The Essence of Innovation: Uncovering the Conditions Essential for Innovative Instructional Practice

A Doctoral Thesis

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EdD Program

Educational Leadership (K-12)

Northeastern University

College of Professional Studies

November 30, 2012
ABSTRACT

The sharing of innovative best practices drives systemic and transformational change and, while there are many ideas and practices worthy of replication, there are also many questions to be explored concerning the conditions necessary for a culture to successfully foster these ideas and practices in an educational environment. Uncovering the conditions that allow for innovation to take root is the purpose of this study, as it seeks to examine the phenomenological development of these conditions in the Davis Public Schools in Massachusetts during the time of the creation, adoption, and implementation of an instructional writing program called Writing with Colors that is still practiced today.

The data collection protocol for this interpretive phenomenological analysis involved interviewing five Davis educators in order to uncover their perceptions of the phenomenon of the conditions for innovation. The research question driving this study was: How do those present at the time of the development and adoption of the Writing with Colors program perceive the conditions for innovation and the resulting effects of these conditions, if any, on their teaching of writing during these years? The results of the analysis were organized into four super-ordinate themes: self-knowledge, educator collaboration, leadership, and culture: the perfect storm. The findings of the study included that a district looking to replicate the success of a promising practice should consider the need to move from a culture of isolation to a culture of collaboration in which the seeds for innovation can come to fruition.

KEY WORDS: change, collaboration, innovation, writing

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership
In the College of Professional Studies of
Northeastern University
November 30, 2012
DEDICATION

This doctoral project is dedicated to my family—my wife Marisa, and my sons, Jack and William. Marisa, you have supported me in every step of this doctoral program, even when I logged on for my first class in this program while on our honeymoon. Thank you for the countless nights and weekends that I’ve spent working late with a laptop on my lap while you carried more than your share. I’ve been in school since we met, seven years ago, and you have been so patient with me night after night.

To borrow from A.A. Milne:

My book is ready, and comes to greet
The mother it longs to see-
It would be my present to you, my sweet,
If it weren’t your gift to me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Claire Jackson, who has guided me through this process and always been there with her advice, suggestions, and ideas. Special thanks also to Dr. Alan Stopskoff who provided input for the proposal in his role as second reader.

Thank you also to my current second reader, Dr. Billye Rhodes and especially my outside reader, Dr. Elizabeth Keroack, who provided me with so much of her time and advice. Her notes and specific feedback helped to make my writing the best it could be.

Thank you to Dr. Leslie Hitch for encouraging me through this process and for supporting me in my pursuits in higher education.

Thank you to Kathleen Willis, my Superintendent, for her guidance, and encouragement to persevere. She helped me to accomplish this goal and I am so grateful for her continued support. Thea Peach, my assistant, thank you for understanding my scattered thoughts and for making it a joy to come to the office each morning.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the inspiration from my parents, who always encouraged me to do my best in school and who modeled for me the pathway to academic success. Both my mother, Joanne, and my father, Patrick, served as my readers, editors, and cheerleaders and spent so many late nights helping me improve me writing. Dad, you set the bar high when you earned your doctorate. Mom, you have always pushed me to do my best work.

Marisa, you served as my reader and my sounding board for every step of the process. I could not have completed this without your love and support. Thank you.
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Chapter One
Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The sharing of best practices is a common goal for many educational systems throughout the world, but the challenges of introducing a new idea and cultivating transformative change are numerous. The conditions for the development, adoption, and sustainability of these promising practices are worthy of further study. Why do some innovations take hold while others do not? Is it the innovation itself or are there other factors? Do all promising practices have to be novel or innovative? The answers to these questions will certainly benefit those school districts looking to replicate promising practices.

A powerful example lies in the world of technology. The Dvorak keyboard was infinitely more efficient than the intentionally slow QWERTY keyboard that we find on our laptops today (Rogers, 2005). Introduced in 1932, Professor Dvorak’s keyboard arranged the letters in patterns that were easier to navigate and even avoided the unnecessary movements that caused physical ailments such as carpal tunnel syndrome. The QWERTY keyboard was designed to slow down the typing so that the hammers in the typewriter would not jam, a problem that is non-existent today. Still, the less innovative keyboard remains the choice of all users and manufacturers. For some reason, this innovation was not adopted, despite its obvious advantages (Rogers, 2005). The question emerges, why do some innovations take hold while others do not?

As educators face a shift to a new paradigm of 21st century teaching and learning, many new ideas and innovations will help to guide their journey. Further study is needed into the essence of innovation and the conditions present when change successfully occurs in a school district so that other districts can replicate that success. Advancing from the emerging ideas and
The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomena of the conditions for innovation in order to possibly replicate them in another setting. The data collection protocol for this interpretive phenomenological analysis was a set of interviews conducted with Davis High School English Language Arts educators who worked at Davis High School in Davis, Massachusetts during the time of the development, adoption, and continued implementation of the teacher-created innovation called the Writing with Colors program, a program that is still in use in Davis today.

**Problem of Practice**

Colonial School District, where the researcher is currently employed, is a small suburban district in Massachusetts. Colonial has traditionally high test scores, but in recent years the scores on the standardized exams have plateaued, especially with respect to student writing. The Colonial Public Schools need a writing program to galvanize the efforts of both the teachers and students. Past programs, including The Collins Writing Program℠ and the 6+1 Traits Program ™, have been introduced, but there has not been a deep adoption or implementation of these programs systemically. Some teachers have informally expressed their disappointment in how The Collins Writing Program℠ initiative seems to have faded away and fear that the 6+1 Traits Program ™ is just the latest fad. A culture of isolation has developed, where, in pockets,
teachers are exploring the QAR or Question Answer Response protocol or utilizing 6+1 Traits Program for tackling open response questions. While there is an interest in these programs, respected teachers do not seem to want a deep connection to either program, nor do they demonstrate a willingness to invest the time or the energy to collaborate and try new strategies the way educators in Davis Public Schools had with the Writing with Colors program, a teacher developed program that was initially adopted at Davis high school by the English department and eventually shared with English language learners (ELL), special education, history, middle school, and elementary teachers and is still practiced today.

Could Colonial simply adopt the Writing with Colors program and see the same success as Davis, whose scores on standardized tests improved dramatically following the introduction of Writing with Colors and whose administrators have championed the program? While the 6+1 Traits Program™ has been well received by many Colonial educators, especially those at the elementary level, test scores have plateaued, and there is a need to improve the writing scores across the district.

By uncovering the essence of the innovation that took place in Davis, the researcher hoped to better address the problem of practice in the Colonial school district since there may have been present universal truths, applicable to all districts, small or large, suburban or urban. In contrast to Colonial, Davis is a larger urban district with a more diverse population. Davis has a larger number of English language learner and special education students, two high needs groups who are often “at risk” for not achieving proficiency on standardized tests. Davis’ standardized test scores for English Language Arts saw substantial improvement during the years following the introduction of the Writing with Colors program, leading many to correlate the student success with the timeline for the introduction of the program.
In 2004, members of a visiting committee from the Massachusetts Department of Education visited Davis High School to investigate the school as a potential member of the Compass Schools program. The purpose of this program, established in 2001, was to “recognize and celebrate individual school improvement and to encourage the sharing of good ideas and effective practices among educators statewide” (http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=3255). Teachers were interviewed in small focus groups throughout the school and interviewers asked many questions about the reasons for the improvement in student test scores. A pattern emerged in their responses. Many teachers, administrators, and others interviewed referred to a particular innovation that had been developed just a few years prior, the Writing with Colors program, a program designed to help students understand how they could improve their writing skills. This teacher-developed program assigned colors to specific elements of a quality essay: red for thesis; orange for transitions; yellow for vocabulary, language, and style; green for textual examples; and blue for commentary and analysis. Figure 1.1 demonstrates the elements of this program. The program began as a combination of the instructional methods of two teachers working with students who were at risk of not passing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exams. As other educators learned of the program through positive comments based on the achievement of students, teachers, and the Director of English, additional teachers began to inquire about integrating the program into their classrooms.
In many focus groups organized by the State Compass Team, the conversations began to center around the Writing with Colors program, so the Department of Education representatives asked detailed questions to determine if this program could be shared throughout the state in the same way as it was disseminated throughout Davis High School. Ultimately, the Department of Education concluded that the school-wide connection was not yet broad enough and that the benefits of the Writing with Colors program were centered primarily on the English Language Arts department. Consequently, Davis High School was not selected as a Compass School and
the program was not disseminated as a best practice throughout the state. Nevertheless, the program continued to thrive at Davis High School, and the innovators began teaching co-lessons with teachers of English, special education, English language learners, and history, and with middle school teachers of history and literature. In 2005, the co-creators of the program received the Goldin Award for Educational Excellence and they have since presented *Writing With Colors* in workshops involving high school English teachers in several school districts. By 2009 both of the original co-creators of the program had left the district. Nevertheless, *Writing with Colors* continues to be a major component of the instructional approach throughout the system as it has been utilized at the middle schools and upper elementary levels in recent years.

In other districts, such as the researcher’s current district, Colonial Public Schools, there is a need for replicating the promising practices found in districts like Davis. The problem is that it is often difficult to replicate these promising practices and even more challenging to replicate their success. There are many educators who share promising practices with the best intentions, but perhaps there is more that needs to be shared than just the tool, the idea, or the procedure. Perhaps there is something deeper, less obvious to the casual observer, which also needs to be replicated. This problem of practice led the researcher to develop this inquiry into the essence of innovation.

Something was present in the Davis, Massachusetts district that allowed and encouraged the development and integration of this program into the instructional culture of the secondary school. The Compass Schools program identified *Writing with Colors*, but fell short of identifying the underlying essence of how this or any similar program came to be part of the institutional instructional culture. One could certainly imagine packaging this program with templates and how-to instructions in order to share with other districts, but would this program
be able to be replicated easily? Is it the program itself that can be replicated, or could the conditions that allowed that program to develop and thrive also be transplanted? This study explored the conditions necessary for innovation in a school setting in order to identify and analyze the possibilities for replication.

In the traditional education model, sharing best practice is uncommon and, as a consequence, it is even less likely that ideas are disseminated system-wide. Furthermore, as Fullan (2007) wrote, “there is a growing problem in large-scale reform; namely, the terms travel well, but the underlying conceptualization and thinking do not” (p. 10). The common complaint is that leadership is top-down, that initiatives are piled on top of one another. In Davis, however, adoption of an entirely new instructional strategy for teaching writing was a bottom-up innovation created by and for teachers (DuFour, 2005). Research strongly suggests that teachers are resistant to change and “even an idea whose time has come seems to have come to lose momentum when colliding with the traditional beliefs it challenges, particularly if those beliefs go unchallenged” (DuFour, 2005, p. 11). Yet, in Davis, teachers requested that the new writing program be introduced into their classrooms. As DuFour (2005) wrote, “educators must develop deeper, shared knowledge of learning community concepts and practices, and they must demonstrate the discipline to apply those concepts and practices in their own settings if their schools are to be transformed” (pp. 9-10). Clearly, something was present in Davis that allowed for the change that occurred during the years when Writing with Colors was introduced and adopted systemically. This study investigated and uncovered the perceptions of educators in Davis in order to discover the conditions that allowed this innovation to flourish in hopes of cultivating these conditions in other districts.
Significance

The larger significance of the problem of practice is that there is a universal need for understanding the processes of change and innovation for all districts looking to improve. The educators’ perceptions of the essence of innovation in Davis, uncovered in this study, could be shared with school leaders and educators in K-12 districts throughout the world as these findings should have elements of truth that can be applied universally, irrespective of the size of the district and the make-up of the educators.

Even when successful, innovation is a slow and painstaking process that often frustrates those who are hoping to cultivate a climate for systemic transformational change. The investigation of the conditions for why the Writing with Colors program was successful in Davis sought to uncover important information that will assist any K-12 District with the replication of the conditions necessary to implement any similar innovation.

Research Questions and Goals

The research question driving this study was: How do those present at the time of the development and adoption of the Writing with Colors program perceive the conditions for innovation and the resulting effects of these conditions, if any, on their teaching of writing during these years? It is important to clarify that this question did not assume that the educators all agreed that Writing with Colors was a transformative innovation. In fact, the educators who were present during the time of the implementation of Writing with Colors could have perceived that the program had no effect at all. However, the conditions that allowed for the program to be developed, adopted, and spread throughout the high school and middle school revealed evidence of the elements that were present at this point in time that helped to lay the foundation for
educator and student success and those perhaps could be replicated in another district. The research question was crafted to uncover an understanding of the meaning behind the educators’ perceptions and focused on the educators’ understandings, experiences, and recollections of how they made sense of this lived experience during this period of innovation. The goals of this study were to uncover the core themes of the experience for those interviewed and to label those experiences in order to elicit a clearer understanding of the essence of innovation (Moustakas, 1994).

**Organization of this Thesis**

This thesis begins with a discussion of the problem of practice through the lenses of the theoretical frameworks of innovation theory and critical pedagogy in order to more clearly identify the need for this study and the significance of the results. These frameworks help to frame the analysis of the data that is collected through this study. Next, the thesis presents an investigation of the relevant literature on innovation, writing, professional learning communities, leadership and the necessary systemic conditions that foster the growth for innovation in an organization. The research design for the project describes in detail, including a description of the interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology to be used for the study, the research question, and includes an analysis of the validity and credibility of the study. The final two chapters include a presentation and discussion of the findings of this study and conclude with suggestions for further research on the topic of the essence of innovation.
Theoretical Frameworks

To understand the complexities of this problem of practice in more detail, it was imperative to consider the theoretical frameworks that guided this investigation into the essence of change and innovation. The two theories explored in depth were innovation theory and critical pedagogy. The first, innovation theory, clearly related to this study of the essence of innovation and explored Everett M. Rogers’ *Diffusion of Innovations* (2005) and Clayton Christensen’s theory of *Disruptive Innovation* (2008). The second theory, critical pedagogy, helped to frame the perceptions of the educators themselves and provided structure to the discussion of findings.

Innovation Theory

The first lens through which this research was viewed is that of innovation theory. The writings of Everett M. Rogers and Clayton Christensen laid the foundation for this aspect of the theoretical framework. The educators’ perceptions of the conditions for innovation were framed by Rogers’ diffusion of innovations theory and Christensen’s theory of disruptive innovation, as these theories helped to uncover the essence of the phenomenon explored in this study.

Everett M. Rogers (2005) proposed many elements in the process of the diffusion of innovations. He included four main elements in the process and defined diffusions as “the process by which (1) an innovation (2) is communicated through certain channels (3) over time (4) among the members of a social system” (Rogers, 2005, Chapter 1, Section 9, para. 1). Paramount among Rogers’ views was the idea that the innovation is perceived to be new by individuals or those who are adopting the innovation. However, this newness can appear in many ways including new knowledge, new persuasion or even the newness of the decision to adopt the innovation (Rogers, 2005). Additionally Rogers discussed how not all innovations are
desirable; in fact, this was one of the perceptions explored in this study. The conditions present for the innovation to take hold should include this element of newness, but at Davis it did not necessarily follow that all educators perceived the innovation as desirable (Rogers, 2005).

Rogers (2005) continued to define key terms in his explanation of the diffusion of innovation theory. *Relative advantage* was defined as the amount that an innovation is perceived to be superior to the innovation that came before. If an innovation has a greater relative advantage, the faster and more steady its rate of adoption. Relative advantage can be measured in several terms, including economic, social prestige, and convenience, and satisfaction with the innovation by those perceiving its inception (Rogers, 2005).

Another key term for exploration was *compatibility*, or how close the innovation is to those ideas that came before. Uncovering the perceptions that Davis educators held about the programs in use before the introduction of *Writing with Colors* was important to consider, as the introduction of an innovation must be compatible with the norms of a social system in order to be readily adopted. Otherwise it may take much longer to be adopted or it may not be adopted at all (Rogers, 2005).

There are many other aspects of the diffusion of innovation theory that apply to this study. Rogers (2005) also defined *complexity* as an important idea for the diffusion of innovations. Complexity is measured by how easily the innovation is perceived and how simple it is to be used by those involved. If an innovation is too difficult to understand by the members of the social system, it will be adopted more slowly, while an easier to understand innovation will be more easily introduced and incorporated into the culture.

Rogers (2005) described the importance of an innovation to be adopted over time in small increments. He described this quality as *trialability* and explained that new ideas, when given
the ability to be experienced on a trial basis, have a much better chance of being adopted quickly than those that do not have this ability. If an innovation is not divisible and must be implemented fully (and not in part), there is a greater chance that the innovation will not be perceived as well and will not be as likely to take hold (Rogers, 2005).

The final quality that Rogers described as having an impact on the rate of adoption of an innovation is observability. If the results of an innovation are highly visible to others, then it is easier for the individuals to understand and support the adoption of the innovation. With increased visibility, there is more discussion among peers about the innovation and, in the classroom setting, those who are teaching near those adopters will have many questions about the innovation that will increase the rate at which the innovation is adopted (Rogers, 2005).

One of the keys to understanding Clayton Christensen’s theory of disruptive innovation was to realize that the new innovation is often inferior (or viewed as inferior) to that which came before. The disruptive innovation is often targeted at non-consumers, individual users who were not originally intended as the consumers of the innovation. In Davis, the apparently inferior innovation was the Writing with Colors program that was initially targeted at a group of “non-consumers,” the teachers of the high needs subgroups of special education and English language learner students. Several of the experienced writing teachers in the English department, including those of juniors and seniors who had already met the proficiency requirements for the MCAS standardized tests, did not realize the value of the Writing with Colors program for their students. During the analysis of this study, the educators’ perceptions can be viewed in consideration of Writing with Colors as an innovation targeted at non-consumers.

Christensen (2008) described the way in which a disruptive innovation takes hold:

A disruptive innovation is not a breakthrough improvement. Instead
of sustaining the traditional improvement trajectory in the established
plane of competition, it disrupts that trajectory by bringing to the market
a product or service that actually is not as good as what companies historically
had been selling. Because it is not as good, the existing customers…
cannot use it. But by making the product affordable and simple to use,
the disruptive innovation benefits people who had been unable to
consume the back plane product—people we call ‘non-consumers.’ (p. 47)

Throughout the analysis of this study, the educators’ perceptions of the Writing with
Colors program were explored and the concept of the classroom teacher as consumer were
considered by the researcher through the lens of Christensen’s theory. The prevailing paradigm
in place before the introduction of the Writing with Colors program allowed for teachers of
English to consume only those writing programs that were for sale and could be implemented at
the district level (top-down). In that sense, the entire district could not immediately use a
program created by and for high school teachers. However, with the increased attention paid to
assuring that all students met the proficiency standards of the standardized tests, the Writing with
Colors program was introduced (bottom-up) and targeted at traditional “non-consumers;”
suddenly all teachers became responsible for the success of their students’ writing scores.

Of course, the inferior innovation does not necessarily remain inferior. As Christensen
(2008) explained, “little by little the disruption improves…. And at some point, users can take
tasks that formerly could be done only in the back plane [innovation] and do them in the
affordable, accessible front plane [innovation]” (p. 49). The disruptive innovation is often
simpler, easier to understand and use, and often more cost effective than the existing innovation.
These qualities allow for the new innovation to take hold, sometimes outside of the system where
other programs are already in place. In education, the central office often makes curriculum decisions and these decisions are often top-down. A bottom-up, teacher-created, shared, and implemented writing program could therefore be viewed as disruptive. In Davis, the innovation was introduced in the after-school, summer, and Saturday programs and targeted the traditional non-consumers, teachers of special education and English language learners who did not traditionally have a particular writing program. Over time, according to Christensen’s theory, the success of the program with these non-consumers would ultimately disrupt the market for the traditional consumers (English teachers, especially upper level and honors) who initially viewed the *Writing with Colors* program as inferior. This study sought to explore the educators’ recollections of the events and reconcile these findings with Christensen’s trajectory of the implementation of a disruptive innovation.

**Critical Pedagogy**

The second lens through which this study was viewed was that of critical pedagogy. This framework blends the idea that knowledge leads to power and that in a truly democratic system the oppressed, in this case the teachers and mid level administrators, can overcome the authoritarian tendencies of the system, including the influence of the mandates from federal, state, and district curriculum regulations, to create something truly representative of those who will be implementing the program.

Critical pedagogy is, at its core, about empowerment. Teachers must realize the importance of their roles in the teaching and learning process, and districts and educational institutions must understand the essential need to treat teachers as intellectuals. It is vital that an
investigation of the organizational and cultural needs of the school community be framed by the lens of critical pedagogy, as this serves as the basic scaffolding for the success of innovation.

Those in the educational arena are often jaded by the pendulum of educational reform. The 1970s presented ideas of open classrooms and student choice in their area of study while the early 1980s stressed self-esteem and creativity. Following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in April 1983, the 1990s and 2000s focused upon the development of standards and a return to the value of core knowledge, and now the infiltration of the ideas of 21st century skills and the Common Core seem to indicate that the pendulum is beginning to swing back in the other direction. While one hopes that each swing of this pendulum brings together ideas from divergent perspectives to form a more solid direction for reform, it is also true that it frustrates many educators, especially those who have been around long enough to have seen the oscillation through the decades, all leading to many calls to cease the education reform pendulum swings (Ferrance, 2000).

This research project investigated the conditions necessary for innovation to take hold. In light of the theory of critical pedagogy, one aspect explored the value of empowering the teachers to be involved in the creation of innovation. Was this empowerment perceived by the educators as improving the conditions for the innovation to take hold?

The pedagogical perspectives offered by Pablo Freire, Peter McLaren, and Henry Giroux exemplify the theoretical lens through which the educators’ perceptions will be viewed for this study. Freire (1968) argued that educators first need to recognize the truth of the political and cultural needs that the students present before they even begin to consider the best ways to educate the students. Giroux (1988) commented on Freire’s thoughts that, “cultural power then has a dual focus as part of his strategy to make the political more pedagogical…educators will
have to work with the experiences that students bring to schools and other educational sites” (p. 117). Teachers must validate these experiences and provide the students with an affirmation of their experiences in order for the students to begin to develop their own voices and understandings (Giroux, 1988). Handing students a prescribed writing curriculum, then, or even a method or strategy for success that worked in another system, may not be the best manner for replicating that success. It is essential that the educators first know the students in front of them and then adapt the strategies for their students, after first considering a knowledge of the culture of the community in which they teach. As the conditions for innovation in Davis were explored, the educators were asked to describe their perceptions of the factors that led to teacher-driven innovations. The findings of this study included an exploration of whether empowering the educators led to the creation of *Writing with Colors* and if that was also a factor in the successful adoption of the program.

