USING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES TO INCREASE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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by

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of using common planning time and teacher collaboration in professional learning communities with the intent of increasing student achievement at B.M.C. Durfee High School in Fall River, Massachusetts. Focus groups with teachers (n=29) and interviews with administrators (n=10) were used to gather detailed explanations of perceptions relative to common planning and teacher collaboration. Organizational change and socio-cultural learning theories informed the analysis of the data which was guided by three research questions as follows:

1) What impact on instruction and student learning do teachers and administrators believe has occurred as a result of teacher collaboration and professional development which has been brought about through the introduction of common planning time at B.M.C. Durfee High School?

2) Has common planning time benefited teachers as perceived by teachers and administrators, and if so, how has it benefited them?

3) How do teachers and administrators perceive the products of common planning time at B.M.C. Durfee High School (i.e., the creation of common curriculum, common student products, and common assessments) to be an effective means of improving student achievement at the school?

Qualitative coding of administrator interviews and teacher focus groups showed that administrators and teachers believed that the use of common planning time in professional learning communities as practiced at B.M.C. Durfee High School during the 2011-2012 academic school year had a significant impact on teaching and student learning.
Keywords: common planning time, professional learning communities, improving student achievement, teacher collaboration, common curriculum
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Chapter I: Introduction

This research examined the advantages and disadvantages of using common planning time and teacher collaboration in professional learning communities in pursuit of increased student achievement as perceived by teachers and administrators in B.M.C. Durfee High School, in Fall River, Massachusetts. The Fall River Public School District is an urban school district serving a culturally and socio-economically diverse population of over 10,000 students. To ensure students are adequately prepared for assessments and other standardized testing, e.g., the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), teachers and administrators were directed to focus their instructional practices on skills and strategies that align to the state standards. However, students in the Fall River Public School District (FRPS) were not meeting the state’s academic standards for several years, as assessed through annual MCAS testing. Therefore, it was perceived that as more students graduate, many were not adequately prepared for college coursework and post-secondary expectations. It was perceived by FRPS and Durfee High School administration that due to a lack of effective professional development and training programs, teachers were not communicating similar expectations in relation to the creation of lessons, assessments, and classroom rigor that could ultimately impact student success as measured by the state’s tests.

In response to this shortcoming, during the academic school year of 2010-2011, the Durfee High School administration created structures and schedules that allow for common planning time so that teachers could collaborate in developing common lessons, assignments, and assessments that engage students with the expectation that more students would be proficient in targeted state expectations. The purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions of
teachers and administrators with regard to the advantages, disadvantages, and challenges of this strategy for raising student achievement as employed at Durfee High School.

**Problem of Practice**

As noted above, the greater majority of students attending Durfee High School for many years were identified as lacking proficiency as measured annually on the state’s annual student assessment, the MCAS. To attend to this issue, in 2010 the Fall River Public School District decided to adjust the high school schedule starting in the 2010-2011 school year to create opportunities for common planning with a focus on creating common assignments and common assessments as a vehicle for ongoing professional development and teacher collaboration that could significantly raise student achievement in the school. Drolet (2009) states that common planning time can be used to effectively support teachers in the review of student work. Furthermore, providing time for teachers to communicate can support teachers’ opportunity to collaboratively create strategies for classroom instruction in response to student needs. Guskey (2010) also notes that educators at all levels need time with job-embedded assistance as they struggle to adapt to new curricula and instructional practices. In addition, common planning time can provide colleagues the opportunity to gain a better understanding of expected outcomes.

In keeping with the above, Descamps-Bednarz (2007) stated that offering teachers and administrators time to collaborate is an investment. Time enables personnel to engage in reflective preparation and develops a culture of inquiry and collaborative practices. By offering time for colleagues to collaborate and gain a better understanding of proficiency requirements, administrators can develop relevant professional development and support a culture of reflection and learning. In addition, Bezzina (2006) has argued the importance of this professional training as it provides teachers with varied opportunities to extend their knowledge base in specific areas.
Given that passing the MCAS is now a graduation requirement in Massachusetts and that most students were not passing the test, it became vital that teachers were given the adequate support and opportunities to understand the expectations of the state test and were able to work with one another to support students in meeting those expectations. Ultimately, the objective of this study was to determine how the educators participating in this initiative perceived the district’s planning time initiative as an effectively vehicle for increasing student achievement through a focus on common curriculum and common assessments during regularly scheduled common planning time. In so doing, the research may inform the current and future practices of collaboration amongst educators as a means towards increasing student achievement. This information may, in turn, provide further evidence of the importance of planning time for educators and its potential for increasing student achievement.

**Significance of this Study**

A gap exists in the research related to the value of professional learning communities at the high school level, and circumstances at the Fall River Public School District provides an opportunity to employ such strategies and gather data related to the impact on student achievement. The Fall River Public School District has experienced an ongoing challenge with student achievement as measured by performance on state mandated assessments. Subsequently, the decision was made to implement common planning time for professional learning communities and for designing standard curriculum aligned to the Common Core in an effort to improve test scores. Given that there has been an initiative by the school system to implement professional learning communities through the use of professional development times during the school day, this study contributes to the field by assessing educators’ perspectives of such an initiative. This study has the potential to afford Fall River Public School District officials, local
school boards, administrators and teachers the opportunity to effectively understand the perceptions of educators and their overall interpretations of professional learning communities as well as effectiveness in supporting instructional practices. By having access to a broader research base relative to the value of professional learning communities, educational stakeholders may respond by creating more effective programs and services to enhance instructional designs and ultimately, overall student performance.

The necessity for studies such as this has become evident with directives given by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to the Fall River Public School District to improve specific areas of assessment through curriculum alignment and data utilization for informed instruction. The goals of these efforts are to ensure that students are equipped with learning habits and skills that enable them to succeed in performance assessments, post-secondary educational opportunities, professional careers, and potentially their lives. Benchmarks include an academically challenging curriculum, formative and summative assessments, and state evaluations. This is particularly important, as students are required to meet state assessments with a qualifying score of proficiency on the MCAS. However, many students at Durfee High School have been earning scores that deem them as “needs improvement” within the English content area. Therefore, it was seen as vital that the school make strides toward better preparing and supporting its teachers, administrators, and students by aligning curriculum and assessment expectations.

Because many states are moving towards curriculum frameworks that favor the alignment of curriculum and coursework to the Common Core Standards of 2010, these preparation efforts are significant for Durfee as well as the educational community-at-large. Given this national movement, teachers’ ability to be autonomous and independent within their classrooms has
shifted. These shifts have progressed towards explicit enactment of a common curriculum which includes scopes and sequences that encourage all teachers to be facilitating content similarly. In addition, it has become vital for teachers to be cognizant of assessments by calibrating their grading practices to effectively assess student work through the utilization of rubrics that align to the state graduation requirements. Therefore, allotting time for teachers to communicate, assess, and grow as a community may assist teachers and students in achieving success.

In response to the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Common Core Standards of 2010, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has charged districts with revising and implementing curriculum alignment (DESE, 2010); accordingly, Durfee High School must continue to align curriculum, quarterly benchmarks, and common products to inform instruction. The goal of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is to ensure “that high-quality academic assessments, accountability systems, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, and instructional materials are aligned with challenging state academic standards so that students, teachers, parents, and administrators can measure progress against common expectations for student academic achievement” (NCLB). Consequently, with recommendations from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and stimulus money from “Race To The Top” devoted to aligning teacher quality and professional development through leadership, it is evident that these current reforms efforts are underway.

Given these circumstances, it is imperative that Durfee High School demonstrates improvements in areas of curriculum and assessment to improve student outcomes. These improvements must include equitability in the classroom regarding state mandated skills and all students being college ready. In fact, it is imperative that all schools meet these standards. The Fall River School District was charged with raising rigor and expectations in an effort to raise
student achievement. Having completed the first year of deployment of the new strategies, it is valuable to get constructive feedback regarding the educators’ perspectives of the new strategies and their viability as effective mechanisms for improved student performance.

**Research Questions**

The following three research questions guided the focus and design of this qualitative study:

1) What impact on instruction and student learning do teachers and administrators perceive to have occurred as a result of teacher collaboration and professional development which has been brought about through the introduction of common planning time at Durfee High School?

2) Has common planning time benefited teachers as perceived by teachers and administrators, and if so, how has it benefited them?

3) How do teachers and administrators perceive the products of common planning time at Durfee High School (i.e., the creation of common curriculum, common student products, and common assessments) to be an effective means of improving student achievement at the school?

**Document Organization**

The remainder of this thesis presents the theoretical framework informing the research study, a literature review presenting literature relevant to the study, the research design, the research findings and analysis, and a discussion of the findings and their significance to the field.

**Theoretical Framework**

Organizational change and socio-cultural learning theories were reviewed with the goal of informing this study by providing context to the problem of practice introducing universal
curriculum in the context of professional learning communities through common planning time. Through these two theories we gain greater insight into the issues associated with system-wide change and leadership (Knapp & Siegel, 2008). This study also applies these learning theories to illuminate reasoning for educational reform, and inform the data obtained from the focus groups and interviews.

**Organizational change theory.** Organizational change theory, as presented by Jones and George (2011), is applicable to this study as the Fall River Public Schools undertook significant changes to their organization during the 2011-2012 for the explicit purpose of increasing student achievement and is the topic of this study. In this case, the study intends to apply the concepts of organizational change theory to gain the perspective of the educators on the effectiveness of institutionalized collaboration times and information sharing sessions (Van de Ven & Sun, 2011).

A study of organizational change suggests that the reaction of the individual, particularly in the educational sector, determines the effectiveness of change; more specifically, this change depends on individual perception of control (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). In order for change acceptance to occur, perceptions must change. Authors Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, (1999) noted that the perception of control throughout the organizational change impacts employees’ levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem, positive affectivity and risk tolerance. However, other empirical studies note that organizational change is situational. Therefore, enacting change is a question of the environmental influence that dictates its effectiveness. In relation to this study, with the information that educators have received from the collaborative environments, they are asked to provide their input on the organizational changes thus far (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Chawla & Kelloway, 2004; Miller, Johnson & Grau, 1994; Oreg, 2006; Wanberg & Banas,
2000). These responses cover their levels of trust in management and trust in social influence and how this impacts affective, cognitive and behavioral learning.

Many models of organizational change can be used to build and promote the culture of learning in the Fall River Public School District. This study is to gauge analytical measurements of the unique roles of organizational leadership within the school system. Although the Fall River Public School board has developed models specifically for programs serving students, these models may not necessarily address the cultural depth revealed in this study. This study’s framework reflects attitudes towards change in organizational structure and policies, which ultimately affect every component and function of the high school and district.

The model of this study was designed to use organizational change theory in the qualitative research process to explore educators’ perceptions towards common planning and teacher collaboration as it impacts the success of students. Bosworth (2000) noted, "Culture is the most pervasive influence in a school, and even seemingly minor steps to create a positive culture can have profound effects on students’ lives, yet it is frequently overlooked or taken for granted” (p. 6). What Bosworth was saying was that the goal of organizational change in shaping successful school culture is achieved through intangible structures and materials within the organization, policies and procedures, and the perceptions of educators in the effectiveness of their curricula.

Simply stated, organizational change theory applies to this study because the objective is to determine the value of collaboration from the perspectives of teachers and administrators. According to Jones and George (2011), organizational change is defined as "the movement of an organization away from its present state and toward some desired future state to increase its efficiency and effectiveness” (p. 15). These organizational changes involve alterations to
structures, strategies, personnel and processes, now underway at the Fall River Public Schools district.

Socio-cultural learning theory. The socio-cultural learning theory developed by Albert Bandura, a social psychologist, states that people learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling. Bandura (1993) noted the process of learning occurs through continuous reciprocal interaction of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental stimuli. Bandura posited that this learning process occurs through “reciprocal determinism,” which states that the interaction between the world and a person’s behavior in turn causes each other’s reactions (p. 22). Strauss (1996) stated that students are not blank slates to be filled with information. Student education provides an optimal environment for the direct application of socio-cultural learning theory.

Socio-cultural learning theory also was heavily influenced by psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who stated that the individual and the society around them are not mutually exclusive in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky contended that cognitive development in the educational sector is a developmental process involving social interactions and mediated by tools created from the societal and cultural environment. In turn, these social and cultural environments support development of collaborative efforts. However, Vygotsky also stated that it is vital that the individual educator serve as an active learner for the development process to occur. In the active learning environment, educators are constantly analyzing, searching for explanations, and speculating about relations between new and existing curricula (King, 1995).

In relation to professional learning communities, "This view [the socio-cultural perspective] has profound implications for teaching, schooling, and education” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 6-7). Vygotsky posited that the individual and their environment influence
learning. The learning process involves participation with peers that requires cognitive and communicative functions (Kublin, Wetherby, Crais, & Prizant, 1998). Vygotsky emphasized two aspects of social interaction that stimulate learning. The first aspect is culture, while the second involves the individual’s pattern of development (Adamson & Chance, 1989). Both aspects involve learning from reactions and interpretations from social interactions. After several experiences of supported actions, the individual eventually learns that this action has cultural meaning.

Vygotsky also stressed that a learning experience should make the educator strive to meet high student achievement expectations. He stated that educators must provide appropriate support to students through standardized activities to stimulate students to interact with other students and faculty members to achieve high levels of development (Nordvall & Braxton, 1996). In order to ensure these activities are successful in maximizing student development and learning, Vygotsky stressed the processes of humanistic orientation of mentoring, modeling, nurturing, and participation in a social environment are vital.

Vygotsky’s theory directly relates to the Fall River District’s professional learning communities strategy. Educators’ perceptions of their personal value to the district may contribute to student performance. Educators who display high efficiency, and ultimately a greater feeling of being able to succeed in educating students, may be more likely to have a positive perception of collaborative efforts and curriculum alignment. Their perception of professional learning communities in conjunction with their sense of learning within this environment may positively impact student ability to succeed in various academic areas.

Vygotsky emphasized this communicative learning process as the connection process, or scaffolding. He stated that this process is vital to learning, as it calls for the creation of support
programs to extend current skills and knowledge. With these support programs, strategies are developed to make connections with new and existing materials. Essentially, this process pools together student educational stimulation strategies to heighten the knowledge of the educators by simplifying their tasks (Hausfather, 1996). Scaffolding is used in this study because it has been demonstrated to have positive effects in the educational sector. The process is designed to simplify new knowledge into existing educational models in order to foster student independence and active participation in the classroom.

Bandura (1993) noted that another essential aspect of socio-cultural learning theory is self-efficacy. This theory states that all individuals are motivated to achieve due to belief in their own competence to successfully perform a task. Therefore, their learning in social environments should stimulate their self-efficacy by making advanced curricula knowledge more about self-comparison than competition. The raised self-efficacy, in turn, promotes improved performance from educators and increased student academic achievement (Bandura, 1993). The process also calls for teachers and students to select activities based on their levels of self-efficacy. The alignment of level of difficulty to levels of confidence enables them to control their learning, persist at tasks, and increase goal attainment by choosing tasks that challenge their existing knowledge (Grusec, 1992). From an educational perspective, the implementation of self-efficacy strategies has been shown to help educators and students relate prior knowledge to new knowledge while promoting positive academic achievement.

In short, socio-cultural learning theory suggests that learning is a social process, and the expectation of the common planning time initiative is to explicitly support teacher learning through their social interaction. Essentially, this theory helps us to understand school district
reform because individual participation in a group activity, practice amongst groups, and the
value of community, all may influence learning through ongoing social interaction.

Summary

It has been suggested by researchers that educators’ perceptions can influence their
implementation of state education standards and curriculum alignment; therefore, it is fitting that
the theories of organizational change and socio-cultural learning provide the framework for the
research. These theories may provide an explanation to educators why their perception of
professional learning communities and curriculum alignment in relation to student academic
success is so important. This appears to be especially pertinent when addressing the issue of
below average standardized test scores at Durfee High School. The manner in which educators
view their learning environment overall may directly impact their students’ academic
achievement. Also important are educators’ perceptions of their own self-efficacy through
collaborative experiences. Exploring the issue of collaborative planning times through these
various theoretical lenses may inform educators’ subjective feedback regarding the initiative and
its utility.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the current literature as it relates to benefits of
professional learning communities and use of common planning time for educator professional
development. This review of the literature is presented in the following three areas: (a) the use
of common planning, common lesson planning, and common assessments, (c) the research on
professional learning communities, their benefits and challenges, and (c) the issues and
challenges to implementing effective professional learning communities. The literature review
documents what may be a shift in the overall focus on the effectiveness of professional learning
communities and collaborative efforts based on the cumulative accounts of research dedicated to this subject, including the use of common planning time.

**Common Planning, Common Lesson Planning, Common Assessments**

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has used a significant amount of research to design guidelines for school reform (Antonucci & Reville, 1995; DESE, 2010). This includes guidelines for common planning time, common assessments, and common lesson planning to align curriculum and use data to optimally inform educators in improving their instruction (Mertens, Flowers, Anfara, Jr. & Caskey, 2010). Additionally, professional learning communities, designed to ensure that students are equipped with learning habits and skills, are suggested to enable students to be successful on standardized tests, including the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) (Antonucci & Reville, 1995; DESE, 2010).

The literature focuses on the national movement toward professional learning communities to address the low student proficiency scores within specific content areas. The claim has been made that the movement towards curriculum frameworks in favor of aligning curriculum and coursework to the Common Core Standards may maximize resources as part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and the 2010 Common Core Standards (Mathis, 2010). The literature examines how the nationwide objective of these Common Core Standards were set in place to minimize repetition, gaps, and disruptions for students (Zwolak, 2011). It recommends that educators are to have the same curriculum to be able to share resources and reduce costs in the process of enhancing student learning and achievement. Apparently, the goal of the transition is to cultivate an environment of autonomy for educators by allotting time to
communicate, assess and grow as a community (Zwolak, 2011). This approach may be helpful in assisting teachers and students in achieving success.

