matt: Kids will see a lot of different activities, not just directed study.

Erica: It won’t be just recess or extra help.

Cathy: If there are special activities such as for holidays, we’ll adjust as necessary. Might keep them in home base in that case—like when they have a door-decorating contest.

Matt: This will work.

In less than ten minutes, the plan was in place, and the group moved on to the next topic.

Discourse related to instructional scaffolding for particular students covered a wide range of topics from meeting to meeting—a child “labeled Learning Disabled but [who] scores very well in comprehension when things are read to him” (“We need to be consistent in skill building as we each work with him one on one.”) students who were missing work (“Do their parents sign their agendas? Do they understand how this works?”), students having a bad day (“Sean doesn’t like his new haircut. He wanted some character, but it’s not what he expected. He can’t focus, and neither can the other kids around him.”), students who need extra help with understanding (“Emily is doing a terrific book float for the parade, but she’s confused. One of us will need to talk with
students who are not focusing well in class (“He wasn’t like that until these last few weeks. He’s not disruptive but doesn’t seem to know what we’re doing sometimes. Maybe he’s not taking his medication.”), students who seem to have gaps in their knowledge (“John just doesn’t get sentence structure. We’ll all have to work with him, be on the same page in our expectations.”). In each case, team members focused the discussion first on the problem or situation and then moved to how teachers would address the issue. Follow-up plans included conferences with students, calls to parents, and classroom strategies that might help. Sometimes an individual teacher volunteered to take the lead; other times teachers agreed on a uniform behavior that they would all employ in their interactions with the student (and perhaps the parents).

Frequent quick discussions about classroom approaches were part of the conversational routine. Often, teachers would bring up specific situations that were part of continuing efforts to improve instruction. Teachers would ask each other questions, either seeking advice or following up on how a previously discussed lesson or project had gone. For example, the team’s newest member, Erica, had been seeking advice about a writing project for the English classes she was teaching:

Erica: Do you think I’m trying to cover too much in one week?

Cathy: No, we talked about it, and we all thought it seemed reasonable. How did you work out the assignments?

Erica: They’re just drafting their introductions the first night. I broke up the writing and the class discussion into segments the way all of you suggested.
Matt:  How did the brainstorming go yesterday?

Erica: First period wasn’t as engaged as I’d hoped, but the discussions got a lot better after that.

Sandra: I always find that, too. I guess I just ask better questions as time goes on.

The conversation continued, with considerable give and take.

In general, the team discourse centering on professional practice had evolved into what Horn and Little (2010) termed *conversational routines*, patterned and recurrent moments of pedagogical reasoning and strategizing complemented by shared reflection. As the conversations turned toward teaching as an object of collective attention, teachers would specify and revise the problem or situation and sometimes conclude by generalizing. As Horn and Little found in their study of effective professional discourse, discussion moved between *specific* accounts of classroom practice and *general* lessons from experience.

The sixth grade team had developed a common set of conceptual principles and tools, rooted in shared professional expectations and understandings. Their discussion topics maintained an ethos of professional caring focusing on improving student learning within each classroom and within the collective classroom experience of all sixth grade students.

**Eighth Grade Inter-Disciplinary Support and Planning**

Eighth grade team discussion topics differed considerably from those comprising the sixth grade team discourse. The two teams shared a common interest in planning activities and in supporting students, but the eighth grade team members spent much less time on topics related to specific pedagogical practice. Content of eighth grade team
discussion was particularly dependent on the time of year, team members reported. “We trade off as we go through the year,” said one eighth grade teacher, noting that attention goes to “whoever has a [state] test coming up.” Major inter-disciplinary units also required a great amount of discussion time and attention.

Testing was a significant topic of discussion (and stress) for the eighth grade team. All eighth grade students took state tests in English language arts, math, science, and social studies; advanced students took high school level state tests in algebra and earth science. “It’s especially hard in eighth grade where there is state testing in all content areas,” one teacher lamented. “It’s hard to be creative and spread your wings to connect the disciplines or collaborate when you have to be so focused on preparing kids for the tests,” she continued. “The tests are good,” a colleague claimed, “in that they provide focus. We might be lost without them, but it does seem that we are test-driven even though we each feel that we personally don’t teach to the test.” Team members stressed that they needed “to help each other, especially when it comes to state tests.” Accordingly, team discussions just before testing tended to center on the logistics of supporting each other in preparing students for taking the state tests and adjusting student activities and field trips to support rather than conflict with state exam preparation.

Always a major focus, support for individual students became more intense before state tests and toward the end of the year. “We really do teach student-by-student, giving a lot of extra attention based on their individual needs, especially just before tests, but really all year long,” one teacher affirmed. “In late winter and spring a lot of the focus is concentrating on the kids who are not making it,” a team member stressed. “We really
want everyone to succeed,” added a colleague, “so we strategize about how we can help get them through eighth grade. We work harder than they do at it.”

During some times of the year, eighth grade team members focused intensely on inter-disciplinary units, such as the “Civil Rights and Mid-Century Life” unit at the end of November. For about six weeks before the multi-day activities, team meetings concentrated on building and fine-tuning the program plans. In October and early November, team meetings consisted almost exclusively of planning for the interdisciplinary unit. At each meeting, team members reviewed what they were doing in their respective classes to support the theme of Civil Rights in the background of the 1950’s, 60’s, and 70’s. The social studies teacher took the lead with assignments and student presentations involving the history of the time period, with particular attention to the civil rights movement. In English class, students were reading and discussing *Journey to Chatham* and anticipating a visit by the author. In science class, experiments produced some of the “state-of-the-art” materials of the time, including silly putty. Math classes prepared graphs and solved fraction and percent problems related to prices, statistics, and other numerical information from the time period. Special areas included activities featuring rock and roll music, mid-century food, and tie-dyed fashion. Eighth grade team members planned a field trip, a school dance (“sock hop”), and other highlight activities related to mid-century history. Some of the team discussion involved permission slips, scheduling, trip finances, facility usage, and other logistical planning. The late November week in which the project culminated was a whirlwind of activity and communication. In early December, the group reviewed the successes and suggested improvements for the unit. While there was considerable team planning involved, discussion before, during,
and after the interdisciplinary unit centered on reports and evaluations rather than on instructional strategies.

Teachers demonstrated an increased sense of professional agency during discussions of interdisciplinary projects in contrast to times when discussions centered on test preparation or student behavior. The content of eighth grade team discussion thus seemed purposeful and well planned although it did not rise to the level of effective professional discourse identified by Horn and Little (2010) in that there was little of the specific to general pedagogical strategizing and reflection associated with improved teaching practice. The overall effect of the team discourse was significant engagement on the part of faculty and students but little collaborative examination of pedagogical practice.