A second aspect of critical pedagogy that helped to illuminate the findings of this study was the idea that the teachers themselves were considered to be the intellectuals, treated with the respect often reserved for outside experts brought in to introduce a new writing program or curriculum. The leadership structure that created the collaborative culture and learning community in Davis was viewed with respect to those ideas of Freire that framed this study. Giroux and others have argued for the importance of recognizing the voices of the intellectuals who were a part of the culture that was researched:

In this case, intellectuals are organic in that they are *not* outsiders bringing theory to the masses. On the contrary, they are theorists fused organically with the culture and practical activities of the oppressed. Rather than casually dispense knowledge to the grateful
masses, intellectuals fuse with the oppressed in order to make and
remake the conditions necessary for a radical social project.

(Giroux, 1988, p. 118)

As the perceptions of the educators were analyzed, this concept of organic fusion was explored in greater detail. A top-down approach to leadership where innovative seeds are planted but the teachers are treated as outsiders differs greatly from a culture where the educators are considered innovators and are encouraged and recognized within their own school community.

Critical pedagogy guided an analysis of the educators’ perceptions of the juxtaposition of writing programs in Davis, such as The Collins Writing Program℠ and 6+1 Traits™, with the teacher-created program such as Writing with Colors. The very idea that a product could be purchased and distributed to the teachers to follow implies the removal of the conditions that critical education theorists would consider essential. The notion of procuring kits, workbooks, and templates deprives the teachers from accessing their own intellectual abilities to create these materials, as well as the time needed to develop their own voice in bringing about change. There is certainly a time and a place for adopting existing materials, but as this study explored, is there a greater possibility of transformative change if the conditions exist for the creation of innovative, teacher-developed programs? As Giroux (1988) concluded, “in one sense, Freire’s work and presence is there to remind us not simply about what we are but also to suggest what we might become” (p. 120).

Critical pedagogy also helped to frame the educators’ perceptions about the emergence of teacher voice that should be present in a culture of innovation. The development of teacher voice is a critical component of educational innovation as this voice either sustains or challenges
the existing conditions (McLaren, 1989). Because there are many forces at play in the
development of a school culture, the significance of educators’ voices in shaping that culture was
explored in this study through the critical pedagogy framework.

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

Intellectually, this project satisfied the researcher’s curiosity about the conditions
necessary for the adoption of an innovation such as the *Writing With Colors* program. This
writing program had been described by several educators and in newspaper articles as having
been successful with students, and the researcher was curious to learn more about *Writing with
Colors*’ impact in Davis. Additionally, the ideas the educators shared about the reasons why
they perceived that the innovation took hold and was sustained met the intellectual goals of the
researcher. An analysis of the participants’ statements provided an understanding of the ways in
which an innovation can be replicated and also provided information on whether *Writing with
Colors* alone or also in concert with other cultural conditions allowed for the program to take
hold in the school community.

The practical goal of this study was to uncover the conditions necessary for innovation so
that these conditions could be replicated in the Colonial school district and shared as a promising
practice with others. Davis Public Schools had success with the *Writing with Colors* program,
but it may not be sufficient to simply replicate the program in another district. Introducing a
writing program in Colonial that has been successful in another district could help to build a
common language and bring increased focus and clarity to the curriculum, but there is also a
need to understand the conditions in the original district that allowed for the adoption and
implementation of this program. Through the study of the essence of innovation these conditions
were explored in order for the findings to be shared with Colonial and other districts looking to replicate the success found in Davis.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study did not investigate the success of the *Writing with Colors* program by analyzing student test scores on state and local assessments for those students who used the program. Students were not interviewed as a part of this study, and so students’ perceptions about this innovation were not included among the data collected and analyzed. Further studies could examine these results and explore how this innovation specifically impacted student learning.

Another limitation was the concern for reliability given the past experiences of the researcher in this study and his relationship with the development of *Writing with Colors*. This limitation was clearly described here and later in the findings so that these prejudices and biases of the researcher could be evident to the reader. Through the process of bracketing, the researcher’s perceptions were set aside so that the perceptions of the participants could speak for themselves.

Further, this study focused on the essence of innovation and the perceptions that those educators present during the time of *Writing with Colors* had about the conditions necessary for the successful implementation of any innovation. This was not simply an exploration of the *Writing with Colors* program itself. There was also no assumption that the *Writing with Colors* program was a transformative innovation, so the interview questions allowed the participants to describe whether they believed *Writing with Colors* had an impact on their teaching of writing.
The study did not examine the reasons why some educators may have been more responsive to

*Writing with Colors* than others, but future studies could explore this in depth.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

In order for the researcher to appreciate the significance of this study in relation to the existing research on this topic, several bodies of literature were reviewed. Three key questions drove the literature review for this study:

(1) *What writing theories and processes constitute the basis of successful writing programs?*

(2) *What are the factors that contribute to successful and transformative change in education?*

(3) *What is phenomenology and how will this approach help in an investigation of the essence of innovation?*

As dissertations, articles, and books were read for this review, many common themes emerged and so the following four bodies of literature were identified for further exploration in this review: Writing Theories and Processes, Professional Learning Communities, Collaboration, and Teamwork, Leadership and Phenomenology. The first body of literature that pertained to writing programs was most closely related to the first question in this literature review. The next several sections more closely explored the second question, which related to transformative change. The final body of literature explored the third question, relating to the proposed methodology, phenomenology, in order to gain insight into how this type of analysis can lead to a clearer understanding of essence and perception.

The review of these bodies of literature intended to define the importance of this study in relation to the existing writings on these topics and to more clearly illuminate the implications of
the findings of this study on the problem of practice as it relates to the process of replicating the conditions for innovation.

Writing: Theories and Processes

Much has been written about the writing process and theories that govern successful writing programs. The process that teachers use to engage students in writing is as varied as the many types of writing that can be created by the students so this study sought to elicit educators’ perceptions about their own approaches to the teaching of writing, including their perceptions of the Writing with Colors program.

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), through its position papers, offers many insights into the development of the national position and thinking on writing over the past thirty years. In 1983 a resolution was passed to address and support writing across the curriculum that stated, “writing is such a valuable life skill and such an important means of learning that it should not be practiced solely in English classes…students should write frequently in every course as a way of learning the subject matter and of sharpening their writing skills” (http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingacrossthe curr). In 1987 the NCTE commended the work of the National Writing Project, a resource that Sarah, one of the participants in this study, discussed in her interview. The NCTE believed that “the National Writing Project [was] a major force for increasing public understanding that writing is fundamental to student learning in all subjects” (http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/nationalwritingproj).

In 1987 the NCTE released a position statement on the teaching of composition. This statement addressed the act of writing, the purpose of writing, the scenes of writing, the teachers
of writing, and the means of writing instruction. In her interview, Sarah, one of the Davis teachers, makes reference to one of the components of the teachers of writing section that stated “Writing teachers should themselves be writers. Through experiencing the struggles and joys of writing, teachers learn that their students will need guidance and support throughout the writing process, not merely comments on the written product.” This position statement also described the scenes for writing, which further described a classroom that valued writing as a place where “students will develop a full range of their composing powers.” This section also reiterated the ideas from the aforementioned 1987 position statement concerning the need for writing to take place outside of the English classroom and even suggested that “teachers in all academic areas who have not been trained to teach writing may need help in transforming their classrooms into scenes for writing. The writing teacher should provide leadership in explaining the importance of this transformation and in supplying resources to help bring it about” (http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/teachingcomposition).

A 1993 position statement described the resolution on grading student writing and included the statement from the NCTE to “encourage teachers to refrain as much as possible from using grades to evaluate and respond to student writing, using instead such techniques as narrative evaluations, written comments, dialogue journals, and conferences” (http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/gradingstudentwrit).

By the early 2000s NCTE’s position statements began to include information about English language learners (ELL), digital writing, and an increased focus on informational writing as well as in the critical evaluation of information. In a position statement from February 2004, teachers were asked to “recognize and take responsibility for the regular presence of second language writers in writing classes, to understand their characteristics, and to develop
instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs.” Teacher preparation programs were urged to engage teachers in a deeper understanding of the unique needs of English Language Learners and the implications of those needs for student writing. NCTE also made several suggestions for college writing programs to address the challenges of ELL students and their writing needs (http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/digitalenvironments).

Writing in digital environments was also discussed in the position statement from February 2004, including a discussion of four assumptions for all courses that engage students digitally, including the need to introduce the students “to the epistemic (knowledge constructing) characteristics of information technology,” “provide student with opportunities to apply digital technologies to solve substantial problems,” “include much hands-on use of technologies,” “engage students in the critical evaluation of information,” and “prepare students to be reflective practitioners” (http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/digitalenvironments).

The NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing position statement from November 2004 described several major statements including the idea that “everyone has the capacity to write, that writing can be taught, and that teachers can help students become better writers” (http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingbeliefs). It was interesting to compare the statements in the Davis educators’ extracts to this belief system as espoused by the NCTE. Was there a belief system that was shared by the leadership and educators in Davis that is similar to the NCTE position statement? Writing with Colors developed and was implemented at about the same time as that position statement was being developed and so an interesting area to explore would be the parallels between the belief system described in the NCTE documents and the
belief system that affected the culture in Davis
(http://www.ncte.org/positions/sstatements/writingbeliefs).

Other aspects of the November 2004 position statement included the idea that “people
learn to write by writing” and that “writing is a process” and “a tool for thinking”
(http://www.ncte.org/positions/sstatements/writingbeliefs). The position statement also stated,
“writing and reading are related” and that “assessment of writing involves complex, informed,
human judgment” (http://www.ncte.org/positions/sstatements/writingbeliefs). The statement on
writing process was related to the effect the process would have on the teaching of writing,
expressed that “teachers should attend to the process that students might follow to produce
texts—and not only specify criteria for evaluating finished products”
(http://www.ncte.org/positions/sstatements/writingbeliefs). These belief statements about the
writing process, along with the idea that writing is a tool for thinking, shed a lot of light on the
Writing with Colors program as it relates not only to the belief system already in place in Davis
but also to the rate of adoption of a new idea. Both will be helpful in the analysis of the findings.

A March 2009 position statement from the NCTE described the guiding principles for
assessment of writing, another component of the Writing with Colors program and something
tangentially described by many participants in the study. As the statement suggested:

Assessments of written literacy should be designed and evaluated by well-informed
current or future teachers of the students being assessed, for purposes clearly understood
by all the participants; should elicit from student writers a variety of pieces, preferably
over a period of time; should encourage and reinforce good teaching practices; and
should be solidly grounded in the latest research on language learning as well as accepted
best assessment practices.”

(http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/writingassessment)

These NCTE position statements helped the researcher to understand the thinking at the national level about student writing. These belief systems were similar to those found in the 2011 Massachusetts Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy that incorporated the Common Core State Standards. The key design consideration for the standards as well as the guiding principles (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy, March 2011) incorporated many ideas similar to those of NCTE, especially related to developing thinking, emphasizing writing across the curriculum, and incorporating digital modes of writing. Adjusting to the challenges of the new frameworks is a component of the problem of practice for the Colonial School District and others as they looks to improve their writing program to meet the needs of the 21st century learner.

In addition to having this historical perspective, the researcher explored some of the current research on writing, which helped to lay the foundation of his understanding of the necessary writing program components that might be reflected in the varied responses given during the interviews. Clearly, there is no one way to teach writing, and there is much to be discovered in the perceptions of the individual educators. According to Robert Marzano (2001), who compiled the research from many studies on writing, the “processes…have a much higher tolerance for variation relative to the steps involved than do skills. For example, there are not a great many ways to go about reading a bar graph, but many different ways to engage in the process of writing” (Marzano, et al., 2001, p. 141).

Graham and Perin (2007) described the writing proficiency crisis by citing data that large numbers of students graduate without college-ready writing skills. Their meta-analytical
approach to writing instruction focused on quantitative data and looked to compare the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies by building upon earlier studies by Bangert-Drowns, 1993; Bangert-Drowns, Hirley, & Wilkinson, 2004; Goldberg, Russell, & Cook, 2003; Graham, 2006; Graham & Harris, 2003; and Hillocks, 1986. Other studies described the challenges of the students’ need to perform well on high stakes tests as well as the high need (53%) of college students who need to take remedial courses due to their lack of preparedness for college (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

Another important finding about writing is that students should not practice the subcomponents of the writing process in isolation, as it is critical that the students realize the importance of the subcomponents within the context of the whole process (Marzano, et al., 2001). Robert Marzano, with his colleagues (2001) wrote, “Students should practice the parts of a process in the context of the overall process” (p. 142). They further noted important findings of several studies that concluded that merely demonstrating what effective writing looks like and also having students write a large amount do not have nearly the effect on student outcomes as focused practice on particular skills (Marzano, et al., 2001). Of great importance also is an emphasis by the instructor on the metacognitive control of the process. Instructors should provide students with guided practice materials that use the strategies, provide reinforcement and feedback for every student, and create opportunities for the students to prove that they are executing the strategies (Marzano, et al., 2001).

There have been a number of observational studies to examine effective teachers’ writing practices, including those of Pressley, Yokoi, Rankin, Wharton-McDonald & Mistretta (1997). Other studies suggested that following a process writing approach that includes planning the writing, making a formal outline before drafting, defining the purpose and audience, using
resources other than the textbook, and writing more than one draft of a paper all improve the quality of student writing (Unger & Fleischman, 2004).

Other studies have focused on the performance of subgroups on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP, demonstrating that females tend to score higher on writing exams at grades 4, 8, and 12 than their male counterparts and that students who are not eligible for free/reduced lunch score higher than those students who are eligible (Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003). This information concerns a topic for a study that would be very interesting to explore in future studies on the Writing with Colors program.

This first question explored in this review of literature, related to the significant components of writing programs, helped to uncover the current research in writing and writing programs and provided the researcher with a foundation of information related to the components of these programs, including those that were present in Davis before the introduction of Writing with Colors and other innovative ideas.

Educators in many districts seek to improve student writing and individual educators often develop creative and innovative approaches to writing interventions. Still, there appears to have been something distinct in Davis that allowed for the implementation of Writing with Colors to become a 6-12 innovation. The second question, What are the factors that contribute to successful and transformative change in education? led to an exploration of Professional Learning Communities, Collaboration, Teamwork, Culture and Leadership and provided a comprehensive review of the current thinking on the conditions that contribute to successful and transformative change in education.
Professiona Learning Communities, Collaboration, Teamwork, and Culture

The literature review made evident that in order for any writing strategy to make an impact systemically, there must first be a well-defined community of support (DuFour, 2005). Motivation is essential in developing the support among the staff for the work required to successfully implement a new program. It is crucial that teachers who embrace a writing program (or any new program) be given the proper administrative support as well as the foundation of teams within Professional Learning Communities that provide all staff with a shared vision and clear mission (DuFour, 2008).

According to Katzenbach and Smith (1993) in The Discipline of Teams, a team is not really what we often refer to as a team, just any group working together. Committees, councils, and task forces are not necessarily teams. Groups do not become teams simply because that is what someone calls them. The entire work force of any large and complex organization is never a team, but think about how often that platitude is offered up” (p. 2). Similarly, in many schools, teams are assigned by the principal and they are given common students and goals, but often this leads to confusion about what the actual overarching vision is for the school or district.

Wheelan (2005), in Creating Effective Teams, described the stages of group development, and how groups “experience periods of dependency, conflict, trust and structuring, work, and disengagement” (p. 25). This is related to the problem of practice in that teachers in several districts have struggled with establishing successful teams. Wheelan (2005) describes four stages of group development that describe the make-up of the group at that stage. Stage 1 groups are dependent upon the leader, while Stage 2 groups are counter-dependent and tend to fight amongst themselves as they break away from Stage 1 dependence. Stage 3 groups realize an increase in the “member trust, commitment to the group, and willingness to cooperate”
Finally, Stage 4 groups engage in an intensive amount of productive and effective work. Many groups are Stage I groups that need support from the administration in identifying their goals and objectives. The problem that a district may encounter in providing support for Stage I groups is that some leaders believe that teachers need to find their way to Stage 4 on their own, while others believe teachers need to be guided. Wheelan (2005) explained that a leader facing a Stage I group should be “directive, organized, and task oriented” (p. 82). He also stated that “members want the leader to provide that structure for them” (Wheelan, 2005, p. 82). Aspects of the leadership in Davis were examined to determine whether the leaders provided structured, directive, organized, and task oriented guidance for the staff of teachers during the period of time explored in this study (Wheelan, 2005).

Much has been written about the need for defining the institution’s culture and identifying the underlying assumptions of the stakeholders in order to bring about change within that culture or institution (Thompson, 2007). David Thompson (2007) described the seven levers of change:

Every organization has a personal climate and culture that has taken many years to develop. Thus, any effort to change an organization’s culture or, more feasibly, climate, will need to be customized. Most prescriptions for change have many similarities, which are categorized into the following seven levers of change:

- Analyzing the organization’s readiness for change
- Shared vision and strategy
- Creating a sense of urgency
- Involving all stakeholders
- Planning for evaluation
Creating a culture of collaboration is equally as important as creating a culture that is sensitive to the diverse cultural needs of the students. Given the already described diversity of Davis Public Schools, and in anticipation of some of the possible participant responses about student culture and diversity, several writers and theories of culture were explored by the researcher. Although the participants did not discuss culture in detail, this remains an area for further research.

Culture affects our educational process in many ways, including the cultural impacts for students in the United States. While it is admirably ambitious to envision a future where cultures and nations can unite in collaborative learning centers, there also needs to be careful consideration given to the gaps and divisions occurring in our own backyards. In Sonia Nieto’s *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities* (1999) she wrote, “That students come to school as a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, no longer is widely accepted as self-evident truth. That is, virtually all children develop many cognitive abilities before even setting foot in a school building” (p. 8). Recognizing the importance of the cultural differences among our students is something that teachers in the 21st century need to embrace and not shy away from for fear of passing judgment. Appreciating the differences among our students is crucial to creating a climate in the classroom in which students can succeed. As Nieto (1999) wrote, “Learning also is influenced by the particular individual personalities of students and by the values of the cultures in which they have been raised. Usually, however, it is primarily individual differences that are considered to affect learning, and intelligence and achievement tests as well
as other measures of students’ individual abilities are used to determine why they are successful or unsuccessful at learning” (p. 8). Teachers must recognize the importance of the values and differences among the students in order to begin to teach the essential skills of teamwork, communication, and critical thinking, and in recognizing these implications on student learning we also recognize the student as an active learner. As Nieto (1999) stated, “cognition described as social and cultural implies agency on the part of the learner; no longer is the learner simply acted upon, but she acts, responds, and creates through the very act of learning” (p. 15). The diversity of the students and educators in Davis represented an important aspect for the conditions for innovation and this study did address culture as the perceptions of the educators were analyzed.

Several of the texts reviewed gravitated toward the topic of leadership. As the problem of practice was explored in detail it became evident that there were many benefits to establishing a common language for understanding the components of a long composition or open response piece of writing that is assessed as a part of the MCAS for ELA. But a common language cannot be infused systemically without the pillars of strong leadership.

Certainly an exploration of the writings on collaboration and teamwork is of critical importance for a better understanding of the conditions necessary for innovation. In analyzing the interviews with Davis educators, the language of professional collaboration and teamwork was beneficial to the researcher in qualifying the experiences, as was the common understanding of the key elements of effective leadership.

**Leadership**

There were several authors considered for this review of leadership, with Michael Fullan
and Robert Marzano emerging as two authoritative voices on the topic. *Leading in a Culture of Change* (2001) and *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2007), both by Fullan, were seminal works in the area of educational leadership. Marzano, in *School Leadership that Works* (2005), brought together years of research and highlighted the results that have proven useful in schools in order to bring about transformational change.

The implementation of a strategy for writing, no matter how well designed, will not survive in a school climate that does not support philosophically the goals of this innovation (Fullan, 2001). Fullan (2001) wrote:

> [T]he job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing
> the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a
> common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and
> knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together
> in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals
> accountable for their contributions to the collective result. (p. 65)

In order for successful implementation, leaders will be required to assist in implementing the program system-wide and must provide the clarity needed by the stakeholders in order to understand the change. As Fullan (2007) wrote, “even when there is agreement that some kind of change is needed, as when teachers want to improve the school as a whole, the adopted change may not be at all clear about what teachers should do differently” (p. 89). Teachers will need to be given clarity as to the purpose of any training, and professional development time should be allotted for teachers to reflect upon the successes of the program and to share best practices, as was the case for integrating the *Writing with Colors* program into the classroom (Fullan, 2007).
The literature indicates that it is crucial that leadership recognize that much of the reason for the success of the Davis program is that it was teacher created, teacher driven, and teacher implemented (Fullan, 2007). If a program becomes a success, it should not become a top-down process that no longer involves all of the stakeholders. Fullan (2001) noted how “effective leaders understand the value and role of knowledge creation, they make it a priority and set about establishing and reinforcing habits of knowledge exchange among organizational members” (p. 87). Not only must the leadership encourage the teachers to share what they know, but they must also cultivate a climate in which teachers see the value in this sharing process. As Fullan (2007) stated, “large scale change cannot be achieved if teachers identify only with their own classrooms and are not similarly concerned with the success of other teachers and the whole school” (p. 302). It is important to consider whether the Writing with Colors program must be adopted by every single teacher (or writing teacher) in a district or whether it can be adapted by the individual teacher as he or she sees fit. A question that arises centers around the role of the leadership in supporting the full implementation of an idea, or in establishing what non-negotiable pieces of the idea must be implemented in order for the full vision to be realized.

Fullan’s theories influenced the development of several of the open-ended interview questions for this study, questions that lead to an investigation of leadership as a theme that was perceived as significant to the conditions for innovation at Davis High School.

Change does not happen instantly, and the readings about it indicated that “people do not learn or accomplish complex changes by being told or shown what to do. Deeper meaning and solid change must be born over time” (Fullan, 2007, p. 92). Exposure to the basics of the Writing with Colors program, being shown what to do, is only a starting point for educators who are looking to implement the innovation. The true challenge of replicating the success of Writing
with Colors or any program resides in the development of the process over time. The creation of lessons that provide opportunities for students to engage in the critical and analytical thinking exercises via the writing process, and the sharing and modeling of best practices are a part of this process. Part of the investigation of this study was to discover educators’ perceptions about the ways in which the Writing with Colors program impacted their instruction and how the complexity of the program and the opportunities for observing and trying the program led to its rate of adoption.