The current need for collaborative planning resulted from the last twenty years of myopic efforts to improve school systems which lacked the infrastructural support necessary to instill a culture and framework for gains in educator performance and student academic success (Antonucci & Reville, 1995; DESE, 2010; Mertens, Flowers, Anfara, Jr. & Caskey, 2010). One could make the claim that the reason for the lack of success in these improvement initiatives was due primarily to a lack of interaction with colleagues in order to gain insight and levels of understanding necessary to stimulate their students within the curriculum. The research notes that the lack of interaction resulted in many teachers lacking the skills and knowledge needed to teach students successfully, let alone challenge them to achieve high-quality performance on standardized tests (Antonucci & Reville, 1995; DESE, 2010; Mertens, Flowers, Anfara, Jr. & Caskey, 2010). Furthermore, this seemed to result in confusion amongst administrators, as there were many schools where principals were unaware of how to optimize teacher performance in meeting educational needs. Therefore, the concept of collaborative learning communities began to surface in school day schedules in order to enhance educator interaction (Antonucci & Reville, 1995).

Common planning time and professional learning communities provide a structure for teachers and administrators to improve their educational strategies and learn new curricula (Antonucci & Reville, 1995; DESE, 2010). These collaborative efforts are believed to enable teachers and administrators to openly communicate in the middle of busy school days in order to be on the same page, while becoming more effective in achieving student academic success. Carmichael (1982) stated “students cannot raise their level of achievement until teachers become
more effective in their own practice” (p. 58). It was his belief that teachers need to learn first in these collaborative communities.

Collaborative communities may be provided through professional learning communities scheduled into the school day, as “teacher and administrator learning is more complex, deeper, and more fruitful in a social setting, where the participants can interact, test their ideas, challenge their inferences and interpretations, and process new information with each other” (Morrissey, 2000, p. 4). These collaborative communities may take the strain off the individual teacher to learn and convey new concepts and information involved in each new curriculum (Antonucci & Reville, 1995; Mertens, Flowers, Anfara, Jr. & Caskey, 2010). Additionally, collaborative efforts may produce new ideas through educator interaction, as teachers and administrators are enabled to communicate and learn multiple sources of knowledge and expertise to enhance their education.

Hord (1997) stated in his book, Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement, that there is no universal definition of a professional learning community. Specifically, he stated that these collaborative environments operate in five dimensions: “(1) supportive and shared leadership, (2) shared values and vision, (3) collective learning and application of learning (formerly identified as collective creativity), (4) supportive conditions, and (5) shared personal practice” (as quoted in Morrissey, 2000, p. 3-4).

Common planning time. The concept of a common planning period became increasingly popular in the 1970s after a report by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) was published in 1975 (Gatewood & Dilg, 1975). This ASCD report stated the physical and emotional development of the early adolescent age group needs to be a focus in these schools. George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane (1992) discussed
how the concept of a middle school education led administrators to support the theory of interdisciplinary teams with common planning periods. In 1994, editors Strahan and Hartman published an article where they stated that, “Exemplary middle schools are able to demonstrate positive outcomes related to academic achievement and student personal development” (p. 115). They listed the same nine common elements that George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane (1992) found were needed for middle schools to achieve this rating: classroom-based guidance efforts, interdisciplinary team organization, common planning time for a team of teachers, flexible scheduling, a curriculum emphasizing balanced exploration and solid academics, heterogeneous grouping whenever appropriate, instructional characteristics that consider learners’ characteristics, a wide range of special interest experiences, and collaboration between and among administrators. Strahan and Hartman (1994) stated the value of common planning time as having, “substantial positive outcomes in virtually every area of concern to educators and parents, including academic improvement” (p. 115).

**Origins of common planning time.** Peter Senge is credited with the development of collaborative communities in the education sector. In his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge (1990) stated that while all educators have the capacity to learn, it is necessary for structures to be in place that enable engagement and participation in an active community; “people are continually expanding their capacity to create the results they truly desire…” (p. 459). He stated that “personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking” (Senge, 1990, p. 459) are essential to properly institute collaborative communities. In essence, his book appears to have laid the framework for common planning time to be implemented by educators on a broad scale.
The movement toward common planning time was additionally spearheaded through the work of Louis and Kruse (1995); “Teacher effectiveness must, of course, be judged by what they do when they are involved in direct contact with students, but they are also members of an adult work world, that whether studied or not, effects what goes on in the classrooms” (Louis & Kruse, 1995, p. 30). The authors state that the continued learning of teachers is essential outside the classroom to sustaining an engaging and stimulating environment. They describe a professional learning community is an environment where teachers work together, reflecting on their instructional practices and providing recommendations on more effective and efficient strategies. However, in order for these collaborative communities to be used efficiently, their practices have to be directed toward student achievement (Louis & Kruse, 1995). It suggested that this ultimately may create a shared vision in which educators can observe and provide feedback and/or assistance for one another based on the fact that they have a universal goal and are teaching the same curriculum. As a result of this collaborative community, a sense of teamwork begins to develop, which improves “classroom motivation, work satisfaction, and greater collective responsibility for student learning” (Louis & Kruse, 1995, p. 45). Louis, Kruse and Marks (1996) expanded this concept of professional learning community and its impact on student achievement by conducting research on working conditions, job satisfaction, and sense of community. Their findings demonstrate that these factors contribute heavily to student achievement, and that these collaborative communities foster a teamwork culture.

Hord (1997) supported this study by examining administrators and their functions within collaborative communities. The author found that teachers led these professional development communities from multiple disciplines within the school, which in turn resulted in enhanced student achievement. Hord also noted that within these communities where teachers were put
into leadership roles, with input equal to that of the principal, a sense of community and teamwork was generated, which helped participants “to overcome the sense of isolation felt by secondary school teachers” (Hord, 1997, p. 5).

Hord’s primary research in her study was teacher development, which she found is heightened through common planning times (Hord, 1997). The claim was made that with all resources devoted to advancing the education of teachers, principals openly communicate with teachers on all aspects of student learning. This may result in sovereignty amongst the teaching staff and a stronger sense of community. A related study conducted by Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1995) found that schools with high functioning collaborative communities have a more significant impact on student academic success, with greater scores than traditionally organized schools with the same curriculum. These results are credited to be the product of less isolation amongst teachers, more commitment to the overall objectives of the school, and shared responsibility and accountability for student outcomes (Hord, 1997).

DuFour (1998) supported the work conducted by Louis and Kruse (1995) and Hord (1997), and expands the research stating that: “School reform initiatives have tended to focus on structural issues—policies, procedures, rules and relationships. Reform efforts generally overlooked the culture of a school—the assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norm for that school and that shape how its people think, feel and act” (p. 1-2). DuFour’s point seems to be that what makes these professional learning communities effective is that there is a culture of learning built around them. This, in turn, may increase the likelihood to ensure that the reform initiatives are successful in impacting student academic achievement. However, he reiterates the research completed by Louis and Kruse in stating that student learning is only
achieved through teacher education. Therefore, all efforts of collaborative communities amongst teachers and administrators must be focused around ensuring student education (DuFour, 1998).

A multi-year study conducted by Huffman and Hipp (2000) through the Southwest Education Development Laboratory, furthered the movement toward common planning time in schools. The authors found four common characteristics necessary to the success of any school:

1. Supportive and shared leadership: School administrators participated democratically with teachers sharing power, authority, and decision-making.

2. Shared values and vision: Staff shared a vision for school improvement that had an undeviating focus on student learning.

3. Collective learning and application of learning (collaboration): Teachers worked together to plan lessons and assessments. This high level of collaboration allowed teachers to make curricula decisions as a team of teachers rather than on an individual basis.

4. Supportive conditions and shared personal practice: School administrators put in place certain conditions to assist in the development of a professional learning community.

These structures included time in the school day for teachers to meet and collaborate (Morrissey, 2000, p. 18).

All of these characteristics seemed to be facilitated through collaborative communities. In 2003, Sparks wrote an article for the National Staff Development Council supporting this point stating that, “some of the most important forms of professional learning occur in daily interactions among teachers in which they assist one another in improving lessons, deepening understanding of the content they teach, analyzing student work, examining various types of data
on student performance, and solving the myriad of problems they face each day” (Sparks, 2003, p. 402). Sparks suggests that this communication amongst educators is the primary aspect of collaborative communities; therefore, it may be vital there are meaningful relations formed where teachers can thrive in a learning environment. This environment might include activities focused on enhancing student achievement.

DuFour (1998) stressed that collaborative communities need to embody these five characteristics of “shared values and vision, a focus on learning, collective responsibility, reflective inquiry, and collaboration” (p.1), or else the “term…is in danger of losing all meaning” (p. 2). He states that the collaboration amongst teachers is only effective if it is focused on monitoring each student’s progress in learning. He adds that this attention can be achieved only through a system, as there is not enough time in a day to assess each student; therefore, he suggests that time be allotted to teachers through common planning time and professional development periods where they can work with students having difficulty grasping the curriculum. DuFour additionally states that common planning time must be focused on the teachers’ understanding of what they want students to learn, how to assess if students have learned, and the procedure in response to struggling students.

DuFour and Marzano (2009) expanded on this concept by stating that collaborative communities and common planning times are essential for the high school level, and that teams in different disciplines need time to meet, if only to demonstrate the school’s commitment to student achievement. In a related study by Williamson (2007), the author posited that “creating a school culture that welcomes collegial conversation about curricular and instructional practices, that is built on the belief that through these conversations schools improve, and that views
challenging and difficult issues as an opportunity for improvement is the hallmark of the nation’s most successful schools” (p. 50).

**Professional Learning Communities**

The literature reviewed in this section focuses on the impact of professional learning communities. Epstein and MacIver (1990), research scientists at John Hopkins University, stated “interdisciplinary teams of teachers are considered by many to be a key organizational feature of middle grades education” (p. 37). In their view, the educational philosophy needs to include collaborative environments for educators. These authors researched and wrote several theoretical pieces and empirical studies regarding the usage and implementation of professional learning communities.

Much of the literature covers how time for educators’ strategic planning enhances professional learning communities by enabling them to pool resources to meet and collaborate on interdisciplinary curriculum to achieve high student achievement (Pitton, 2001). “In theory, teachers on a team know how their students are doing in all subjects, discuss the needs for special help with other teachers, arrange extra time for learning, and so on” (Epstein & MacIver, 1990, p. 45). However, teams are only as successful as their administrators can make them. This concept of team-planning appears to be based on the premise that administration allows for professional learning communities: “Teachers could use one common planning period for teaming and one individual planning period for preparations for teaching” (p. 39).

By instituting professional learning communities at a district-wide level, teachers may integrate curriculum for classroom instruction (Antonucci & Reville, 1995). It is explained that time can be included to meet the needs of special education services and discuss students who are academically struggling and/or failing in their classes. Antonucci and Reville (1995) add that
teachers can schedule parent meetings during this time and prepare lessons that align with their colleagues’ with similar skill and standard expectations.

Another focus of the literature addressing this issue involves the financial implications of struggling schools with regard to student achievement. Professional learning communities have become a vital aspect of educational systems nationwide (Dufour and Marzano, 2009). These collaborative efforts in curriculum alignment may have become essential due to the No Child Left Behind Act and the adoption of the Common Core of State Standards as administrators must identify methods to keep within their budgetary constraints without affecting student performance. Cuts have been made in areas such as block scheduling, staffing, athletics, and other extra-curricular activities (Antonucci & Reville, 1995). The professional learning communities’ concept for the high school is no exception because the additional planning period for core teachers may generate a need for additional funding.

**Benefits of professional learning communities.** In 1999, Reyes, Scribner, and Paredes-Scribner supported the benefits of collaborative communities amongst educators while examining their implementation in under-performing Hispanic schools. Their findings revealed that these schools were at one time under-performing, but through the systemic structuring of collaborative community in each school, the educators were able to overcome limited resources to ensure improvements in student success rates. They noted that through the professional learning community times each day, teachers were able to gain insight, further education, and provide additional tutoring to struggling students, which enabled them to achieve enhanced student success. This was accomplished in spite of rising uncertainty in the local community surrounding the schools.
DuFour and Eaker (1998) emphasized the value of common planning time as it encourages collective involvement in identifying and addressing the needs of struggling students. The authors state that the purpose of collaborative communities is to promote the on-going education of teachers so that they have the support system necessary to execute reform initiatives on a school-wide level. Senge (2000) additionally supported this notion of professional learning communities in the education sector, as schools are intended to be a meeting of the minds where all learning is centered on collaboration. He indicates that this is possible only if the collaborative environmental structure is designed to enhance the skills and knowledge of teachers in all disciplines. As Smylie and Hart (1999) stated, “It has become increasingly clear that if we want to improve schools for student learning, we must also improve schools for the adults who work within them. . . . We have only recently come to understand that student learning also depends on the extent to which schools support the ongoing development and productive exercise of teachers’ knowledge and skills” (p. 430-431). The authors’ main point seems to be that the academic success of students is directly correlated with teacher learning.

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) stated that collaborative communities and common planning times are the only means of improving under-performing schools. The research found that collaborative communities with clearly defined goals, purpose, and roles, were critical to impacting student achievement rates. Leithwood and Louis (1998) supported this with research stating, “The task is not just to create a school organization capable of implementing the current set of reform initiatives . . . in the context of today’s turbulent environments. Rather, the task is to design an organization capable of productively responding, not only to such current initiatives in today’s environment, but to the needless number of initiatives, including new definitions of school effectiveness, that inevitably will follow” (p. 73-74).
Other researchers (Bolam et al., 2005; Morrissey, 2000) provided another perspective suggesting that the impact of common planning time and collaborative communities is to be experienced by students. “The goal is not to ‘be a professional learning community’” (Morrissey, p. 5). One of the primary aspects of common planning time is to provide “an effective professional learning community [with] the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning” (Bolam et al., p.5).

Little (2001) claimed that collaborative communities are essential to educational improvement. Louis and Kruse (1995) support this claim positing that schools “with a genuine sense of community and increased sense of work efficacy led to increased classroom motivation and work satisfaction, and greater collective responsibility for student learning” (Louis & Kruse, 1995, p. 171; Passi, 2010, p. 30). Bryk, Camburn, and Louis (1999) stated that, “If professional community in fact fosters instructional change, it does so by creating an environment that supports learning through innovation and experimentation” (p. 771). In their view, along with Rosenholtz (1989) and Louis and Marks (1998), a collaborative community that fosters learning effectively among teachers is directly related to student academic success at the high school level. They suggest that this is due to the confidence and practical application of the teacher’s instructional practices. In turn, they add that this trust in the teacher’s methods leads to higher quality thought in academic work projects, more substantive class discussions, increased connection and relation to topics at hand, and a generally more in-depth knowledge of what is being taught. Wiley (2001) conducted a study focused on high schools which found that students were more likely to achieve higher quality scores and succeed at increased levels in classrooms taught by a teacher who serve as part of a collaborative community. This report was supported
by Visscher and Witziers (2004) who conducted a study in the Netherlands on the link between collaborative communities and mathematics test scores. The authors’ findings suggest there is a significant positive correlation between the two at the junior high and high school levels. They write, “shared goals, joint decision-making, shared responsibilities, consultation and advice were important but insufficient to improve educational practice and, consequently, student achievement” (p. 223). They concluded the study by stating that the impact of collaborative communities is felt most when each departmental discipline

“...Consistently translate(s) their shared vision and willingness to cooperate into a system of rules, agreements and goals regarding teaching and instruction, and evolve(s) their professional activities around this by obtaining data on student performance, which in turn serves as a feedback mechanism for improving teaching and learning. This differs from a ‘softer’ approach stressing reflective dialogue, sharing materials, shared vision and the inner value of professional development” (p. 222-223).

Issues and Challenges in Implementing Professional Learning Communities

Emphasis has been placed on school climate or school culture as well as the impact that professional learning communities have on student achievement. Researchers Morrissey (2000) suggest that schools may be unknowingly contributing to the problem through the culture or climate they portray to student learners. While this may alarm educators, it may shed new light on where the future focus should lie.

Several challenges have been identified in the successful implementation of professional learning communities. Part of the literature in this section focuses on finding time for teachers and administrators to plan together by adjusting schedules accordingly (Morrissey, 2000). Additionally, there is then the issue of productive educator engagement and maximizing
productivity in their professional learning communities. This may require planning before the planning time, so that these sessions can be structured to make them an efficient use of time. However, these researchers also warn that this can prove to be a burden on administrators, as these planning times will occur several times per day in different departments each day.

Morrissey (2000) notes the inability to structure the learning communities can result in schools finding it challenging to focus their efforts simultaneously on implementing new district initiatives directed at preparing students for high stakes tests and on restructuring the school into small learning communities using inquiry-based, contextual learning strategies. Eventually, she warns that eventually, this time issue can cause schools to struggle with tensions resulting from decisions regarding how to effectively cluster students and teachers into small learning communities. Therefore, Morrissey warns that institutionalized professional learning communities can put undue pressure on teachers, as these professional development times are predicated on their desire to provide input into staffing decisions to ensure that students have equal access to a variety of learning methods. It would seem that these staffing decisions could clash with the culture of their student body, which may result in inadequate levels of staffing for bilingual teachers to transition students into English.