**English Department Curriculum Planning and Pedagogical Discourse**

Formal collaborative discussion within the English department emphasized curriculum planning and sharing of departmental writing instruction processes with other educators within and beyond the Riverside school district, while informal discourse centered on pedagogical practice. Working together, members of the department had previously determined the literature to be taught at each grade level, had implemented the graduated writing program, and had coordinated supporting literacy elements such as vocabulary and grammar/usage. Observed or referenced departmental discourse also included informal discussions concerning specific lesson ideas and student evaluation.

All interviewed English teachers gave detailed reports on the work the department had done establishing the literature to be studied at each grade level. “We went through the canon of lit and coded books. We wanted to be sure that kids were using more
difficult texts in the progression.” “Sometimes people forget to look at the list. Advice to anyone who wants to work on collaborating: remind everyone to keep using the list.”

English teachers seemed to experience particular professional agency when sharing literature ideas from conferences and discussions with colleagues from other schools. Several gave detailed accounts of specific books and associated activities that they were able to pass along to other department members. “We’re always trying to find books appealing to kids, suitable for particular age levels. We like to use more modern texts linked to traditional texts. It’s a more interesting way to teach a traditional text.”

“We are also realizing that we don’t teach enough non-fiction reading. [One of my colleagues] is looking into history based non-fiction for the debate unit in 10th grade.”

Much of the department’s collaboration revolved around implementing the sequential informative writing initiative. Aggregate and sequential, the expository writing program began with teaching the articulated thesis statement, which identifies the topic or main idea of the essay, the subtopics to be emphasized, and the order in which the subtopics will appear. The organizational skill of composing an introduction culminating with an articulated thesis statement was seen as the key to effective informative writing. Explicit instruction in the articulated thesis statement began in grade nine, and all high school grades emphasized the process. Grade 10 emphasized experience in building body paragraphs, while grade 11 incorporated introductions, body paragraphs, and concluding paragraphs into cohesive essays. As more than one English teacher pointed out, the scaffolding, consistency, and progression combined to produce solid skills in informational writing. Several ELA teachers outlined the “year-to-year” progression of major writing assignments in the high school: grade nine, research paper; grade ten,
debate papers (with written scripts), grade eleven, state exam essay writing; grade twelve, senior thesis paper. Knowing the “transition” or progression of major assignments and instructional emphasis was seen as helping both students and teachers anticipate and feel organized about writing. The conversational routines centered on the sequential writing program seemed to evoke strong positive feelings of professional agency.

As English department members worked with each other to be sure everyone was comfortable with presenting the curriculum, there was considerable assistance given to the newer department members and frequent informal conversations about instructional technique. Because of the focus on writing, more discussion time was spent on writing instruction than on any other element. Working together on the formal presentations concerning the writing curriculum (three such presentations during the time of the study) provided opportunity to share specific lessons and reflect on practices.

English teachers also consulted each other informally about evaluating student writing. “We do need to consult on particular students’ papers quite often. We definitely go to each other, especially when a parent is upset with a child’s grade.” The department had been experimenting with an on-line grading program using electronic scoring. “We’ve been collaborating a lot about how that’s working, when it works best, concerns we have with the scoring and how helpful it really is.”

Part of the collaboration within the English department was test-driven. Teachers at all high school grade levels were preparing students for either the comprehensive state English exam or the Advanced Placement test. They reported that they consulted with each other often to be sure that their lessons were appropriate and progressive to prepare students for the writing on those exams. State mandated collaborative scoring of the
comprehensive English exam also provided opportunity for department members to consult with each other: “It’s very time consuming but really valuable in making sure we understand the writing standards and are all on the same page in evaluating students’ work.”

The state’s “vagueness” in establishing the English Language Arts program provided more opportunity (and need) for local teacher curriculum planning than other sub-groups experienced. The skill-based nature of the academic discipline lent itself to collaborative discussion of progressive, sequential instruction.

All in all, English department discourse was largely instructionally based and focused on pedagogical practice. Although lacking the daily conversational routines of the sixth grade team, the English department planned curriculum, addressed instructional strategies, and frequently discussed specific lessons, accomplishing the latter in smaller (two- to three-person) gatherings of sub-group members rather than at meetings of the entire department.

**Infrequency of Science Department Discourse**

There were no principal topics of discussion for the science department as a whole, since the department “just doesn’t meet,” according to its members. Even on the infrequent occasions “when the department meets at conferences, which is rare, it is general things we talk about because we’re teaching different subject areas.” Department members noted that the curricula of the separate courses they teach were defined by the state, in specific detail.

Only the two biology teachers discussed problems of instructional practice. This collaborative pair had established a conversational routine that moved from the specific
to the general (as advocated by Horn and Little, 2010) and seemed effective in enhancing instruction. “We aren’t in lock step, though. We like the independence of following our individual preferences,” one biology teacher noted.

Other science department members said that they never discussed problems of practice with colleagues, even informally. The lack of instructional conversation among department members seemed related to the small student enrollment, which typically allowed for only one science teacher per science specialty in this rural setting.

Contrasts in the routine discourse (or lack of discourse) within the sub-groups showed the differing collaborative purposes and patterns that had developed over time. The conversational routines provided a conceptual tool for assessing the learning potential of the collaboration (Horn and Little, 2010). The sixth grade team had the most highly developed focus on instructional practice, with daily anticipatory and reflective conversations centered on pedagogy, moving from the specific to the general. English department members also consulted with each other about curriculum and lessons, but without the daily full-group attention to instructional specificity. The eighth grade team engaged in active sub-group interdisciplinary reporting and logistical discussion, while the science department seldom conversed as an entire sub-group. The content of the conversational routines indicated significant professional learning taking place daily within the sixth grade team and to a lesser extent within the English department in contrast to little opportunity for instructional benefit in the less collaborative eighth grade team and the least collaborative science department.
Feelings of Professional Home within Sub-Groups

Although these four sub-groups varied significantly in terms of their student-centered/subject-centered approaches, their group dynamics, and the content of their discourse, they shared the commonality of serving as one aspect of “professional home” for their members. Their sense of what it means to be a teacher was heavily influenced by their interactions with colleagues in the contexts of where they taught (Ball & Lacey, 1980; Siskin & Little, 1995). In Chapter Five, I looked at “the power of place” teachers felt within the macro-culture of the Riverside educational community—the sense of being “in their element,” the creativity and peak performance engendered by the culture, the perception of belonging and emotional support, and the occasional challenge and constraint. Riverside teachers expressed strong feelings of professional home within the general macro-culture. For some teachers, the sense of professional home was even stronger within their sub-group.

One of the interesting aspects of this study was identifying variations in the professional homes with which Riverside teachers most strongly identified. While all felt some sense of belonging within the school, the grade level team or department, and the classroom, teachers in the different sub-groups differed strongly in which aspects of that narrowing continuum they emphasized in their discussions about professional home.