The literature also revealed that leaders must be ready to address those who do not initially “buy-in” to the proposed innovation. Some teachers may not like proposed or developed ideas and may not be open to adopting a new program. Many may believe that they are already doing something similar or better to improve student writing. Leaders must not only accept these dissenting opinions, they should embrace them. As Fullan (2001) wrote, “investing only in like-minded innovators is not necessarily a good thing. They become more like-minded and more unlike the rest of the organization while missing valuable new clues about the future” (p. 75). A weak leader surrounds himself with “yes men” who will always agree with any innovation no matter how weak this innovation may be. A strong leader seeks the voice of the dissenter in order to bolster the innovation itself so that it takes into account its shortcomings and attempts to address these issues as soon as possible. Without recognizing the voice of conflict, the leader may never hear where the innovation could be going wrong (Fullan, 2001). According to the literature, a change leader must recognize that “change is a process, not an event.” This is not something that will happen overnight; it is an on-going process that requires the time and commitment from all stakeholders as well as the leader. There is work to be done by the leaders to establish the conditions for innovation before and during the time when the innovation is
introduced, and the leader must also follow-up and follow-through during the adoption process, ensuring the cultivation of these conditions after that initial implementation.

Leaders must also provide opportunities for all stakeholders to realize the purpose of their work and communicate the vision of the team. Fullan (2001) described the “strange attractors” that “involve experiences or forces that attract the energies and commitment of employees. They are strange because they are not predictable in a specific sense, but as outcomes are likely…in the process we are describing” (p. 115). And as the process evolves, so do the attractors. The original vision must continually be renewed among all stakeholders in order to remain shared and purposeful. The leader must continually develop his or her relationship with all stakeholders, and the stakeholders with each other, in order to maintain the attraction.

The findings of this study caused the researcher to return to the literature to investigate further the many ideas to be considered when it comes to hiring practices and human resources. Bush (2003) described the ways in which educational human resource leaders should be cautious when applying models that have been successful in the business world. Bush (2003) cited Baldridge (1978) who wrote, “traditional management theories cannot be applied to educational institutions without carefully considering whether they will work well in that unique academic setting….(Baldridge, et al., 1978, p. 9)” (p. 15).

It is critical that schools become places that encourage the support and development of their teachers in order to build communities that support not only teacher growth, but also the culture of collaboration and sharing that results in the development of innovation. The importance of a mentor as well as an induction program for new teachers was also a part of this literature review. Emergent themes in the participants’ responses indicated that there was a lot to consider in relation to the importance of hiring the right staff. Fullan (2007) described the
importance of a solid induction program and creating the climate to foster the development of young teachers. Unfortunately, many induction programs are underfunded or insufficient for the needs of the new teachers, resulting in high teacher attrition. Fullan (2007) wrote, “hiring practices themselves, combined with the presence or absence of induction programs, are an indication, usually negative, of whether teaching is a worthwhile, developmental profession” (p. 279).

In order to develop the idea that teaching is a worthwhile, continuous growth profession, the leadership must not only recognize the importance of establishing a high standard for new hires, but must also establish this standard as the norm for all educators. All of the educators in the school will serve as mentors, either formally or informally, and will lead by example. A school that has a highly effective learning community in place will welcome new teachers to become a part of that community. As Fullan (2007) wrote:

If most schools are not good learning organizations (or good professional learning communities), this means that they are not good employers. They are especially not good employers for teachers who want to make a difference…. In quality terms, if you want improvement, you have to attract talented people and then foster their collective development on the job from day one. Indeed, if you do the latter, you are more likely to attract good people in the first place. (Fullan, 2007, p. 282)

It is essential for educational leaders to develop their teachers from the beginning, and it is also important that new innovations be introduced and supported from the beginning as well. Understanding that an innovation needs time to develop challenges leaders have to put in the effort needed to see those innovations through to the end. This may mean having to limit the
amount of innovations the leader brings forth. And having the best ideas is not enough because it takes a whole team, driven by a common purpose and motivation, to see the change through to the end. An implementation dip is to be expected, and leaders need to be empathetic to those who are having difficulty adapting to the change. Leaders cannot panic when things do not “go smoothly”—they must remain confident and calm and weather the dips in implementation. Resistance needs to be redefined and embraced, turning those resistors into involved educators and, hopefully, into leaders—which helps to adapt the culture in order to cultivate a climate for change.

Reviewing the relevant research in educational leadership and teamwork provided a background for understanding the perceptions of the participants. As the interviewees considered the elements and conditions that were necessary for innovation, it was likely that they would consider not only the role of the teachers, but also the role of the leadership that provided the teachers with the opportunity to develop their ideas. It was interesting to uncover similarities in the interviews with respect to this topic and to relate these findings to the body of research in educational leadership.

**Phenomenological Research**

The research question for this study required a methodological approach that was qualitative in nature and that struck at the essence of the perceptions of the educators being interviewed. Through the investigations of texts related to qualitative research design, the method of phenomenology emerged as an ideal approach and several texts were consulted in order to provide both a theoretical and philosophical understanding of phenomenology as well as a better comprehension of the methodology itself. The previously explored literature review questions mapped to writing and the qualities of professional learning communities, teamwork,
and leadership. This third and final literature review question invited an exploration of the body of literature on phenomenological theory that led to better understanding of the ways in which the researcher could begin to perceive the educators’ understanding of what they have experienced through interpretive phenomenological analysis.

For the purpose of better understanding the intricacies of phenomenological research, several texts were consulted, including *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis* by Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Phenomenological Research Methods* by Clark Moustakas, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design* by John W. Creswell, *Researching Lived Experience* by Max Van Manen, *Faith, Science, and Understanding* by John Polkinghorne, and *Introduction to Phenomenology and Husserlian Meditations* by Robert Sokolowski. Many of these texts will be revisited in Chapter 3 and for the purpose of this literature review the following section focused on the theoretical and philosophical foundation for an understanding of phenomenology.

Phenomenology investigates the question of appearance and was defined by Sokolowski (2000) as “the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (p. 2). The first writings of the phenomenological movement emanated in 1900 and 1901 with the publication of Edmund Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*. This work was the first of its kind and the first to begin to explore the research of lived experience. At the core of phenomenology is “intentionality,” a term developed by Husserl and defined by Sokolowski (2000) as “the teaching that every act of consciousness we perform, every experience that we have, is intentional: it is essentially ‘consciousness of’ or an ‘experience of’ something or other” (p. 8).

During the 1920s Husserl and Martin Heidegger paired to further advance
phenomenological inquiry in Germany, as Heidegger, an educated philosopher, tied Husserl’s thinking to classical philosophical issues. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was published in 1927 and dismissed the Cartesian epistemological problem. No longer could one’s own consciousness be defined as self-contained and solitary, as Descartes described. As Sokolowski (2000) wrote, “we experience and perceive things, not just the appearances or impacts or impressions that things make on us” (p. 216). Through the concept of intentionality, a detailed and descriptive analysis can be presented that seeks to demonstrate the realism of these perceptions. As Sokolowski (2000) stated, “one does not prove realism; how could he do so? One displays it” (p. 216).

Further developments to the concept of intentionality and phenomenology came from France and the writing of Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre’s early writings from the 1930s and 1940s developed phenomenological arguments and advanced Husserl’s concept of absence and non-being. These ideas are critical to my understanding of the responses provided through the interviews, since the recall of the events is an absence of time and an absence of things being remembered (Sokolowski, 2000).

Another text that helped to uncover the path to understanding educators’ perceptions of the conditions for innovation was *Faith, Science, and Understanding* by John Polkinghorne. This text contained philosophical as well as theological arguments about belief. This led the researcher to further consider *why people believe what they do*, which will become a component of the analysis and commentary on the interviews conducted. Polkinghorne (2000) wrote eloquently on the motivations for belief:

> There is a middle way between intellectual certainty and intellectual doubt, between logical guarantees on the one hand and solipsistic
individualism or social determination on the other. This middle way is called critical realism: ‘critical’ because it acknowledges the problematics of motivated belief and concedes our inability to rid it of all intellectual precariousness; ‘realism’ because it recognizes, nevertheless, that we can attain a verisimilitudinous grasp of reality. (p. 32)

Sokolowski (2000) described the journey from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude, when, in essence, the researcher becomes a philosopher (p. 47). Sokolowski (2000) discussed in great length the relationship between the parts and the whole, as well as the purpose of seeking the essence of the true identity of something being explored. Phenomenology is an examination of the true nature of being and through this study the “disclosure of truth” about the perceptions of the essence of innovation will be revealed (p. 65).

Additionally, Van Manen (1990) offered many practical suggestions for understanding phenomenology and researching lived experience. He explained “a good description that constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way” (p. 39). This was an excellent description of the type of inquiry to be conducted for this project, to discover the truth behind these experiences in a new way. For many years teachers and administrators have been discussing the Writing with Colors program, but through this phenomenological approach these interviews provided additional understanding for the researcher into the true nature and essence of the educators’ lived experience.
Summary

This review of the literature provided an opportunity for an in-depth investigation of the key elements that have better informed the researcher’s understanding of the problem of practice and the research proposed in this study. In anticipation of the elements uncovered in the interviews, these readings have provided a foundation of the current research in writing and writing programs as well as the elements of collaborative culture and leadership. Furthermore, based upon the writings on the topic of phenomenology the researcher was better prepared to begin to interpret the educators’ perceptions of their experiences. These philosophical and methodological readings confirmed his assertion that phenomenological inquiry was an appropriate method to investigate this problem of practice and the details of the design of this research are described in the following chapter.
Chapter Three
Research Design

Introduction

Pursuing a greater understanding of innovation is of great professional and personal interest to the researcher. Professionally, cultivating a climate for innovation is essential to bring a school district from good to great. Personally, the researcher is interested in the investigation of why some innovations succeed and others do not. Qualitative research, specifically interpretive phenomenological analysis, provided the method for exploring the essence of innovation at Davis High School in greater depth.

As with any qualitative research, interpretative phenomenological analysis is most successful when the researcher is passionate about the topic (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Additionally, the researcher was interested in exploring change and facilitating change to combat the problem of practice, replicating the conditions for introducing an innovation in another school district (Kidder & Fine, 1997). This research project investigated the meaning behind the educators’ perceptions as they were interviewed in their natural setting, Davis High School.

Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) explained how quantitative research focuses on what happened and investigated the relationships between events. Much of the research surrounding innovative writing programs focused on the results of the program, of the relationship between the student or teacher performance before and after the introduction of the program. However, much remained to be investigated into how to make sense of what happened, and this was the purpose of this qualitative research study. Making sense of the claims made by the educators revealed insight into innovation itself and the conditions present that allowed the innovation to thrive.
In this qualitative study both the interviewer and interviewee were active participants. The researcher acted as the interviewer and was an instrument in this study, as he used a variety of question types in order to elicit in-depth responses from the interviewees. These open-ended question types included descriptive, narrative, structural, contrast, evaluative, circular, and comparative questions as well as prompts and probes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Investigating innovation is complex, and a qualitative exploration provided a detailed and complex understanding of the issue (Creswell, 2007). Allowing the teachers from Davis to recount their own experiences empowered the teacher voices that were witness to and a part of the culture of innovation to have their stories told. The relationships among the teachers and between the academic leadership and the educators was explored and the meaning of the perceptions of the educators was analyzed in depth. A qualitative study, as Creswell (2007) stated, “begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). This study followed all of those steps and closely examined the meaning behind the very human problem of the perceptions of the educators concerning the conditions necessary for any innovation in a public education setting to succeed.

A key component of this study was interviewing the teachers in their natural setting, their high school. This study did not bring the teachers into a lab or another unnatural environment and the interviews were conducted individually, face-to-face, over time. This provided a close interaction between the researcher and the interview subjects. At all times the privacy of the individual participants was maintained as much as possible. This included changing the names of the participants and the school districts that were the focus of this study (Creswell, 2007).
Furthermore, the researcher was a key instrument in this process, conducting the interviews from questions developed by the researcher himself. The focus of the analysis was on the emergent themes from the data and thus the design of the process emerged as the study progressed. As a qualitative study, the researcher interpreted the data, but as Creswell (2007) stated this “cannot be separated from [his] own background, history, context, and prior understandings” (p. 39). Therefore, the researcher needed to bracket his previous understandings and thoughts on the topic under investigation. According to Anderson and Spencer, “bracketing is a process of setting aside one’s beliefs, feelings and perceptions to be more open or faithful to the phenomenon (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 269.)” In setting aside his own beliefs, the researcher was better prepared to elicit the meaning behind the educators’ statements of their experiences. This research project served as a holistic account of the perceptions of the educators in Davis and examined the complexities of the relationships and feelings of the educators about the conditions that shape innovation (Creswell, 2002).

**Research Question**

The purpose of this research was to investigate the conditions essential for innovation to take hold, as the *Writing with Colors* program did in the Davis Public Schools. The research question was:

> How do those present at the time of the development and adoption of the *Writing with Colors* program perceive the conditions for innovation and the resulting effects of these conditions, if any, on their teaching of writing during these years?

Moustakas (1994) described five characteristics of a qualitative research question, all of which were considered in the formulation of the research question for this study. In short, this question sought to explore the essences and meanings of human experience, directly involved the
personal and passionate involvement of the research participant, avoided casual relationships, and elicited an exploration of vivid and comprehensive descriptions of the events and the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The interviews with the individual educators who experienced the essence of the experience, that is, the conditions for the culture of innovation, provided the descriptions to be analyzed. Through several close readings of the participants’ responses to the interview questions (Appendix F), the researcher was able to more clearly identify the educators’ perceptions. The data was analyzed for the significant statements, meanings, and the textural and structural units; as such, a clearer understanding of the essence of the experience emerged (Creswell, 2007).

Methodology

This study consisted of an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of the phenomenon experienced by the educators from Davis High School. Phenomenology is a type of research in which the researcher suspends his understanding or knowledge of an experience in order to understand the phenomenon in a more substantial way (Creswell, 2007). An investigation of the essence of innovation requires a method of inquiry that will set aside preconceived notions of meaning and allow for the deep exploration of the participants’ experiences. Phenomenology is the perfect method for this purpose (Sokolowski, 1974).

Moustakas (1994) described philosopher Edmund Husserl’s concepts of Epoche and Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction as the means to discovering the essence of every experience. Moustakas (1994) explained that “epoche is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things….”
Epoche requires a new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn to see what stands before our eyes, what we can distinguish and describe” (p. 33). Phenomenology allows us to gain insight into the true essence and meaning of an experience in a way that a quantitative examination of what happened cannot provide.

One of the keys to Epoche is that everything is of equal value so that everything enters “freshly into consciousness” and only what emerges has the possibility of representing the truth (Moustakas, 1994, p. 87). Moustakas (1994) described how the word is commonly used as a caveat for children “to be alert, to look with care, to see what is really there” (p. 85). Similarly, this researcher needed to investigate the essence of innovation in Davis with the same care, first by setting aside any preconceived notions of what happened and why and then by reading and rereading the interviews in order to deeply investigate the emergent themes in the transcripts.

Sokolowski (2000) suggested that Husserl provided suggestions on how to intuit an essence, as Sokolowski stated, “when phenomenology ‘neutralizes’ the internationalities at work in the natural attitude, it does not dilute, destroy, upset, or ridicule them. It merely adopts a contemplative stance toward them, a stance from which it can theorize them” (p. 63). The methodology of this study, from the selection of the site and participants to the data collection protocol and the many stages of data analysis, served to “intuit an essence” and employed the methods of phenomenology to explore the meaning of the perceptions of the educators in Davis (Sokolowski, 2000)

**Site and Participants**

The site of this study was Davis High School and the participants for this study were five Davis High School educators. The study did not identify any of the participants by name and
pseudonyms were used for the educators and school districts in the study to protect the confidentiality of all the participants. Throughout this study the participants are referred to as participants, interviewees, and co-researchers, since the method of Phenomenology deeply involves the participants in the research process. All interviews were scheduled to take place at Davis High School unless the interviewee wished to choose another location. All interviews were conducted one-on-one. The interviews were recorded digitally and lasted for approximately 90 minutes, depending on the length of the responses and follow-up questions. At the end of the interview the interviewees were informed that there could be a follow-up interview if questions still remained; they were also informed that they would be able to view their individual statements and review the portions of the transcript that were used in this study for verification.

Several educators who were present during the years of the introduction, adoption, and implementation of Writing with Colors were asked to participate in the study. Those educators who responded to the inquiries for participation were interviewed in order to measure their perceptions about the Writing with Colors program and the conditions necessary for this or any innovation to be successful. The purposive sample included five educators who worked at Davis High School at this time.

In order to gain access to the site and participants, arrangements were made with Davis High School Principal and the Director of English Language Arts. Teacher interviews were conducted in person via interview at Davis High School unless the participant requested another location. The researcher believed that the teachers would participate in the study from intrinsic motivations based upon their own desire to learn more about the reasons for their successes in developing interventions and innovations for improved student writing.
The five participants represented a purposeful sample in that they comprised some of, all of? the teachers who were present in Davis during the time of the development of the *Writing with Colors* program. This grouping provided a focused sample for interviews and provided the greatest representation of the educators for this study. In order to ensure the cooperation of the participants, each was sent a letter asking for his/her participation. If someone did not respond, he/she was sent a second letter as a reminder of the initial request. If the potential participant did not respond to the second letter, a final request was sent, stating that this would be the final request for participation.

Participants participated in an individual pre-interview meeting in which the preliminary instructions were provided and the determination was made as to whether the participants would be chosen as co-researchers. This determination was based upon the willingness of the participants to engage in the exploration of the essence of innovation (Moustakas, 1994).

*Writing with Colors* developed at Davis High School over the period of several years and was shared in the same classrooms that these teachers taught in every day. All of the educators who were interviewed witnessed the creation and systemic adoption of this and possibly other innovations and so the careful analysis of their interviews provided insight into their perceptions about the conditions necessary for the creation, adoption, and implementation of innovation.

**Data Collection**

Phenomenological research allows for the study of the meanings behind everyday experiences, and this method of inquiry was ideal for discovering the perceptions of the educators in Davis during the time of the innovation of the *Writing with Colors* program. The process of data collection for this study was through conversational interviews with open-ended questions. The interviews began conversationally and then the interviewee was asked to focus
more directly on the essence of his or her experiences with the introduction of the innovation. It was the responsibility of the researcher to establish the comfort level and climate for the interviewee to provide in-depth responses to the questions.

While conducting the interviews, it was essential to “avoid, as much as possible, forcing the person in any direction, other than keeping their attention on the original topic” (Boeree, 1998). The collection of data led to an examination of the emergent themes in the teachers’ accounts of the introduction of the innovation (Moustakas, 1994). An essential component of the process of phenomenological research is bracketing, which is the process of distancing oneself from the usual assumptions about the phenomena (Boeree, 1998). This was a key component of this research project due to the close association of the researcher with the Writing with Colors program.

The data collection protocol included qualitative interviews that consisted of open-ended questions that were asked during the interviews. The interviews were recorded using digital audio recorders and transcribed so that the data could be analyzed. The devices used, a digital recorder and an iPhone app for Dragon Naturally Speaking, were adequate for the interviews and sensitive to the acoustics of the room (Creswell, 2007). The interviews remained within the allotted time in order to be courteous to the participants (Creswell, 2007) and, due to the open-ended questions and the conversational approach of these interviews, any misconceptions were clarified during the interview process (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants were informed that all materials and recordings were solely for the purposes of this research project and were to be destroyed as soon as they had been transcribed and the project completed.

There are many essential elements of qualitative data analysis that specifically relate to
phenomenological research. This includes the process of horizontalizing the data, which includes assigning equal value to all of the information provided during the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Meaning was assigned to the participants’ responses related to the topics and the statements were clustered based upon emerging thematic elements allowing for the investigation of the essence of the topic to be described in detail (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data Analysis Protocol**

For this study the process of bracketing, or setting aside any preconceived notions of the phenomenon, was used as much as possible. This was significant since this allowed the researcher to more fully understand the experience from the point of view of those being interviewed (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) was also employed, as each statement was given equal value by the researcher and explored by investigating how the phenomenon was experienced. Moustakas (1994) suggested that data analysis involve horizontalization, reduction, and elimination to determine invariant themes. Coding was also utilized to determine emerging themes and significant statements (Creswell, 2007). This process involved assigning codes and categories for the observations made from the study. As the data was transcribed into the computer, significant notes were made in the margins in order to identify key information. These notes were representative of the reflections and other thoughts the researcher had throughout the process (Creswell, 2007). In order to facilitate this process, the computer coding software MAXQDA was utilized throughout the coding process of the interviews.

The analysis of this study involved the data analysis spiral as described by Dey and invoked the three “I’s” - ‘insight, intuition, and impression’ (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 150).
Through the process of culling the data, classifying and coding, and then revisiting emerging themes, the analysis spiraled to provide a comprehensive picture of the investigation. This process began with the data management and organization of the collected data. As the analysis progressed, the data was read, memoing took pace, and notes and reflections were compiled. The codes and categories were created to classify the data and consisted of both in vivo codes and those composed by the researcher (Creswell, 2007).

Memoing is the process of creating notes and memos throughout the analysis that serve to represent explicitly the evolving implicit thoughts and feelings of the researcher (Creswell, 2007). This process was critical in that it allowed for the formulation of theory throughout the process of analysis. Self-reflective memos reflected the reactions to the interviews that were personal and provided the researcher with the opportunity to note his emerging feelings during this process. Analytic memos may consist of “questions, musings, and speculations about the data and emerging theory” (Creswell, 2007, p. 290) and memos were created throughout the process of data analysis.