Time. The issue of time is most important when developing collaborative communities for educators. Morrissey (2000) indicates that as communication between teachers and administrators is central to the success and value of professional learning communities it is vital that these relations are nurtured and maintained through adequate time allotment. With an ordinate amount of time per day, teachers and administrators enhance their opportunities for “collective learning, problem solving, and decision-making” (Morrissey, p. 5). However,
adequate learning and planning time can be difficult, as it may never be fully adequate, as the use of this time always will remain an issue.

Antonucci and Reville (1995) note that time is where the issue of educator productivity comes into play, as it is vital that there are goals established to develop and sustain improvement. They suggest that it is important that educators act as a community where there is free exchange of ideas and knowledge in the direction of improving the school and the articulation of goals. This may be accomplished through the implementation of a collaborative learning culture where trust and comfort are reached. “The need for common planning time will not be temporary, but will be ongoing if we are to sustain our capacity for collaboration. Collaboration is a key pedagogical assumption underlying the high standard of learning envisioned by the curriculum frameworks” (Antonucci & Reville, 1995, p. 7). These efforts may augment workshops and training sessions through the distribution of ideas and concepts on how to maximize the curriculum taught by all teachers. In other words, these collaborative learning communities may be support structures rather than reforms in order to ensure long-term academic success amongst students.

**Educator engagement.** Certainly, the support structure from collaborative efforts will have a significant impact on the capacity a school has to change and develop new programs (Hopkins, Harris & Jackson, 1997). However, it is noted that there are other complex hindrances to this progress, including individuals’ willingness and capacity to change, group dynamics, individual school influences, school size, and location, the local community around the school, school policies, and the methods to implement professional learning communities.

An individual’s willingness and ability to change may be one of the most important determinants of change. “Although everyone wants to talk about such broad concepts as policy,
systems, and organizational factors, successful change starts and ends at the individual level. An entire organization does not change until each member has changed” (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 59). However, this development and change may become an issue when individual teachers’ priorities and lives are not considered. In a study on Swiss teachers conducted by Huberman (1989), the author found that a teacher’s capacity and orientation to change and further learning comes with experience and when a teacher is vested in the individual school. “Several studies show that secondary school structures sometimes result in teachers having a stronger sense of belonging to a departmental community than a whole school community” (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Hargreaves, 1994; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Siskin, 1994, p. 15); or, as Claxton (1996) stated, “learning ... takes place in people’s heads,” (p.14) which posits that factors restricting or limiting the learning process need to be examined, as they cause teachers to be resistant to change and development.

**Group dynamics.** The dynamics of each group of teachers also is a potential hindrance to change and development. Three studies conducted in the private sector (Belbin, 1993; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Larson & LaFasto, 1989) showed that “effectiveness depends in part on unified commitment from members: loyalty to and identification with the team, fostered through a balance between respecting individual differences and requiring unity” (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 18). A study conducted by Sammons, Thomas, and Mortimore (1997) stated that high school teachers tend to work better together. However, this position was disputed somewhat by Wallace and Hall (1994) in their study which posited that high school systems have two contradictions that exist together: “in a management hierarchy topped by the head teacher uniquely accountable for the work of the senior management teams, and in the entitlement of all team members to make an equal contribution to the team’s work” (Wallace, 2001, p. 153-155).
It is added that this intern causes tension amongst teachers, as the lead teacher chooses teams to develop an environment of collaboration, but their word is mediated and misquoted by other team members.

**School environment.** The school itself is also a potential restriction to the implementation of professional learning communities. It is suggested that a teacher’s learning is impacted by the environment of the school, and this environment can vary with the size of the school, as this is vital in structuring the social dynamics of a workplace (Bryk, Camburn & Louis, 1999). “The larger the school, the more difficult it can be to engender strong identification with a whole-school community” (Huberman, 1993, p. 22-23). Additionally, the racial, ethnic and gender diversity of a school can have a significant influence over school functions (Thrupp, 1999).

The local community surrounding the school also can present barriers to change. “While disadvantage does not automatically inhibit a school’s capacity, some schools face a greater struggle in helping pupils achieve national standards” (Mortimore & Whitty, 1997, p. 215). The authors’ main point was that the students come from these local communities and subsequently influence a school’s achievement levels, particularly in English Language Arts (Reynolds, 2000). Therefore, this community may impact a teacher’s motivation to learn and actively participate in professional learning communities. For instance, in a study conducted by Dinham (1994), teachers became apathetic to students as the general perception of their efforts was not appreciated, regardless of increased planning and preparation.

**School policies.** School policies also are a potential hurdle to reform, in terms of “placing demands on the learning capacity of the organization” (Karsten, Voncken & Voorthuis, 2000, p. 152). Policies can result in tensions that mount due to stress from an excess
of additional work to transition into new reform initiatives (Woods, Jeffrey, Troman & Boyle, 1997). These pressures can cause teachers to become disaffected and reluctant to participate in collaborative efforts for fear of additional workloads. Such pressures may make it difficult to maintain motivation and energy to stimulate students (Helsby & McCulloch, 1996). As a result, satisfaction amongst teachers is reduced (Stobart & Mutjtaba, 2003), which will negatively impact student academic achievement (Stoll & Myers, 1998).

**Competing agendas.** Lastly, implementation of professional learning communities and various collaborative communities also can be a barrier to change when implemented in the context of several competing professional agendas (Hargreaves, 2003). The resources and support available to an individual school may significantly impact its ability to effectively implement these collaborative efforts. Fostering dependence on continuing education may also become an issue. As Hargreaves (2003) argued, there is a problem with an emphasis on ‘‘performance training sects’’ (p. 152) with national curriculum models, as the training provided can result in the teacher losing the initiative to think independently in the classroom.

**Summary**

The research and literature presented in this literature review provides a context for exploring the perceptions of Durfee High School teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives of the advantages and disadvantages of the Fall River Public Schools’ initiative to significantly raise student achievement through the implementation of professional learning communities through common planning time. It is hoped that the ensuing study can add to the existing body of research through an examination of the perceptions recorded in the study. Educator perceptions as obtained through focus groups and interviews may extend our understanding of
professional learning communities, assessments, and lesson planning, as well as align with the more recent research surrounding the importance of school climate and student engagement.

**Chapter III: Research Design**

The objective of this study is to use organizational change and socio-cultural learning theory in a qualitative study of teachers and administrators to gain their perspectives of the instructional development programs. Organizational change theory suggests that teachers and administrators need to see that their learning is a process enhanced through social interaction and collaboration. Learning is not an isolated event; rather it involves an educator’s ability to apply their learning in improving students’ academic success levels. Jones and George (2011) note organizational change theory encourages educators to take their knowledge to a new level where they become the expert through instructional development programs. Bandura (1993) socio-cultural learning theory involves the beliefs that many educators possess regarding their ability to learn and apply this knowledge in the classroom. These two lenses help to illuminate how educators themselves perceive professional learning communities. This in turn, helps teachers and administrators to see the relevance and necessity of professional learning communities and assess their impact on student success.

**Research Questions**

Three research questions will guide this qualitative study:

1) What impact on instruction and student learning do teachers and administrators believe has occurred as a result of teacher collaboration and professional development which has been brought about through the introduction of common planning time at Durfee High School?
2) Has common planning time benefited teachers as perceived by teachers and administrators, and if so, how has it benefited them?

3) How do teachers and administrators perceive the products of common planning time at Durfee High School (i.e., the creation of common curriculum, common student products, and common assessments) to be an effective means of improving student achievement at the school?

Methodology

Very little of the research surrounding professional learning communities and curriculum alignment has focused on the resulting impact on student academic achievement or on educators perceptions of the impact. The studies regarding these well-documented efforts are primarily qualitative in nature, and there is only a limited amount of research that has focused on the impact of these programs on explicit student achievement outcomes. Thus, a qualitative research study that seeks to include the voices of teachers and administrators may provide useful information as to why students in the Fall River Public School system are achieving lower levels of academic success. Their stories incorporating their perceptions of the school climate and the role of these collaborative efforts will lead to meaningful discussions regarding the integral factor of common planning times.

Qualitative research is vital to this study. According to Crotty (1998), “Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Qualitative researchers tend to use open-ended questions so that the participants can share their views” (p. 45). One of the added benefits of this study is that it measures how these educators “engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives” (Crotty, 1998, p. 45). A qualitative study measures the “understanding [of] the meaning, for participants…of
the events, situations, experiences, and actions they are involved with or engage in” (Maxwell, 2008, p. 214-215). It is through this type of research that educator perspectives are told in a meaningful manner that explains the value of professional learning communities and collaborative efforts for improving student achievement.

**Site and participants.** The site for this research is the Durfee High School Department of English Language Arts, located in Fall River, Massachusetts. Durfee High School is a large, urban high school made up of a diverse student body. This site was chosen due to the low academic achievement rate in the English Language Arts Department. The Fall River Public School District continues to struggle with low scores on standardized testing and assessments in English Language Arts. Therefore, the Durfee High School Department of English Language Arts may serve as a microcosm for the school system as a whole.

This study employed *purposeful sampling* (Maxwell, 2008). Purposeful sampling “…is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 2008, p. 214-215). This study uses purposeful sampling in interviews conducted with 21 English teachers, two teachers of English language learners (ELL), and five special education teachers from the Durfee High School Department of English Language Arts to learn of their perceptions on professional learning communities and collaboration. Their input was helpful in learning the value of these mandated professional development sessions and curriculum alignment.

This group was also asked to participate in a focus group. Their insight was helpful in obtaining the different backgrounds and struggles that their peers may have encountered during these professional learning community and collaborative development programs. This information is discussed in a generalized manner where educator identities are not revealed.
Their insights regarding student academic success are invaluable given their experiences and contact with numerous students on a daily basis.

**Data Collection**

Data collection for this qualitative study consists primarily of focus groups and interviews with administrators and educators at Durfee High School. Interviews were conducted with administrators (principal, vice principals, and department chairs) and five focus groups of teachers within the English Language Arts Department, with a minimum of one at each grade level (9-12), and the English as a Second Language (ESL) staff. Focus groups took place within two fifty-minute common planning time sessions. Interviews then were conducted with administrators that created and continued to oversee the professional learning communities and structure of the schedule.

**Interviews.** Interviews were conducted with five key administrators (principal, vice principals, and department chairpersons). Information gained through these interviews lent additional data to this researcher regarding the collaborative development programs instituted by the Fall River Public School District and Durfee High School. Their perspective on the effectiveness of professional learning communities and collaborative efforts of educators to address the issue of student academic achievement will be discussed later.

**Focus groups.** Focus groups were conducted with five groups: English Language Arts teachers at each grade level, ESL teachers, and special education teachers at Durfee High School. “Focus groups can be viewed as a data collection method or as a strategy for research...Focus groups in essence, are group interviews that rely, not on a question-and-answer format of interview, but on the interaction within the group (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5). “This reliance on interaction between participants is designed to elicit more of the participant’s points of view
than would be evidenced in more researcher-dominated interviewing” (Mertens, Flowers, Anfara, and Caskey, 2010, p. 50). Their perspective on the efficacy or lack thereof regarding these professional learning communities and collaborative efforts to address the issue of student academic achievement represents a body of knowledge important to the conclusions of this research.

**Data collection summary.** A singular interview or focus group protocol has been developed for each group. The initial questions for educators focus on steps taken by the district and the high school to implement professional learning communities that address student achievement. They also focus on educators’ views as to whether or not the programs are effective or ineffective. The initial questions in the focus groups are designed to elicit overall impressions of educator experiences in these collaborative programs.

It was this researcher’s intent to learn of the various experiences of every the participant. Participants in the interview or focus groups were assured that any information they choose to share would be held in the strictest of confidence. Focus groups and interviews were held in a comfortable setting where input was completely voluntary. An interview was conducted with the participants, and then, based on their responses, follow-up questions were asked. Additional questions also followed for individual participants based on their willingness to offer more information and continue the conversation. The culmination of the responses to the various questions provided the researcher a better sense of the various educator perceptions and the impact that professional learning communities had on their educational decisions.

**Data Analysis**

Data collection consisted of audio-recorded focus groups and interviews. Once data was collected, it was categorized and coded. From this point grouping and codes were further
analyzed for the emergent themes of significance pertaining to the specific research questions. Semi-structured interviews identified the benefits and challenges of the observation. Document review of pertinent documents was related to common lesson planning and assessments.

In the process of this qualitative study, there were several components of thematic analysis that were taken into account. “The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 1998, p. 183). In this qualitative analysis, “…the researcher collects qualitative data, analyzes it for themes or perspectives, and reports…” (Creswell, 1998, p.183).

Creswell (1998) outlines several different steps to follow in completing the qualitative analysis: “Organize and prepare the data for analysis; Read through all the data; Begin detailed analysis with a coding process; Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis; Advance how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative analysis; Make an interpretation or meaning of the data” (Creswell, 1998, p. 183). In accordance with these steps, this study followed this process for analysis.

Several additional steps proved helpful in the completion of qualitative data analysis. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the researcher should

1. Give codes to your first set of field notes drawn from observations, interviews, or document reviews;
2. Note personal reflections or other comments in the margin;
3. Sort and sift through the materials to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups, and common sequences;

4. Identify these patterns and processes, commonalities, and differences and take them out to the field in the next wave of data collection;

5. Begin elaborating a small set of generalizations that cover the consistencies discerned in the database, and

6. Examine those generalizations in light of a formalized body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories (Mertens et al. 2010, p. 9-10).

The focus groups were asked parallel questions to evaluate the differences and similarities in their perceptions of their professional learning community experience. More specific follow-up questions measured those initial responses and themes that emerged through the discussion. The educators, in particular, were asked parallel questions to evaluate for differences or similarities in their experiences in the effectiveness of collaborative efforts in relation to their students’ academic performance.

The data analysis utilized information obtained through focus groups and interviews. This information was recorded by audio and transcribed verbatim to complete these qualitative research processes. “The main categorizing strategy in qualitative research is coding…the goal of coding is not to count things, but to ‘fracture’ the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts. Another form of categorizing analysis involves organizing the data into broader themes and issues” (Maxwell, 2008, p. 96). Themes emerged from the responses of the focus groups with administrators and teachers. The data obtained was then examined through
the two theoretical lenses of organizational change theory and socio-cultural learning theory to
determine if these lenses helped to explain the observations of the study. This process helped the
researcher to challenge hypotheses, ideas, and assumptions.

**Coding.** Coding involves the researcher grouping similar data statements or phrases for
initial structure. Simply, it is “the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of
text before bringing meaning to information” (Creswell, 1998, p. 186). Coding is a complex
process comprised of various components, which were divided “into two main sections: First
Cycle and Second Cycle coding methods” (Saldana, 2009, p. 50). The two coding types were
broken down based on the nature of the qualitative study: “First Cycle methods are those
processes that happen during the initial coding of data…Second Cycle methods require such
analytical skills as classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting,
conceptualizing, and theory building” (Saldana, 2009, p. 56). For this study, five specific coding
steps were chosen based on the type of information attained by the researcher.

**Step 1: In vivo coding.** In vivo coding is a strategy that involves assigning each piece of
data a label that grasps the main concept of a participant’s statements for sorting purposes.
Literally, an in vivo code “refers to a short word or short phrase from the actual language in the
qualitative data record, the terms used by participants themselves” (Saldana, 2009, p. 57). This
coding approach is appropriate for “studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice…the
child and adolescent voices are often marginalized, and coding with their actual words enhances
and deepens an adult’s understanding of their cultures and world views” (Saldana, 2009, p. 60).
These perspectives were obtained through the specific information from the questions in the
interviews and the focus groups.
**Step 2: Initial coding.** Initial coding reflects the researcher’s first impression of what a participant is saying in a response. Saldana explains that it is “breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences… [and] is intended as a starting point to provide the researcher with analytical leads for further exploration and to see the direction in which to take this study” (2009, p. 60). “The task can also alert the researcher that more data are needed to support and build an emerging theory” (Saldana, 2009, p. 60). The researcher obtained this information through the initial evaluation of the data obtained through the focus groups and interviews.

**Step 3: Values coding.** Values coding reflects consideration for the influence of a participant’s values on their responses when labeling and grouping them for analysis. It is “the application of codes onto qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (Saldana, 2009, p. 59). Values coding is used “…for those that explore cultural values and intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions in case studies” (Saldana, 2009, p. 59). Values coding analyzes participant values, attitudes and beliefs as obtained through the data collected and compared between the participants.

**Step 4: Pattern coding.** The interpretation of the data collected was analyzed for themes and relationships, as well as differences and similarities between the responses from the focus groups and interviews. “Pattern codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation…[they are] a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs” (Saldana, 2009, p. 59). “Pattern coding is appropriate for development of major themes from the data, the search for rules, causes, and
explanations in the data, examining social networks and patterns of human relationships, the formation of theoretical constructs and processes” (Saldana, 2009, p. 59).

**Step 5: Theoretical coding.** Theoretical coding is the last step and entails reviewing the transcripts of the focus group and interviews in relation to the primary constructs of organizational change theory and socio-cultural learning theory examined in this study. Through theoretical coding, the researcher examined the perspectives of teachers and administrators for alignment, reinforcement/support, or dissonance from the viewpoint of the theories to explain the impact of professional learning communities on student performance. Two themes that were important to the construct of organizational change were (a) educators as participants of professional learning communities and collaborative communities, and (b) students were well supported in their academic preparation. Also, two themes vital to the construct of socio-cultural learning included (a) educators effectively acting within these collaborative communities, and (b) teachers and administrators establishing goals for themselves and becoming active participants in their own learning to ensure that students were adequately prepared for standardized testing.