The sub-group within which teachers felt the strongest sense of belonging was the sixth grade team. “This team is my school family.” “We do everything together.” “These people really care about me as a person and they make me a better teacher.” “I just realized that I probably communicate more with team members than I do with anyone else in my life.” “They really know me and encourage me. I can talk with them about any
aspect of my teaching.” “This is where I live my life as a teacher—with these colleagues.”

For members of other sub-groups, the identification was more distributed (or, in some cases, layered) among elements of school, grade level or academic domain, and classroom.

Eighth grade teachers expressed some conflict in identifying professional home. While all teachers studied felt strong belonging to the school macro-culture, eighth grade teachers were the only ones who said they sometimes felt some strain between school and sub-group home: “I identify with both my team and the middle school in general. Sometimes there’s a bit of tension between the two.” Eighth grade teachers suggested that they felt even more conflicted about “whether my real identify is with the grade level team or with the subject I teach.” Math, science, social studies, and English teachers in grade eight all said that they probably thought of themselves more as subject matter teachers than as eighth grade faculty or team members. However, it was the eighth grade team that provided a “home base” for professional interactions in their daily lives.

Members of the two high school departments studied felt strong identification both with the high school faculty in general and with their respective academic domains. They indicated pride and attachment associated with both, and did not feel that one precluded the other. “Sometimes I describe myself as an English teacher, sometimes as a high school teacher. There’s no conflict there.” English teachers said that they felt especially fortunate because “we have such a strong sense of community in both our department and our school.”
Science teachers, always the most independent in the views they shared in this study, were more difficult to classify. While all felt that they were important contributors to school culture, and all expressed strong identity as science teachers, none indicated a strong sense of community within the science department sub-group. For several science teachers, the real professional home was the classroom: “The classroom is where I’m in my element. That’s where I spend my time. That’s where I have my professional identity.”

The strong feelings of professional home within the sixth grade team and the English department seemed to contribute to a sense of collective pride and agency within those sub-groups. Eighth grade team members and science department members did not describe their sub-groups as significant venues for a sense of belonging and encouragement in their daily professional lives. Identification of professional home within a sub-group was associated with strong professional collaboration within that micro-culture.

**Overview of Factors**

Looking closely at four specific sub-groups, I examined the following factors that seemed to influence the nature and extent of instructional collaboration within the sub-group micro-cultures at Riverside: the student-centered/subject-centered approaches in the sub-groups, the group dynamics of sub-group communications; the purpose and content of sub-group discussions; and teachers’ feelings of professional home within sub-groups.
In examining the impact of these factors, I found that:

- Specialization of subject area was associated with less collaboration and little focus on instructional improvement within sub-groups, whereas sequential skill-building disciplinary domains provided both opportunity and purpose for instructional collaboration.

- Instructional collaboration and feelings of collective agency flourished in a sub-group dynamic of shared leadership and silo-style solidarity supported by continuous group interaction.

- Effective professional collaboration was associated with conversational routines focusing on specific classroom instructional practices.

- A strong sense of professional home in the sub-group contributed to the collaborative spirit and instructional agency of teachers in sub-groups known for their solidarity.
Chapter Seven
Discussion and Conclusion

Teachers, like other groups of people, build a culture as they work together over extended periods of time. School cultures are heavily dependent on the attitudes and practices teachers share and build upon from day to day. Much of the professional life of a secondary school teacher takes place in peer-to-peer relationships with other faculty members. When teachers work together to achieve instructional objectives, they engage in professional collaboration to varying degrees and in varying ways. Being a part of an academic department or grade level team may have a significant influence on the nature and extent of such professional collaboration.

The role of collegial sub-groups in influencing teachers’ professional collaboration within school culture has been heretofore largely unexamined, particularly in rural settings, although the professional lives of secondary school teachers take place in their peer-to-peer relationships as well as within the larger context of the school and the smaller context of the classroom. In this study, I examined the interconnected roles of participation in overall school culture and membership in specific faculty sub-groups in influencing the nature and extent of any instructional collaboration in which teachers engaged.

The related macro-cultures of district and school and the micro-cultures of faculty sub-groups are interwoven contexts in which teachers learn and construct meaning and in which teachers develop feelings of professional efficacy to varying degrees.
Underlying Concepts and Previous Research

This study was informed by the sociocognitive theory in which learning is rooted in social relationships and develops and grows out of activity and interaction (Langer, 1984). A sociocognitive view of teachers’ academic sub-groups provides for a heretofore sparsely examined perspective on teachers’ professional collaboration. The nature and extent of instructional collaboration within and among teacher groups reflects Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986) ideas of both ontogenesis (development of individuals over time) and phylogenesis (development of a society over time). Professional attitudes and professional relationships develop over extended periods of time, both for individuals and groups.

The associated concept that thinking is shaped by culture (Bruner, 1996) provides a basis for the examination of the shared and interwoven influence of the peer-to-peer interactions teachers experience in their daily professional lives. Teachers develop their understanding of their instructional roles partly through their interactions with colleagues within evolving contexts. As teachers experience these dialogic and inter-textual professional relationships (whether richly or sparsely), their ideas about what it means to be a teacher move from the tangible to the conceptual and from the external to the internal in constantly evolving patterns (Langer, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1995).

Previous research has shown that interwoven aspects of academic climate, school improvement initiatives, and professional learning communities contribute strongly to the success of a school culture. Significant research supports the idea that enhanced student learning is supported by developing a school environment that is personalized, nurturing,
and academically optimistic (Fehner et al., 2007; Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006); working collegially toward school improvement based on communal vision and shared decision making (Le & Smith, 1995; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000; Copland, 2003); and building faculty communities of learning through shared goals, shared resources and processes, and shared leadership evolving over time (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, 2002, 2006; Kruse & Louis, 2007; Hargreaves, 2007).

Theory and research join to support the idea that nested communities of teachers can help to create shared meaning in educational settings—both in the macro-culture of a school and in the micro-cultures of sub-groups of teachers such as grade level teams and academic departments.

The Study

In the present study, I examined both the macro-cultures of this rural district and its secondary schools and the micro-cultures of the academic departments and grade level teacher teams to determine the interwoven influences on teacher professional collaboration. Two main questions guided the study:

1. What is the role of teacher professional collaboration in the culture of this district and its middle school and high school?
2. How does participating teachers’ membership in particular subject area departments and inter-disciplinary grade level teams influence the purpose, nature and extent of any professional collaboration and the value ascribed to such collaboration?

Using a micro-ethnographic approach to these questions, I visited two related sites, a middle school and a high school in the same small, rural school district at least
once a week over a period of six months. The 41 educators who participated in the study included three administrators, 24 high school faculty members, and 17 middle school teachers.