Finally, as the data was interpreted and presented, consideration was given to the visual representation of the information collected. The presentation benefitted greatly from being visual, in the form of a table or figure that helped to illustrate the categories and layers of analysis from this research (Creswell, 2007). As coding was used throughout this stage of the analysis, Saldaña (2009) as well as Shapiro (1972) were reviewed in depth for guidance in this process. These authors presented many questions to be considered during the coding process and suggested that, though mundane, coding as an essential component of a research analysis will invite the most in-depth investigation of the data (Shapiro, 1972).
Van Manen (1990) offered six research activities that are essential when conducting phenomenological research, which this qualitative data collection process followed:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world
2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it
3. reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon
4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting
5. manipulating a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and the whole (p. 30-31)

Furthermore, this study followed the recommendations of Moustakas (1994) and began with a narrative that described the researcher’s personal experiences with the phenomenon of the conditions that allowed for the innovation of the *Writing with Colors* program. The purpose of this narrative was to clarify the personal experiences of the researcher and to set those beliefs aside so that the analysis could focus on the perceptions of the participants in the study (Moustakas, 1994). The next step was to discover the significant statements within the interviews and assigned each statement equal value so that there was a series of non-repetitive statements of equal worth and then assigned these statements to larger groups thematically (Moustakas, 1994). After the statements had been arranged by theme, the next step was to investigate the *what* and the *how* of the participants’ experience by depicting both textural and structural descriptions of the participants’ statements. In the analysis for this study the *what* would include a verbatim description of the statements of the participants and the *how* would include describing where and when the innovation seemed to take hold. Finally, as Moustakas (1994) suggested, this study included a composite description of the events that truly elicited the essence of the experience of the participants.
Creswell (2007) provided an excellent graphic (Figure 3.1) to illustrate this process, a template for coding a phenomenological study:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 3.1**

Data was collected and transcribed and, during the analysis process, was read, reread, coded, and analyzed through this iterative and inductive cycle (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The first phase of this analysis included the process in which the data was read and reread with a close analysis to every line and word in the participant’s individual interview. In rereading the interviews several times, the researcher was able to enter the world of the participant and drew ever closer to understanding the perception of the participant. Initial noting took place in the next phase and included notes made on the transcripts reflecting the researcher’s open-mindedness to the data. Anything noteworthy was recorded in the margins to be used later to help identify the emerging themes in the interview. These explorations included any descriptive comments and highlighted any key words, phrases, and ideas present in the transcript. Linguistic comments were also investigated in order to analyze the specific words and expressions used by the participants. The third level was perhaps the most time consuming and involved the coding of the conceptual comments based upon the interviews. Computer software was employed to
help facilitate this coding process. The researcher considered the possible emotional meanings of the statements of the participants and also the implications of understanding these meanings through the lens of the personal experiences of the researcher. During this stage the researcher drew upon his own understandings and perceptions in order to better understand the meaning of the statements of the participant. The themes that emerged as a result of this close analysis were the basis for the next phase of the process. As the themes were identified, they were clustered and the connection among the themes identified by the researcher (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

There were several ways that Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) recommended to investigate emerging themes. Abstraction involves arranging similar items together under the umbrella of a super-ordinate theme and arranging them in the notations into groups and providing a name for the cluster. Subsumption is a similar process; however, one of the emergent themes itself rises to the level of a super-ordinate theme. At other times, emergent themes might be opposing in nature, and this strategy is called polarization.

The strategy of contextualization involved a deep analysis of the transcripts and asked the researcher to consider the narrative of the participant and how this related to the specific details of the transcript. The transcripts were reviewed to determine if there were contextual narrative patterns and if there were emergent themes that could be assigned to those patterns (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Numeration involves analyzing the frequency of the use of certain terms within the transcript. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) cautioned that while this strategy is effective it should not be over-used and should not be used as the only means of eliciting meaning.
However, there was much to be discovered in terms of possible importance and meaning behind certain terms if they were used frequently during one or more participant interviews.

The final strategy that Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) described is function. This strategy requires that the researcher determine the function of specific words or emergent themes within the transcript in order to better understand the purpose of these words or themes in the greater narrative. The researcher considered whether the participant was mentioning these items in order to portray himself in a certain light, and this deep analysis helped to provide a greater understanding of the true meaning behind the words included in the interview transcript.

The next step in the process was to move on to the next interview and repeat the process. One of the keys in this step is to bracket, as much as possible, the ideas emerging from the analysis of the first case before moving on to the second. Setting aside the emergent ideas was key in remaining as objective as possible as each case was reviewed, and then following the processes described in this data analysis protocol helped to assure the integrity of the process (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Once these steps had been completed for all of the interviews, the patterns that were present across the cases were explored and analyzed. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) indicated that this is a highly creative endeavor as the researcher begins to examine the themes and review the possible implications of those themes on the responses of the participants. This exploration led to the creation of tables that include the elements from the interviews grouped and arranged by the primary focus of the emergent themes (i.e., focus on results, focus on relationships, etc.) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The early drafts of the analysis were given to the participants for their review (member checking) and the subsequent drafts will be shared with the primary researcher for feedback as well (Moustakas, 1994).
In order to successfully complete this research project, time was required over the summer of 2012 to interview the teachers and collect the data. After all of the data had been collected, the analysis was conducted during the early fall of 2012 in order to complete this project by the late fall of 2012.

Validity Issues

It was of the utmost importance to establish the validity of this study. Objectivity was paramount and establishing academic positionality and trustworthiness in a naturalistic setting was equally as important as in any other type of study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In a qualitative study, issues of validity are as significant as in a quantitative study and much has been written concerning establishing the terms for qualitative validation in terms of the quantitative equivalent. Many researchers, such as LeCompte and Goetz (1982), have addressed the contention that qualitative research fails to “adhere to canons of reliability and validation” (p. 31). These researchers believed that qualitative equivalents to quantitative checks should be found in order to validate the study. Others, such as Lincoln and Guba (1985), believed that an entirely new set of terms, unique to qualitative research, should be used since they are more appropriate for research in a natural setting (Creswell, 2007).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered four useful questions in relation to validity: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (p. 290). They stated that the researcher must show the reconstructions of the findings are credible to the constructors of the original realities, thus providing truth value. The study must also be applicable to other contexts and also consistent with the possible replication of the inquiry. Finally, to ensure neutrality, the findings must be
determined by the subjects and not by the biases and opinions of the investigator (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In this study, potential threats to internal validity were examined, and the strategies that were used to verify the accuracy of the findings included member checking, detailed description, and other approaches (Creswell, 2007). Allowing the interview subjects to validate the findings helped to ensure the truth value of the study, and an atmosphere was created that allowed the subjects to question or challenge the findings. To this end, the interviewees were given the opportunity to review the findings and any significant results were included in the study. This member checking, according to Creswell (2007), involved “taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (p. 208). This process ensured a higher level of reliability in the findings based upon the ability of the participants to review their own drafts of their interview and provide feedback to the researcher to increase the accuracy of the preliminary analyses.

Perhaps the most significant validation and reliability measure that this study employed to ensure neutrality concerned the clarification of researcher bias from the outset. The past experiences of the researcher in this study were clearly defined from the beginning of the presentation of the findings so that these prejudices and biases could be evident to the reader immediately. Framing the entire analysis with this clarification lent credibility to the analysis and allowed for the detailed descriptions of the participants to speak for themselves.

Creswell (2007), Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) analyzed 13 studies and other writings about validation and found four primary credibility criteria: credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity. Credibility concerns the accuracy of the interpretation of the participant’s meaning. Authenticity addresses the presence of different voices in the study.
Criticality describes the critical appraisal of all aspects of the research, while integrity values the ability of the researcher to be self-critical (Creswell, 2007). With the careful coding and analysis of the interviews, the inclusion of a variety of voices, and the critical and self-critical approach that the researcher took, this study met these four criteria for credibility and directly addressed these concerns in the analysis in order for this qualitative study to meet the standards for validity and reliability.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Educators who were interviewed for this project were represented with pseudonyms in the final presentation, and any audio recordings will be destroyed within a reasonable time (approximately one month) after they have been transcribed and the study is complete.

No individual students were mentioned or interacted with face-to-face, so there was no need for parental consent. The questions for the participants were created so as to discuss aspects of the conditions for innovation and not only for the *Writing with Colors* program. As a scholar practitioner looking to investigate a problem of practice, the researcher was deeply connected to the topic and the outcome and hoped to share the findings with others so that they could replicate the conditions for innovation found in Davis.

The study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines established and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Northeastern University. This study was approved on August 16, 2011 and reapproved on April 3, 2012. All participants were informed about the purpose of this study and the informed consent form was distributed and reviewed with all participants. Copies of these documents can be found in the appendices of this study. The researcher relayed the goals of the study and answered any questions from participants in language and terms that
they easily understood. Any individual who was asked to participate in the study could exercise his or her right not to participate.

**Conclusion**

An exploration of the conditions necessary for an innovation to take hold was well suited for interpretative phenomenological analysis. This methodology allowed the researcher to interview participants who were present at Davis High School during the time of the implementation and adoption of the *Writing with Colors* program and analyze the educators’ perceptions of the conditions that were present in the school at the time.

Moustakas (1994) wrote “the challenge of the Epoche is to be transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a native and completely open manner. Thus, in the process of being transparent in the viewing of things, we also become transparent to ourselves” (p. 86). The problem of practice in this study described the challenges of replicating successful innovations and leading a district from good to great. The methodology of this study allowed for the educators’ perceptions to become transparent as this problem of practice was viewed in an entirely new way, setting aside any preconceived notions of the experience and allowing the participants’ words to speak for themselves. The findings of this study, presented in the next chapter, reveal the essence of the educators’ perceptions of the conditions necessary for an innovation to take hold.
Chapter Four

Research Findings

Introduction

Beginning in the late spring of 2012 and continuing through the summer and into the early fall, the process for conducting the research, transcribing the interviews, and coding the emergent themes for this study revealed itself to be an exciting, and at times, frustrating, experience.

Letters were sent to all co-researchers in the spring and, as their interest in participating was confirmed, interview sessions were scheduled. The educators who agreed to participate included several educators who still work in Davis, including Harry, the mid-career Director of English; Sarah, a mid-career teacher of English; and Emily, a mid-career teacher of special education. Karen, a retired teacher of English language learners, and William, a mid-career teacher of English, have since left the district but were present during the time of the introduction of the Writing with Colors program.

The first interview was recorded onto an expensive digital recorder that later failed to function properly, effectively trapping the data on the failed device. For months the researcher would play with the device and attempt to resurrect the interview because he knew that it contained important data. The researcher could have rescheduled the interview but was afraid that he would not again capture the energy present in the room during that first conversation. The researcher had actually written to the participant to reschedule when the device began to function. The researcher raced for his smartphone (which had been used for all subsequent
interviews) and recorded the interview, allowing for him to begin the transcription of what turned out to be the most referenced interview in these findings (Sarah).

After the failings of the expensive device, the researcher recorded the remaining interviews using the *Dragon Naturally Speaking Recorder* application on his smartphone or with Google Voice. These recordings were then transferred wirelessly to the computer for back-up, which the researcher always did immediately following the interviews, having learned “the hard way” from the experience with Sarah’s interview. For those interviews conducted in person, the smartphone was placed on the table and the app started to record the interview. Small segments were recorded with frequent check-ins to ensure that the interview was being properly recorded.

Additionally, at the request of the participants, there were two interviews that were conducted via phone and those interviews were recorded using Google Voice and then transferred to the computer. Google Voice involved having the participant call the researcher at a Google Voice number and agree to have the conversation recorded. Once the call was completed, the recording was saved into the researcher’s Google Voice account.

From the computer, the recordings were converted into .wav files and imported into iTunes. For the transcription, two methods were used. From the outset the researcher was determined to conduct the transcription process himself because he believed that, though extremely time consuming, the process of transcribing invited repeated interactions with the data. Since *Dragon Naturally Speaking* will not recognize multiple voices, the researcher was not able to directly transcribe from the recording application on the smartphone into the *Dragon* program. However, if the researcher listened to the interview through headphones, he could repeat what he was hearing into the *Dragon* program to transcribe the interview. This worked fairly well at first
but soon became tiresome, and the researcher returned to the manual transcription process that involved listening to the recordings and typing out the interviews.

This process took several weeks, as small snippets of the interview needed to be re-played repeatedly for clarity and accuracy. However, as previously mentioned, this allowed for an increased in-depth analysis and many of the memos that were created and later used in the analysis came about during this process.

The purpose of the interviews was to uncover the educators’ perceptions about the conditions for innovation. Throughout the process of analysis the researcher uncovered many emergent themes in the transcripts of the conversations with the co-researchers. These themes were coded and organized, then reorganized, only to be reorganized again. During the initial coding process it was decided that the first cycle coding processes most appropriate for this study were descriptive coding and *in vivo* coding (Saldaña, 2009). For a beginning researcher conducting his first study, descriptive coding provided a good way to categorize the data and also formed an essential baseline for second-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009). In addition, as Saldaña (2009) wrote, *in vivo* coding provides the opportunity to “honor the participant’s voice” (p. 74). These two methods comprised the initial coding using the MAXQDA software.

During the second cycle of coding, focused coding was used to begin to develop the themes and categories for the study (Saldaña, 2009). After several iterations of the coding process, some over-arching super-ordinate themes came into focus and they served as the basis for the organization of this analysis. There were many surprises along the way and ultimately one of these surprises became the most significant of the outcomes of this analysis.

The exploration of the essence of innovation began with questions that asked the co-researchers to examine their own perceptions of the way they approach the teaching of writing with students.
This led to the sharing of pieces of evidence of the teacher’s own self-efficacy as an educator and a model of good writing practice. The responses included information about the process of knowing oneself, knowing one’s students, and knowing one’s community. It became apparent that the educators’ perceived that for any innovative approaches to take hold there was first a need for dedicated teachers who understood the importance of these three types of knowledge and so the first super-ordinate theme to emerge was educator self-knowledge.

But recognizing the significance of these elements in an individual classroom is not enough. Teachers need the time and desire to work with one another and to share ideas. A culture of collaboration, it seems, is the perfect breeding ground for innovation. These ideas are the basis for the second super-ordinate theme, educator collaboration.

Of course, in a school system there are both organized and informal collaborative experiences. In order for the systemic culture of collaboration that is necessary for a new idea to be introduced and thrive, there must also be support from strong and effective leaders. The third super-ordinate theme of this chapter addressed the participants’ recollections of the leadership who were in administrative roles during the introduction and implementation of *Writing with Colors*. This included the characteristics of a leader and the examples of support that the leader can provide that reinforce the culture of innovation and collaboration.

But is it sufficient to have passionate educators who are willing to collaborate and leadership that supports these efforts? Was there something unique to the culture in Davis that allowed a program such as *Writing with Colors* to flourish? This chapter will conclude with the presentation of the participants’ descriptions of the conditions for a collaborative culture that support the cultivation of innovative ideas—a “perfect storm” of hiring the right people at the right time.
Box 4.1 illustrates some of the abbreviations and clarification symbols used in the extracts of the interview transcripts.

**Box. 4.1 Abbreviations and Clarification Symbols**

[ text ]  text inserted to preserve anonymity or cohesion in the extract
[       ]  pause in the interview
    ...  break in the interview text

Box 4.2 represents the organization of the super-ordinate themes that emerged in the interviews conducted for this research.
### Box 4.2 Organization of Themes in this Chapter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Supporting Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-knowledge</strong></td>
<td>knowing oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>knowing the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>knowing the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>measuring student success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>loving to write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educator Collaboration</strong></td>
<td>trusting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>study groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
<td>having high standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>willing to accept new ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>having a hands-off approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>keeping focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maintaining communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>facilitating study groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>providing direct support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>providing financial support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>leading with a bottom-up and not top-down mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culture: The Perfect Storm</strong></td>
<td>hiring: the farm team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>recognizing youth and position in life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>working together on Saturday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>building friendships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>possessing the “likeability factor”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the purposes of this analysis, pseudonyms have been used and the co-researchers were chosen based upon the criteria detailed in Box. 4.3.

**Box. 4.3  Participants for Co-Research**

- Employed at Davis High School during the time of *Writing with Colors*
- Used *Writing with Colors* with Students
- Participated in either the Saturday Program or Study Groups

Sarah, referred to as S, is a teacher of English language arts.

Harry, referred to as H, is a district-level administrator of English language arts.

Emily, referred to as E, is a teacher of special education.

William, referred to as W, is a former teacher of English language arts.

Karen, referred to as K, is a retired teacher of English language learners.

Patrick, referred to as P, is the researcher and interviewer in this study.

The super-ordinate themes in this study were identified as recurrent themes if at least half of the five participant interviews included these themes. Box 4.4 illustrates the recurrence of the super-ordinate themes across the five interviews.

**Box 4.4  Identification of Recurrent Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-ordinate themes</th>
<th>Sarah</th>
<th>Karen</th>
<th>William</th>
<th>Emily</th>
<th>Harry</th>
<th>Present in over half the sample?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-knowledge</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture: The Perfect Storm</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Self-Knowledge

In this investigation of the essence of innovation, the first emergent super-ordinate theme among the participants was self-knowledge. Did the participants see themselves as innovative? Did they see themselves as not only witnessing a culture that allowed for innovation but also as beneficiaries? As contributors?

The participants were enthusiastic to speak about writing and many expressed that the teaching of writing was essential for the success of their students. However, those interviewed were very modest. Many were uncomfortable thinking of the work that they did as innovative, a term that the interview questions required the participants to grapple with in their responses.

As Sarah expressed:

I want my kids to write. They write every day. That goes without saying. And I think that sounds not innovative at all, it sounds so basic. I’m a teacher of writing and so therefore my kids [write] every day.

Throughout the interview Sarah not only expressed her self-realizations but also shared these very ideas with her students:

I tell them that my job as an English teacher is not to tell them the only way to write but to expose them to as many different ways of writing as possible. Hoping that they will go in and figure out what works best for them. I talk a lot about my process as a writer and telling them that… I used to walk around college like a crazy person thinking of a thesis statement.
This type of modeling may represent Sarah’s attempts to know herself better as both an educator and a writer. Similarly, Emily, a special educator, understands who she was as a student and in knowing herself as a learner, she positions herself to be better able to understand her students. This type of self-knowledge leads to a foundation of trust that will be explored in greater depth in this analysis. As Emily explained:

I never took an AP or honors class. You’re looking at the [College Prep] kid for English. But what I can tell you is…how that [College Prep] kid learns. And that's where the trust came in. [My colleague] trusted me to know what to do with this kid [for the purposes of differentiation] and I trusted her to kind of tell me, okay, this isn't working, this is what we need to do [in terms of content]. That's the way it worked.

Emily expressed an understanding of herself that was common among many of the participants. Sarah was also quite honest about her own understandings and I found it interesting that when she specifically discussed her first encounter with the Writing with Colors program, Sarah was not afraid to describe herself as discovering, for the first time, some of the conceptual building blocks of writing:

It’s embarrassing to say, but for the first time I understood what needed to go into an essay. And I was looking at student essays for the first time. I wasn’t just looking at my own writing and realizing, “Okay, this is where we need to get to.” [Writing with Colors was]… having anchor sets to color code and sharing ideas and making sure that not only are [kids] reading [their] own essays but [they’re] reading paragraphs by three or four other kids on the same topics. So for me it was hugely instrumental. And it’s then realizing, you know, okay, so we do MCAS writing, we’re doing analytical writing and
we’re writing on open response and long comps. They’re different enough but they’re similar. I can see how, you know, having a thesis statement on an open response was essentially having a thesis statement on a long comp. But then realizing okay, I’m doing this “I believe” writing prompt. “I believe” was like a unit that I did, having students write on a belief statement. And I’m reading these and … [laughs] and in my head I’m realizing, “Oh my god, the color system can work on this, too.”

This extract suggested that there needs to be an element of new learning for educators in order for them to embrace the innovation. In Sarah’s case, Writing with Colors allowed her to realize something that she had not realized before about herself as a writer. She also quickly learned that the program could be applied beyond the limitations of preparing students for standardized tests. For those who are passionate about writing, this is especially important and there is a significant correlation between those who realized this early on and those who embraced the innovation.

The word “innovation” itself seemed cumbersome to most of the participants. As a part of their role in the classroom, educators are asked to create and innovate every day. At one extreme would be the teacher who lives and dies by the textbook and worksheets, and at the other would be the teacher who creates all of her own materials and instructional approaches. But many teachers are often developing new things for their students. Karen, a teacher from the English language learner department, was quick to share the fact that while she did create many things, she was not alone in doing this in her department:

I think I did that as much as anybody does, especially in our department. There was a real dearth of materials… I’ll just speak for myself, I developed virtually all of my own
materials my first years there…. I can’t specifically think of any innovative things I did. [ ] Again, we’ve had a focus on literacy… using the content area that was my specialty. The content area had a specialized vocabulary that we would want to develop. I would have to adapt curriculum and materials, … in my case, the history department would offer me materials, but I couldn’t use them with my kids, so I would have to adapt them all and modify them all.

Sarah, in a positive way, made connections between her perceived lack of innovation and collaboration. The old adage “don’t borrow, steal” seems apropos to Sarah’s definition of a culture of collaboration:

I think I’ve stolen everything that I do. A lot of the stuff comes from the writing project which I’ve been involved in for a few years, … and then I’ve taught for two or three years, so I’m constantly stealing people’s lesson plans for outlining and brainstorming ‘cause I think there’s so many options out there.

In stealing the best ideas, and in not being afraid to admit this, Sarah demonstrated a confidence in her own place in the picture of the school and the educational community at large. The second or third time I reviewed this quotation I noted her modesty in the perception of her role in the success of Writing with Colors. Sarah herself was, according to many accounts, a major reason for the program’s spread and sustainability.

**Knowledge of the Community and Students**

In addition to knowing oneself, the educators all expressed that it was important to know
the community in which they worked. It appears that there is something to consider about the community at large, beyond the school or departmental community that may have had an impact on the development of new ideas. Emily represented the sentiments that many participants had about the community in which they work:

Okay, … I think Davis is a community where I think there are a lot of people who …think this may be a single class and maybe some blue-collar, but if you look at our city Council and the school committee and the teaching staff, it's really not representative of our demographics-- it's not-- and I don't think people realize what Davis is. Having said that we have a lot of kids who are ELL, a transient population, our special ed rate is high, but I think there is a need. Teachers want to be successful…. So when these new ideas come about, these innovative ideas, and take a struggling population and lift them up, yeah, that's what we grab onto.