**Data analysis summary.** The study actively recruited the participants’ voices to be heard on this crucial topic to learn why they believe these programs are effective or ineffective, and whether they need to be expanded. Through first and second cycle coding of interviews and focus groups, including in vivo, initial, values, pattern, and theoretical coding, the researcher held a high priority for accurately presenting the opinions, attitudes, values, and believes of these participants through effectively analyzing, coding, and reporting them, as described by Creswell (1998), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Saldana (2009),
Validity and Credibility

The areas of credibility, transferability, dependability, authenticity and transformative paradigm criteria in the research were examined when assessing the validity of this research project. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated, credibility is the “criterion in qualitative research that parallels internal validity…In qualitative research, the credibility test asks if there is a correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). In order to ensure credibility in the study, the researcher communicated with peers and advisors to gain insight into new themes included in the study.

However, the researcher primarily relied on prolonged engagement, which included a continuous weekly observation cycle with interviews to capture challenges and successes. In addition, participants had a learning journal to individually reflect on the process. This reflection enabled persistent observation that developed since participants had the opportunity to use their learning journals to take notes rather than recall information from memory. During semi-structured interviews, the researcher used member checking in order to review data to be sure that it adequately represented their experiences. This allowed for participant briefing in order to identify any barriers that restricted the participant’s full participation in the study.

With regard to the study’s transferability, the information obtained in the focus groups and interviews with these English Language Arts teachers, ESL, and special education teachers was used to evaluate the impact of educator perceptions in other schools within the Fall River Public School District with similar attributes. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), transferability is vital to the study because it serves “as the qualitative parallel to external validity…In qualitative research, the burden of transferability is on the reader to determine the
degree of similarity between the study site and the receiving context” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

The dependability of the study was predicated on the fact that the researcher made all information obtained public for other researchers to review. “Reliability means stability over time…change is expected, but it should be tracked and publicly inspected” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110)

According to Guba & Lincoln (1994) the confirmability of the study is that it provides “a chain of evidence” (p. 110). Therefore, the researcher communicated any biases, hypotheses and underlying assumptions involved in the study prior to its implementation. This ensured the objectivity of the study as the researcher’s judgment, was not a factor in the conclusions drawn (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). To elaborate further, Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated, “Confirmability means that the data and their interpretation are not figments of the researcher’s imagination. Qualitative data can be tracked to its source, and the logic that is used to interpret the data should be made explicit” (p. 110).

The researcher ensured authenticity in the study by explaining the process by which interview and focus group themes were developed and the recommendations determined based on the information obtained. The process of explaining the process of how themes were developed enabled the researcher to become aware how the information obtained may have altered their perspective, thus ensuring authenticity. “Authenticity refers to the presentation of a balanced view of all perspectives, values, and beliefs” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). It answers the question, “Has the researcher been fair in presenting views?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).
The transformative paradigm criteria that this researcher reported include the findings on a particular set of data. Therefore, only information relevant to the study was included. As Guba & Lincoln (1994) stated, “…texts cannot claim to contain all universal truth because all knowledge is contextual; therefore the researcher must acknowledge the context of the research” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

The limitations involved in this study included a small sample size, high school level only participants, and a focus on participants that primarily teach one grade within the context of English. These limitations may impact the transferability of this study.

**Researcher’s Role**

The researcher is currently employed by Durfee High School as an English teacher and direct administrator as Chair of the English Department. Therefore, the researcher has direct contact with the educators and students at Durfee High School in the role of academic evaluator of English Language Arts. However, the researcher’s position did not appear to threaten the validity of this study, as the participants from Durfee High School voluntarily participated in this study. All researchers must be aware of and cautious of the not interpreting data through personal and professional perspectives, allowing for an analysis and coding of the data to not be influenced by the researcher’s lens based on their personal experience rather than the natural emergence of themes and codes from participant data. As a participant in conducting the research, one cannot say that bias was completely eliminated from the study. Given the position of the researcher may serve as a source of interpreter bias. However, this researcher attempted to draw directly from the data the critical issues that impacted professional learning communities as stated by participants, while attempting to be continually cognizant of any interpretation that did not allow for a valid and trustworthy analysis of the data.
Protection of Human Subjects

Ethical challenges in connection to the study were identified, such as the researcher’s dual role as English teacher and direct administrator as Chair of the English Department. All risks for participants, as well as challenges to relationships were addressed in order to account for fairness of inquiry and interpretation. The application to the Institution Review Board (IRB) followed the approval of initial Doctoral Research Project (DRP) by the researcher’s advisor, Dr. Unger, and the Northeastern University doctoral program committee.

Informed consent. All participants involved in this research study were informed of its purposes. In order to ensure informed consent, participants were encouraged to ask questions as to the nature of the study and the intended data to be obtained. Participants were then given an informed consent form and an explanation of the meaning of the form. Participation was voluntary and all participants were given the option to not participate after information was provided as to the nature of the study.

Confidentiality. As all participants signed the informed consent form, it was of the utmost importance that all participants were aware that their responses would be secured in strict confidence. People not directly involved with the study were not privy to the information provided by participants. Additionally, the researcher implemented a coding system, which designated each individual participant’s response in the focus groups and interviews.

Summary

The Durfee High School community is currently making an effort to provide teachers within the English Language Arts Department and in all content areas, common planning time to collaborate and create common lessons and assessments with the intention of increasing student achievement. The importance of this topic has become popular within the Fall River School
community because for the past two years much effort has been made to provide time for teachers to collaborate within the school day. The hope was that implementation of professional learning communities through the use of common planning time with a focus on common curriculum and assessments would increase student achievement.

The purpose of this was to hear the voice of teachers and administrators who were (and continue to be) involved in the process of creating and participating in the professional learning communities. While much research has identified the benefits of such communities, hearing the voices of those who attend the weekly common planning time for the extensive purpose of raising student achievement through common lessons and assessments at Durfee High School may inform similar initiatives elsewhere. The research may offer valuable insights to Fall River administration as well when considering the continued implementation or modification of the initiative in the Fall River Public Schools.

Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to report and discuss the key findings of the research conducted over a three-week period. The first section provides a brief review of the study context and defines technical terms associated with the study. The second section presents the emerging themes as connected to the research questions using the teacher focus groups and individual administrator interviews. The final section presents a summary of the key research findings.

Study Context

Common planning time and professional learning communities have many connotations for schools within educational settings. For the sake of this study, the idea of professional learning communities refers to teacher collaboration during scheduled planning times for
common planning of lessons, assessments, and professional development. Collaboration refers to the experience of group interaction with fellow teachers as part of professional learning communities. These collaborative efforts enable teachers and administrators to openly communicate in the middle of busy school days in order to develop a shared mindset and instructional approach, while becoming more effective in achieving student academic success. Student achievement refers to adequately preparing students for standardized assessments, common assessments, and common instructional lessons on skills and strategies that align to state standards.

This study focuses on the Durfee High School community, where there are many challenges as in most urban schools. With a diverse population that has a high number of students who speak limited English or come from households where English is not the primary language, a majority of the student population performs lower than their peers on standardized achievement tests. This requires teachers to design new approaches to English Language Arts based on their student cultural diversity.

The essential components of teacher and administrator input were elicited formally through one-on-one conversations and small group discussions. The study took place over the course of three weeks and involved two approaches. The researcher met with five focus groups of teachers over the span of two days, each of which included five or six participants. There were a total of 29 participants including 22 English Language Arts teachers, four special education teachers, and three teachers of English as a Second Language.

The researcher met with the teachers during their regularly scheduled common planning time and asked them the same series of questions that administrators were asked during face-to-face interviews. Within this same period of time, administrators (n=10) participated individually
through one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with the researcher, either during or after the school day, in which they were asked a series of questions.

There were a total of fourteen questions, each question linked to one of the three essential research questions of the study. Teachers were asked questions 1 through 7 on day one of the focus groups and questions 8 through 14 on day two. This break in between questions allowed both the researcher and teachers time to reflect on the responses and implement changes if needed.

**Coding for Themes**

Themes developed in the responses from the focus groups with teachers and from the face-to-face interviews with administrators, and these themes were coded in relation to each of the three research questions. The themes were established from an analysis of transcribed data from teacher focus groups and administrative interviews. Data was coded using in vivo coding for the first cycle which is a coding method that preserves the actual language of participants and helps to ensure that the participants' voices are honored (Saldana, 2009). The iterative, subsequent coding was undertaken using pattern coding which helps to develop major themes and examines patterns in human relationships and social networks (Saldana, 2009). The vehicle for the coding process was MAXQDA software.

**Research Question #1: What impact on instruction and student learning do teachers and administrators believe has occurred as a result of teacher collaboration and professional development which has been brought about through the introduction of common planning time at Durfee High School?**

The first research question was: *How do administrators and teachers perceive the creation of teacher collaboration and professional development during common planning*
Upon a review of all administrator interviews and teacher focus groups, four themes were identified across all groups. Teacher collaboration and professional development during common planning time (a) allowed for the sharing of instructional strategies, (b) facilitated sharing of resources and ideas, (c) designated time for teacher collaboration, (d) fostered collegial relationships. Table 1 presents the four themes from across all administrator interviews and teacher focus groups, and the following sections present the themes that were discussed by the participating faculty of Durfee High School. Subtle differences in how each group discussed them will also be presented.

Table 1

Themes Identified from Participants’ Responses for Research Question #1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.  Allowed for sharing of instructional strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.  Facilitated sharing resources and ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.  Designated time for collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.  Fostered collegial relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sharing of instructional strategies.** During the first focus group session, 29 of 29 teachers cited that collaborative professional learning communities allowed time for them to gain an understanding of instructional strategies that assisted them in classroom instruction. Throughout the focus groups, teachers mentioned that collaboration helped them not only to understand the curriculum material, but also to feel they were not alone in learning new instructional approaches. Being a part of a team allowed them to work through the new material together and assist each other with finding the best instructional approach(s) to support students.
within their individual classrooms. For example, as one grade 11 English Language Arts teacher said, “The implementation of the Laying the Foundation Pre-AP instructional strategies allowed for students to understand the complex material better”. The teacher also noted the phenomenon of “working together complement[s] each other, and we also have different ideas. We are able to merge our ideas together. And I think that it is better for the kids”. The sharing of instructional strategies also allowed for teachers to be exposed to innovative ways to teach traditional methods. As one 10th-grade English Language Arts teacher said:

I think that having the opportunity for someone to model for us, allowed us time to go through it together and work through the strategy. We had the opportunity to have seen it at least once. It is not totally new for us to teach. We have seen it and ask questions. It lets us feel more at ease to go into the classroom and teach to the students.

A ninth-grade English Language Arts teacher added:

I think we get to compare a similar strategy with a different set of students. Whether it be individual education plan (IEP) driven or size of the class, a strategy that may work with a smaller class may not work with another. But, that all may depend on the mix of kids so, there is an option that we now have. This is something that did not occur in the past.

Similar to teachers’ responses, nine out of 10 administrators also noted that common planning time allowed teachers greater opportunity for teachers to be exposed to and work through instructional strategies. As one department chair said, “It is a huge shift in practice to implement specific strategies that connect to the curriculum”. In support of this idea, a guidance counselor added that consistency was essential: “The consistency from teacher to teacher is key”. For teachers to talk about the topics and exchange consistent strategies sends a strong message to
the community. Both teachers and administrators communicated positively that instructional strategies impacted classroom instruction.

**Facilitated the sharing of resources and ideas.** Throughout discussions and focus groups, faculty continually came back to *accessibility for sharing resources and ideas* as a key benefit of professional learning communities. Accessibility to both material and assistance from peers was a common theme throughout both groups. Of the administrators interviewed, nine of the 10 noted that frequent access to materials and resources support teachers in assisting students. The special education department chair stated, “It has had a positive impact, especially for the special education teachers who are working with the general education teachers.” Within the professional learning communities, special education teachers and special education case managers met with general education teachers to share modification and alteration suggestions to support both students with and without IEPs. A guidance counselor noted from her interactions that it was dependent upon the individual teacher, but most teachers were open to the exchange of ideas and strategies that work for most students.

The science department chair stressed:

> Just the fact of communicating with the other department heads, administrators, and faculty is beneficial. Having that open dialogue has had a huge impact on sharing of resources. And for me, being a new department head has been beneficial for communication and consistency. The collaboration of teachers and administrators has also allowed for newer ideas to be generated. More and more teachers are changing their approaches to find innovative methods to teach the content they have taught for years.

The associate principal stated, “I think the biggest impact this had on the teaching so far this year is that people are trying new things.” The principal somewhat agreed to the sharing of resources
and ideas, but also said, “I think one thing that I would like to see each department identifying through common planning, is planning that is pushing the limits on instructional practices”.

Throughout the focus group discussions, 25 of 29 teachers supported that professional learning communities have provided them with resources and newer ideas. Through collaboration and ongoing interactions, teachers provided one another with ideas and suggestions to enhance their lessons to support the diverse needs of their students. An ELL teacher commented:

   It has impacted my instructional knowledge a great deal. When I come to common planning and meet with the other teachers, I learn a lot from them. Sometimes, I will bring in my lesson plans and present the lesson to them. They give me their thoughts on the lesson, their expertise, and how I need to change it.

The professional learning community allows for teachers to offer insights on ways to view lessons through the students’ perspective. Often, teachers would use the time to seek feedback, support, and criticism on teaching styles and instructional approaches. An 11th-grade ELA teacher noted, “It has helped me find flaws that I may not have seen on my own”. In addition, teachers have updated curriculum planning and revised curriculum maps to include lessons that would be best suited for students. A 12th-grade ELA special education teacher stated:

   We were looking for something really interesting to do for senior year. We found The Last Lecture. It was uplifting, motivational, and inspiring. The feedback has been phenomenal from the kids. Unless you are collaborating in here, we would never come across that. We would never have believed to share ideas like that.
Allowing time for teachers to interact with one another has facilitated ideas, sharing of resources, and the opportunities for them to alter their instruction in a way that scaffolds instruction for students.

**Designated time for collaboration.** Providing teachers and administrators time within the school day to communicate through ongoing dialogue has provided faculty with ongoing support and has allowed for them to work collegially with their peers. During one-on-one interviews, nine out of 10 administrators cited collaboration as a positive aspect of professional learning communities. A guidance counselor stated, “I would say it has had a tremendous impact to teach each other best practice and share resources with each other”. Under this thought, administrators also noted the various approaches to collaboration. The department chair of guidance noted:

I believe that teachers work off of each other's knowledge. So, prior experience of more veterans teachers and working with different texts and assessments have factored into collaboration in general. We are always as good as the next best person. So, I always feel that collaboration with a structured approach is what common planning had provided for teachers in this building.

To provide effective collaboration during professional learning communities, many administrators commented that to have successful collaboration, structure needs to be provided. The Principal noted, “It is in the way common planning time is structured” Under this thought, the department chair of social studies said:

Professional learning communities are structured to have collaboration with other professionals. With fine-tuning of techniques and strategies that work with students,
teachers can focus on changing some of the curriculum or topics that they’ve covered with kids. They can find things that kids really liked, connected with, or alter things. Within focus group discussions, 29 of the 29 participating teachers commented on the effects that collaboration had on their instructional approaches. Many of the teachers noted that collaboration allowed them to step out of their comfort zone and employ alternative instructional approaches to their traditional style of teaching. A 10th-grade ELA teacher agreed with the group discussion:

I’ll agree with you, it has taken me out of my comfort zone in a lot of ways that I have taught this year.” The teacher went on to say, “But listening to other people’s ideas has changed everything this year. Again, I think I grew a lot as a teacher because of common planning.

Teachers also communicated that the collaboration allowed for them to understand the newer curriculum materials better. A ninth-grade ELA teacher stated, “It was helpful with collaboration with the new assignments and different ideas in the ways in which to assess students”.

Another ELA teacher within the ninth-grade focus group supported this idea, “As we collaborate and share, I get other ideas. So, I think that that is beneficial to my students and me”.

Throughout the focus groups, teachers often mentioned that collaboration allowed them to not feel alone and isolated within the department. A 10th-grade ELA special education teacher stated:

This is my first year working in common planning and it was very beneficial to me in terms of just getting all the information. For 7 years, I have been teaching on my own in a separate setting, because I work with the most at-risk students. So coming into this
environment is very beneficial. At first, I was deathly afraid to come in, but I have truly enjoyed my experiences this year and I look forward to next year.

Collaboration has allowed teachers to interact positively and shape their feelings towards their instructional performance and sense of collegiality.

**Fostered collegial relationships.** Commonly both administrators and teachers felt that professional learning communities provided the opportunity for teachers to build on creating collegial relationships. For years, teachers have worked in isolation. With the ongoing trends in education and the newly adopted Common Core of State Standards, teachers need to be able to collaborate with their peers and be a part of a team. Table 2 shows select comments from both administrator interviews and teacher focus groups related to the perceptions of collaborating as a team.

Table 2

*Illustrative Administrator and Teacher Quotes regarding the Theme “Fostered Collegial Relationships”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrators</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In a school with 200 faculty, it becomes very easy to become isolated. And even in the department of 32. And if you're not forced to collaborate with others and given time, I think it's a great expectation to have teachers do that outside of the school day.</td>
<td>It made me a better teacher because I don't have to do it all on my own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would say it forces teachers to be more reflective and they are being asked to agree to the way in which a team thinks</td>
<td>I think we get to a more personal level, just interacting with other teachers. As a younger teacher, I know that I have these five mentors. Instead of just one. For me, this is my first year here and I don't know what I would do if I didn’t have the all of you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's good to have these open conversations and understand perceptions. And feel more comfortable with the concept of teaching.</td>
<td>… Gives that feeling that these are my colleagues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are excited because they are getting all of that support and understand how to move</td>
<td>… My team. We want to help each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Before common planning everyone would</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question #2: Has common planning time benefited teachers as perceived by teachers and administrators, and if so, how has it benefited them?