Much of the data came from extensive interviews with 21 educators, most of whom were members of the four sub-groups chosen for in-depth study: the sixth grade and eighth grade teacher teams in the middle school and the English and science departments in the high school. These sub-groups were chosen based on information provided by those answering an initial questionnaire designed to provide an overview of participant educator demographics and to gather general participant perceptions about the nature and extent of collaboration within sub-groups of teachers. Supporting data came from field notes on observations of the school environments and professional interactions, particularly formal and informal meetings of groups of teachers.

Ongoing analysis relied heavily on coding, i.e. chunking data into categories to identify core consistencies and contrasts. Interpretation gave particular note to the patterns of decision-making and leadership styles, school context dynamics, communication silos and networks, and teacher identification of professional home.

**Overview of Findings**

In general, the findings suggest that support of the concept of collaboration is not sufficient in and of itself. What matters is the nature of the formal and informal professional interactions within and across elements of the macro- and micro-cultures. Group interactions in which teachers feel professional agency and pride of belonging, experience continuing instructional communication with peers, and focus on helping each
other to build classroom instructional skill were associated with strong professional collaboration.

First, for research question one, looking at the role of the district and the school, I found, overall, that empowering leadership styles, sub-group supportive logistical arrangements, a combination of silo and networking communication patterns, and a strong sense of home in the macro-culture provided a context encouraging productive collaborative interactions in this rural setting.

Second, for research question two, examining the ways in which membership in particular subject area departments and inter-disciplinary grade level teams influences professional collaboration, the results showed, overall, that sequential skill-building academic domains, shared leadership and solidarity within a sub-group, instructional focus of conversational routines, and a strong sense of professional home within the sub-group contributed to purposeful professional collaboration in certain micro-cultures in this rural school system.

**Macro-Culture Influence**

Four findings related particularly to the school macro-culture.

- Increased teacher collaboration and stronger feelings of collaborative agency were fostered by leadership styles that were more open and collegial and less directive and authoritarian.

Teachers in the study described flourishing collaboration in environments where they were given the opportunity for decision making and felt empowered to make improvements in both school based and classroom based practice. In contrast, some
teachers felt disrespected and discouraged from collaborative planning by situations in which administrators used directive, “top-down” leadership styles.

- Arrangements such as scheduling and school layout joined with commonality versus specialization of subject matter to provide increased opportunity for instructional collaboration in the middle school and decreased opportunity for collaboration in the high school.

School contexts matter. Teachers’ day-to-day environment can provide either strong support or strong barriers to instructional collaboration. Middle school scheduling of team planning time and classroom arrangement allowing easy teacher-to-teacher interaction were important factors in middle school teachers experiencing more routine collaboration. On the other hand, the logistics of class scheduling and building layout in the high school presented barriers to day-to-day close collaboration for academic groups of teachers such as departments or grade level teams.

- Both the silo effect and linked networks characterized communication patterns, with the insulated, channeled communication of the silo effect encouraging constant collaboration concerning day-today instruction within certain professional groups, and the network of hubs and links functioning most effectively when growing spontaneously from peer-to-peer sharing of resources and expertise across diverse subjects and grade levels.

A feeling of “we’re in this together” was aided by both the silo effect, with emphasis on close communication within groups such as the sixth grade team in the middle school, and the linked networks, which fostered collaboration among groups such as high school teachers from various departments who collaborated on research and writing instruction.
Overall, teachers who were not a part of either a silo-style sub-group or a network linking teachers from differing sub-groups experienced little peer-to-peer assistance with classroom instruction. While all middle school teachers of core subjects were part of grade level teams, high school teachers were at a disadvantage. Those high school teachers not involved in networking on research and writing instruction felt particularly isolated from peer-to-peer communication related to student instruction, although they did express a sense of closeness with other faculty in maintaining a nurturing context for the general learning environment.

- A strong sense of professional home in the macro-culture, supported by feelings of fulfillment, pride, and belonging, fostered a collaborative spirit in which teachers supported each other professionally while exhibiting both individual and collective confidence.

The group dynamics and shared values of the workplace were a significant factor in teachers’ sense of purpose and agency. The feeling of belonging to a professional culture of academic accomplishment and personal caring was particularly profound, as teachers saw their growth fostered by a heartfelt realization of socio-cognition. Teachers “got it”—they attributed their own personal professional efficacy to working in a context in which meaning was produced by and within the social/professional interactions. This was the one finding in which there was little contrast from person to person or group to group: there was unanimity in educators’ pride in professional home within the macro-culture.

**Micro-Culture Support for Collaboration**

Four other specific findings related particularly to collaboration within sub-group micro-cultures.
Specialization of subject area was associated with less collaboration and little focus on instructional improvement within sub-groups, whereas sequential skill-building disciplinary domains provided both opportunity and purpose for instructional collaboration.

Teachers in subject areas such as English and math experienced purposeful collaboration as they helped each other to build progressive student knowledge and skill in their academic domains. Teachers in specialized subject areas such as high school science saw little purpose to instructional collaboration and experienced little subject-specific collaboration. In this school each of the sciences was regarded as distinct from all other sciences, with no commonality of experience, even in areas such as lab expectations or scientific writing, which might be viewed as opportunities for progressive skill building among science teachers in some schools.

Instructional collaboration and feelings of collective agency flourished in a sub-group dynamic of shared leadership and silo-style solidarity supported by continuous group interaction.

The most successful sub-group collaborations were experienced in those sub-groups (such as the sixth grade team and the high school English department) in which teachers felt strong sub-group unity and shared agency. Teachers in these collaborative sub-groups supported each other in reaching consensus on a wide variety of decisions affecting their facilitation of student learning. Sub-groups having little sense of silo effect solidarity, such as the high school science department and the eighth grade team, were less inclined to work together on building effective instruction. The “scattered” dynamic of the high
school science department seemed to be a factor in those teachers’ diminished feeling of collective agency as a sub-group.

- Effective professional collaboration was associated with conversational routines focusing on specific classroom instructional practices.

Planning, discussing, and evaluating specific classroom teaching practices occurred most often in the two sub-groups universally seen as most collaborative. Sixth grade team discussions sometimes provided a model for collaborative discourse centering on dilemmas of instructional practice, including reflection on elements to keep or change in subsequent lessons. In contrast, less collaborative sub-groups rarely focused on the specifics of classroom instruction and thus were not seen as aiding instructional practices.

- A strong sense of professional home in the sub-group contributed to the collaborative spirit and instructional agency of teachers in sub-groups known for their solidarity.

Those teachers who expressed the most identity with a sub-group were members of the most collaborative micro-cultures. That sense of professional home was reflected in the can-do attitude and “let’s work together to make this happen” approach seen consistently in those sub-groups. Teachers who identified less with their sub-groups, such as eighth grade team members and high school science faculty members, experienced less sense of collaborative spirit and professional agency within the micro-cultures.