This extract illustrated the feeling among many of the dedicated educators that the community at large does not fully recognize or understand the needs of the special populations in the city. The school community is not representative of the larger community, and so an integral piece of the educator knowing herself is recognizing the needs of all of the students that are in the school. Throughout the interviews both Emily and Karen made several references to the need for the school community to know their students. Karen, who works with English language learners, expressed the following:

With ESL kids you have to work on their prior knowledge. You have to show respect for their culture. We would start with discussions, interest generating discussions. Relate to the content. Relate to their own experiences.
Similarly, Emily, a special educator, stated:

All of the students I work with are on an IEP and usually have my mild to moderate learning disabilities, mostly reading, writing, and comprehension-- so literacy. I've taught self-contained special ed classes, which is a modified English curriculum. More recently I've [given] academic support to students … in the regular ed classroom … any kind of support they need, typically with writing [and] comprehension, they will get that service from me.

Teachers who know their students are able to recognize when a new idea or program will be helpful. As more participants discussed this idea, it became clear that this was a key to understanding the culture that will allow an innovation to take hold. Another extract from Karen recognized that writing is the hardest thing for her students:

And the four domains are always there and writing is always the hardest thing for the kids. It’s always the last thing that they come to.

William stated his belief that a program such as Writing with Colors works with some students, especially those who are visual learners:

It depends on whether or not the kid was a visual learner. If that style or recognition of what was missing or what was strong in an essay, [Writing with Colors] worked for them. Like, I had success with it in Davis, I have found kind of a break down between kids that are more visual and kids that don’t—it doesn’t work for [them] as well. It kinda depends on learning style somewhat. Some kids just like to color their paper. If they can do it right they can tell how the essay is
broken into pieces. But I don’t know if they get a lot as far as the recognition for correction. It depends upon the kid.

Karen also commented on the visual aspect of *Writing with Colors*:

We use a lot of visuals, which is something I always liked in the color system. I mean, we’re trying to teach writing to kids who couldn’t read in any language so - it’s a very, very slow process.

Sarah took the concept of knowing her students one step further and made sure to express these differences to her students:

So by talking about the process and them understanding that not everyone writes the same I hope that it gives them the confidence to realize that writing is a unique thing and that it’s just kind of a matter of practicing and figuring it out for themselves and finding out [what] works best for them.

This type of student reflection and the concept of student self-efficacy was something that Sarah discussed throughout her interview. It was noted as she spoke, and again as the interview was transcribed and coded, the respectful way in which she discussed her students.

Sarah truly seemed to believe that her students are capable of success and that she provides them many opportunities for success in her classroom. These are small successes that can help to develop confidence and be built upon for larger successes. This is an aspect of the teaching in the English department that Harry, the Department Head, realized:

…the idea is to basically get kids to think about it, get some words on paper, re-write those words, go back and think about it some more if you need …. the teachers really try to get the kids to do a series of writing pieces that are informal before-hand so that when the kids actually go to write about it once … they are really in an “expert” position about
the topic … But [it’s] the process that actually scaffolds the writing and puts the kids into the expert position.

**Measurable Student Success**

Another emergent theme that seemed to support the successful implementation of a new idea is measurable student success. There needs to be a buy-in from everyone, the administrators, the teachers, and the students. Sarah noted that the student success on the MCAS exam of those students who used *Writing with Colors* led the administrators to allow the program to develop. As Sarah stated, “we’ve always had a lot of autonomy over it and I think as the results were coming in from MCAS and we were having so much success with it.” This measurable success served as a foundation for the conditions for innovation and allowed the professionals to take appropriate risks without fear of failure. MCAS success allowed the educators to take a chance and open up their classroom doors and consider a new practice that was making an impact on student learning.

Not only were the teachers willing to learn from this new approach, but also the students knew of the success others were having with *Writing with Colors* and were not opposed to learning more. As Sarah stated, “I do think that kids in Davis … are for the most part ready and willing to learn and kind of excited to try new things and won’t fight you too hard on change.” Karen and Emily recalled that the *Writing with Colors* program was working for students and that many throughout the school were hearing of the success that some teachers were having in increasing scores. This led many educators to be more aware and curious about the program, and these factors helped to deliver the “buy-in” necessary for adoption throughout the school.
Harry also noted the significant impact of the results and the connection to the success of the innovation:

And so the culture of innovation—sounds big to call it that—but certainly something happened here and it showed up in the data and it still shows up in the data to this day.

### The Writing Process

The final piece that fit under this umbrella of teacher self-knowledge and understanding related to the educators having an understanding of writing, the writing process, and in fact, loving to write.

Sarah discussed her involvement with the National Writing Project at length:

The Writing Project, it’s part of the National Writing Project, and I belong to the Boston chapter. And it’s this philosophy that teachers are the best teachers [and not writers who may have never taught others]. And so, when you’re educating teachers, you want teachers of writing [leading the] teaching…And then, my favorite part of the writing project, is that you can’t be a teacher of writing unless you yourself are a writer. And so many of us came into the English profession because we love to write and we don’t do it,… we spend so much time correcting and doing lesson plans. When was the last time you just sat and wrote for pleasure? So two days a week you write. You have like a writing group and you bring in fiction or non-fiction or poetry and you share it and you get feedback on it and at the end you publish your piece… in our group.

Sarah’s description of teachers as writers caused the researcher to think about the importance of the educators’ need to embrace the same message for themselves that they are
communicating to their students. If taking the time to write is important for teachers of writing, then by extension taking the time to write critically would also be essential for teachers of academic writing. Did *Writing with Colors* provide teachers with an approach that allowed them to become more aware of their own understanding of writing? Did this meta-cognitive approach provide increased local opportunities for the teachers to work together as writers and teachers of writing?

Interestingly, when asked if she had ever thought of starting a local writing program Sarah replied:

The writing lab? It’s interesting because I’ve suggested it many times, getting a writing group together, but people are very hesitant to do that. Like, I’ve tried to start it and people are like, “Noooo, I don’t think so.” So we have our book club in the school, you know, a lot of us do a book club together, but writing is a very personal thing that people are very scared to share.

Whether all of the teachers of writing are taking the time to be writers themselves is open to further discussion. However, all of the participants indicated that they recognized the importance of writing. As the many references to the importance of writing were coded, it became clear that the success of a writing innovation was dependent upon the educator’s belief in the significance of teaching writing and its relationship to thinking.

### Box 4.5 Writing Processes Supporting Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>I kind of teach it in a similar way…</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Pre-writing, brainstorming and stuff like that…</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>16</td>
<td><em>I’ve seen us here doing a narrative essay…</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>35</td>
<td><em>My main thing is breaking it into pieces…</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants discussed the process for writing that they had with their students. Box 4.5 demonstrates samples of the line numbers and extracts from William’s interview that related to the writing process.

William discussed some of the elements of the writing process he recollected and also some of the changes in his instructional practice that he has witnessed with the emergence of the Common Core State Standards and revised expectations for student writing:

My main thing is breaking it into pieces and try to use exemplars … and model and stuff like that. I think that there are a lot of things that I picked up there. I’ve seen, though, certain concepts that are the same. Not as much with the writing and literature specifically. I think it’s changed a little bit though. Before it was like… you did a narrative, you did expository, then you did persuasive. So same principles but they’ve kind of changed the texts.

Karen also recognized the importance of teaching writing:

Oh yeah. Yeah. There always has to be writing. SEI teachers, sheltered teachers have two tasks, and actually everybody should be doing it when they have immigrant students…. And the four domains are always there and writing is always the hardest thing for the kids. It’s always the last thing that they come to. So it was a building process, a scaffolding process.

Sarah’s approach to writing with students involved asking the students to reflect and consider the meta-cognitive aspects of writing:
So I approach writing, not that writing is the end goal, which part of it is, but that we write because we don’t always know what we’re thinking and we’ve got to figure it out. And writing allows our brain to slow down and a lot of times, through writing it down, and kind of giving kids the time to process what they’re reading or what they’re thinking about an issue that they start to understand what they’re thinking. And it’s not just “whatever comes to my head I’ve got to say” or “I’ve got to say it because there is this dead space in the air and I’ve got to fill it.” So giving them that time to process what they’re thinking and evaluate kind of their different options getting it on paper, suddenly they’re realizing that they have thoughts on things that they might not have thought they did.

Harry also considered the writing process that he witnessed among those in the department. He believed it was about stimulating the thinking of the students and having them actively engage in the writing process:

Maybe everybody here more or less follows the writing process model. I’m going to try and remember a quote here, I think it’s Flower and Hayes, who have the writing process model. The standard model is when we write we pre-write, then write, then re-write, but that’s not their model. Their model is that writing is a very complex process that involves a series of steps that has the student writer as the monitor who comes and goes from these different steps in the process. All of my teachers follow this. They may not know the theory but they follow this particular approach. They try to stimulate their thinking through various kinds of pre-writing activities, they get the kids to write stuff down and then from there start to revise. And that might get them to go back and do
some more pre-writing. It’s not a linear process, it’s kind of a recursive model. It’s iterative.

Teachers who know themselves, their community, and their students and who also have a firm grasp on the importance of writing will often seek out ways in which they can improve their practice. Collaboration and sharing was seen by the participants as essential for an innovation such as *Writing with Colors* to become widespread. The second super-ordinate theme that emerged was that of educator collaboration. Throughout the interviews the participants referred to the many positive aspects of the educators in the department and school who work together and how these relationships allowed for a program such as *Writing with Colors* to thrive.

**Educator Collaboration**

Many participants spoke to the concept of “buy in” or the idea that the educators need to be on-board with the innovation in order for it to be adopted. There is a need for commitment to an idea in order for change to come to fruition. Pre-packaged programs that are bought and “sold” to the teachers are not as likely to be successful as those that are organically created. As Sarah explained:

That’s why when you hear about all these ed reforms it’s like, they can bring all these things to the table, but if you don’t have a school of committed teachers, … no program is going to change it. Programs don’t teach kids. Teachers teach kids. And there’s no program in the world that will do that. So unless you have people who are willing to buy into it, you’re dead in the water. That doesn’t mean I support firing every teacher and starting anew [laughs] because I don’t think that works either, you know, it’s got to be this balance.
Box 4.6 represents the line numbers from the participants’ transcripts corresponding to the coding of their interviews in relation to the theme of educator collaboration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 4.6</th>
<th>Educator Collaboration Supporting Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
</tr>
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<td>a common dialogue</td>
<td>41, 43, 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change</td>
<td>34, 46</td>
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<td>collaboration</td>
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<td>focus</td>
<td>72, 75</td>
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<tr>
<td>freedom to innovate</td>
<td>41, 43, 64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sharing best practices</td>
<td>16, 31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interdepartmental Collaboration**

Both Karen and Emily uncovered the elements of interdepartmental collaboration. Very often departments can operate in silos, with one department not realizing what the other department is doing and not coming together to achieve common goals. Since many of the ELL students are in sheltered classrooms, there have historically been challenges to educator collaboration since the educators in the English department and ELL department do not often have the same students. However, there is collaboration within the ELL department. As Karen expressed:
And also, with our kids, I would have to differentiate as much as possible. ESL classes have no tracking. So we would have kids that are very high and very low all tossed in the same class and we would have to work with all of them. And so we were all constantly trying to brainstorm ways to do that.

A collaborative culture that values and supports interdepartmental collaboration is the perfect breeding ground for new ideas to spread. As Karen stated:

For the past two years I’ve been able to go to History department meetings. And [on professional development] days there has been collaboration, say, between History and English. This past year or two we’ve had a reading teacher come and work with ESL teachers. That’s been really important. There’s been some openness recently the past year or so. There’s been a lot of openness to new ideas and collaborating. Yeah, we’ve had to work with other teachers and other departments.

The communication of a common problem is also a way that educators come together to collaborate. In many ways, the MCAS standardized tests offered this common problem that many teachers in many departments were facing. Since all of the students in the school were held accountable for demonstrating proficiency on the exam, doors were opened for interdepartmental collaboration like never before. The idea that “all” of the students needed to demonstrate proficiency created a sense of urgency for all teachers and leaders to discover the best practices to share. One of the factors that may have influenced the spread of the *Writing with Colors* program school-wide was the MCAS success seen by the English department. Very
quickly many other departments were looking to collaborate as they, too, had scores that were in need of improvement. As William recollected:

Writing in general was so emphasized. I’m not sure writing across the curriculum took off but I remember having conversations with [a Math teacher] about how he could use pre-writes in Math, triangles, circles. I don’t know that took off afterwards, if people actually did anything with it. We certainly were so tied in to the test, and not that we taught to the test, by any means, but we did teach a pretty intensive, you know, with the exemplars and stuff, at least with the sophomores. I think using the exemplars and stuff was a great technique, and I was on board with it as far as that went. The writing didn’t get worse you know.

The collaboration between departments was something that the participants recognized to be essential in the creation of a culture where ideas and innovations would thrive. But there were also factors at the personal level that allowed for these collaborative experiences to flourish, including the level of trust between educators in the school.

**Trust**

The participants in this study shared many reasons why collaboration between educators was effective in Davis. The supporting theme of trust emerged in many of the participant interviews through descriptions of the relationships with colleagues. This trust was built over time and embodied a respect for the intellectual, professional, and personal qualities of the other educators in the building.
When educators are co-teaching, planning, and collaborating, trust is especially important. In Davis there were many opportunities for this type of cooperation. Emily, a special educator, mentioned:

I think it was because I had a really good relationship with a lot of English teachers … some really good friends who I trusted, [and] they trusted me and the whole thing about how teaching is, it has to work. It has to be the relationship and the way I was thinking myself is if you’re a really good teacher then your best skill is the ability to form relationships. I'm not really sure how to do it, but that's how it started that … [with] the trust that it's not my show, it's not your show, and let's work together so we can only help that kid.
Sarah also expressed her understanding of the importance of not being afraid to share new ideas. This type of trust accompanied the absence of fear that good ideas will not be attributed or recognized. If the educators are constantly being recognized for their ideas and encouraged to share, then a culture can develop where new ideas are developed and spread throughout the department and school. As Sarah stated:

…people aren’t afraid, you know-- I have a worksheet that’s sitting on the lunch table and three people ask me for it. It’s like there’s no problem handing that out to people. Where I think in other schools other people are very scared to hand that out. What if it gets out? What if they use it? My name isn’t on it! Or whatever, but we share constantly. So I think that’s a big part of this department.

William, who is no longer at the school, also described his views on the importance of friendship and trust between co-workers:

As far as approaching other colleagues …I think it really does come down to collegiality. Some departments resist everything, they don’t get it, they use their own individual ideas…. It certainly helps to be friendly with people so that they can have those types of conversations just because you’re kind of in their circle.

The level of trust and the quality of the relationships in the school were significant factors that the participants uncovered when discussing the importance of collaboration. Once those relationships were established, the colleagues were able to share best practices with one another, to take what was working in one classroom and extend the learning opportunities for students in another classroom. But this has to be, according to the participants, an organic practice of
sharing and not something that follows a district-wide or state-wide requirement. As Harry stated:

And that became the informal way, and I can’t say much about that other than I know that it wasn’t just study groups and just the people in them who picked this up. Other people got it. To me it’s the organic professional development that goes on sort of around the edges with professional chatting over lunch or over a coffee break or just when they get a moment when they happen to be free and they’re in the same room together.

**Sharing Best Practices**

There have been many over-arching mandates or recommendations to bring about the collaboration between the teachers throughout a school system. At Davis High School there were opportunities for the sharing of best practices to occur naturally. Among these collaborative efforts were those of the teachers of English language learners and the mainstream teachers of English. Karen, an ELL teacher, discussed some of her successful collaborative efforts with the English department but hinted that this happened because of the individuals involved and not because of the district’s role in facilitating the collaboration:

In particular, working with English teachers, the techniques of mainstream kids, and there is a lot of push, a lot of requirements to get mainstream teachers to get training in working with ELL students because I think Davis has been really backward on that.

The first step in this collaboration and sharing is to have conversations with one another in a Professional Learning Community. Harry, the Director of English, stressed the importance of just getting the educators to talk to one another:
So that was, and as an administrator my goal was, to get people to talk. Sometimes almost too much so, where they wanted more structure in the meetings. No, just talk. Talk about what you do and your approach to writing. It felt a little raw and naked for some of them but I was trying to simply formalize and give time to what I thought was an important conversation that needed to continue with district support on the district nickel.

Box 4.8 represents samples of the participants’ extracts that supported the coding of the emergent supporting theme of sharing best practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 4.8</th>
<th>Sharing Best Practices as a Supporting Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>William</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Harry</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Harry</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Harry</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Harry</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As educators collaborate, there must be an element of openness and sharing among the participants. Forced collaboration, where teachers are put together without a purpose, has little effect. Unfortunately, these constructs are often exactly what educators find when they engage
in professional development at the school level. As Harry, a district-wide administrator often charged with facilitating these opportunities, stated:

Let me say it more bluntly, those two ways, [professional development] time and curriculum release time are not great times to do this. People are tired. They’ve taught, typically, a portion of the day, either way, either the full portion for the one-hour curriculum meeting or half the day which has it crammed in. So, the only other time we have is study group time. And that’s time where people, teachers, as professionals, get paid to come to the table and meet and focus around, say, writing and what it is that we need to do to get better at writing.

The importance of finding the time to collaborate was certainly reiterated throughout the interviews and will be discussed in greater detail under the super-ordinate theme of leadership. Leaders set the tone and create the schedules that allow the educators to find the time they need to collaborate in the professional manner required for best results.

It was interesting to note both the administrator and teachers discuss the importance of the study groups to the successful sharing of best practices. In Davis, study groups were proposed by either Harry, the Director of English, or by the educators themselves and were paid opportunities for the educators to come together to examine a problem or practice, design a curriculum or curricular materials, or share a best practice. Although he expressed that this was not the only way to communicate new ideas, Harry truly saw in these study groups the opportunities for improvement over the traditional forums for professional development:

Study groups here in Davis are the way in which we advance professional development. There are two ways. One is the one-hour-a-month curriculum meeting. Not much can
get done in that time. It’s not really an effective use of time and it’s funny that this district continues to do it that way. There are, 5 or 6 times a [year], two hour PDRT, Professional Development Release Time, where you can dig in a little bit deeper. But there seems to be massive confusion here around how to use that time. Is it the principal who is the educational leader, per Ed reform, who is leading that? Is it something having to do with NEASC accreditation? Or are you really going to let us do work by ourselves and what role does the administrator play in that process?

Harry continued:

And so, what I did was, once I realized, it took me a number of years that there was going to be no response to the writing program that I wrote, in large measure because I just think people didn’t understand it, … I went ahead and started doing the stuff on the writing program that I knew was going to be good for kids and helpful to teachers, with teachers through study groups. And I drove the whole process through study groups. So study groups involving the sophomore composition curriculum development came out of there. Part of that involved integrating Writing with Colors and colorizing the anchors that were chosen that were connected to the passages for open response questions …. If the math … and the science teachers came to me, and they did, and said, “Hey, how do we find out about this Writing with Colors innovation you guys are doing?” I said, “Great, let me put you in a study group with someone like [Sarah], someone like V--, someone like S-- and we’ll do some teacher sharing across the board.” Michael Fullan’s knowledge sharing and capacity building, I didn’t know at the time that’s what it was called, but that’s what we were doing. It made every good sense to do it and so that’s what we did with study groups.
So what started as an administratively driven idea about the creation of a new curriculum became a conduit to transfer new ideas, such as *Writing with Colors*, to those who were curious. Sarah noted she sees the study group as a venue for the teachers to bring forth their ideas for change:

That is probably even more important, that you have to have people see this problem as something that they actually want to fix and they are willing to put the time towards. Like if you only have a problem that an administrator sees as a problem or something that’s coming from the state and teachers aren’t invested in it, you can work on it for days and nothing’s gonna change. But if it’s something that affects teachers and they’re committed to changing it, I think that’s what happens. But then you’ve got to be given the space and the time to do it. If you just say this is something we should work on this year, nothing is going to get done because we have 10,000 other things that need to be happening. But when we have a study group and you know every Tuesday you’re going to be coming together for an hour to work on this one thing suddenly you make sure you have the materials and suddenly you’re going out and finding the outside research and you’re collecting the data that you need to look at. So I think that is a key. Those are the two elements. The committed teacher and then the time and the space to do it.

These study groups allowed for the educators to come together and develop a common understanding of the essentials of a quality piece of writing, and this common language was at the center of the *Writing with Colors* program. In many ways *Writing with Colors* was a process
for teachers to come together to share best practices, a vehicle for professional discourse that solidified the relationships in the department.

Sarah expressed the ways in which the common dialogue shared helped to solidify the success of the writing program at Davis:

But I think the biggest thing with the colors was that it gave us a common dialogue. Not only among teachers but among students. You could say to a kid, “It needs more blue” and kids knew exactly what you meant or “There’s not enough green in this” and they would say, “Okay.”

Sarah elaborated on the importance of sharing in a collaborative culture, especially as it relates to the adoption of an innovation. A teacher in isolation can only bring about so much success but, through sharing, students can see the success travel throughout the school. As Sarah stated:

But I do think it can’t just be in one classroom. That can be okay for a little while. But if you come up with this great thing and kids are learning it and then they go to the next year—we’re creatures of habit. If I teach them the color system and it works fabulously and then they go to an eleventh grade classroom and they don’t ever see a color again? Maybe one kid is going to pick out a highlighter set, you know, in January the next year. Even if it was working super well for them, if it’s not focused on in other classrooms, it’s not something they’re going to do. So I think it does sort of need to have some consistency and I think that comes from teachers who are allowed to share and to talk and discuss things who are given that space and that freedom [ ] to help things out.
At its peak, the *Writing with Colors* program and the accompanying dialogue among educators surrounding student success created a common language for teachers at Davis. However, Sarah expressed that some of this collaborative culture has waned in recent years, as evidenced by the collapse of the common language:

…that has gone away. I’m finding that I need to teach colors in the beginning of the year because they’re not necessarily knowing them. Or, you know, I’ll hold up a color, “What color is this,” you know, I hold up the orange. “Okay, what is orange?” “Transitions! Details! Thesis!” and you’re like, “You’ve said everything!” So, it’s not this kind of common language that it used to be and that I think is one of the sadder parts that people aren’t using colors.

In order for an innovation to take hold and influence the educators, there must be time and space to collaborate and share best practices. *Writing with Colors* was a teacher-created program that presented a common language and invited discourse among educators. But as in developing any common language there must be those who take the lead in spreading the information to those throughout the building and district. In Davis, there were leaders who recognized the possibilities of *Writing with Colors* and helped to facilitate the dissemination of this program systemically.