The second research question was: Has common planning time benefited teachers as perceived by teachers and administrators, and if so, how has it benefited them? Upon a review of all data gathered from administrator interviews and teacher focus groups, four themes were identified. Teacher collaboration and professional development during common planning time allows for (a) teachers to receive ongoing support, (b) common language and expectations for both teachers and students to be created, (c) positive impacts to develop for both teachers and students, (d) teachers to become reflective practitioners. This section presents both the positive comments as well areas of improvement as identified by the participants. Conflicts in scheduling and other administrative constraints due to professional learning communities will be included at the end of this section. Table 3 highlights the themes drawn out of the interview and focus group data.

Table 3
Themes Identified from Participants’ Responses for Research Question #2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Provided ongoing support for both teachers and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provided an opportunity to create a common language and similar expectations for all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Positive impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Supported teachers to become more reflective in their teaching and learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Provided ongoing support for both teachers and students. Of the teachers that participated within the focus groups and administrators interviewed, nearly all communicated that professional learning communities provided ongoing support for both teachers and students. Of the administrators interviewed, nine out of 10 articulated that allowing for common planning time during the school day provides ongoing support through professional development and other offerings of resources to support teachers. One guidance counselor noted:

"Guidance counselors would attend common planning to meet with teachers to discuss students that were struggling either academically or because of discipline. Often, academic referrals were completed at that point in time to begin providing recommendations of support for both the teacher and student. Teachers often will try many modifications to provide ongoing support to the diverse needs of students. In many cases, teachers may have exhausted all options and needed to seek others for advice on alternative approaches for remediation. The dropout prevention coordinator and guidance counselor for ELL populations noted, "Teachers utilized this time to contact parents and guardians, or sought support from other teachers". The Social Studies Department Chair stated, "Collaboration provides many resources and supports to teachers". The time provided supports to all teachers and allowed them to share best practices and communicate lessons that needed some adjustments. The Associate Principal stated, "For me the most valuable part has been just a different kind of dialogue. I think it has been more purposeful and supportive".

In addition, 28 of the 29 teachers that participated in the focus groups agreed that professional learning communities provided ongoing support for them. Two 10th-grade ELA teachers noted that, "Being exposed to new ideas has been very helpful". In support of that point, an ELL teacher stated,
The most valuable part for me is just learning from the other teachers. Because, I am always looking at how I can become a better teacher. And when you're working with other teachers it helps you to become a better teacher.

Teachers providing suggestions to lesson warm-up activities, formative and summative assessment suggestions, and dynamic ways to capture students’ attention has allowed for more productive and purposeful learning environments. A 12th-grade ELA Teacher stated, “I think sharing ideas and resources have been a big help. It helps everyone to have more of an opportunity to grab resources that are really working well”. In addition, a 12th-grade ELA Teacher said, “There is an old cliché that four heads are better than one”.

Teachers continued to promote the use of professional learning communities as opportunities for them to receive support. An 11th-grade ELA Teacher said,

For me, having other teachers sharing what students are or are not doing has been helpful.

So, I can assess is that just me or is it a bigger issue that is going on. And, I think that there is a sense of defending each other when something may be unfair.

Teachers communicated that there were many more opportunities for veteran teachers and teachers that participated in particular professional development over the course of the year and summer months to present resources and supportive ways to provide academic rigor to lessons. An 11th-grade ELA Teacher added:

I also like the sharing of other strategies. That has been nice. We have been able to bring strategies from Advance Placement to share. There are supports from the Pre-AP teachers. And, that has been helpful. To see if we can do it a little differently it is effective for students. And it seems to be. For example the bull's-eye chart, when they were presented, I was unsure if my students would get the concepts. I wasn't even really
clear on it. But when I did it, it was a success. And kids did a great job with it. It was good, and I will do it again.

Allowing time within professional learning communities for teachers to share ideas, seek guidance with difficult classes and/or students, and explore alternative ways to capture the attention of students with rigorous approaches has provided ongoing support.

**Provided an opportunity to create a common language and similar expectations for all.** Prior to the inception of professional learning communities, teachers were given much autonomy to teaching the curriculum and adhering to the scope and sequence of the curriculum. As professional learning communities unfolded, the alignment of similar expectations, adherence to common strategies and expectations became the norm. Throughout each academic term, common products, similar assessments, and quarterly benchmark assessments were refined to mirror these expectations. The principal stated:

*When there wasn't common planning time. There was no overall expectation on student achievement. It was kind of like your kids will learn what you taught. And when I talked to people about grades, they said that they didn’t make sense. Because it's a very subjective reflection on what is actually being done and it's not quantifiable.*

Due to this shift in practices, many teachers had to alter their approaches to teaching English, teach outside of their “comfort zones,” and utilize data to inform instruction within individual classrooms and across grade levels. A guidance counselor noted, “From guidance it is absolutely beneficial. It allows for consistency and similar expectations”. To support this thought, another guidance counselor noted that, “Most teachers report it as a huge positive here at Durfee because you cannot be behind closed doors, and you have to collaborate with colleagues”. Of the 10 administrators interviewed, seven commented on the positive aspects of having common
language and similar expectations for all. The shift in culture towards teaching and learning allowed for the collaborative nature of the school community. The department chair of social studies stated:

I think that it has had a profound impact. It still has allowed for them to work with one another. I see a lot of sharing going on. That may be looking at different practices; they may have looked at their own. So, I think that it has impacted the teachers on all teams.

These shifts in practices were not well received by all teachers, but for many it allowed for commonality and fewer teachers being isolated from their department. The department chair of guidance stated:

There were some teachers that would prefer to be left alone and shut their door. And not want anyone to bother them. Those are the teachers that take a little bit longer to get them to buy into the whole collaboration. And then there are teachers that love to share their knowledge. And like to see others peoples knowledge to use it to their benefit in the classroom.

From an administrative point of view, it allowed for consistency and transparency to students and parents about what to expect within all classrooms. One guidance counselor suggested, “The consistency in communication alone is definitely important”. The consistency amongst teachers allows for similar language and the ability to truly understand what expectations should look like at particular grade levels. The dropout prevention coordinator and guidance counselor for ELL populations stated:

I feel that the teachers collaborating together caused communication amongst the department to be more consistent. The teaching styles become more consistent. It still needs to be tweaked, but they seem to be able to speak the same language. And, it makes
it easier to understand rather than get to know twenty teachers’ expectations. It makes it easier for us to be on the same page. This is because of collaboration.

Teachers noted that having similar expectations and common approaches did shift their instruction, but most said for the better. Of the 29 teachers that participated in the focus groups, 26 commented positively on common language and similar expectations for all. A 10th-grade ELA Teacher noted, “I think it’s really changed my approach. We created lessons together and similar objectives, and it’s because of common planning.” Similarly, an 11th-grade ELA Teacher stated:

I think the biggest things about reflective practice are the kinds of things that the team puts out on the common product/assessment. Whether it’s the notes or the graphic organizers, it forces me to think reflectively. Am I teaching these concepts? I want to make sure I teach these concepts. I want to make sure we have shared language and we are teaching the same types of vocabulary.

In addition, teachers across the board communicated about their feelings of having similar approaches to common formative and summative assessments. A 12TH-grade ELA teacher noted, “I think in general, whether we are all struggling or not, it gives you more confidence”. Similarly, a ninth-grade ELA teacher stated, “I think the quarterly benchmark assessment has been helpful. I always had to make exams on my own.” Most of the teachers agreed in favor of common quarterly expectations. An 11th-grade ELA teacher noted, “It forces you to expand and go outside of your comfort zone, even if it’s not as successful as you like”. Even though most teachers were in favor of consistency, there were three teachers that did not favor commonality. One 10th-grade ELA teacher stated:
Having common assessments and products, I feel like we're losing what we do best. There isn't time to do those things. Some people feel less effective as teachers in units that they really felt successful in before, because you have to do it this way and not that way.

The suggestions from these teachers were to provide some flexibility within the curriculum to allow for teacher choice. Such an approach can allow for teachers that may not feel comfortable teaching particular units to find comfort within areas they prefer to teach.

**Positive impacts.** Professional learning communities have played a vital role in the delivery and level of expectations that are seen within the Durfee High School Community. Common planning has allowed for collaboration, support, and new ideas to support both teachers and students. Table 4 shows select comments from both administrator interviews and teacher focus groups related to the positive impacts of professional learning communities.

Table 4
**Illustrative Administrator and Teacher Quotes regarding the Theme “Positive Impacts”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrators</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has forced healthy collaboration and teachers feel more comfortable with their practices.</td>
<td>Looking specifically at writing topics and how we're going to focus on their last essays were important. I saw a big benefit especially with my students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a chance to review the quarterlies, the assessment, and using feedback to help guide the instruction.</td>
<td>I think that the common assessment holds both the teacher and student accountable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it's helped that comparing to the years past it has really helped with the instruction and the strategies. Again it’s having a better understanding of the diversity. So, I do feel it's helping instruction and the pacing and that's a big thing…</td>
<td>I think the common assessments can provide teachers to look at common data. And teachers can make more changes to their next assessment and change instructional approaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… When a kid comes in and I know what they are working on in their English class.</td>
<td>The quarterly tests the skills that we've been teaching throughout the term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… A way to identify the at-risk kids who may be falling through the cracks.</td>
<td>… And your numbers will show if there was a skill that you just glossed over. It’s on the quarterly, you have no choice but to go back and teach it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking at the standards and who’s covering what and how we are covering it, that is going to impact teaching.</td>
<td>I think one of the nice things is that it is a leveler across the field to say that we have different instructional practices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reflective practitioner.** Professional communities foster a collaborative nature and allow for teachers to become more reflective in their teaching and learning. When asked, 8 out of 10 administrators discussed that common planning and teachers working together allow for educators to be more reflective in teaching and student success. A guidance counselor stated, “I think common lesson plans allow us to look at the data and know what students are producing in the classroom. Without the common lesson plans we, wouldn’t be able to see the glitches in learning”. Common approaches allow for teachers to reflect on the data of their students’
progress and address areas of concern. Another guidance counselor noted that common planning “…Focuses on what we need to get done and look(s) at the student data together as a group”. Instructional approaches are assessed together by teams. The teachers are taking a critical look at the formative and summative assessments to adjust instruction. The department head of science stated:

The reflection is mostly on the instruction. How did the tests go? Were the questions valid? So, that type of vetting has been going on. Teachers taking a critical look at what they're doing and how they are presenting the lessons is continuing.

Through data assessment, teachers are able to see the types of questions and standards that students are excelling at and areas where improvement is needed.

Similarly to administrators, 24 of the 29 teachers commented during the focus groups on being more reflective in their instructional practices in part because of professional learning communities. As teachers were exposed to new ideas and more resources were shared with them, they became reflective on assessing the ways in which they instructed their classes and constructed their lesson plans. A 10th-grade ELA teacher stated:

I read out loud with the kids and I do it very differently than I used to. I will frequently stop and read a paragraph or page and ask them to come up with different types of questions. I feel like I'm teaching them how to read and I didn't feel that before.

Throughout the term, specific strategies through reading and writing are highlighted that align to state standards. The quarterly benchmark assessments assess these standards specifically and mirror the types of strategies that were taught. After the examination, data is assessed collectively within professional learning communities to allow for reflection and areas for continued growth and refinement. A 10th-grade ELA teacher said, “The ‘data dives’ we do every
quarter helps you to understand the population we are teaching more as well. We know that this may work; you can also change as you go. I think that it really helps”.

Under this thought, a 10th-grade ELA special education specialist noted, “the data allows for us to make modifications and accommodations for students”. Through these focus groups, teachers have been able to look at assessments to support instruction, make needed adjustments, and connect their class sections of students to their like-peers.

The allotment of time has allowed for teachers to think differently about their teaching style and understand why they are teaching a particular way. It has streamlined education and allowed teachers to teach beyond their comfort zones. Both administrators and teachers communicated many positive areas, but they also identified some areas that could allow for professional learning communities to be more productive. In the following section, Table 5 highlights the three major themes communicated through administrator face-to-face interviews and teacher focus groups and the commonality in their discussions. In addition, Table 6 identifies the major constraints that administrators reported on the difficulty in scheduling the professional learning communities.

**Research Question #3: How do teachers and administrators perceive the products of common planning time at Durfee High School (i.e., the creation of common curriculum, common student products, and common assessments) to be an effective means of improving student achievement at the school?**

The third research question was: *How do teachers and administrators perceive the products of common planning time at Durfee High School (i.e., the creation of common curriculum, common student products, and common assessments) to be an effective means of improving student achievement at the school?* Upon a review of all administrator interviews and
teacher focus groups, four themes were identified across all groups. Teacher collaboration and professional development during common planning time allowed for: (a) discussion of student concerns, (b) improvement on assessments, (c) student achievement, and (d) students discussing their own learning. This section presents both the positive comments as well as those that identify areas needing improvement. Table 5 highlights the themes culled from the interview and focus group data.

Table 5

*Themes Identified from Participants’ Responses for Research Question #3*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Allowed for the discussion of student concerns which allowed for student support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Allowed for the improvement of assessments which allowed for instructional alterations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Led to increased student achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Increased students discussing their own learning</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Allowed for the discussion of student concerns which allowed for student support.**

Of the 10 administrators interviewed, six of them noted there an ongoing dialogue of student concerns within the classroom. “Student concerns” relates to the teachers collaborating on areas within the curriculum and also to instructional practices with which students were performing well neither individually nor as a whole. In addition, student concerns relates to areas of assessment in which students tended to score lower than expected by content area teachers. These assessments were reviewed after quarterly benchmark assessments and discussed during professional learning communities. A guidance counselor noted, “It allows for us to discuss
issues with teachers and set up a C. A. Team (curriculum accommodation team) referral.” Under a similar thought, the drop-out prevention coordinator and guidance counselor for ELL populations noted, “It allows time for teachers to make phone calls home to [student] families.” Teachers collaborating and informing guidance on student concerns also allows for transparency with students about their overall academic progress within specific content areas. Another guidance counselor stated, “We are constantly having conversations with kids and letting them know that we are savvy of what's going on in their classes. We can talk about upcoming exams. These conversations take it to another level for students”. From the perspective of identifying student concerns, professional learning communities allow for communication within and outside of the department to inform all stakeholders on specific student concerns. The department chair of guidance noted, “I think it is a way to identify kids in a way that we can start a C. A. Team or identify students that may need to be placed on a 504 plan”. This process that has been created through professional learning communities has allowed for more students to receive early interventions and be identified for additional supports.

Of the teachers participating, 23 of the 29 communicated that student concerns are discussed within professional learning communities. An ELL teacher stated:

You know we’ve had some behavioral issues this year. It allowed us time to talk and say that this particular student misbehaved this way. I can ask the other teachers who have that student if they did something similar in their class. Or, someone will know a piece of information on our students and can share that with us. In those cases, it helps us become more sensitive to the students and feel like we can understand their patterns and behaviors a little better.
With a similar thought, another ELL teacher noted that professional learning communities allow time for the teachers to, “Discuss students’ progress and make level changes based on their English proficiency levels.” Working closely together, teachers also discussed areas on students’ progress as indicated by assessments. A 12th-grade ELA teacher stated, “I think that looking at the data, you can assess where we are. You can assess where weaknesses are and where the strengths are for particular students.” The quarterly benchmark assessment data allows for teachers to assess individual students’ progress, course progress, and the entire grade level. If students as a whole are struggling or successful on particular questions linked to particular standards, teachers are able to hypothesize why students performed a particular way. It also allows for instructional adjustments as teachers move forward within the curriculum.

Allowed for the improvement of assessments which allowed for instructional alterations. Collectively, some of the teachers and administrators communicated seeing an improvement on test scores. Test scores relate to quarterly standardized assessments, Advanced Placement tests, and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Of the participating administrators, six of the 10 discussed seeing improvements on assessments since the inception of professional learning communities. The principal noted, “If you look at our data, we keep doing well” Under a similar thought, the associate principal stated:

Yes, we see student achievement impacted. I think [based on] what I have seen and what I have heard, I will expect our 2012 MCAS to increase, simply because of the commonality. Because there has been detail to make sure that we have covered everything. Looking at the standards, who’s covering what, how we’re covering it, that is going to impact teaching. That is going to impact student learning and student achievement.
In looking at improved assessments, the disaggregated data of free and reduced lunches, limited language learners, and special education students are also assessed. The department chair of special education stated:

I would say it has a huge impact even in our specialized self-contained classes. With the same curriculum, we are aligning it with the general education curriculum. Everyone is on the same page. And with common planning they are all discussing strategies. We are more consistent than we have been in the past. That is a direct result of student achievement and assessments moving forward.

Given that the commonality of the curriculum is moving forward in part because of common planning, some administrators have discussed having common formative and summative assessments more often. Having frequent assessments within the term(s) allows for remediation for students who are struggling in particular areas and enhances the ability to challenge students further who are excelling on particular standards. The department chair of social studies stated:

I got the results of the survey, and I had teachers answer questions to see if they feel that the common assessments have had a positive impact on the curriculum. The results were 80% positive and 20% not so much. But, they feel as though in the opposite that they would like to get away from quarterlies. Except for 2 people abstaining, 19 agreed to go into common unit tests, instead of waiting for the quarter to end for the benchmark.