**Macro- & Micro-culture Relationships in a Sociocognitive Context**

These findings provide a way of thinking about the interplay of culture and cognition within and among faculty sub-groups. All of the findings relate professional interactions within the culture to the understandings that teachers develop about what it
means to be a teacher, specifically what it means to be a teacher in this district, in this school, in this academic department, in this grade level—i.e., the collaborative context of the whole and/or the parts of individual and collective identity and its evolution.

There was surprising similarity in educators’ perspectives about how participation in the macro-culture supported their positive professional identity. Overall, the greatest emotion was expressed in educator’s praising the general school and district environment that they felt they had co-created and that gave meaning to their professional lives. Overwhelming support of the instructional macro-culture and an intense feeling of belonging were reminiscent of the findings of academic climate researchers (see below); pride in the educational macro-culture was expressed even by those few teachers who felt that they did not personally engage in much instructional collaboration.

These positive feelings about the macro-culture, associated with the strong sense of professional home in the macro-culture, provided a base for the individual and small group instructional confidence seen among teachers in this setting. District and school support for collaboration, though sometimes evidenced as more conceptual than practice-based, influenced the nature and extent of the instructional support teachers gave each other. Although not all teachers collaborated on classroom practices, teachers were unanimous in feeling that they were “there for each other” in general and that their sense of professional efficacy was engendered by the macro-culture.

Administrative leadership styles and resulting group dynamics in the macro-culture had significant impact on the nature and extent of sub-group shared decision-making, sense of collective responsibility, and conversational routines. For example, the empowering leadership approach of the middle school principal helped to provide a
context in which the sixth grade team could flourish in planning of grade-wide initiatives and specific classroom instruction. The directing style of the former high school principal was key to understanding the group dynamics of the high school English department.

The context of the rural setting no doubt contributed to both the macro-cultural and micro-cultural findings. Having a small school system where everyone knows everyone else and all educators interact to some extent certainly influences perceptions of leadership styles, logistical arrangements, communication patterns, and sense of professional home in the macro-culture. In the micro-cultural findings, the rural context may be especially significant in contributing to the isolation associated with the perception of subject domain specialization, especially since it is only in small districts that there would be many “one-of-a-kind” courses. The small school environment seems less important to the group dynamics within sub-groups and to the conversational routines established in the sub-groups. However, the size of the educational system may be associated with minimal need to establish a feeling of professional home in a sub-group, since the school and district are small enough to provide that sense of belonging.

**Academic Climate, School Improvement, and Professional Learning Communities**

The findings suggest that the professional collaboration at this site at the time of the study would fit firmly into the continuing and interwoven research on the importance of academic climate, the development of school reform initiatives, and the emergence of professional learning communities. The study adds to scholarly understanding of these intertwined research strands by showing the complications of real-life professional practice in context and providing insights into the relationships among sub-group factors.
and collaboration related to the fields of school climate, reform, and communities of learning.

While giving strong corroboration to previous research on academic climate, the study presents a more complex picture of teacher agency in school improvement and highlights the difficulties of transforming teacher sub-groups into professional learning communities.

Confirming the significance of well-established, positive academic attitudes in this macro-culture, the study adds to the research on the importance of school climate (Hoy, Tarter & Hoy, 2006; Felner et al., 1997, 2000, 2001; Hernandez-Gates et al., 1995; Green, 1998; Crosnoe et al., 2004). Academic climate sets the context in which professional collaboration and student learning might occur. The macro-culture of the Riverside district provided a deep, ingrained sense of high expectations and academic focus set in a personalized, nurturing environment. The strong sense of caring about students and fellow faculty members was central to understanding the macro-culture (Green, 1998; Crosnoe et al., 2004). Riverside faculty members were proud of the nurturing environment they had co-created and saw that environment as critical to their academic accomplishment, in keeping with the declaration of Felner and his co-authors that “Personalizing the school environment is a central goal of efforts to transform America’s schools” (2007, p. 1). Teachers overwhelmingly saw peer-to-peer interactions as a way to reach academic goals and help students as well as each other. The substance and tenor of the daily discourse and actions within and among the faculty sub-groups exhibited a high degree of the quality Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006) called academic optimism, the cultural construct of cognitive focus, belief in collective and individual
agency, and trust in each others’ shared goals and support. In this case, the small size and rural nature of the school district seemed to have contributed to the positive academic climate. At the least, the study adds to the literature of academic climate by showing its importance in the professional lives of teachers in a rural setting.

This study’s findings complicate research on school improvement by suggesting that the results and cohesiveness of teachers’ collaboration in instructional improvement may seem scattered or unfocused in the absence of shared, organizationally-supported, instructionally-based planning efforts involving teachers. Several previous studies of school reform have focused on how school organizational dynamics relate to educator attitudes and interactions and to the resultant learning environments (Lee & Smith, 1995; Bidwell et al., 1997; Kemple, 2005; Henderson et al., 2005). Despite, or perhaps because of, the Riverside district’s seemingly having already achieved the strong sense of community often associated with successful school reform efforts (Lee & Smith, 1995), teacher participation in school improvement was viewed as important but was not evidenced as contributing universally to teacher feelings of collective agency as previous research has found (Lee et al, 1991; Tschannen-Morn and Barr, 2004). Riverside had a long history of continuous improvement. While Riverside teachers felt that they shared a vision about what needed to happen to ensure continuing school improvement, there was much less commonality in views about decision-making processes for identifying and achieving needed improvements and in feelings of micro-culture agency for change. Within focal sub-groups, three of the four felt that they were participating collaboratively in improvement efforts of some sort to some extent, but those groups did not describe sustained planning for identifiable, targeted school improvement.
Previous research has shown a strong relationship between successful improvement and shared or distributed leadership (Smylie et al., 2003; Sebring and Bryk, 2000; Copland, 2003) but has not focused on how group-based, meaningful planning structures can support instruction and build teacher agency. Riverside teachers felt that “improvements” were making a positive difference only in those situations where teachers were able to work collaboratively in small groups to develop both the framework and the details of change initiatives, for example designing the sixth grade academic building wing several years ago or periodically adjusting middle school student schedules for academic enrichment. Although fostering the discourse of small groups of faculty members working together to improve academic frameworks and student engagement was widely regarded as the most important “reform” initiative that was, could be, or ought to be happening at Riverside, this study saw unmet opportunity in building and sustaining an infrastructure for such collaboration. The lack of structured organizational support for classroom-related collaborative discourse for school improvement may relate to a lack of professional development for the professional learning community concept discussed below. The findings of this study thus add complexity to scholarly efforts to understand the role of teacher agency in school improvement.

I also found it interesting that several previous studies of school reform have examined ways in which the academic climates of large school systems were improved through creating smaller learning communities (sometimes called “houses” or “schools within schools”) that would allow for more nurturing, personalized instruction (Lee & Smith, 1995; Lee et al., 1995; Kemple, 2005). Riverside educators’ universal praise for the ways in which the Riverside macro-culture supported their positive professional
growth and feelings of professional home suggests that this rural school system was exactly the type of context that many school restructuring efforts were seeking to establish. The findings of this study in a rural school district contribute to our understanding of how school size may influence school improvement initiatives centered around establishing positive academic climate.