**Leadership**

The third super-ordinate emergent theme from this analysis related to the importance of strong leadership. Many of the participants described the importance of the leadership style at
the time of the innovation *Writing with Colors*. Box 4.9 illustrates the many supporting themes that fall under the super-ordinate theme of Leadership.

Depending upon their place on the career ladder, each participant had different opinions of when effective leadership was present in the district. Questions that emerged for the researcher based upon these discrepancies included “Are things better now than they were during the time *Writing with Colors* was created?” and “Are things better in the past decade than they may have been in the years previous?”

In response to questions about the systemic conditions in Davis that allowed for innovation to take hold, several participants spoke in detail about leadership. An emergent idea was that the individuals in leadership positions certainly played a role, based upon the desire by both teachers and administrators for the leader to be personable and to support the educators at all levels in pursuit of the shared overarching vision of improving student learning.
High Standards for Student Success

Throughout the state of Massachusetts there has been a high regard for student success as measured by the criteria for proficiency established on the MCAS exam. This high bar for success was reiterated with the passage of the Federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sarah</th>
<th>Karen</th>
<th>William</th>
<th>Harry</th>
<th>Emily</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>willing to accept new ideas</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>having a hands-off approach</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4, 6, 8, 11</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>keeping focus</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>maintaining communication</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>13, 37</td>
<td>6, 12</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>facilitating study groups</td>
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<td>providing direct support</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>providing financial support</td>
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<td>leading with a bottom-up and not top-down mindset</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>13, 24</td>
<td>6, 8, 16</td>
<td>8</td>
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</table>
and its emphasis on proficiency for “all” students. Leadership that encourages a climate for high student success must also encourage this for all students, which involves more than just a surface level understanding of the students and educators in the building. Karen expressed her thoughts on the importance of leadership to promote high standards and to know the community:

The support of the school administration, in particular when like [Harry] came on board and our new Assistant Superintendent, who is sort of a math version of [Harry], there has been a lot of community support. There is a general desire for high standards. There have been lots of study groups. There’s been encouragement from higher ups.

Karen continued:

There has been a real motivation for improvement on the district level. In that sense things have gotten a lot better. There’s been more commitment to programs and innovations. A lot of good people have come in. We’ve had some really good people come in to central administration, which is key.

**Validation of Concerns and New Ideas**

A culture that promotes innovation will also have leaders who possess a willingness to accept new ideas. This is logical, certainly, but the fact that so many of the participants discussed the presence of this quality in the leadership in place at the time of the adoption of *Writing with Colors* speaks to the fact that this is not an ever-present quality of all leaders.

Box 4.10 shows samples of two participants’ transcripts as they relate to the theme of concerns for new ideas.
The educators recognized elements of the leadership’s willingness to accept new ideas in many forms, from the creation of new courses to the receptiveness to new instructional methods. Others focused on the trust and a “hands-off” approach to the leadership style.

For many years the teachers in the ELL program had requested the creation of new courses to better address the needs of the students. In the English department there had been the creation of MCAS prep courses as well as Sophomore Composition, a course that focused on all types of writing and served as the course in which many students were initially introduced to Writing with Colors. For several years there were no additional courses created for the ELL students, but Karen described the creation, in recent years, of new courses for English language learners:

There’s been a willingness to create new courses and augment new programs. I’ve seen that a lot in my department where we’re developing. When you were there we had ESL 1, 2, and 3. And we have a step under that. We have ESL literacy, again, for those kids who don’t have any.

The acknowledgement from the leadership for the need for these courses recognized and validated the concerns of the teachers. The creation of these courses, after many years of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 4.10</th>
<th>New Ideas as a Supporting Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karen 31</td>
<td>…and they would have to invest in the idea of it and the concept of it…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily 11</td>
<td>…you know what, [Harry] as a director, was always like [Emily] do whatever you want…</td>
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</table>
unanswered requests, served to develop a trust between the teachers and the leadership. However, it was not enough for the courses to be created and the teachers’ concerns addressed through the introduction of a pre-packaged curriculum. The process of creating new courses and allowing the teachers to develop the curriculum themselves further demonstrated an understanding by the leadership that they were not only validating their trust of the importance of the idea for the new course but also their trust in the teachers as the best designers of a course that could meet the needs of the students. The participants perceived that it was not only critical that the leaders listen to the suggestions for new ideas, but also that it was equally important that the leaders allow the educators the space and time to develop these new ideas on their own.

The Hands-Off Approach

Once educators feel validated and supported, it is important to allow them the space to grow. Sarah expressed the importance of a hands-off approach to leadership:

I think you need a director who is willing or an administration who is willing to kind of take their hands off for a little while and let you experiment with things. And that also means letting you fail at things. If our scores drop for a little while that’s okay because I trust you and I know that there’s this end goal of something bigger than getting our 89% advanced and proficient. But letting people kind of have that autonomy to try things out and test things.

The fear of failure, for many educators, is a roadblock to innovation. There must be a trust with the leadership that educators are safe to be audacious and to take acceptable risks.
Emily expressed a feeling that was common to many participants. She was allowed to pursue her own ideas, some of which she brought in from her graduate studies:

You know what, [Harry] as a director, was always like “[Emily] do whatever you want.”

You know I kind of think he is like this with his department. He trusts them to do the right thing in moving in that direction and did the same thing with me. So administrators, having the administrative leader [who] was open and who is really going to say, “Hey, let's give it a shot.” … That's a huge part of it. Having a school system that can really identify problems without personalizing them, knowing what especially it yields…. I'd definitely do everything I can to make a change and I think that's what you want for your teachers, that motivation. You never really get 100% I don't think. It's unrealistic. But I think identifying those teachers who have an ability to form those good relationships, who want to recognize a problem, who want to see the change…empowering them to share and do. That's where it starts.

A good leader empowers those teachers to trust in the leader and in one another. A culture of trust and sharing is certainly fertile ground for innovation. It appeared through the interviews that the leadership in place over the past several years in Davis built this culture, and Karen believed that this openness began with the arrival of some new administrators and that it has continued with new leaders in recent years:

I think there’s a lot more openness to innovation. Like when [you] were there when the innovation was starting, say, with the colors and the scores were going up, that was so good. That was such a vivid display of what the results could be with a successful
innovation that sort of extended to other areas. Like science, and math, and even history.

There’s a lot more push.

Karen expressed the belief that leadership was the driving force behind the collaboration among the departments:

The collaboration between departments, that’s been a good effect. And the administrative support. It would have gone nowhere without that. Department heads, principals…and now, central administration has been better.

The participants described a connectedness in this culture that they ascribed to the leadership. In this culture, the educators shared frequently with each other and were open to trying new ideas without the leadership dictating this exchange. This extract from William’s interview is representative of the views of many of the participants:

Nobody’s out on an island. As far as “I need this, what do you do for this?” people are like, “I do this, this works.” You know, you’re happy to pass this along to someone else.

**Focus**

### Box 4.11  Focus as a Supporting Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>but we’re also concentrating on the Common Core…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>so I don’t know if the emphasis on writing came from that…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>focus…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Yeah, so I think having that support system…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another aspect of strong leadership that emerged from the participant interviews was leadership’s ability to focus on the most essential goals for advancing student learning. Box 4.11 represents samples of the participants’ interviews that related to the supporting theme of focus.

Several participants discussed the importance of focus as it relates to goal setting and the measurement of success. William discussed how his current school is focusing on the common core and Sarah emphasized the importance of focusing on a goal in order for the educators to see the follow-through on the part of the administrators:

I think focusing on one or two things is huge. So often we’re kind of given these tasks of “here are all the problems in our school or all the problems in our department, what are some of the solutions?” And this happens every year at our professional development. We meet in our House Offices and talk about the twenty things that are wrong with this school. And we spend five minutes on each and we throw out twenty ideas. And then nothing changes. Where, if we had—and this has been a suggestion that has been given but hasn’t been [adopted]—let’s just have one goal for this year!

**Communication**

Communication was also an important aspect of strong leadership. Sarah described her perception of how important communication has been for success in the past, and intimated that it is perhaps not as strong currently as it had been in the past:

That’s how change happens, with these small, little one thing[s]. But it’s like when you come in at the beginning of the year and it’s like “this year we’re going to have a common final.” Every one of us has to have a common final. We have to have mid-terms and a common final, so go ahead and make it. And it’s like. Why? Our Superintendent
wants common finals. Why? Because we need data. Why? Like, there’s no reason to it. So we’re making these finals and none of us really have an end goal. Like there’s no end goal and there’s no talk about why the finals? So for me it’s like “you want us to make common finals, that’s a step away from we’re all going to be teaching the same thing at the same time.” But no one’s talking about that ‘cause we’re just focusing on the final. It’s just like “but we teach differently so why would we have the same end goal?” I don’t know.

Sarah’s use of the word “why” repeatedly in this statement may have been representative of the process she went through in questioning authority. One of the more fascinating aspects for the researcher in this study is considering whether the conditions for innovation have actually changed in Davis or whether the participants have themselves changed. For example, is Sarah, now a more veteran teacher, more likely to question “Why?” Are the administrators less communicative now than before, or is Sarah, for better or worse, less receptive to the message?

**Facilitating Collaboration: Study Groups**

The leader plays an essential role in the design and facilitation of the opportunities for educator collaboration. In Davis, these opportunities were epitomized by the aforementioned study groups, and this supporting theme emerged as a definite area of interest to the participants. The concept behind a study group in Davis was that educators are paid for this opportunity to come together with colleagues to investigate a topic. In many districts there are similar opportunities, but not all districts compensate the teachers with stipends. Throughout the coding process the researcher had many memos about the study group process:
Was it the study groups themselves that represented a sense of respect for the teachers? The notion that they were paid is often recognition of the value of their ideas, and the fact that the group was approved was recognition of the importance of the idea being developed.

At a later time the researcher also thought about the comments made by both the teachers and the middle level administrators about work that they had created that was now sitting on a shelf collecting dust. A climate that allowed for the creation of the study groups alone but that did not follow through with the products could not sustain a culture of innovation.

It was interesting that the participants commented on the importance of the inclusion of the time and space for collaboration. For several educators, providing time and space was viewed as an additional form of compensation. In addition to any stipend, the leadership acknowledged the value of the work being done and this was interpreted as a sign of respect by the participants.

The participants discussed the ways in which the leadership guided the educators to take advantage of the opportunities for collaboration. Karen discussed a myriad of things that she believes are associated with the culture developed by strong leadership:

[We were] encouraged to do study groups. Encouraged to develop things. There’s been more effort to show respect and value for student cultures and prior learning…. Collaboration between English and history, English and ELL, Reading and ELL. The PDRTs have been focused on techniques and improvements. Department meetings, use of technology. There’s been a lot.

Sarah continued to describe of her earliest experiences with the study groups. The
researcher found this story to be interesting as it represented the time when the *Writing with Colors* program began to be transferred to new members in the department. From the researcher’s point of view, this was not one of the first study groups, but later study groups. The first study groups, in the researcher’s estimation, were the ones in which Sarah herself was trained and brought into the department. During the process of reviewing this interview it was noted that Sarah said:

Perhaps I am also not fully aware of my place within the context of this innovation. Was I at the beginning, middle, or end of a wave?

Sarah described her recollection of the first study groups she was a part of in the following way:

So the first study group was when we had a new increase in teachers. So there were probably five or six new teachers who came in five years ago and so [Harry] paid some of us through a study group to help them through sophomore [composition]. So we would teach them kinda what the color system was, what an open response looked like, what a long comp looked like, and then through there kinda started to create other lessons that people could do. So we’d bring kinda our best lessons to the table and share those. From that a smaller study group was created which was probably [several new female teachers] and we created a more tailored unit where we had different things and focused on, looking at results and what things were needed and especially knowing, at this point we’d heard rumblings that the MCAS was changing. That it wasn’t always going to be this literary based work. So [we focused on] figuring out how …to get these other types of writing back into the curriculum.
From this extract it was evident that the study group, facilitated by the leadership, was an essential conduit not only for the collaboration among the teachers but also for the empowerment of those teachers in sharing best practices. As new teachers were brought into the fold, the other teachers in the department were able to share the *Writing with Colors* program as well as other best practices with those newcomers. Had the leadership not recognized this importance, the collaborative process would not have been sustainable.

In contrast to Karen, who indicated that in recent years things have been improving to an even greater degree, Sarah was more reserved in her comments. She was careful not to be negative, but she expressed her displeasure with some aspects of the current leadership. Much of this seemed to be related to a perceived change in the aforementioned study groups, time, and space for professional learning:

"It was stuff like… we used to have department meetings. We don’t have them anymore. I don’t mean to badmouth [Harry] in this, but we don’t. We have like these five minutes, we come together, we get our Doritos and then we go into our grade groups and we talk in our grade groups. Which is fine, but that’s **so** not helpful [laughs]. Because you need to have these, never mind the fact that there’s no ninth grade “grade group” which needs to be the most important one because that’s the foundation for all of…"

As Sarah continued, her frustration was emerging:

We had a study group, I want to say, four years ago and there was one of us from each grade level, there was a ninth grade teacher, a tenth grade. It went from six to twelve actually. And we created, and it wasn’t a great thing, because again we were just kind of
going with what we were already doing in our classrooms rather than focusing on what needs to happen. But we had this chart where it was like all the different types of writing we expect, what we expect from homework at every grade level. And it was just like, you could very easily see...that chart...never got distributed.

These comments were coded in red during the initial coding process because they represented negative feelings or perceptions of things moving in the wrong direction. These statements of frustration that signaled disappointment in the absence of the type of leadership that once existed underscored the importance of its necessary presence in a culture of innovation.

During the coding process, the researcher created a memo that related his thoughts on this lack of distribution:

It’s so interesting that both Sarah and Harry both feel the disappointment of a leader who does not distribute the product that they worked so hard to create. In Sarah’s case it is Harry who has disappointed her. In Harry’s case, it was the Assistant Superintendent.

This disappointment was surely connected to a feeling of a lack of respect for the work completed by the individual or group. It became apparent that when the culture for innovation was thriving, the work that was being created was not only recognized but distributed and communicated via the study groups. Without that vehicle the work “sat on the shelf” and the new ideas never came to fruition.

Support

Leadership was also described in terms of the direct support as evidenced by the personal
interactions of the leaders with the teachers and students. As Karen described:

A lot of it, I think, in Davis, has been due to personalities. Like the department head has been a real advocate, has been a facilitator, has worked interdepartmentally. He has worked hands-on with teachers and kids… [Harry] is always the role model for other directors. He didn’t just come in and order teachers to do things. He worked with them. He was there after school, he was there on Saturdays. He was there at the school committee meetings. He was in [the Principal’s] office, probably other offices (some of which weren’t as friendly). He would come into everybody’s classroom…That’s a key part. Just coming into the classrooms. Getting to know the kids. Getting to know the teachers. Seeing what went on and really caring. I don’t think just anybody…there’s a lot of department heads that couldn’t be a [Harry].

Leadership was also described in terms of “putting your money where your mouth is” as many participants detailed financial support and advocacy for the new ideas and needs of the educators. As she considered the question of what it would take to replicate the successful conditions that fostered Writing with Colors or any innovation in Davis, Karen stated:

That’s a lot of variables there. It would have to depend on the level of administrative support in other schools and if other districts were willing to invest in the program, invest financially…buying markers or dictionaries. And they would have to invest in the idea of it and the concept of it. But people in Davis like you, or [Harry], or [the former Principal], some others, really believed in the program and advocated for the program and implemented the program. And then the program had tangible successes. It’s a
process, as you know, it took years. Other districts would have to be willing to make that kind of investment in a program, time as well as money. And again, the collaborating.

Harry also described the support that he received early on from the Superintendent at the time when he was looking for financial support for *Writing with Colors*:

We needed to replace the white boards, we needed to get whiteboard markers, we needed to get highlighters. It wasn’t expensive but we needed things. The Superintendent at the time… backed us for that. We needed to make sure that we were consistently applying the approach even though we were evolving the approach as we did it. And so anchors, exemplars needed to be colorized. It took a number of years to kind of get that in place.

It was very interesting throughout the interviews that leadership was addressed as significant by educators at all of the levels in Davis. Teachers spoke of Harry’s leadership as a director, Harry spoke of the leadership qualities of his supervisors. Both Harry and the teachers described the importance of recognizing and valuing the ideas that were created from within, such as *Writing with Colors*, the creation of study groups, and several other ideas that required the support of administration.

**Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up**

All of the educators interviewed, both teachers and middle level directors, stressed the importance of support from the leadership above. The participants were very careful to point out that the idea for the innovation needed to be teacher-driven in order to be successful. Several
discussed the idea of a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach to the introduction of new ideas. As Sarah expressed:

I think teachers are constantly getting these [ ] directives put upon us. “Here is this new thing that’s going to solve all of our problems.” Whether it was the Collins writing that was ending as I was coming in, not that the Writing with Colors was this band-aid from anyone or that it was even like, when it was being developed, like an actual program that was being sold, but we’re constantly hearing “This is the new thing. This is the new thing.” And as soon as you hear one thing, it feels like it’s gone. So I think if you have teachers who are committed to it and can see that this is not something that’s going to replace anything that I’m doing. This is not going to take away from anything that I’m doing in my classroom, it’s only going to enhance it. I’m not going to use it with every writing assignment. But it’s something that my kids can decide to use, or not use. It’s a tool that I’m going to be able to teach to enhance what I’m already doing. I think if it’s presented that way it will be more successful.

Harry also explained the thinking behind the introduction of Writing with Colors to the department. He described the teachers as “welcoming” and expressed that the Writing with Colors program was never something that he believed was forced upon them:

So in short order, I want to say over the course of that year you and I had developed and brought that approach into the rest of the curriculum and went in and did a series of “I’ll show you what it looks like” demo lessons for the teachers with kids. Teachers were welcoming of the process. You need open doors for that kind of innovation. And that innovation came sort of as a top-downy kind of “here’s an approach you might want to
try.” I never required it. In any of the school documents if you go back and look at any of the improvement plans for school or district it never said “thou shalt all do this.”

Karen also expressed her views on the need for the spread of the idea to be teacher-driven:

It could come from the top, “We’re gonna use the color system,” but if the teachers weren’t trained and weren’t so… weren’t believers in the practice of the system, no, I don’t believe it would really go anywhere, if it were just a rote thing that they had to do or had to learn. No, people were really into colors.

Similarly, William felt that there was a need for teacher “buy-in”:

It really depends upon the people and the buy in. The way it’s presented. I had told other people about it, I’m not sure how many people—it’s not just as much of the conversation since it’s not as much of a huge focal thing. If it was brought into another school I guess it would just be like anything else, where if the people think it’s cool and buy into it they’d want to work with it and see if they could do it. As to how it would be presented, as you said originally, it’s not something you’d want to jam down people’s throats. You’d want to do it as a technique or something, teach it that way. And then see how people innovate off of it.

As the researcher transcribed these aforementioned thoughts, he began to think about the implications of an innovation that allowed for improvisation.
An idea that is not forced upon the educator, an idea that has a common language and foundation but that allows for the user to add her own thoughts and ideas. Is this why it was successfully implemented throughout the school? Was it the fact that the program, as well as the leaders who implemented it, were flexible enough to include everyone’s improvisation?

Harry expanded upon the thinking behind the leaders’ approach to program implementation:

And what I found with innovation [that] doesn’t work is when you force people to do stuff. All I said was, two things: If you have something else you think is better, by all means, join the conversation and let us know because there were some people who didn’t like colors, reacted to it, thought they could do something better. And I was all ears for that because I didn’t want to push those people away. And the other thing was, whatever you do, don’t mess with the colors and what they represent because you’d get quickly somebody saying “no, my orange is theme and this is that” and you’re going to confuse the kids. And I thought my role as an administrator was to control the instructional intervention and innovation’s clarity and focus.

Sarah also described her understanding of the need for the leader to allow the teachers the room to innovate:

I think giving the space for teachers to do [the innovation and] … not saying, “I would love you guys to go ahead and form a teacher group or comment on this or here’s a problem, it’s your job to fix it.” I don’t think that works. But I do think that if you give
teachers the respect of giving them legit time to do it and that could be after school but
that you’re rewarding them either with money or with less duties or something like that,
when you’re giving them this problem and you’re giving them the time and the space to
do it—then I think it works.

**Culture: The Perfect Storm**

The final overarching theme that emerged from the interviews can be described as
Culture—The Perfect Storm. The interview questions did not include anything about the hiring
process or the likeability factor and friendships among the educators in the department, but every
participant spoke to these ideas, some at great length.

Box 4.8 represents the coding of participants’ interviews as they relate to the super-
ordinate theme of Culture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 4.12</th>
<th>Culture: The Perfect Storm</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Code</strong></td>
<td>Sarah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hiring: the farm team</td>
<td>28, 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recognizing youth and position in life</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>working together on Saturday</td>
<td>22, 27, 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>building friendships</td>
<td>26, 28, 29, 33</td>
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<tr>
<td>possessing the “likeability factor”</td>
<td>45</td>
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</tbody>
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Human Resources and Hiring: The Farm Team

There were several participant responses that described the importance of the bringing in the best educators to work together and develop the school culture. Karen described the importance of good human resources practices:

The hiring’s been good. I’m not sure the retention has always been good, but the hiring has been good.

One of the more surprising revelations in this study was that many of the teachers had a common mentor or inspiration. The Director of English actually had come to know a college professor at Parker University and many of the students who graduated from the Parker program were sent to Davis as newly trained educators. After the first few teachers from this program were highly successful in the classroom, more teachers were recruited and the Parker program became like a minor league baseball team sending players to the majors. Before long the Parker program became known as the “farm team” for Davis Public Schools.

Despite his knowledge of this phenomenon, the researcher had never connected it to the success of Writing with Colors or any other innovations that took root. But through the revelations of the participants, the researcher began to see a pattern emerge as many of the participants had in common this mentor from Parker, as well as his philosophy of writing. Sarah was the first to enter the school from the Parker program and she spoke fondly of her mentor:

[My Professor] was my…I don’t even know how to describe him. He was my facilitating teacher when I was working on my Masters. He’s done a lot of work with the state on MCAS. He’s a professor at Parker University and just has what I think are the smart
views of writing. He has this saying and I like to think that I do it (I don’t always know if I accomplish it) but that “writing is a journey, destination unknown.”