Similarly, most of the teachers agreed that they have seen an improvement on assessments. Of the participating teachers, 25 of the 29 communicated they had seen improvement on assessments. A 10th-grade ELA teacher noted, “I am seeing more students getting ready for the test, and I definitely contribute it to common planning”. Likewise, another 10th-grade ELA teacher commented on the MCAS assessment: “Common planning works well in helping kids
get ready for this type of assessment”. The opportunity for collaboration also gives teachers the chance to review the results of assessments, and provides them with the opportunity to develop specific strategies to support students within particular areas. A 9th-grade ELA teacher stated:

Whether it is vocabulary, we know we have to look at it. If we know they're struggling with multiple-choice questions, we can work on it. If we have to practice working with multiple choices, we will. The data helps us to see where the real problems are.

Each quarter, teachers study data from benchmark assessments and devise test-taking strategies to strengthen instructional practices. Throughout the year, professional learning communities provide teachers time to assess students’ progress at various grade levels to assist in instruction and student achievement. Ninth-grade teachers can assess students’ eighth-grade ELA MCAS results and understand their skill sets as they transition into the high school. 10th-grade teachers have access to students PSAT results that provide writing and reading areas of strengths and weakness. Eleventh-grade teachers have access to students ELA MCAS results as students’ transition into their junior year. Twelfth-grade teachers have the opportunity to assess students’ MCAS, PSAT, SAT, and ACT results to support them as they transition to college and career pathways. An 11th-grade ELA teacher stated:

On various assessments, we will see that that a number of students getting that question right would be small. We see the data and look at the percentile of students that answer that question incorrectly. We'll see how the question was phrased and create instructional approaches for the next time. That has helped us as a team.

The data assessments conducted within common planning meetings allows for teachers to understand how well students comprehend the material. Having common assessments
throughout the quarters allows for teachers to see common threads to inform instruction. This approach holds both teachers and students accountable.

Led to increased student achievement. Student success is related to not only students’ class grades, but also their overall performance on the various standardized assessments they take within the given academic year. Of the participating administrators, seven of 10 commented they have seen student success as a result of professional learning communities. The associate principal stated:

Yes, I think that it has definitely improved student achievement. Teachers are teaching differently and students are responding. So, when you do instructional rounds in many observations, we are seeing that people are on the same page. We also see teachers doing their own thing. And that's a good thing. They're doing their own thing if it matches the needs of their students.

Similar in thought, the principal noted, “We have definitely improved in student achievement”. During professional learning communities teachers have time to create common activities and hands-on projects that are appealing to the students. Students have become more interested in what they are learning because of this approach. Student engagement in their English classes has allowed for more student success. For example, a guidance counselor commented on common planning, “It allows for different ways to approach a student– if they are auditory or visual learners– and how teachers can deliver it to the students”. Common approaches to the curriculum allow for equity within all classrooms and allow all students access to the same curriculum. A guidance counselor noted, “It provides equitability for students. They are being taught the same instruction”.

Common approaches have also allowed for more students to have access to higher-level coursework. The department chair of guidance stated:

We are looking at over 200 kids that put themselves out there to take AP. That came from somewhere. It has to come from teachers over and above guidance counselors talking with kids and empowering kids and boosting their self-efficacy that they can do this if they tried. So, when I think of student achievement. Again, I don't just look at the test scores, but I look at what they're trying to aspire towards, our kids are continuously looking to get to step up the rigor and increase their achievement. So, I have to imagine that during common planning, conversations had to have taken place in regards to course recommendations and when the time came how we would recommend kids.

The teachers have also noted students performing well within their classes; 24 of the 29 teachers commented that student achievement has improved. An ESL teacher noted, “I have been incorporating the flip camera which has helped to impact students’ performance. And I think that the camera did impact my students just in regard to their listening skills”.

Teachers also encouraged students to succeed when particular assignments were tough. A ninth-grade ELA teacher said, “We are all doing the same thing. It is nice to say to my students, I know that this is tough but every freshman is doing this”. The collaborative nature of common planning has allowed teachers to not only create rigorous activities, but interactive approaches to the lesson. An 11th-grade ELA teacher noted, “Being able to collaborate allows us to find out things like Prezi and other things that help appeal to students”. In support of this, another 11th-grade teacher noted, “Also strategies we create in the classroom support students”. The professional learning communities also provided approaches to support students in their styles of writing and reading. A 12th-grade ELA teacher commented, “Looking specifically at writing
topics and how we're going to focus on their last essays was important. I saw a big benefit especially with my students”. In addition, a 12th-grade ELA teacher stated:

I think the pacing is really important. Together, we knew we had to slow down or go a little faster or go deeper. It offers time for students to reflect in their writing and it helps with their thought process in writing.

The way in which students read also improved. An 11th-grade ELA teacher commented, “For the first time, I saw my entire class reading silently. I have never seen a class so focused in my life annotating”. Professional learning communities have allowed for students to become more engaged in their learning process because lessons are engaging and appealing to their areas of interests.

**Increased students discussing their own learning.** As teachers began collaborating within professional learning communities, creating similar lesson plans and implementing common products and assessments, students began having more conversations with other students about what they were learning. Table 6 illustrates responses from both administrators and teachers regarding this theme.
Table 6

*Illustrative Administrator and Teacher Quotes regarding the Theme “Increased students discussing their own learning”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrators</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students are working together better here every day and invested in their education.</td>
<td>Students have conversations. So, they now can have those conversations with other students about what they are learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The students come into my office and talk about what they are learning.</td>
<td>… Because, we are doing such similar things at similar times, it raises their interest level a lot of the time because they can now have a conversation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the world of student achievement an increased number of kids are attempting to excel.</td>
<td>In after school 21st Century, you see freshmen from different English classes helping each other out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids talk about what they are being asked to do versus what a specific teacher told them to do.</td>
<td>I had a student come in this morning to ask me about my class, because the other junior teacher was doing something different.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When students can communicate what they are learning, it enhances their knowledge of the material.</td>
<td>Because we are all in the same general area in studying the same work, they now can talk to each other and it helps motivate them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Additional Commentary**

In addition to the teachers’ and administrators’ comments in relationship to the three research questions above, teachers and administrators made several comments regarding how professional learning communities could improve as well as the difficulty administrators faced in providing common planning time during the school day. Participants’ commentaries in these two additional areas are presented below.
How professional learning communities could improve. In addition to teachers’ and administrators’ comments in relation to the three research questions, many comments were made across participants regarding how professional learning communities could be improved. Table 7 lists the common themes, which were to (a) increase cross-disciplinary collaboration; (b) include guidance counselors and other administrators in the professional learning communities; (c) provide for much more flexible scheduling to increase the effectiveness of the professional learning communities. It also presents a synthesis of these comments across both teachers and administrators. Following the table, a summary of these points is presented by theme.
### Increase cross-disciplinary collaboration

**Administrator(s) Suggestions**
- Allowing the content ELL teachers to work with the ESL teachers. It is imperative for the success of the students and the school as a whole.
- Allowing the school initiatives to be the indicators to be part of, and discussed with teams from different disciplines.
- Meeting with different teachers from other departments that share the same grade level/or students.

**Teacher(s) Suggestions**
- Create common products that are cross-disciplinary.

### Include guidance counselors and other administrators in the professional learning communities

**Administrator(s) Suggestions**
- Allowing for school adjustment counselors, guidance counselors, and vice principals to participate in at least one meeting a month.
- Guidance counselors and other administrators could provide recommendations for students that are struggling academically or behaviorally.

**Teacher(s) Suggestions**
- Vice principals and guidance counselors have information on students that can allow us to make curriculum modifications.
- Continue to meet with special educators to assist in closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities.

### Provide for much more flexible scheduling to increase the effectiveness of the professional learning communities

**Administrator(s) Suggestions**
- Allow teachers time to make parent-phone calls and seek support from other school personnel.
- Rather than three days a week of meetings, one day could be meeting with other departments.

**Teacher(s) Suggestions**
- Allowing time to make phone calls, correct assessments, and make photocopies.
- Creating flexible time for teachers to observe other teachers teaching, create assessments, and/or meet with special education teachers and specialists.
Cross-disciplinary collaboration. Of the administrators interviewed and teachers that participated within focus groups, nearly all of them communicated that creating opportunities during professional learning communities for teachers from cross disciplines would benefit teaching and learning. Administrators communicated within one-on-one interviews that allowing teachers of English Language Learners to interact with other content teachers could help teachers with providing scaffolded instruction and more effective teaching strategies. ESL teachers conveyed that through cross-disciplinary collaboration, they would be able to understand curricula expectations in other content areas and be better able to provide extended support for ESL students within the ESL classrooms. In addition, through cross-disciplinary collaboration, district and school based initiatives could be incorporated within common planning time to support the vision of the school. Teachers could work collaboratively to support the initiatives and gain ideas for avenues to alter instructional practices. The participants also communicated that through such collaboration, safety nets could be put into place to support struggling students and also create formative assessments that link between the disciplines as literacy applications.

Including guidance counselors and other administrators in the professional learning communities. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants communicated the benefits of including guidance counselors and other administrators within common planning time. Such collaboration could provide teachers with recommendations and essential information to support students that are struggling academically and/ or behaviorally. This could also allow for administrators to understand the differentiation that teachers have created for students for modifications to the curriculum. Such information could be essential evidence for administrators to include within Curriculum Accommodation Team meetings to provide
transparency to parents and guardians. In addition, administrators and teachers agreed that incorporating special educators and liaisons into professional learning communities has helped content area modify teaching and learning practices, as well as formative and summative assessments.

**Flexible scheduling.** A major suggestion that resonated within both administrator interviews and teacher focus groups was the opportunity to allow for flexible scheduling. Currently, teachers are expected to attend three common planning meeting within a given week. Throughout various academic quarters and weeks, teachers need more time to attend to other educational obligations, such as parent-phone calls, grading assessments, and creating resources for instructional practices. Of the administrators interviewed, many of them communicated that incorporating flexible scheduling and having teachers participate in potentially two or three common planning meetings could allow for more teachers to contact parents and guardians and meet with colleagues from other departments for sharing of instructional strategies and resources. Teachers affirmed the suggestion of flexible scheduling to allow time to contact parents, correct assessments, and make photocopies and attend to gathering instructional resources.

**Difficulty in scheduling.** In addition to the numerous comments regarding the improvement of professional learning communities, administrators mentioned several challenges related to effective scheduling. Table 8 highlights three themes that reflect the challenges administrators communicated they face with the scheduling of professional learning communities: (a) difficulty in attending meetings, (b) large differences in class size across departments, and (c) difficulty in fulfilling all assigned administrative duties.
Table 8 also identifies specific comments relating to each theme. Following this table, a summary of these comments is provided by theme.

Table 8

*Themes and Illustrative Administrator Quotes regarding Difficulty in Scheduling*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Difficulty in attending meetings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Administrators cannot attend all meetings for each team because of their other duties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Large differences in class size across departments</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● There were multiple content teams off erroneously and it ended up rolling class size off across every other department because of that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Difficult to fulfill all administrative duties</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Because teachers are meeting three times a week, they cannot complete other duties because of their contract. (i.e., hall duty, lunch duty, additional tutoring).</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Difficulty in attending meetings.** Of the administrators interviewed many of them spoke to the challenge of not being able to attend many or all of the professional learning communities. Given their complex duties within a school day -- dealing with student discipline, meeting with parents, observing classrooms, in addition to other duties-- many administrators found that one of the biggest challenges was attending the common planning meetings. Many of the department chairs communicated they would review the common planning notes that were posted digitally to assess the progress of the meetings, respond to group concerns, and redirect groups’ progress if needed.

**Large differences in class size across departments.** The administrators interviewed communicated that the scheduling of common planning time and the team of teachers collaborating was not as difficult as they would have expected. However, one thing mentioned as a challenge was ensuring that class sizes were not impacted due to common planning. Given
that a particular grade level team of teachers is meeting at a particular time causes other departments to have to have students within their classrooms. Thus, multiple content teams could not be off at the same time. This is something that has to be assessed continuously throughout the scheduling process by administrators.

**Difficult to fulfill all administrative duties.** The administration at the high school has made a committed effort to allowing teachers time within the school day to collaborate during common planning. Given the current contract, teachers cannot have any duties beyond the three days of common planning. This allows time for their preparation period. With such an approach, the administrators and other faculty have to oversee the duties that teachers would have typically completed. Under the current schedule, all administrators monitor daily lunch room rotations. Security staff and other administrators assess hallways during instructional time, and other responsibilities previously assigned to teachers have been allocated to other administrators and faculty members.

**Summary of Findings**

The findings from this study are compiled from the collaborative voices of both teachers and administrators as they reflect on their participation in professional learning communities. The collection of data from these two participating groups provided a look into the impact that professional learning communities have had within the English Language Arts Department at Durfee High School. Analyzing the use of professional learning communities from the administrator-teacher point of view allowed for a deeper understanding on how the collaboration within common planning can impact the educational process within this urban high school and what the future may hold for continued collaboration amongst teachers to increase student achievement.
In sum, the teachers’ perceptions reported during small focus groups were similar to that of administrators’ responses during face-to-face interviews and indicated that: (a) the sharing of instructional strategies allowed teachers to receive ongoing support and created opportunities for the discussion of student concerns; (b) collaborative planning facilitated the sharing of resources and ideas, created common language and expectations for both teachers and students, resulting in improvement on assessments; (c) designated time for teacher collaboration created positive impacts for both teachers and students and resulted in a noted increase in student achievement; (d) teaming fostered collegial relationships that allowed teachers to become more reflective practitioners, resulting in students discussing their own learning. The findings also concluded that both teachers and administrators believe the positive impact of professional learning communities further extends into the entire school. Suggestions for improvement included (a) allowing for cross-disciplinary collaboration; (b) continuing to include guidance counselors and inviting vice principals and other administrators to the meetings; and (3) allowing for flexibility in scheduling throughout the year to allow for teachers to attend to other responsibilities. Administrators further noted that allowing for such collaboration amongst departments had resulted in some scheduling conflicts pertaining to administrators attending meetings and adhering to other responsibilities, the impact on class size, and limited ability of teachers to adhere to other duties and still attend meetings.

Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

There have been many discussions in educational communities about how to ensure that all students receive a high quality education and about how to use standardized assessments to measure progress in relationship to common expectations for student achievement. As more
students graduate, many are not adequately prepared for college coursework and have
demonstrated limited success on standardized assessments. It has become clear that due to the
lack of effective professional development opportunities and training programs, many teachers
are not communicating similar expectations in relation to common assessments and classroom
rigor, and that this ultimately has an impact on student success. To ensure that students are
adequately prepared for standardized assessments; e.g. the Massachusetts Comprehensive
Assessment System (MCAS), most teachers and administrators have shifted their instructional
practices in efforts to articulate similar expectations and deliver assessments that align to state
standards. In doing so, school officials had to create structures and schedules to allow for
common planning time for teachers.

Through these efforts, teachers are expected to conform to similar expectations and
modify their teaching and learning practices to ensure that all students are equipped with learning
habits and skills that will enable them to be successful on performance assessments and post-
secondary endeavors. Through such transitions, teachers’ earlier tendencies to be independent
and autonomous have shifted towards working collaboratively with colleagues to align to a
common curriculum, common quarterly benchmark assessments, and common products to
inform instruction.

The purpose of this study is to identify educators’ perceptions of the use of common
assessments, planning, and teacher collaboration to increase student performance. This study
was designed to answer the following research questions:

1) What type of an impact on instruction and student learning do teachers and administrators
believe has occurred as a result of teacher collaboration and professional development
which has been brought about through the introduction of common planning time?
2) Has common planning time benefited teachers as perceived by teachers and administrators, and if so, how has it benefited them?

3) Do teachers and administrators perceive the products of common planning time (i.e., the creation of common curriculum, common student products, and common assessments) as being effective means of improving student achievement?

**Review of the Methodology**

This participatory case study investigated how administrators and teachers in an urban high school implemented common planning time to align common expectations and instructional approaches with the hope of increasing student achievement. Data was collected through focus groups with teachers from English Language Arts, Special Education, and ESL educators as well as through face-to-face interviews with administrators. The focus groups were conducted two times during the study with grade-specific teachers. All data was then coded for significant themes and analyzed.

This chapter will be broken down into the following sections: summary of findings, a discussion of the findings in relationship to the theoretical framework, a discussion of the findings in relationship to the literature review, a conclusion, the significance of the study, and the next steps.

**Summary of Findings**

According to the results of this study, the teachers and administrators at Durfee High School believe that professional learning communities are valuable. Both focus groups with teachers and face-to-face interviews with administrators indicated that teachers were provided with ongoing support, gaining instructional strategies that assisted them in their teaching and learning practices and ultimately had a positive impact on student achievement. Questions
related to the types of collaborative efforts and professional development opportunities that common planning offers yielded responses that show that teachers’ believe professional learning communities had a positive impact on their instruction and improved student learning and achievement. The participants in the focus groups sessions and interviews also indicated they felt common assessments allowed for similar language and expectations that positively impacted student learning.

The data collected during this study shows that administrators and teachers believe professional learning communities are a place for teachers to share instructional strategies and share resources and ideas that can assist in teaching and learning. Participants conveyed that common planning practices fostered collegial relationships and teachers’ feelings that they were a part of a team. The teachers perceived positive feelings that resulted in fewer teachers feeling isolated within their classrooms and that they, instead, wanted to support their team members. The dialogue alone during the common planning time was powerful. This finding was unexpected and offered greater insight into the positive feelings that teachers felt as participating members within learning communities. The findings also indicated that such practices allowed teachers to gain insight on resources and instructional strategies to modify lessons and tailor assessments to adhere to IEP regulations. It was noted that district professional development and departmental initiatives allowed teachers to gain further content knowledge and access to high-yield Advance Placement and Laying the Foundation (LTF) Pre-AP strategies and that this, in turn, helped them create strategies and engaging approaches to learning for students. Teachers noted that ideas were shared amongst the department and that this sharing offered all teachers access to new approaches. This meant that a greater number of students, including special
education and English language learners, were able to benefit from innovative instructional methods.