Despite occasional interview references to professional learning communities and a vague sense that Riverside was using the concept, Riverside’s focal sub-groups rarely functioned with the systemic formal organization of professional learning communities as identified by McLaughlin and Talbert (2001, 2002, 2006) and others (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; King & Newmann, 2001; Hargreaves, 2003, 2007). Teachers experienced peer-to-peer networking and cooperation among colleagues, but the sub-groups did not often rise to a high level of consistent, organized collaboration focusing on sharing pedagogical knowledge and implementing new instructional practices. The most successful collaborative sub-groups had firmly established two of the three types of essential collaborative actions identified by McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) but lacked consistent achievement of the third key component. Both the sixth grade team and the English department had created shared language, vision, and standards for practice in keeping with the first of the three types of essential collaborative action; both the sixth grade team and the English department were actively involved in sustaining school culture in keeping with the second component; however, even these most collaboratively successful sub-groups had unmet opportunities in terms of consistently building and managing knowledge to improve classroom instructional practice. This phenomenon of less than ample focus on specific instructional practices may be typical of schools trying
to establish what they interpret as learning communities without the intervention of outside experts and without a great deal of organized support for putting the concept into practice in terms of specific discourse. In this case, I had the impression that teachers and administrators had experienced no professional development upon which to build their knowledge and thus could not be expected to have transformed faculty sub-groups into professional learning communities. Thus this study adds complexity to the associated research on professional learning communities by highlighting the need for strong organizational support, including engaging faculty members in the specifics of learning how to build instructionally based collaborative discourse.

Overall, the school macro- and micro-cultures at Riverside exhibited considerable evidence of having internalized some aspects of the interwoven initiatives of academic climate, school improvement, and, to a lesser extent, professional learning communities: educators were experiencing a personalized, nurturing, and academically optimistic school environment; working toward school improvement based on communal vision; and attempting to build faculty communities of learning through shared goals, shared resources and processes, and shared leadership evolving over time. However, only in the aspect of academic climate, which seemed to have been built and nurtured almost intuitively, did the Riverside macro- and micro-cultures consistently experience the strongest levels of collective agency.

All three of these related sub-sets of educational research (academic climate, school improvement, and professional learning communities) emphasize the sense of collective educator responsibility for student success. Although the findings of this study suggest complexity in this rural district’s efforts to build on the positive academic climate
through focused improvement achieved through professional learning communities, the findings establish a relationship between professional collaboration and collective responsibility, which was deeply felt and universally shared among participants in the study.

As I sought to determine the intricacies of the blended roles of macro- and micro-cultural factors in influencing professional collaboration, I found that factors of academic climate, school reform, and professional learning communities can interact in a particular context. The strong academic climate of the macro-culture was a major contributor to professional collaboration; the supportive academic climates within the sixth grade team and English department contributed heavily to their professional agency. Inconsistent and incomplete macro-culture support for school improvement was linked to somewhat mixed-message leadership styles and led to mixed feelings of “we’re working together and headed in the right direction” although “we’re not quite sure where we’re going and not quite sure we’re getting there” [paraphrased] in current district- and school-based initiatives; the micro-cultures of the sub-groups reflected those mixed sentiments, although the most successful sub-groups felt a strong sense of agency in decision-making for improvement within their own realms. Lack of macro-cultural knowledge and experience in developing professional learning communities resulted in faculty sub-groups having considerable unmet opportunity in developing discourse practices to help each other to improve classroom instruction.

Thus, this study adds to our understanding of how factors of academic climate, school improvement, and professional learning communities blend and interweave to help determine the nature and extent of professional collaboration.
Limitations

As a case study, this research was conducted in one small, rural school system and focused on a limited number of sub-groups of educators. Participating individuals might not be typical of educators in general or of grade level team members or academic department members in general. Because the sample is small and idiosyncratic, there is no way to establish the probability that data collected would be representative of data from a larger population.

Educators in the sub-groups studied most closely had long-standing professional relationships. The two new teachers who participated were not members of the focal sub-groups and thus were not studied closely, although each was interviewed on two occasions. All interviewed members of the focal sub-groups had been part of the school macro-culture for at least several years, although some specific classroom assignments had changed. Thus, the socio-cognitive collaborative relationships had developed over time and might not provide sufficient evidence of how collaborative group dynamics emerge and develop.

Case study researchers must constantly draw upon their own knowledge and judgment in determining data to be collected and how data should be interpreted. Such decision-making can never be objective. As the interwoven intricacies and detail of developing data become richer, they also present continuing challenges for determining relevance and relationships. Data collection and analysis always occur from the perspective of the researcher. In this case, my background as a long-time teacher and professional developer and my previous role as a researcher visiting this district have certainly influenced the gathering and interpretation of data.
Although the depth and complexity of case study data can illuminate ways in which interwoven factors influence each other, it would be inappropriate to draw universally applicable conclusions about cause-and-effect relationships from this study.

**Implications**

As a nested case study, this research focused on looking closely at the interactions of particular groups of teachers in particular contexts. A case study, by its very nature, cannot lead to generalized conclusions delineating applications for future reform of educational practice. It can, however, provide insight into avenues to be explored in future research.

This research suggests that the links among macro- and micro-cultural factors are complex. Establishing the importance of interwoven cultural factors in influencing the nature and extent of collaboration in this rural setting, the study suggests a myriad of opportunities for further examination.

Additional research in other settings might examine aspects of whether and how macro-cultural and micro-cultural group dynamics fostering teachers’ feelings of professional pride and agency contribute to successful teacher collaboration. For example, in this study the contrasting leadership styles of the middle school principal and the former high school principal suggested that more collaborative agency is engendered by empowering rather than directive administrative approaches. This raises the question of how administrative leadership styles in other districts contribute to teacher agency as a factor in the nature and extent of teacher collaboration, and how those leadership styles “trickle down” into the organizational models teacher sub-groups adopt. Similarly, on another but related aspect of group dynamics, this study found collaborative significance
to the communication patterns such as silos and networks that had developed over time. The rural setting of this study may have been a significant factor in the findings related to group dynamics. The small, close-knit school community might have influenced teachers’ perceptions of the leadership styles and communication patterns that worked well in developing collaborative teacher agency. It would be interesting to see whether contrasts or similarities in the influence of group dynamics might be found in non-rural districts or in other rural districts. There is considerable opportunity for future examination of how directing versus sharing or empowering leadership styles and how organizational silos and networks affect collaboration in other schools and teacher sub-groups.