Harry also spoke highly of this same mentor, a man that he also had worked closely with in the past:

I had hired a group of teachers that had been trained by [Sarah’s Professor] in this iterative scaffolding. The kids write three low-stakes writing about diction, tone, and theme and then he hits them with the essay to follow. The kids have already written about it so it’s like you’re tipping them—no! You’re priming the pump. They write much better when you’ve made them an expert in the content they write much better.

During the course of this interview it became apparent that the hiring process played a critical role in the later success of the introduction of a new idea. Harry, who hired many of the teachers in his department, acknowledged that the “quirky friendship network” that developed was beyond the scope of his plans. However, the researcher wondered whether there was some method to the hiring process that supported the development of this culture. This led to a new line of interview questions:

P: This is a little bit off the grid, too, but is there any formula for hiring the right people to get some friendships? Is there thought that goes into that?

H: There is. We don’t have a test yet for how to, for what you’re looking for when you’re building a staff but what I was looking for and what I found through Parker Campus school that [Sarah’s Professor] had trained, not all of them, some of them were decidedly lone wolves, in large measure they were trained to be collaborative, they
participated in teacher rounds at Parker Campus school which actually comes from Parker University, [the Math Professor] and [Sarah’s Professor] and others. The gist of it was you discussed your lesson before you did it with a group people in the rounds group, a teacher led process, you do the observation, sometimes 5, 6, 7 people in the room, sometimes videotaping, watching you work with the kids. The teachers can get involved in the lesson or they can sit and observe the whole time. And then the post rounds process, this time the teacher listening to the feedback and then kind of discussing it with people afterwards. I hired people who came from that training, were collaborative by nature, had a formal process to collaborate…I can’t really take credit for it except that [Sarah’s Professor] was sending me people and I quickly realized in seeing them and in evaluating and encouraging them to stay for the rest of their careers here that they were that good because they were reflective practitioners. And that to me, is, if you don’t have that you can’t really function. In this department, you won’t innovate. The Lorax closing the door and going away “I’m just going to teach my kids” approach is hopefully dead and gone. That’s not to say that it was alive and well here but we had the opportunity here from 2002 on to reshape the staff through retirements, through non-renewals in a way that allowed us to dramatically change the course of instruction here, the level of innovation, and the results.

This extract from Harry uncovered yet another layer in the process of understanding the essence of innovation. In Davis, educators were encouraged to collaborate and the share best practices. They were provided the time and the space as well as monetary compensation for this work. But beyond these conditions, there was actually a process in Davis that recruited
individuals who had experience following protocols for sharing and who had collegiate experience collaborating; many of those who joined the department with this experience became the adopters of the innovation when it was introduced.

**Hiring the Right Teachers**

As the interviews progressed, it became apparent the new hires often had quite a bit in common and were frequently recruited from the same place. These new hires were young and eager, not yet set in their ways. They were likeable and looking to form friendships. They were willing to work long hours and collaborate afterschool and on the weekends. As Sarah expressed:

I think a lot of us came in together and had no idea what we were doing! [laughs] This was all our first job or our second job and we were just looking at these kids thinking, “I thought I knew what I was doing but I didn’t.” So we had this kind of shared fear, maybe, and came together to figure out what it was that we were doing. And by doing that we had these shared goals and we really looked at what makes good writing and what doesn’t. And we were able to have those dialogues early in our careers rather than later so they kind of shaped how we teach. And I think that’s kind of continued. I think that one thing that our director does is that he’s really good at hiring people who are excited about teaching and who want to do good and who want to change, who aren’t afraid of changing their ideas or throwing lessons out there or sharing, that’s huge.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of the importance of the make-up of the teachers was the fact that Sarah believes that the innovation would not be as well received now as when it was first introduced nearly a decade ago:
I think that if we brought the color system in today-- this is where I’m going to get negative—if we brought the color system in today it would be very different than when we did five years ago. I don’t think it would be as successful [ ] because we’re starting to now become established teachers who have our own routines, who have our lessons. Now, I have my binder and I don’t want something new because that means I have to change things….I still do think we have good people who are willing to learn and willing to change things but I think it would be a lot harder. Study groups have dried up. We don’t have the money that we did five years ago to fund things…A lot of us, we all came in as young teachers who, you know, this was our life. We were here until five o’clock. We were doing activities after school. We were going down to the middle school and doing [after-school programs]. I was in Davis until 5 o’clock most nights. A lot of us have kids now and I realized the other day that I’m just an English teacher for the next few years, and that made me sad. But I think that’s a lot of us. We’re in a different stage of our life and I think that innovation is hard for that. I still do think that we have the commitment that if we all really believed in it or if it was something that a few of us all really believed in we’d have the commitment to get it going, but I don’t think it would be as easy.

Throughout the interviews the participants referred to many elements that they believed were related to the successful implementation of the Writing with Colors program. Sarah’s statement above described the fact that at the time of the implementation of Writing with Colors many of the young teachers who were hired were able to commit the time and effort into the adoption of a new program and also into the relationships that advanced and sustained the culture
of collaboration. This revelation brought many other factors into focus, including the idea that the teachers’ ages, position on the career ladder, and place in life (unmarried and without children) may have contributed to this culture. Karen discussed the Saturday program, a grant funded program in which many of the educators participated and which served as the breeding ground for the spread of *Writing with Colors*:

The idea that we’re all working with these innovations and being trained in them and supporting them [was great]. And I have to say, the Saturday program… even now that I haven’t been doing the Saturday program, I still see the effects of it in my classroom. The kids come in and say, “Can we use markers, can we do this or that?” And the kids who have regularly attended the Saturday program have more skills than those who haven’t.

The participants discussed their willingness to come together during the school day, afterschool, and even on Saturdays. This willingness certainly seemed to emanate from a passion for teaching the students, and without the right teachers who were willing to put in the time to come together the innovations may not have taken hold. But many educators are willing but not able to afford this time commitment. A challenge many districts face is that it is not often when many new hires can be made at one time, and even when this does happen, as was the case in Davis, in ten years those same educators may no longer be able to make the commitment that they made earlier in their career.

In addition to the conditions described above, the participants also related another aspect of the hiring process that was significant in Davis, the personality and likeability of the educators
who were hired. This included the new hires’ ability to form friendships, share, collaborate, and champion new ideas and innovations.

**The Likeability Factor**

There was a need for the participants to describe the delicate balance between friendships, collegial relationships, and cliques. Colleagues need to be open and trusting of one another in order to share new ideas, but if smaller sub-groups form cliques, barriers can arise. The participants spoke to the great amount of turnover in the years before they arrived, and the small amount of turnover since. This stability, the sense of “coming up together,” has allowed for the development of community and friendship among the educators in the English department. Sarah explained the importance of the relationship among the group that came together:

I think we’re friends. That we go out for drinks and we go over each other’s houses. So it’s a comfortable environment to kind of admit your mistakes and ask for help.

William also commented on the importance of this idea:

There was a pretty solid group of people in Davis and this is probably an even more collegial group that I’m with now. Not a lot of turnover…It’s been a very core group…

Harry also described the importance of the informality of the early meetings between these new hires. The friendships that formed can be attributed to hiring the right people, but some of the other factors can only be attributed to “the perfect storm” of variables. No new idea,
no matter how innovative or interesting, will spread as well as it will amongst friends who trust each other and seek out one another to share best practices:

[Sarah] is someone I’m thinking of, people loved teaching beside her. People love teaching beside her. She’s smart. She gets it. She’s collaborative, and yet, people like her. That likeability factor. She’s got a very good antennae around what people need. It’s what makes her a great teacher but also what makes her a great fellow professional, fellow colleague in a collaborative, innovative mode.

Harry recognized that not only were the teachers new hires to the school, they were also new to the profession. They were new teachers who were young, single, and fresh out of college. This meant that they were open to new ideas and willing to work together outside of school. But there was something else that was a key factor in making this group of excited newcomers the agents of change. As Karen explained:

Most of the teachers there are not old veteran teachers. They’re younger. They’re highly skilled. They’re very trained. I mean, they’re gifted, some of them. I mean look at people like [Sarah] or V-- or, you know, people like that. It’s really the quality of the teachers, the connection they make with the students, how much they believe in the color system, how skillful they are in teaching the color system. Their enthusiasm and energy. It’s the teachers.

The participants uncovered that it was more than a good idea, good leadership, and a culture of sharing that brought a program such as *Writing with Colors* school-wide. It was the make-up of the individual messengers as well. Harry was well aware that it was essential to have
teachers that their colleagues deemed likeable as the conduits for passing along the new ideas and information:

And then other people I would get them into a study group and I purposely picked [Sarah] to be involved in it because she would lead the kids in that direction, of leading the teachers in that direction, all with a mind towards those two approaches that were, to me, were innovative, certainly for this culture. In terms of—it had been a “Thou shalt only do the following, Links and Collins, and we hope you be creative within those” to Writing With Colors as an option, “What’s that?” I found people were curious about it and the fact that it wasn’t, a lesson would be demoed in front of them instead of being sent to some workshop off of 495 somewhere. It was appealing to them because it wasn’t required. I think it made the innovation more palatable to people. They were curious about it. They felt respected.

Summary

The conditions for innovation were revealed during these interviews in many ways. The make-up of the teachers, both as individuals who were confident and comfortable to embrace ideas, who cared about their students, and who were willing to collaborate and share best practices, was essential. So, too, was the leadership in place that supported a teacher-developed and teacher-driven idea and helped to facilitate the spread of this idea through study groups, the Saturday program, the afterschool sessions, and with the financial support of the administration by purchasing whiteboards and markers for every student in every class where the program was embraced. But finally, and perhaps most importantly, was the fact that this idea spread through a network of friends. Likeable educators who were purposefully committed to forming a
community of professional learners (though the term Professional Learning Community was never explicitly mentioned) spread *Writing with Colors* to all receptive members of the school community.
Chapter Five

Discussion of Research Findings
and Implications for Educational Practice

Introduction

One of the easier things to do in education is to throw money at a problem and purchase a solution to address low standardized test scores or poor writing performance by the students. The junk mail and spam that finds its way into a curriculum director’s inbox could fill the gymnasium in most districts and there are some teachers and administrators who actually prefer these pre-packaged programs or curriculum, assuming that they would be easier to implement in the district. However, the Colonial School District, like many others, has believed in promoting the capacity of every educator to understand the problem (in this case, the need for a common writing program) and work toward a teacher-driven solution through their work in the professional learning community. Even a teacher-generated program such as Writing with Colors, developed in the Davis Public Schools, cannot be transferred simply from one district to another and adopted without first considering the necessary elements that were in place in Davis that led to its successful implementation.

Overview of the Problem

Based on standardized test scores, the Colonial School District, of which the researcher is a member, is high-achieving but is in a position to recognize the challenges of moving from good to great (Collins, 2001). The MCAS scores in recent years have plateaued, while the scores for writing for the high needs subgroup (Special Education, Low Income, and English Language Learners) are below the state average. The district needs a writing program to galvanize the
efforts of the educators and to provide a common language for teachers, students, parents and the entire school community.

Colonial has adopted the 6+1 Traits Program™ program at the elementary and middle school levels and though this program has started to provide a common language about writing, the results over the past five years of implementation have not been as substantial as the introduction of Writing with Colors in the Davis Public Schools. Since Writing with Colors would work with the 6+1 Traits Program™ many outside educators have suggested bringing the program to Colonial as a top-down initiative, citing its success in Davis and a handful of other districts. But is the program successful in and of itself, or were the conditions that existed that supported its implementation in Davis the same conditions that would need to be replicated in Colonial in order to see the same level of success?

Cultivating a climate for innovation is no simple task. While the ultimate goal would be to replicate the conditions for innovation and lead the educators to create their own program similar to Writing with Colors, it is also important to realize that there is great benefit to understanding the conditions in which the innovation took hold. Writing with Colors, like any program, was not the silver bullet in Davis, but the conditions that allowed it to thrive could be replicated and could benefit the introduction of this or any program in another district.

Purpose of the Study

When implementing a new program there are many variables that must be considered, and this study was an interpretive phenomenological analysis that closely examined the essence of innovation in order to understand the perceptions of the educators present during the time of the development and implementation of Writing with Colors in the Davis Public Schools.
The research question driving this study was: How do those present at the time of the development and adoption of the Writing with Colors program perceive the conditions for innovation and the resulting effects of these conditions, if any, on their teaching of writing during those years?

**Interpretation of the Findings Based on the Literature Review**

The participants provided interesting recollections of their experiences that reflected much of the literature that exists about professional learning communities, the culture of collaboration, and leadership. The findings also related to the bodies of literature that addressed phenomenology and researching lived experience.

A major finding of this study related to the importance of establishing the optimum cultural conditions for a successful innovation to take hold. According to DuFour (2008) “school administrators and teachers must build a collaborative culture in which they work together interdependently and assume collective responsibility for the learning of all students” (p. 19). There was evidence in Davis that these interdepartmental relationships developed for a variety of reasons, many of which were surprising to the researcher.

Much of the literature consulted for this study discussed the benefits of Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, 2008) but consistently described the challenges of full implementation. In many cases the PLCs were described as looking good on paper, but much more difficult to implement in practice. The Colonial School District uses the term PLC and it existed in pockets prior to the arrival of the current administration. In Davis, the term PLC was never used to actually describe the culture, but interestingly enough, was closer to the true definition of a Professional Learning Community as defined by DuFour (2008). In Davis, as
several of the participants stated throughout their interviews, there was a common wave of collaboration that spread throughout a majority of the teachers in the departments. In some ways this culture was pre-existing, as many Davis teachers were at one time Davis students and there was a long history of friendship, collegiality, and trust. But there was also an influx of new hires with similar values and educational philosophy who were introduced into this culture and encouraged to collaborate and share best practices. As DuFour (2008) stated, “When a culture has truly shifted, a faculty recognizes that they are a PLC, they do not do PLCs. They subject every practice, program, policy, and procedure to ongoing review and constant evaluation according to very different assumptions than those that guided the school in the past” (p. 21).

This was certainly the case in the English Department in Davis, as it became the norm to fund a study group to investigate every new idea that came across the table, but those study groups themselves would have been called, incorrectly, PLCs in other districts. In Davis the spread of those learning communities was fueled by something more than the compensation for the study groups, and they came together organically and were not derived from the scheduling of teachers into a “team” and calling it a “PLC.” It was based upon a few underlying ideas that were echoed throughout the participants’ interviews. First, there was the belief that all students could learn and achieve the high standards that were held in Davis. Second, there was the belief that all stakeholders would roll up their sleeves and take the time to come together and directly work with the students in whatever way they needed.

DuFour (2008) wrote that “…simply providing educators with time to collaborate will do nothing to improve a school if they spend that time focusing on issues that do not impact student learning” (p. 28) and this was certainly true in Davis. One of the more interesting findings in this study was that time, always one of the more crucial common denominators in any equation, was
less of an issue in Davis during this time period due to the position in life of the educators involved in the study. In all districts, a group of well-intentioned educators could come together and agree that, in theory, student learning is at the heart of everything that they do. At Colonial, in fact, every administrator and teacher would likely agree with everything that DuFour says about PLCs…on paper. But the reality is often that there is not enough time to do what needs to be done (Fullan, 2007).

Interestingly, in Davis this was not often the complaint. The reason for this is perhaps twofold. First, several participants in this experience described how the leadership allowed time during the district-mandated release times for the teachers to collaborate. This collaboration invited dialogue, debate, and focused conversation around common pedagogical and instructional challenges that the educators faced. There were not many contrived exercises and activities to be completed on these afternoons as the leadership determined that it was a better usage of time to spread ideas that were working. But this is no easy task for leadership. In many districts, the leadership either restricts the amount of variance of a discussion by dictating exactly what happens during professional release time or the pendulum swings in the other direction, and the result of the discussion, without protocols or direction, tends to lose focus. DuFour (2008) described the leadership in this culture:

The most fertile ground for cultivating PLCs is found in district and school cultures that are simultaneously loose and tight. Some elements of the culture are tight. These elements clarify shared purpose and priorities as well as the parameters within which all members are expected to operate on a day-to-day basis. Within those parameters, however, is tremendous latitude for individual and collective innovation, empowerment, and autonomy. (p. 107)
The second reason for time not being as much of an issue in Davis was something unanticipated that emerged throughout the study. Several of the participants alluded to the age and place in life of the educators who were the driving force behind these professional learning communities. Since many of the new hires were young, single, and new to the community, they bonded and became friends. This perhaps also brought them together for the Saturday and summer programs, as time allowed for them to come in to work on several weekend dates without the complications of a spouse or child at home also requiring attention. These Saturday and summer programs helped to facilitate the interdepartmental collaboration activities, especially among special education teachers and English language learner teachers and English department teachers who often remained in silos during the school day collaboration periods. Additionally, Harry, the department head, was also present “in the trenches” during many of these weekend and summer programs. These were opportunities for everyone to get to know the kids and one another in a slightly different, more relaxed environment. Trust is born from such experiences.

Sarah expressed during her interview that things have changed in many ways as this original group of educators, representing a large number of new hires who came in within a three year period, are now married with families and outside commitments. Attendance at the Saturday programs has declined and the teachers are now participating on a rotational basis and some of the original educator participants have moved on to other districts or retired.

Harry, the administrative leader in this group, recognized throughout his interview that hiring practices and leadership decisions alone were not the cause for this culture to develop. However, he was aware of the impact that placing these young, energetic, and like-minded
teachers together would have on the culture of the department. The literature describes the process of cultivating a climate for collaboration akin to cultivating a garden (DuFour, 2008). This is not a factory model, this cannot be only top-down or only bottom-up. There must be a constant nurturing force that continually supports all of the individual developments and also encourages all of the opportunities for collaboration. DuFour recognized that “Tending to culture is nonlinear and requires rapid responses to unanticipated problems as they arise. Cultural norms are typically invisible, implicit, and unexamined, made up of scores of subtleties in the day-to-day workings of the school. Culture is ongoing” (p. 109). In this fertile ground the seed of an innovative idea can take root and flourish.

The literature described the importance between PLCs, opportunities for teachers learning, and the significance of student performance (Fullan, 2007; Kruse, Louis, & Burk, 1995; Newman & Wehlage, 1995). Several of the participants described that the reason why Writing with Colors took hold and elicited teacher buy-in was not only the fertile ground into which it was introduced, but also the evidence of student success attributed to this program. MCAS scores improved and several leaders took the opportunity to thank and congratulate the teachers for this success. The co-creators of Writing with Colors were recognized with an educational award, and many of the educators who used the program received coverage in the local and Boston area newspapers.

The literature described the need for more than top-down leadership (Fullan, 2007) as this can lead to a disgruntled workforce that complies with the directives, not out of respect or shared moral purpose, but out of compliance (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Without a sense of collaborative leadership that encourages educators to work together, teachers will work in isolation, closing their doors and turning their backs on the best practices that may
be succeeding down the hall (Fullan, 2007). Many of the participants in this study spoke to the need for sharing materials and ideas with one another, whether they were worksheets from the copier or fully developed programs like *Writing with Colors*.

This study also investigated the educators’ perceptions about how their approach to writing changed (or did not change) because of the *Writing with Colors* program. Sarah described that her whole way of thinking about writing changed after she stopped to consider a piece of writing in a new way. She also realized that these lessons could be extended to all types of writing, not just the five-paragraph essay. Karen described the ways in which she used writing with her English Language Learner students and expressed that the *Writing with Colors* program specifically worked for her kids because it was very visual. According to Robert Marzano (2001), the “processes...have a much higher tolerance for variation relative to the steps involved than do skills. For example, there are not a great many ways to go about reading a bar graph, but many different ways to engage in the process of writing” (Marzano, et al., 2001 p. 141). The findings of this study supported this line of thinking in that the educators seemed open to exploring new ways to address the writing process and were certainly engaged in learning more about *Writing with Colors* as it was introduced.

As the educators discussed their approach to writing, many commented on the process of modeling, both by the teacher and by Harry, the Department Head, in that regard (Marzano, et al., 2001). However, as the participants described, there is more to the equation than just teacher modeling. The students need to practice the skills as evidenced by the participants in the Saturday program who returned to Karen’s class with improved performance. Marzano (2001) noted important findings of several studies that concluded that merely demonstrating what
effective writing looks like and also having students write a large amount do not have nearly the
effect on student outcomes as focused practice on particular skills (Marzano, et al., 2001).

Sarah also described in detail the importance of having the students take accountability
for their own writing and thinking about the writing process:

So by talking about the process and [the students] understanding that not everyone writes
the same, I hope that it gives them the confidence to realize that writing is a unique thing
and that it’s just kind of a matter of practicing and figuring it out for themselves and
finding out [what] works best for them.

Harry described how the students were put in a position to succeed. In Davis the students
and educators developed an understanding of the process for writing and the strategies that the
educators used led to improved student performance:

My approach to writing that I try to push as an administrator is that the teachers really try
to get the kids to do a series of writing pieces that are informal before-hand so that when
the kids actually go to write about it… they are really in an “expert” position about the
topic— [it’s] the process that actually scaffolds the writing and puts the kids into the
expert position.

These extracts spoke to evidence in the literature review that suggested how the research
supports the meta-cognitive understanding of the writing process for all students. Building upon
the students’ self-confidence and strengthening their understanding of why they are writing in
the first place will help them on the smaller tasks and skills that they will need to practice
(Marzano, et al., 2001).
Another aspect of this study was the uncovering of the likeability factor of specific educators and their role in spreading the culture of collaboration. Fullan (2001) noted that “effective leaders understand the value and role of knowledge creation, they make it a priority and set about establishing and reinforcing habits of knowledge exchange among organizational members” (p. 87). In Davis these habits of knowledge exchange were sought after in the hiring process as they were skills that were developed by many students at one particular college working with one particular professor. This “farm team” mentality helped to bring together like-minded educators who possessed these habits and were able to increase the rate of exchange and the likelihood that the ideas would be successfully communicated in the school setting. As Fullan (2007) stated, “large scale change cannot be achieved if teachers identify only with their own classrooms and are not similarly concerned with the success of other teachers and the whole school” (p. 302). The educators need be not only likeable to their colleagues, but also genuinely interested their colleagues’ success in the classroom. As Sarah stated, “I think that one thing that our director does is that he’s really good at hiring people who are excited about teaching and who want to do good and who want to change, who aren’t afraid of changing their ideas or throwing lessons out there or sharing, that’s huge.”