In the focus groups and interviews, participants revealed their additional perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the professional learning communities. Both groups perceived that having agendas, goal setting, and roles for participants provided structure for the meetings and effective collaboration. The participants indicated that the support they received provided suggestions for lesson warm ups, formative and summative assessments, and dynamic ways to capture students’ attention resulting in productive and purposeful learning environments. It was noted more by teachers than administrators that teachers felt less autonomous given the common expectations towards assessments and types of student work. This shift in instructional expectations shifted the culture of the department and school. Participants perceived that the shifts allowed for adherence to common strategies and expectations for both teachers and students. The study shows that though these expectations may have taken more teachers out of their comfort zones, they also resulted in the creation of a system (common planning) that would provide them with ongoing support and resources to positively impact student learning and achievement.

The teachers in the focus groups also revealed that they agree with the common language and expectations but that they may not be familiar and/or comfortable with particular units of study. Some teachers suggested that flexibility within the curriculum in which teachers have some suggested options might lead to greater success for both teachers and students.

Results of this study revealed that both teachers and administrators believe that professional learning communities have led to positive impacts within the school community. Guidance counselors, department chairs, and other administrators note that common language
and expectations have allowed for more people to have an understanding of what occurs within all English classes. Students have opportunities to discuss their learning with peers from other classes and additional supports and reminders can be in place if needed. Teachers concurred with this position and also noted that common planning resulted in them becoming more reflective practitioners. Within teams, teachers can evaluate summative assessments to understand areas of growth as well as deficiencies or inequities on student learning. Teachers also noted that such approaches stimulated them to teach the content differently, and subsequently they reported that more students were successful and engaged within the classrooms.

The participants within the study also revealed suggestions that could improve professional learning communities. They thought that if teachers and administrators had time to collaborate with colleagues from other departments, student achievement might be impacted. They conveyed that such interactions could support district and school initiatives and allow for more teachers to have similar expectations, which would, in effect, bridge learning across departments. In the focus groups and interviews, participants revealed that meeting three times within a given week might be taxing at times. They suggested that a flexible schedule, in which teachers meet two to three times a week, depending on the time of year and other duties that may arise within the term, might allow for greater productivity within the common planning time. Teachers and administrators agreed that having a flexible schedule could allow for more teachers to make phone calls home, seek support from other staff (special education and ELL), and provide teachers with additional time to make photocopies and attend to pending work from common products. The interviews within the study revealed that given the number of meetings per week, not all administrators could be present because of other administrative duties.
The participants in this study conveyed that student concerns were a part of discussions held within professional learning communities. They noted that assessment of quarterly benchmarks allowed for teachers to monitor their students’ progress and gain insight on ways to differentiate instructional practices. Additionally, the participants noted that student data on MCAS, PSAT, SAT and ACT is readily available and were analyzed during common planning time. The participants also revealed that having similar expectations within all classrooms has improved student achievement. Through instructional rounds and in other forums, students have become more interested in what they are learning and are more engaged, which leads to them being more successful. The participants conveyed that the instructional strategies from Advanced Placement and Pre-AP (Laying the Foundation) have also allowed for students to understand the content easily and strive towards enrolling in an Advance Placement course. Teachers also communicated that having similar approaches allowed them to find interactive ways for students to be engaged with the content taught in English classes. The findings from the study further revealed that there was some evidence to support the contention that because all grades had similar expectations and were learning similar, that students began having conversations with their peers in what they were learning.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed through the perspective of organizational change theory and socio-cultural learning theory. These two theories offered a lens through which to investigate the associations that influence the effects of professional learning communities.

**Organizational change theory.** Cousins’ (1998) explanation of organizational change refers to the learning of a collective group and how individual interactions contribute to other’s education. Organizational change involves the difference, “in how an organization functions,
who its members and leaders are, what form it takes, or how it allocates its resources” (Huber, Sutcliffe, Miller, Glick, 1993, p. 216). Jones and George (2007) note that organizational change occurs when an organization transitions from its current state toward a desired future state.

The idea of the school organization transitioning from teachers working independently within a department to that of teachers collaborating within professional learning communities and working collectively was evident in the findings of this study. The participants of this study discussed the past experiences of the school community and how the district’s implementation of a professional learning organization has impacted their teaching and their students’ learning outcomes. According to Lieberman (2009), participating in learning communities allows teachers to develop or confirm an identity that includes meeting the needs of students and learning from one another. In both teacher focus groups and administrative interviews, the participants of this study often mentioned the emphasis that the school has placed on common planning amongst all departments.

An administrator pointed out that the shift to having a focus on professional learning communities within the school has helped compared to years past, especially on instruction and strategies. The principal and associate principal claimed that having common planning time takes away from other school duties, such as lunch room supervisor and hall monitoring, but it is clear that common planning has helped create a shift towards a culture of teaching and learning within the school. Bosworth (2000) mentions that culture is a major influence in a school and small steps can have effects on the learning of students. The procedures and policies that the school implemented had a positive impact on both teachers and students.

The teacher focus groups reflected discussion regarding the shift in teaching styles and the fact that teaching common units of study took many of them out of their comfort zones. One
teacher stated, “Because we are all working together we are forced to move out of our comfort zones. In trying things, sometimes it is great and sometimes it isn't, but that's the only way to move forward.” The attitudes of the teachers, both positive and negative are a direct result of the organizational change. In addition, through professional learning communities, teachers are able to examine data gathered from quarterly benchmark assessments and reflect on their teaching and student outcomes. This type of practice is a direct shift from teachers’ previous experiences within the department.

The organizational change to implement professional learning communities, also had a direct impact on the school’s approaches towards common products, common assessments, and instructional strategies. Both administrators and teachers discussed the impact that common products, common assessments, and instructional strategies had on the culture of teaching and learning within the school. The participants associated these impacts with positively improving student achievement. They said that working collaboratively on the school’s initiatives provides teachers time to practice the instructional approaches, share ideas, and feel more confident when working with students within the classrooms.

**Socio-cultural learning theory.** Bandura (1977) noted that behavior is gained through observation and modeling from others: “To understand teacher learning, [one] must study it within these multiple contexts, taking into account both the individual teacher-learners and the social systems in which they are participants” (Borko, 2004, p. 4). King (1995) noted that within the active learning environment, educators are constantly analyzing, searching for explanations, and speculating about the relation between new and existing curricula. In this study, the idea of socio-cultural learning and the belief that people learn from one another through their
interactions are related. Theorists believe that cognitive development is a process involving social interactions and active learning.

In this study, the idea of sharing of instructional strategies emerged as a benefit of learning communities and supports the theory of socio-cultural learning. Through the use of professional learning communities, teachers were provided with ongoing support that allowed for ideas to be shared. Teachers were able to model the use of specific graphic organizers and other ways in which to motivate students to understand complex material. Teachers presented strategies, modeled them and allowed for expanded time for students to comprehend, seek support, and practice. Bandura regards socio-cultural learning as the result of a mixture of environment, behavior, and an individual’s psychological process. This, along with organizational change theory, supports that learning occurs when individuals participate in meaningful interaction within a community. Teachers interacted with one another to focus on interactive ways to enhance instructional strategies to support students in their learning and understanding of the curriculum.

The facilitation of sharing resources and ideas allowed for the creation of common language and standardized expectations. The resulting improvement on student assessments coincides with socio-cultural theory. Nordvall and Braxton (1996) suggested that in order to achieve high levels of development, educators must standardize activities to stimulate student interactions with one another. Participants noted that teachers collaborate and create ideas and alternative approaches to allow students opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge on assessments. Teachers discussed the use of Pre-AP strategies that were demonstrated within common planning times. These approaches facilitate opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding of reading by annotating the text and noting specific areas that interest them.
The participants within the study also claimed they learned helpful instructional approaches directly from their colleagues. Teachers within the focus groups discussed how common planning allowed them time to model, practice, and try new instructional approaches at least once before teaching it to their students. Administrators concurred with the teachers and believed that collaboration allowed for new ideas that positively impacted students’ learning.

Many of the participants discussed how they believed that the collaboration within the professional learning communities allowed them to feel closer to their colleagues and allowed for teams to interact by gaining new ideas, sharing classroom difficulties, and supporting one another throughout the units of study.

**Summary of the theoretical framework in relation to the findings.** The findings of this study support the theories of organizational change and socio-cultural learning. The information gathered in the teacher focus groups and administrator interviews support the ideas that the organizational changes altered teachers’ instructional approaches and positively impacted student achievement. Organizational change theory proposes that the structure within any organization and the direction the organization takes has a direct impact on all individuals. In the case of this study, the structure of the learning communities, through the support of the educational community, directly impacted the direction and outcomes of teachers and students. Program structures and the communication of initiatives directly impacted the direction that the organization strove towards. The practical experiences of the participants of this study were vital to the outcome of the professional learning community at Durfee High School.

Socio-cultural learning theory suggests that learning is a social process, and that theory is supported by the findings of this study. Teachers’ collaboration within the professional learning communities at Durfee High School, allowed them to gain ideas and learn instructional strategies
that positively impacted classroom instruction and student achievement. The data suggests that teacher collaboration fostered the ability of teachers to gain insight and develop new ideas for instructional approaches-- an idea directly related to socio-cultural learning theory. Educational institutions that utilize professional learning communities should consider the role that common planning has on enriching the insights of educators, the professional development these environments provide for teachers, and the subsequent growth they foster for students. These theories remind educators of why their utilization of professional learning communities and curriculum alignment can be important to student academic success. This is pertinent when addressing the issue of below average standardized test scores. This also lends insight into how to better instruct educators to perpetuate learning and engagement in Fall River Public Schools and the educational community.

Organizational learning theory and socio-cultural learning theory are the two major lenses that illuminate this study. In the next section, the theories are put briefly aside in order to examine the study’s results as they relate to the literature review previously presented.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

This section presents the findings of this study as they relate to the literature review presented earlier. The literature review was broken down into three parts: (1) common planning, common lesson planning, and common assessments; (3) professional learning communities, and (4) Issues and challenges to implementing professional learning communities.

**Common planning, common lesson planning, and common assessments.** The research regarding common planning, common lesson planning, and common assessment offers varying conclusions about teachers’ perceptions of maintaining similar expectations. Morrissey (2000) noted that students cannot exceed their levels of achievement until teachers become more
effective in their own practices. The findings from this study confirm that providing common planning time allows teachers to receive the support necessary to instill a culture of gains in student achievement. The previous administrative directions within the school provided teachers with a lack of interaction with their colleagues and failed to allow insight necessary to stimulate students within the curriculum. The lack of interaction resulted in many teachers lacking in the skills and knowledge necessary to challenge students rigorously within the curriculum.

Common planning allowed teachers to collaborate on specific skills and content expectations that challenged students differently. The research findings concluded that more teachers felt successful within their classrooms because professional learning communities provided them with innovative approaches to engage students. Teachers were also provided with modeling, time to understand the instructional materials, and support for clarity prior to instructing students.

Morrissey (2000) notes that collaborative environments provide supportive and shared leadership, common values and vision, collective learning and application, and shared personal practice. The findings from the study confirmed this idea. The collaborative community allowed for teachers to support one another, understand new approaches to learning, and find ways to interact differently with colleagues and students. Strahan and Hartman (1994) cite that schools are able to demonstrate positive outcomes related to academic achievement and student personal development when common elements are found. Similarly, the study found that common planning provided teams of teachers the opportunities necessary to interact and find instructional characteristics that considered learners’ characteristics. The authors go on to explain that higher rates of student success were noted when interdisciplinary teams, flexible scheduling, and collaboration between and among administrators existed.
The findings from the participants within the study noted that these currently do not exist within the professional learning communities and they perceived that if such approaches existed, students and teachers could excel more. Teachers noted that there was a lack of communication amongst teachers from various departments on student learning. In addition, they discussed that providing a flexible schedule could allow teachers to complete other tasks that related to supporting student outcomes. Finally, teachers noted the lack of administrative participation in common planning times. The presence of administration could assist in the communication and expectations of school initiatives and also support teachers with classroom and student issues.

Louis and Kruse (1995) supported that professional learning communities need to provide teachers an opportunity to collaborate on instructional practices and offer recommendations on more effective and efficient strategies. In addition, these communities had greater impact when teachers used the practices from professional learning communities directly to support student achievement. The findings from the study demonstrated that both teachers and administrators had seen a positive difference in student achievement since the inception of common planning time. Time allotted for teachers to assess students’ progress on standardized assessments and receive support from colleagues on how best to support the diverse needs of the students played a key role in creating that difference.

The findings from the study determined that teachers currently do not usually have common lesson plans. Teachers interacted collaboratively three times per week to align curriculum expectations, share strategies, and implement common instructional approaches, but all grade level teams were not at a point of creating common lesson plans. Teachers communicated that they were aligned to the scope and sequence of the curriculum, and that they
adhered to all expectations of instructional strategies, but teachers did not have similar warm-ups for students to complete at the beginning of the class, similar tests, or other assignments.

The study did confirm that teachers had common benchmark assessments that were administered four times in the academic year. The benchmark assessments test students on the essential standards and skills to be taught over the course of the given term. In addition, all teachers participated in incorporating a common product for each term. This assignment varied amongst the grades, but it allowed students to demonstrate skills learned during the particular term. These two areas were aligned across all teachers, though the daily instructional practices were still determined by the individual classroom teacher. Teachers communicated that having common daily instructional approaches would hinder their individual autonomy as educators, but they did agree that common planning time allowed them to seek support and recommendations from their colleagues on student and instructional concerns.

Professional learning communities. Epstein & MacIver (1990) noted that common planning periods allow for teaming and one individual planning period for teachers to prepare for teaching. They go on to note that in theory, teachers know how their students are doing in all subjects and can arrange for special help from other teachers. The findings from the study concluded that teachers only collaborate within their specific content and grades. Teachers and administrators confirmed that interdisciplinary communication would allow for common planning to have a greater impact within the school community.

As noted within the literature review, budgetary constraints, scheduling and staffing do have great impact on the amount of time teachers can meet to collaborate and they also have a direct impact on student achievement. The administrators questioned in this study confirmed that professional learning communities do not allow teachers to be utilized for other professional
duties, such as lunchroom supervision and hallway duties, but they did not mention financial or major scheduling constraints. DuFour and Eaker (1998) emphasize that common planning times allow for collective involvement in addressing and continuously supporting the needs of struggling students. The findings of the study confirmed that professional learning communities allowed for ongoing support and innovative ways to support struggling students. In addition, special education teachers greatly impacted collaboration to allow for the exchange of strategies and dialogue to modify and adjust instruction for students with IEPs. Rosenholtz (1989) and other scholars confirmed that professional learning communities foster learning among teachers and are directly related to student academic success. The participants within the study confirmed that professional learning communities fostered the exchange of instructional materials and created an environment that supported learning and experimentation.

Visscher and Witziers (2004) stated that impact of professional communities is felt most when goals regarding teaching and instruction involve the use of data on student performance and serves as feedback for improving teaching and learning. The findings of the study confirmed that common planning time allowed for the assessment of student data through the academic year, and it also provided time for teachers to make recommendations for remediation and support for students’ inequities within their learning, but there was little time to implement such instructional changes because the data came at the end of the term.

Issues and Challenges to Implementing Professional Learning Communities. The two major issues that administration faces according to the research identified in the literature review are time itself and educator productivity. This study supports the research findings. Morrissey (2000) noted there is an ordinate amount of time per day for administrators and teachers to meet for decision-making. During the face-to-face interviews with administrators, they did discuss
that it was difficult for them to attend each and every common planning time session. Team leaders were appointed to each team to direct the grade level meetings and adhere to the expectations that administrators had when they were not in attendance. Teachers met three times per week. Teachers noted that three times became laborious and often took them away from their other educational responsibilities, a concept communicated throughout the study. The research notes that creating professional learning communities can cause schools difficulty in regards to clustering of students and leveling for English language learners. The findings from the study noted similar issues, but English language learner teachers communicated differently. They found that common planning time allowed them time to discuss student concerns and make the appropriate level changes when needed. They did note that they do not have time allotted to meet with content area English teachers to assess the progress of English language learners once they transition into mainstream classes. This was similar to the findings within the research.

Educator productivity by a group of teachers working collaboratively was another area in which the research noted struggles for educational communities. The findings from the study concluded that both administrators and teachers felt that they were productive and collaborative as a collective group. They discussed the dynamics of each group and how they collectively rely on one another for support and suggestions. The findings indicate a clearer direction and more productive outcome occurs when teams of teachers adhere to the prescribed agenda. Teachers communicated that they would continue working beyond the common planning time independently because they wanted to have items prepared to present to their teams at the next scheduled meeting.

Huberman (1993) noted that the larger the school, the more difficult it could be for an identification of a whole-school culture during professional learning communities. The findings
from this study concurred with the research. Both teachers and administrators indicated that they did not communicate with other content area teachers beyond their content grade level team. Given the sizeable population of the current English Language Arts Department at Durfee High School, \((n=29)\), it is not surprising that teachers noted limited communication beyond their grade level cohort of teachers. The findings concluded that teachers within their professional learning communities did feel very close and were comfortable sharing successes, challenges, and student concerns.