In this study, I found that logistical support for close and frequent teacher communication within sub-groups was among the keys to effective professional collaboration. Future studies might focus on the collaborative significance of teacher opportunities for continuing day-to-day professional conversation with colleagues and how school systems can best provide such opportunities. Recognizing that middle schools have considerable advantage in building grade level team communication opportunity, it might be especially useful to examine any high schools that have tried similar arrangements for routine professional discourse within academic departments or among grade level colleagues. What would such arrangements look and feel like, and how would they affect the nature and extent of sub-group collaboration?

Also ripe for further examination is the influence of sub-group factors on teacher dialogue for mutual classroom instructional assistance. In this study, I found that significant teacher discourse on the specifics of classroom instruction occurred only in
those sub-groups where teachers felt less specialized in their academic domains and where instruction was seen as sequentially and progressively skill building and thus related to the work that other teachers were doing. For example, Riverside educators attributed the lack of science department instructional collaboration to the specialized nature of the science courses in this small school, where each science speciality was typically taught by only one teacher. In contrast, notable previous research on collaboration within science departments has focused on large, city schools such as Rancho (Siskin & Little, 1995), where science department members experienced a great deal of commonality and collegiality in their teaching. Future research might look closely at multiple examples of science departments in other small schools to determine whether and how the barrier of perceived specialization might be overcome to allow for collaborative dialogue assisting colleagues with specific instructional practices. In this study, the background of sixth grade teachers as former elementary educators contributed to their generalized knowledge of all subjects and fostered collaborative discourse specific to classroom instruction. Sixth grade teacher teams in other settings might be studied to explore in more depth if and how their more generalized, less specialized educational background contributes to their collaborative expertise. In this study, both a long-time former writing initiative and a new writing curriculum contributed strongly to the collaborative discourse within the high school English department. High school English departments in multiple schools might be studied to explore in more detail how the nature and extent of their collaboration is influenced by school-wide reading or writing initiatives.
It would be interesting to see the extent to which group dynamic and communication patterns such as those I have identified could be verified as important factors influencing the nature and extent of collaboration in a variety of teacher sub-group micro-cultures.

In general, I found the small, close-knit macro-culture in this rural school system to be especially significant in providing a favorable context for teacher collaboration. Teachers universally credited the overall educational culture for providing academic focus, can-do spirit, and sense of professional home. Since so many previous studies of professional culture and collaboration have focused on urban school systems, there seems to be particular opportunity for examination of the relationships between culture and collaboration in rural schools.

**Conclusion**

Overall, this case study provides insight into the relationships between school culture and collaboration and highlights the importance of formal and informal professional interactions within and across elements of the macro- and micro- cultures. I found that in this rural setting successful professional collaboration was fostered by group interactions in which teachers feel professional agency and pride of belonging, experience continuing instructional communication with peers, and focus on helping each other to build classroom instructional skill. The macro-culture of school and district and the micro-culture of the peer-based faculty sub-group both seem to exert considerable influence on the nature and extent of teachers’ professional collaboration.
References


Peterson, K.D. & Brietzke, R. (1994). *Building collaborative cultures: Seeking ways to reshape urban schools.* Oak Brook, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.


Appendix A. Participant Consent Letter and Form

Circles of Culture: A Sociocognitive Study of Professional Collaboration within and among Academic Groups of Teachers

September 2009

Dear Teacher,

Have you ever thought about the nature, extent, and possible value of professional collaboration in your school, academic department, or grade level team—or in your own daily life as a teacher?

As a Ph. D. student in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the State University of Albany, I will be conducting a qualitative research study at your school on the topic of professional collaboration within and among academic groups of teachers. I hope that you will choose to participate in the study, which will be conducted from September 2009 through February 2010.

Educator perspectives on the role of professional collaboration will be gathered through a general questionnaire (see attached), interviews with selected teachers and administrators, field notes on meetings and other observations, and collection of related documents. No classes will be observed. Research visits to the school will be non-invasive, and no risk to participants is anticipated.

The anticipated benefits of the study include 1) participants’ opportunity to reflect on the nature, extent, and possible value of collaboration in their own professional lives and 2) contribution to a growing body of research on the role and importance of teachers’ professional collaboration.

All faculty members are invited to complete the questionnaire, which will be used for general information and to help identify several departments and grade level teams for further study. Members of selected groups will be interviewed individually, with interviews of thirty to forty minutes in most cases. Meetings of selected groups will also be observed. Interviews and meetings may be audio-taped, with permission.

Participation in the research study is voluntary, and no data will be collected without participants’ written permission. All individual responses will be kept confidential, and the identity of the school and particular respondents will be protected. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time, and any decision to withdraw will be kept confidential. All participants will need to sign the attached consent form. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University at Albany’s Office of Regulatory Research Compliance at 518-442-9050 or orrc@uamail.albany.edu.

If you would like additional information, please contact me by phone (518-587-8450) or email (lalbaker@aol.com) or consult with me during one of my visits to your school. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Arthur Applebee, by phone (518-442-5206) or email (aapplebee@uamail.albany.edu).
I look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely,

Linda L. Baker, Ph.D. Student

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Circles of Culture:
A Sociocognitive Study of Professional Collaboration
within and among Academic Groups of Teachers

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read the information in the attached letter. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in the research study of teacher collaboration conducted by Linda Baker, a Ph. D. student in Educational Theory and Practice at the University at Albany, from September 2009 through February 2010 at my school.

I understand that participation is voluntary, that the confidentiality of those who participate will be protected, and that no data will be collected without the participants’ written permission. I also understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time and that my decision to withdraw will be kept confidential.

_______________________________       ________________________
Name (printed)       Title and School

_______________________________       __________________________________________
Signature       Email address

Date

Please sign below if you are willing to have your interview or meeting audio-recorded. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview/meeting recorded.

_______________________________
Signature

Please return to: Linda Baker
Department of Educational Theory & Practice
University at Albany
1400 Washington Ave.
Albany, NY 12222
Appendix B: Preliminary Questionnaire

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONNAIRE

Studying Professional Collaboration within and among Teachers’ Academic Groups

If you are willing to be a part of this study, please sign the attached consent form and submit it with your survey. Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

1. What is your academic department? ____________________________________________

2. What grade level(s) do you teach? ____________________________________________

3. a. How many years have you taught? _________

   b. How many years have you taught in this subject area? _________

   c. How many years have you been a member of your current academic department? _______

   d. How many years have you been part of an interdisciplinary grade level team? ________

4. a. Please describe any working together that you do with other teachers in your subject area to support instruction. Please note the specific purpose(s) and nature of such collaboration as well as how often it occurs.

   b. How important or helpful do you consider such collaboration to be?

5. a. Please describe any working together that you do with other teachers of the same grade level to support instruction. Please note the specific purpose(s) and nature of such collaboration as well as how often it occurs.

   b. How important or helpful do you consider such collaboration to be?

6. Please suggest any group(s) of teachers that work well together in addressing instructional issues and note why you think their collaboration is successful.