Finally, Woods, Jeffrey, Troman and Boyle (1997) stressed that policies and new reform initiatives can cause tension and stress from the transition from different initiatives. The findings from the study confirmed that the number of initiatives do impact professional learning communities and also impact teachers’ responsibilities. As noted within the literature review even though the implementation of professional learning communities and various other approaches can bring about barriers of change, the resources and support available to teachers can significantly impact the collaboration of teachers, resulting in greater student achievement.

**Validity and Limitations**

Potential issues with the validity for this study, including issues with credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, authenticity, and transformative paradigm criteria were addressed in Chapter III. To insure credibility, the researcher communicated formally with all participants and had consent forms signed prior to all data collection. Given that the researcher is the primary administrator that teachers report to, it is possible this could have impacted their reported perceptions of the program. However, triangulation of the data and using a number of data sources addressed these issues of internal validity and credibility. It cannot fully be addressed in the confines of a one-researcher thesis.
The researcher’s professional role as Department Chair of English Language Arts at Durfee High School awards prior experience and professionally held perceptions regarding professional learning communities. Therefore, it is unrealistic to claim that the researcher’s bias and reactivity within this study and its findings were completely eliminated. Transferability was noted given the complexity of this qualitative study and the degree of similarity between the study site and receiving context. Dependability of this study is predicated on the directive that all information from this study would be made public and can be used for other researchers to review.

In regards to confirmability, there were no underlying assumptions involved prior to this study. All participants agreed to be honest and noted their interest in the findings of the research to either affirm or redirect their efforts and participation within professional learning communities. This ensured the objectivity of the study, as the researcher did not place any judgment on the interpretation of the data. The process of explaining how themes were developed enabled the researcher to become aware of how the information obtained may have altered any perspectives, thus ensuring authenticity. The transformative paradigm criteria note the finding on the particular data that is relevant to this study has been included.

The greatest limitations of this study were the small number of participants. Only thirty-seven participants participated in either the face-to-face interview (n=10) or focus groups (n=27). The low number of participants should be noted, even though all teachers within the English Language Arts department did participate in the study. During the study, a limited number of participants utilized learning journals to reflect on the process. In addition, a limited number of administrators confirmed participation in the study. It is noted that no vice principals
participated in the study. More data should be collected regarding administrators’ perceptions on timing constraints and teacher productivity within professional learning communities.

**Significance of the Study to the Field**

The perceptions of administrators and teachers on the effects of professional learning communities must be considered within the field of education. This study explored teacher perceptions on the impact that professional learning communities had on instruction and student achievement. This study built on existing research that indicated the impacts that common planning time has on a school’s ability to greatly impact students’ achievement on standardized assessments. This study supports such research. Standardized assessments continue to hold schools accountable and truly impact a student’s ability to graduate and move on to post-secondary institutions.

This study is also valuable in that it explores the perceptions of administrators and teachers’ participation in professional learning communities and their abilities to work collaboratively. Through this study, Fall River Public Schools and the educational community as a whole can understand the impacts that professional learning communities have on an individual department and the impact such practices have on instruction and student achievement. All stakeholders can gain an insight on the strengths of common planning time and the collaboration of colleagues during the school day. In addition, they can learn what areas of the program should be enhanced based on the perceptions of the participants. An exploration, similar to this study, has major implications in the field of education. If the problem of deficiencies within reading and writing continue to be apparent within school communities, stakeholders should consider proactive measures to allow for colleagues to work collaboratively on curriculum alignments, shared resources and the assessment of student data during common planning times.
Next Steps

The participants of this study offered suggestions based on their own experiences within professional learning communities. Some of the suggestions should be considered to assist in the collaborative efforts of teachers. For example, the participants mentioned they would like to work closer with other content area teachers to discuss curriculum alignments and student concerns. The participants seemed to really want to know students’ progress within other content areas. Teachers felt supported by the educational community and wanted the organization to consider implementing a flexible schedule that would allow them time within a given week to continue their collaboration, yet have time to attend to other educational responsibilities, such as reporting out on grades and such. In order to increase the positive impact that common planning has on an educational institution, and particularly on student achievement, stakeholders should continue to support professional learning communities as they are a proven pathway to student success.

Conclusion

By assessing the perceptions of administrators and teachers with regards to participation in professional learning communities, this study analyzed the degree to which professional learning communities had an impact on both teachers and students. In fact, most of the participants perceived that making time for teacher collaboration and professional development through common planning meetings has a positive impact on their instruction and on student learning. The study confirmed that teachers and administrators perceive professional learning communities as a particularly effective strategy for significantly improving student achievement.

This study also documented suggestions by both groups (administrators and teachers) that could strengthen the impact of professional learning communities. For example, it was reported
that teachers believe that collaborating with guidance counselors and other content area teachers would have a much greater impact on their instructional practices and student learning and should be incorporated into future plans.

In conclusion, this study found that the Durfee community and Fall River Public Schools professional learning communities contribute to increased student achievement as perceived by administrators and teachers. The advantages of the time allowed for ongoing collaborative efforts, team building, and instructional resources to support the diverse needs of the student body were reiterated many times in the data gathered. The shortfalls, as perceived by administrators and teachers, were the lack of interdisciplinary communication within the school community and limited flexibility within the schedule for teachers to adhere to other educational duties. The positive elements highlighted in the data are valuable and should be considered important aspects of the program that should be maintained. However, in terms of suggestions for improvements, the incorporation of interdisciplinary teams should be considered in order to improve student achievement within all academic areas.
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Appendix A

Permission Letter Superintendent of Schools

March 29, 2012

Dear Mrs. Meg Mayo-Brown,

As you know, as English Language Arts Department Chairperson for the B.M.C. Durfee High School, part of my responsibilities include overseeing professional learning communities within the ELA Department. My interest in professional learning communities has grown sharper through my studies as a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University, where I am currently planning on conducting a study concerning the evaluation of professional learning communities in the high school. This study would require data to be collected from both administrators and teachers who participate in professional learning communities. Therefore, I am requesting permission to elicit participation in this study from these administrators and teachers.

This program evaluation study will allow me to investigate teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of using professional learning communities and teacher collaboration in professional learning communities for the purpose of increasing student achievement at B.M.C. Durfee High School. I plan on interviewing study participants, as well as conducting focus groups and document analysis on products of professional learning communities, such as participants’ common lesson plans and common assessments.

I believe this program evaluation study will only serve to benefit the Fall Rivers Public Schools as it should indicate both strengths and weaknesses of the professional learning communities, allowing for further refinement of the program.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (508) 717-5480 or via email at NBretz@Fallriverschools.org, or the chairperson of my committee, Dr. Christopher Unger at Northeastern University, (617) 909-1360. Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request for permission.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Bretz, M.Ed., M.A.
English Language Arts Department Chairperson
B.M.C. Durfee High School
Fall River, MA
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University, Boston
Appendix B

Permission Letter from the Principal of School

Northeastern University Institutional Review Board
Human Subject Research Protection
950 Renaissance Park
Northeastern University
Boston, MA 02115-5000

March 29, 2012

To Whom It May Concern in the NU IRB,

As the Principal of B.M.C. Durfee High School in Fall River, I am committed to providing professional learning opportunities for faculty and staff. Nicholas Bretz, a student in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University, will lead these efforts through the data that he will collect during his doctoral research project.

B.M.C. Durfee High School and I, are eager to support the efforts of Nicholas’s research, as we look to support our common planning times and student services. I am aware that this research study will involve the following:

- Administrators will participate in one digitally audio-recorded interview that will approximately total fifty minutes, and take place at B.M.C. Durfee High School in a convenient location for those participating, and a convenient time for those participating.
- Participate in one of the five focus groups in a digitally audio-recorded session of approximately 5-6 teachers that will approximately total two-fifty minute sessions, and will take place at B.M.C. Durfee High School in a convenient location and time for those participating.

I understand and consent to this research project, its involvement with B.M.C. Durfee High School staff and all phases of data collection. As principal, I will provide the researcher with the necessary space and time within the school day for the data collection. I am available for contact if any further clarification is needed (508) 675-8100.

Regards,

Paul Marshall, Principal
Appendix C

Initial Participant Recruitment Letter-e-mail

April 25, 2012

Dear Colleagues,

As many of you know, I am currently pursuing my doctorate in education from Northeastern University, and, as part of this pursuit, will be conducting a research study beginning this spring 2012. My study will be a program evaluation of professional learning communities of B.M.C. Durfee High School.

I am currently looking for both teachers and administrators that participate in the professional learning communities program that would be interested in participating in this program evaluation. The purpose of the evaluation is to investigate teachers and administrators’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of using professional learning communities and teacher collaboration in professional learning communities for the purpose of increasing student achievement at B.M.C. Durfee High School. By participating, you would aid B.M.C. Durfee High School in improving and refining professional learning communities. Involvement in this study would entail participation in focus groups for teachers, participation in an interview for administrators, and giving permission to the researcher to collect field notes taken by the researcher during face-to-face meetings of administrators and teachers dating from May 2012 onward, as data.

Once I complete my proposal of this study and receive approval from Northeastern University, I will formally request your participation. At this time, I am simply looking for an initial interest response from administrators and teachers that participate in professional learning communities. Please be aware that agreeing or not agreeing to participate in this study will have no reflection on your work within the ELA department or as a teacher in the district whatsoever. Also, any participation in the study will be completely confidential; names and other personal information will not be used.

Please respond via e-mail to NBretz@Fallriverschools.org if you are interested or have any questions. Thank you in advance for your time.

~Nicholas Bretz
Appendix D

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Investigator Name: Nicholas Bretz
Title of Project: Using Professional Learning Communities to Increase Student Achievement at B.M.C. Durfee High School

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have been asked to participate since you expressed an initial interest in participating from a request letter sent in April 2012.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to investigate teachers and administrators’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of using common planning time and teacher collaboration in professional learning communities for the purpose of increasing student achievement at B.M.C. Durfee High School.

What will I be asked to do?
The researcher will be looking for you to participate in the following ways:

1. Participate in a focus group session that will be audio taped (teachers)
2. Participate in face-to-face interviews that will be audio taped (administrators)
3. Allow use of research field notes from focus groups and interviews dating from May 2012 onward as data

Where will this take place and how much time will it take?
The focus group session will last approximately one to two hours, and face-to-face interviews will last approximately one hour. These focus groups and interviews will take place at the high school at a convenient time and location.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no known significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
Benefits will include the opportunity to reflect on your own growth as a participant in professional learning communities, and the opportunity to aid in refining the program for future participants, benefiting yourself and the high school at large.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in the study will be completely confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for all study participants. Only the researcher will be aware of the participants’ identities. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.
If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
You are not required to take part in this study. If you do not want to participate, do not sign this form.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
There are no known significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Participation in this study is voluntary, and your participation or non-participation will not in any way affect other relationships (e.g., employer, school, etc.). You may discontinue your participation in this research program at any time without penalty or costs of any nature, character, or kind.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Nicholas Bretz, M.Ed., M.A.
B.M.C. Durfee High School
360 Elsbree St.
Fall River, MA 02720
Home # (508) 717-5480
Work # (508) 675-8100 ext. 1150
E-mail: NBretz@Fallriverschools.org

Christopher Unger, Ed. D.
College of Professional Studies
50 Nightingale Hall
Northeastern University, Boston
Campus # (617) 373-2400
E-mail: c.unger@neu.edu

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact________. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
There is no financial compensation for participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is no cost to participate in this study.

I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a participant and the potential risks. Should I be selected, I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis.

____________________________
Research Participant (Printed Name)

____________________________
Research Participant (Signature)    Date
Appendix E

Interview Questions-Administrators

For the purpose of this study, please consider the following definitions:

A. Professional learning communities will refer to the collaboration amongst teachers during the school day in which opportunities for common planning of lessons, assessments, and professional development are provided.

B. Collaboration refers to the experience of teachers interacting with one another as a group as part of professional learning communities.

C. Instructional knowledge refers to teachers’ practice of making instructional decisions based on having reflected on their teaching practices.

D. Student achievement refers to adequately preparing students for standardized assessments, common assessments, and common instructional lessons on skills and strategies that align to state standards.

E. Time will refer to scheduling purposes of professional learning community meetings within a given day/week, the scheduling of teachers and courses, and any other connection to the timing of initiatives and expectations.

F. Educator productivity will refer to the use of common planning times by teachers and adhering to expectations of professional learning communities.

Please answer the following questions:

1. How much impact has collaboration had on teachers’ insight in instructional knowledge so far this year?
2. How much impact has professional learning communities had on teachers in reflective practice so far this year?
3. How much impact has the practice of collaboration had on teachers’ experiences so far this year?
4. What has been the most valuable part of professional learning communities for you as an administrator? Why?
5. What has been the least valuable part of professional learning communities for you? Why?
6. How would you redesign any or all aspects of professional learning communities? Please explain.
7. Please tell me about your experiences in the scheduling of professional learning communities?
   - Has it created any conflicts?
     - Can you provide an example?
     - Do you feel differently? If so, how? Can you provide an example?
   - What program components, if any, were really helpful?
     - Can you provide an example?
     - Do you feel differently? If so, how? Can you provide an example?
8. How has the practice of professional learning communities impacted teaching so far this year, if at all?
   - Please explain, offering specific examples.
9. How has the collaborative nature of professional learning communities impacted teachers’ teaching so far this year, if at all?
   - Please explain, offering specific examples.
   - Do you feel it has increased teachers’ knowledge of instructional practice, or not? How so or why not?
   - Do you feel it has made teachers more reflective practitioners, or not? How so or why not?
   - Do you feel it has impacted students’ achievement, or not? (Do you feel students’ performances have been impacted as a result, or not?) How so or why not?

10. How have common lesson plans impacted teachers’ teaching so far this year, if at all?
    - Please explain, offering specific examples.
    - Do you feel it has increased teachers’ knowledge of instructional practice, or not?
    - Do you feel it has made teachers more reflective practitioners, or not? How so or why not?
    - Do you feel it has impacted students’ achievement, or not? (Do you feel students’ performances have been impacted as a result, or not?) How so or why not?

11. How have common assessments impacted teachers’ teaching so far this year, if at all?
    - Please explain, offering specific examples.
    - Do you feel it has increased teachers’ knowledge of instructional practice, or not?
    - Do you feel it has made teachers more reflective practitioners, or not? How so or why not?
    - Do you feel it has impacted students’ achievement, or not? (Do you feel students’ performances have been impacted as a result, or not?) How so or why not?

12. Has the program scheduling and timing been difficult in any way this year? If so, why? If not, why not?

13. How has your administrative expectations impacted educators’ productivity during professional learning communities?

14. Finally, what are your recommendations for next year’s implementation of professional learning communities? Please provide reasons for your recommendations.
Appendix F

Focus Group Questions-Teachers

For the purpose of this study, please consider the following definitions:

A. Professional learning communities will refer to the collaboration amongst teachers during the school day in which opportunities for common planning of lessons, assessments, and professional development are provided.

B. Collaboration refers to the experience of interacting with your fellow teachers as a group as part of professional learning communities.

C. Instructional knowledge refers to your own practice of making instructional decisions based on having reflected on your teaching practices.

D. Student achievement refers to adequately preparing students for standardized assessments, common assessments, and common instructional lessons on skills and strategies that align to state standards.

Please answer the following questions:

1. How much impact has collaboration had on your own gains in instructional knowledge so far this year?
2. How much impact has professional learning communities had on your own gains in reflective practice so far this year?
3. How much impact has the practice of collaboration had on your own experience so far this year?
4. What has been the most valuable part of professional learning communities for you as a teacher? Why?
5. What has been the least valuable part of professional learning communities for you? Why?
6. How would you redesign any or all aspects of professional learning communities? Please explain.
7. Please tell me about your experiences in professional learning communities?
   - How has it been helpful, if at all?
     - Can you provide an example?
     - Does anyone feel differently? If so, how? Can you provide an example?
   - What program components, if any, were really helpful?
     - Can you provide an example?
     - Does anyone feel differently? If so, how? Can you provide an example?

8. How has the practice of professional learning communities impacted your teaching so far this year, if at all?
   - Please explain, offering specific examples.
   - Do you feel it has increased your knowledge of instructional practice, or not? How so or why not?
   - Do you feel it has made you a more reflective practitioner, or not? How so or why not?

9. How has the collaborative nature of professional learning communities impacted your teaching so far this year, if at all?
   - Please explain, offering specific examples.
• Do you feel it has increased your knowledge of instructional practice, or not? How so or why not?
• Do you feel it has made you a more reflective practitioner, or not? How so or why not?
• Do you feel it has impacted students’ achievement, or not? (Do you feel students’ performances have been impacted as a result, or not?) How so or why not?
10. How have common lesson plans impacted your teaching so far this year, if at all?
• Please explain, offering specific examples.
• Do you feel it has increased your knowledge of instructional practice, or not?
• Do you feel it has made you a more reflective practitioner, or not? How so or why not?
• Do you feel it has impacted students’ achievement, or not? (Do you feel students’ performances have been impacted as a result, or not?) How so or why not?
11. How have common assessments impacted your teaching so far this year, if at all?
• Please explain, offering specific examples.
• Do you feel it has increased your knowledge of instructional practice, or not?
• Do you feel it has made you a more reflective practitioner, or not? How so or why not?
• Do you feel it has impacted students’ achievement, or not? (Do you feel students’ performances have been impacted as a result, or not?) How so or why not?
12. Which program components were most helpful? How and/or why? Which were least helpful? How and/or why?
13. Finally, what are your recommendations for next year’s implementation of professional learning communities? Please provide reasons for your recommendations.