Your name__________________________________________ Date________________________

Please be sure to sign the consent form before submitting your questionnaire.
Appendix C: Interview Questions

ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW

Studying Professional Collaboration within and among Teacher Academic Groups

Name __________________________________________ Title__________________________

1. How does this school determine needed changes or improvements? What instructionally
related initiatives or improvements have been instituted here recently?
   a. Which of these initiatives were policy decisions (i.e. organizational mandates or
guidelines) and which were procedural (i.e. focused on day-to-day planning and delivery of
instruction)?
   b. How was each project started and developed?
   c. Who was involved in initiating the work for each project? How, if at all, were additional
people brought into the process? How, if at all, were you personally involved?
   d. How was this policy or procedural change ensured or enforced?
   e. What changes have you seen as a result of each initiative?

2. What have your experience and educational philosophy led you to believe about the types of
initiatives, if any, which probably benefit from teacher collaboration and the types of
initiatives, if any, which probably do not benefit from teacher collaboration?

3. As you think about educators working together to support instruction, what is your general
impression about the role that such professional collaboration plays in this school?

4. For what purposes and to what extent do administrators and teachers jointly collaborate
here?

5. What role, if any, do you think administrators should play in fostering professional
collaboration among teachers? How, if at all, have you personally interacted with faculty
regarding collaboration?

6. What do you see as the role of collaboration, if any, in helping new teachers professionally?
   a. If you were hiring a new teacher, what would you tell him or her about teachers working
together here to help each other to build strong instruction?
   b. Please explain any program in place to provide mentoring for new teachers.

7. a. What do you see as the value, if any, of teachers working together professionally?
   b. What do you see as the drawbacks, if any, of teachers working together professionally?

8. Which groups of teachers do you see collaborating most often or most purposefully?
   a. What differences, if any, do you see in the extent and types of collegial interactions
undertaken or valued by members of different academic departments?
   b. What differences, if any, do you see in the extent and types of collegial interactions
undertaken or valued by teachers at different grade levels?

9. How, if at all, do you see teacher collaboration being organized or facilitated?
   a. What is the nature and extent of any teacher collaboration that is likely to be formally
organized here, perhaps taking place through structured meetings?
   b. When do teachers and instructional leaders meet to discuss what to do?
   c. What are some examples of teachers working together that you see taking place
informally?

10. What are the topics on which you think teachers are most likely to collaborate?
11. How do you feel that instruction has benefited, if at all, from teachers’ professional collaboration with colleagues?

12. In general, how and to what extent, if at all, do groups of teachers act together to have a positive influence on learning at this school?

### TEACHER INTERVIEW

**Studying Professional Collaboration within and among Teacher Academic Groups**

**Teacher Name ____________________________ Subject ____________ Grade _____**

1. How does this school determine needed changes or improvements? What instructionally related initiatives or improvements have been instituted here recently?
   a. Which of these initiatives were policy decisions (i.e. organizational mandates or guidelines) and which were procedural (i.e. focused on day-to-day planning and delivery of instruction)?
   b. How was each project started and developed?
   c. Who was involved in initiating the work for each project? How, if at all, were additional people brought into the process? How, if at all, were you personally involved?
   d. How was this policy or procedural change ensured or enforced?
   e. What changes have you seen as a result of each initiative?

2. What have your experience and educational philosophy led you to believe about the types of initiatives, if any, which probably benefit from teacher collaboration and the types of initiatives, if any, which probably do not benefit from teacher collaboration?

3. As you think about educators working together to support instruction, what is your general impression about the role that such professional collaboration plays in this school?

4. What role, if any, do school administrators take in fostering or facilitating teachers’ professional collaboration to improve student learning?
   a. For what purposes and to what extent do administrators and teachers jointly collaborate?
   b. How, if at all, do the respective administrator and teacher roles vary depending on whether initiatives are policy based or related to day-to-day planning and delivery of instruction?
   c. How, if at all, has your participation in a particular initiative been influenced by an administrator?

5. How and to what extent do you feel a sense of “professional home” among a group of teachers with whom you work?
   a. What professional factors contribute to any feeling of connection or isolation that you experience?
   b. What expectations for collaboration do you see among the teachers with whom you work? How do these expectations differ, if at all, from the expectations you personally had when you first started teaching? How have your expectations for collaboration changed over time and what factors have influenced that change?
6. What do you see as the role of collaboration, if any, in helping new teachers professionally?
a. What professional mentoring procedures, if any, are in place here to support new teachers?
b. How and to what extent has your department or grade level team provided mentoring?
   How and to what extent have you been personally involved?
c. What are some of the topics and types of professional interactions that you have seen as part of collaborative efforts to help new teachers?
d. How helpful do you think it has been for new teachers to work together with experienced teachers?

7. What do you see as the value, if any, or drawbacks, if any, of teachers working together professionally?
a. What types of professional interaction with colleagues, if any, do you think members of your department value?
b. What types of interaction with colleagues, if any, do you think are valued by your colleagues who teach at the same grade level(s)?

8. How, for what purpose, and with whom do you personally collaborate most often, if at all?

9. How, if at all, do you see teacher collaboration being organized or facilitated in your school?
a. How much of your collaboration, if any, is formally structured?
b. When do teachers and instructional leaders meet to discuss what to do?
b. What types of informal interactions, if any, do you use for professional collaboration?

10. What types of projects or topics, if any, are most likely to involve your personal collaboration?
a. To what extent are these initiatives policy based and to what extent are they related to day-to-day instructional processes?
b. What are some instructional topics, if any, on which you have recently worked with colleagues?

11. How do you feel that your teaching has benefited, if at all, from collaboration with colleagues?

12. In general, how and to what extent do groups of teachers act together to have a positive influence on learning at this school?
## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the role of teacher professional collaboration in the culture of this district and its middle school and high school?

2. How does participating teachers’ membership in particular subject area departments and inter-disciplinary grade level teams influence the nature and extent of any professional collaboration and the value teachers ascribed to such collaboration?

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<th>TIME FRAME</th>
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<td>B. Idea of Most Collaborative Group in School</td>
<td>• Questionnaire</td>
<td>September</td>
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<td>September-February</td>
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Appendix E: Sample Diagrams of Leadership and Communication Dynamics

**Leadership Styles**

**DIRECTING**

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M M M
M M M
M M M
```

**MODELING**

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MM
MM
MM
MM
M
```

**COACHING**

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M
M M M
M M M
M L M
M M M
M M M
M
```

**SHARING**

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M
M M M
M M M
M M M
M M M
M M M
M L M
M
```

**EMPOWERING**

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M
M M M
M M M
M M M
M M M
M M M
M
```

**Communication Patterns: Silos**

```
6 7 8
ELA S.S. Sci Math Other
```

**Communication Patterns: Networks**

- Network of Dr. Mason, Former Super-Hub
- Network of Mrs. Craig, Current Informal Super-Hub