The literature surrounding Phenomenology was extremely helpful in guiding the creation of the questions and directing the focus of this study. Researching lived experience provided the researcher the opportunity to see something in a new and surprising way. In several memos the researcher noted that the interviews had uncovered very different perceptions of the Writing with Colors program among the participants, especially as it related to those participants who saw themselves as the initial agents of change. Van Manen (1990) explained how “a good description that constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of a lived
experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way” (p. 39). There were many surprises revealed in the analysis and findings chapters that have led this researcher to question the value in the process of sharing best practices that are in the form of tools and toolkits (pre-packaged programs) without also interweaving the philosophical and cultural pieces that were also in place in order for these innovations to be considered promising practices. Sokolowski (2000) described how the researcher journeys “from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude” and eventually becomes a philosopher (p. 47). This is certainly true of this researcher as he has contemplated the findings of this study in a philosophical sense and sees the process of philosophical inquiry as the inroad to exploring the “disclosure of truth” in future problems of practice (Sokolowski, 2000).

**Interpretation of the Findings Based on the Theoretical Frameworks**

The major findings of this study uncovered the essence of innovation in Davis and were framed through the lenses of the theoretical frameworks of innovation theory and critical pedagogy.

Innovation theory, in particular the ideas of Everett M. Rogers, (2005) provided a lens to assist with interpretation of the culture surrounding innovation. The second theory, critical pedagogy, helped frame the perceptions of the educators themselves and the significance of recognizing the importance of their own voices in uncovering the essence of innovation.
**Innovation Theory**

As with many of the findings of this study, the lens of innovation theory helped to illuminate the importance of the players in Davis, from those who were the change agents to those who were early adopters, potential adopters, and laggards (Rogers, 2005). The innovators developed *Writing with Colors* based upon the recognized needs of the students who were “at risk” for failing MCAS and who needed to know the essential elements of a quality piece of writing. This knowledge came from many hours spent with these students in extended day and year programs and, as Rogers (2005) stated, “Change agents must have a high degree of empathy and rapport with their clients in order to assess their needs accurately” (p. 254). This idea also extended to Harry’s role as Department Head in understanding the needs of the teachers who would be working with these students, as he recognized *Writing with Colors* as an idea worth sharing and encouraged the innovators to share with the early adopters.

Rogers (2005) wrote of five attributes of innovation that can predict the rate of adoption: relative advantage, comparability, complexity, trialability, and observability (Figure 5.1). The extracts from the participant interviews all touched upon aspects of these attributes and helped to tell the complete story of the essence of innovation.

![Figure 5.2](image-url)
The rate of adoption is the speed at which the innovation takes hold throughout the community, and there are many factors in determining this rate. Several of the participants, in their own words, described the importance of recognizing relative advantage, or the ways in which the innovation is an improvement upon the old. Harry described the previous template-driven writing programs as ineffective and top-down. He believed that they were killing student writing in the district. Sarah described the need for a new idea to not be portrayed as the silver bullet that would be the “new thing that’s going to solve all of our problems.” Writing with Colors, according to the participants, was visual and less template-driven and cookie-cutter than previous programs.

Sarah also described the idea that Writing with Colors was more effective because it was very compatible with existing programs and did not require a great deal of change for the adopters. Since the stakeholders will evaluate the idea and compare it to the ideas that are already in existence, comparability is a key in determining the rate of adoption (Rogers, 2005). As Sarah stated:

[Writing with Colors] is not going to take away from anything that I’m doing in my classroom, it’s only going to enhance it. I’m not going to use it with every writing assignment. But it’s something that my kids can decide to use, or not use. It’s a tool that I’m going to be able to teach to enhance what I’m already doing. I think if it’s presented that way, it will be more successful.

The innovators and leaders need to recognize the importance of compatibility and involving the potential adopters in all aspects of the idea. As Rogers (2005) stated, “Change agents often commit an ‘empty vessels fallacy’ by assuming that potential adopters are blank
slates who lack any relevant experience with which to associate the new idea. The empty vessels fallacy denies that compatibility is important” (p. 254). Sarah stressed the importance of involving all potential adopters:

That is probably even more important, that you have to have people see this problem as something that they actually want to fix and they are willing to put the time towards. Like if you only have a problem that an administrator sees as a problem or something that’s coming from the state and teachers aren’t invested in it, you can work on it for days and nothing’s gonna change.

The complexity of the innovation is also essential to predicting the rate of adoption, and participant comments can certainly be viewed through this lens. Sarah described the program as unintimidating and she also described the ease with which she understood the program, “for the first time I understood what needed to go into an essay. And I was looking at student essays for the first time. I wasn’t just looking at my own writing. And realizing okay, this is where we need to get to.” Both Karen and William described Writing with Colors as a very visual system that was not difficult for both educators and students to learn. As Karen stated, “[ELL teachers] use a lot of visuals, which is something I always liked in the color system. I mean, we’re trying to teach writing to kids who couldn’t read in any language, so it’s a very, very slow process.” William saw Writing with Colors as a program that you would not “want to jam down people’s throats. You’d want to do it as a technique or something, teach it that way. And then see how people innovate off of it.” The fact that the program was complex enough to have an impact on student learning and yet simple enough to allow educators to “innovate off of it” certainly figured were factors in the adoption of the program throughout the department.
The next attribute that Rogers (2005) described is *trialability* or the amount of time adopters can experiment with the innovation before adopting it. This was an area that *Writing with Colors* and the way it was introduced excelled. As the administrator, Harry facilitated opportunities for the change agents to model the program in classrooms but the very nature of the program allowed for the educators to try pieces of the program and adapt much of it for their own classrooms. As Karen stated, “It could come from the top, ‘We’re gonna use the color system,’ but if the teachers weren’t trained … weren’t believers in the practice of the system… I don’t believe it would really go anywhere… people were really into colors.” The educators in Davis were given the choice to adopt the program and really believed that they did not have to change their current practice unless the trials sustained their interest.

*Observability* is the fifth and final attribute that affects the rate of adoption. The more visible an innovation is and the more that people are able to see it in action, the faster the innovation is adopted. In Davis there were many opportunities for showcasing *Writing with Colors* as teachers and administrators attended the Saturday program, volunteered their classrooms, and observed teachers using the colors with students. Harry also played a role in facilitating these opportunities for observation. As Harry stated, “if the math teachers … and the science teachers came to me, and they did, and said ‘Hey, how do we find out about this *Writing with Colors* innovation you guys are doing?’ I said, ‘Great, let me put you in a study group with someone like [Sarah], someone like V--., someone like S-- and we’ll do some teacher sharing across the board.’”

The study also revealed the importance of the early adopters in the success of the innovation taking hold in Davis. Rogers (2005) described how the early adopters are often more deeply integrated into the culture than the innovators, and how “the adopter category, more than
any other, has the highest degree of opinion leadership in most systems. Potential adopters look to early adopters for advice and information about an innovation” (p. 282).

Several participants described the development of *Writing with Colors* as happening in study groups and on Saturdays and introduced to a whole new audience of students, those “at risk” of failing MCAS. The English language learner population along with the special education population made up a large portion of this “at risk” group and so the program, at first, was introduced in a manner consistent with Christensen’s description of a disruptive innovation. As *Writing with Colors* progressed and improved, the rate of adoption increased among the teachers of mainstream English Language Arts classes.

The self-efficacy of the educators also plays into the rate of adoption of an innovation. When exploring a new idea, many self-doubters abandon the process if they are not initially successful, while those with high levels of self-efficacy will continue to proceed and discover the best way of accomplishing the task (Bandura, 1986). The early adopters, then, help to increase the confidence of the potential adopters, since they are themselves not very far ahead in the adoption process (Rogers, 2005). The early adopters model the innovation and help to build the confidence of others in the other attributes of adoption. Bandura (1986) wrote:

> Creative achievements do not spring from a vacuum. They are built, in part, on the preceding innovations of others. Modeling probably contributes most to creative development in the inception of new styles. Innovators achieve novelty by incorporating new elements into customary forms. Once initiated, experiences with new forms create further evolutionary changes. (p. 105)
Critical Pedagogy Theory

Another lens that helped to frame this study was that of critical pedagogy. Throughout the interviews, participants described the importance of teacher voice and the empowerment of the district’s own educators in the innovation process.

Giroux (1988) and McLaren (1989) described the importance of theorists from within a culture becoming the agents for change. As Giroux (1988) stated, “rather than casually dispense knowledge to the grateful masses, intellectuals fuse with the oppressed in order to make and remake the conditions necessary for a radical social project” (p. 118). Emily perceived that many of the citizens in Davis do not fully understand the make-up of the school community, “…I don't think people realize what Davis is. Having said that we have a lot of kids who are ELL, a transient population, our Special Ed rate is high, but I think there is a need….So when these new ideas come about, these innovative ideas, and take a struggling population and lift them up, yeah, that's what we grab onto.”

The study also confirmed that the development of teacher voice is a critical component of educational innovation. Teachers must discover and encourage the development of their own voice in order to create the opportunities for the instructional innovation. As McLaren (1989) stated:

The power of teacher voice to shape schooling according to the logic of emancipatory interests is inextricably related not only to a high degree of self-understanding, but also to the possibility for teachers to join together in a collective voice as a part of a social movement dedicated to restructuring the ideological and material conditions both within and outside of schooling. (p. 231)
A culture that empowers teachers to create their own program, that is built upon trust and educator self-knowledge and self-efficacy, will lead to a higher rate of adoption of innovations. The participants in this study spoke to the trust factor, as Emily stated, “I'm not really sure how to do it, but that's how it started… the trust that it's not my show, it's not your show and let's work together so we can… help that kid.”

Critical pedagogy encourages us to envision a classroom where students take a larger role in their learning and a school where teachers are learners who take a larger role in the culture of learning. In such a culture teachers will take more risks, trust one another, and share best practices while also reaching out to parents, and strengthening their belief in the system (Bryk and Schneider, 2001; Fullan, 2007). These educators will be less likely to change for the sake of change, and will likely reject top-down initiatives such as those that Sarah described as being introduced in recent years. Fullan (2007) wrote, “teachers in the learning-enriched schools were less likely to conform to new state or district policies that they judged ill-conceived or as directing energies from classroom priorities and more likely to assess innovations in terms of their actual impact on students” (p. 141). A significant finding in the study was that early adopters of Writing with Colors were presently having great difficulty with district-wide initiatives, such as the development of grade level common assessments. Perhaps it is not the concept of these common assessments but the way in which this idea was introduced that is creating the difficulty. If the new initiative were viewed as coming from the top-down, as opposed to the Writing with Colors program that was viewed as bottom-up, then this could have led to the resistance from those same educators who were the early adopters of Writing with Colors.
Several participants in the study discussed the study groups that were created as a vehicle not only for passing along the innovative ideas but also for recognizing and empowering the educators. It was significant that participants also mentioned that teachers were compensated for their efforts in these study groups. Harry described the importance of collaborating “on the district nickel.” Sarah spoke about how the study groups provided the “time and the space” to complete the important work. Viewing these extracts through the lens of critical pedagogy allowed for the voice of the oppressed educators to emerge. Not only do educators need a culture of collaboration as an essential breeding ground for educational innovation, but they also need to be recognized and empowered—and not treated as ‘empty vessels’-- to take the appropriate risks necessary to cultivate real change (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Fullan, 2007).

Practitioner Significance

Following the recommendations of Moustakas (1994) this section begins with the researcher’s personal experiences with the phenomenon of the conditions that allowed for the innovation of the Writing with Colors program so that those feelings can then be set aside in order to focus on the perceptions of the participants.

As one of the co-creators of the Writing with Colors program, the researcher was present in Davis during the time period investigated for this study. At that time the researcher had been in the classroom for about five years and worked collaboratively with others in the English department to take best practices and develop them into a writing program that worked with students who were looking to understand the essential elements of a piece of writing. Something about the program was memorable and was well received by students of all ability levels and ages. The program was developed for educators working with students who were “at risk” of
failing the MCAS exam and many creative writing strategies for writing, editing, and re-writing short stories with a very practical and pragmatic approach to deconstructing and analyzing writing were employed. It was left brain versus right brain. The researcher and his colleagues removed the mystery of the components of a quality piece of writing in order to assign each component a color and see what was really going on in the essay. This process transferred the ownership of the understanding of what was working in that piece of writing from the author to the student reader/writer.

Borrowing from MCAS exemplars and anchor sets, quality student writing was deconstructed by the students using the colorized method. Red was assigned to the thesis and topic and if it was well written this color should follow throughout, the “life blood” of the piece. Green represented the textual examples. Students could colorize their reading passages green to identify the text that they wanted to transfer to their essays. They could also colorize green in their writing samples to represent those passages that included summaries, quotations, and paraphrasing. Yellow represented language, style, and vocabulary. This was also a color that some teachers used for various other purposes, exemplifying this program’s low complexity and compatibility. Depending on the level of students they were working with at the time (honors, college prep, special education, English language learners), the educators riffed on the innovation to create something with the color yellow that worked in their classroom. Blue represented the student voice, the commentary and analysis, the thoughts and feelings of the writer. Together these colors represented the essential ingredients for a quality piece of writing.

A colorized essay could be held up from across the room and a student could tell if it had the necessary components. There was something to be said for this macro view of the challenge of understanding an anchor set. It allowed for the students to develop self-efficacy in that they
may not understand the language or be writing at the highest level, but they could easily recognize that an essay needed more blue.

It also helped to develop the educators’ self-efficacy in that the teachers with less knowledge in writing and deconstructing anchor sets and exemplars were able to follow along and learn the process as either the researcher, his colleague, or the English Department Head, or other early adopters, co-taught the classes. But how did the early adopters come to work in those co-taught classes? Yes, the success of the students using the program spread, but it was clear that the leadership who championed the program and facilitated the opportunities for collaboration (conversations, study groups, positive reinforcement) were instrumental in creating the culture that allowed the Writing with Colors program to take hold.

**Replicating Opportunities for Innovation in Other Districts**

Having left Davis four years ago, the researcher is now in the position of needing to introduce a writing program in the Colonial District that will help educators and students develop the common language and improve their writing, and he is reluctant to champion the program from his previous district. The researcher is now more interested in re-creating the culture that allowed that program to develop in the first place. For two years the researcher has attempted to work with the teachers and administrators to gauge the climate and investigate the strategies that could be shared as best practices, and there is a need for a protocol for investigating anchors and exemplars. There have been two reasons why the researcher was hesitant to introduce Writing with Colors in the Colonial District. The first reason was that a program introduced by an administrator alone could be perceived as being too top-down. One of the reasons that the researcher perceived the introduction in Davis to be a success was the fact that this was a
teacher-created program that was championed by an administrator and not introduced directly by
the administrator himself. The second reason was that the researcher witnessed some teachers in
Colonial beginning to share their own best practices, and since the program that they shared was
similar in many respects to Writing with Colors, he did not want to confuse the educators or the
students by introducing the Writing with Colors program as well.

However, this study has allowed the researcher to understand that the Writing with Colors
program itself, though significant, is less important than the other factors that allowed the
program to take hold. If the leadership in Colonial School District were to take the suggestions
from the participants in this study and create a climate where Writing with Colors or any other
program could be introduced, it would be worthy of increased time and effort. While the
researcher has been saying that he believes in teacher-led innovation and the development and
spread of new ideas, his actions have not facilitated this kind of culture. In order to address this
problem of practice, it may be necessary to replicate the introduction of Writing with Colors or
any other similar program through the design of study groups, workshops, and opportunities for
modeling in the classrooms of teachers throughout the district in order to create the momentum
behind this new approach to analyzing student writing.

**Research Findings in Davis**

Setting aside the researcher’s own beliefs and bracketing his understanding of the
program has allowed this research to focus on the perceptions of the participants. It was
important to consider the motivations for the participants’ beliefs and through their interviews
the educators elaborated on the conditions in Davis that facilitated the growth and development
of Writing with Colors and more importantly, the conditions that epitomized a Professional Learning Community (Polkinghorne, 2000).

**Was it Writing with Colors or something else?**

One of the more revealing pieces of this study was how infrequently Writing with Colors itself was described as the silver bullet. None of the participants viewed the program as distinct from the process of implementing it. This may be common to the primary development sites for any program and as the program is replicated the process is slowly watered down and the essence of the original design is forgotten. However, the participants spoke not only about how the program itself was contagious, but how the elements for spreading the program were essential to its success.

**What made the innovation take hold in Davis?**

The participant extracts, literature reviews, and theoretical framework lenses have helped to identify that the major finding of this study had much to do with the culture created in Davis by the leadership and the early adopters.

The goal of the leadership and the educators should be to move from a culture of isolation to one of collaboration. This cannot be a top-down, leadership-driven initiative. The leaders must facilitate discussion and create opportunities for philosophical dialogue about learning, both for students and all members of the school community. It is much less important to call these PLCs than it is to embody the true nature of a Professional Learning Community, not doing PLCs, but realizing that everything that is done, every decision that is made, every idea that is introduced, every idea that is discussed exists within a professional community of learning.
Figure 5.2 illustrates the conditions in a culture of isolation and the shifts necessary for the movement to a culture of innovation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture of Isolation</th>
<th>Culture of Innovation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>…from</strong></td>
<td><strong>…to</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators work alone in their classrooms with the door closed.</td>
<td>Educators collaborate frequently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of pre-packaged writing programs by “the district” and expectation that all</td>
<td>Educators develop and introduce programs such as Writing with Colors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers adhere lock-step to the program.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departments work in isolation, little or no collaboration.</td>
<td>Interdepartmental collaboration, sharing of best practices between colleagues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators feel unsupported and disconnected.</td>
<td>Educators have a high level of self-efficacy and confidence in their own work inspired by the positive feedback and support from leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators do not have time to collaborate and when they are assigned work it is not</td>
<td>Educators are provided with the time to complete meaningful work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meaningful and does not impact student learning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators cling to materials they have created and limit sharing.</td>
<td>Educators freely share ideas with one another allowing for best practices to spread throughout the department, school, and district. Eventually, these ideas can be replicated and shared with other districts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.2

What is the culture in Davis now?

A final interesting finding in this study concerned the status of the culture presently in Davis. As Sarah and Harry described, there are fewer study groups today. Those same educators who were early adopters during the time of Writing with Colors are now the veteran educators who are more resistant to change. These educators have young families and less time to commit to solving problems, meeting on their own time to collaborate, or even participate in
programs like the Saturday program. Other early adopters have moved to other districts or retired. Many participants hesitated to state that *Writing with Colors* could be easily replicated in another district, or even introduced in Davis if it were introduced today. Sarah went so far as to say:

> If we brought the color system in today, it would be very different than when we did five years ago. I don’t think it would be as successful [ ] because we’re starting to now become established teachers who have our own routines, who have our lessons. I still do think that we have the commitment that if we all really believed in it or if it was something that a few of us all really believed in, we’d have the commitment to get it going, but I don’t think it would be as easy.

However, in speaking with the participants there remained a common denominator among the majority of those hired during the period explored in this study. These are philosophical, contemplative, and reflective practitioners who have the best interests of students in mind and have high levels of trust in one another. It does not appear that the culture in Davis has reverted back to a culture of isolation, and it is likely that an innovation introduced today into this culture could still thrive.

**Recommendations for Further Action in the Colonial School District**

Based upon the perceptions of those present in Davis during the time of the introduction of the *Writing With Colors* program there are many guidelines that could be considered by the Colonial School District who is looking to replicate Davis’ success in implementing an innovation.
1. Educators should be encouraged to work together in a Professional Learning Community where trust is a fundamental element of collaboration. This group does not need to be named as a PLC, as it is more important that it embodies the philosophical underpinnings of the PLC than be named as such.

2. Study groups are a positive way to provide compensation for educators’ time. These opportunities provide the time to develop the dialogue needed to fuel the sharing of best practices. Teachers need to be treated as intellectuals and recognized as being “fused organically” with the culture of the Professional Learning Community (Giroux, 1988).

3. Leaders should be open to new ideas. This includes the creation of new courses, creating opportunities for the sharing of best practices, and encouraging and facilitating classroom and systemic innovations.

4. Leaders should be visible and present in the classroom. Without “rolling up its sleeves” the leadership is perceived as a top-down and its ideas, even the good ones, are often rejected by the educators.

5. Who is hired matters. Colonial should review its hiring practices and seek out educators who want to work in a Professional Learning Community and share new ideas. However, it is important to note that a leader should also not just surround himself with “yes men” and so there are reasons to be cautious in the hiring process in this respect as well (Fullan, 2007).

6. The early adopters are the keys to spreading the innovation to the potential adopters. These early adopters should be identified and encouraged as much as possible since they play the vital role of bringing others into the fold.
7. Any new idea should be given the opportunities to increase the rate of adoption. The five attributes of relative advantage, comparability, complexity, trialability, and observability should be shared with all potential adopters.

8. It is not the program itself that matters as much as the culture in which it is introduced.

9. The culture of innovation is also the climate which allows for the spreading of any good idea. A teacher-developed innovation may be the best, but if it does not develop, a leader-driven best practice may take hold much in the same way as a teacher developed idea if the conditions are right.

10. It may have been the case in Davis that there was a “perfect storm”-- a good idea introduced to the right people at the right time in their professional and personal lives. This scenario is very difficult to replicate. However, even if the conditions are not ideal there are still aspects that can be replicated, and it is critical to replicate these cultural considerations along with the replication of the tools associated with the innovation itself.

Summary

The exploration of the essence of innovation has been a long and revealing journey. Through this investigation it became clear that the successful introduction and adoption of a perceived innovative program such as Writing with Colors is not only about the merits, appeal, and sustainability of the program itself but also about the culture into which that program is introduced. Replicating Writing with Colors or any program is not sufficient without consideration of the additional conditions that allowed this cultural change to unfold. A district looking to replicate the success of a promising practice should consider the need to move from a culture of isolation to a culture of collaboration in which the seeds for innovation can come to fruition.
This study has also had an effect on the research as a leader. There is much to be learned and shared from these findings as they relate to the needs of all districts to share the conditions for innovation. Implementing a writing program can be costly for any district, and it is important to first consider the conditions for the culture that will be receptive to this new program and will make the investment worthwhile. With the introduction of the Common Core Standards, school districts and states are working towards the same goals for all students and, in the coming years, there will be an increasing amount of resources, methods, and programs to share. These promising practices should be shared with everyone; however, it is essential that all leaders consider not only the practices themselves but also the cultural conditions that will allow these innovations to thrive.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This study explored the essence of innovation in an attempt to understand the perceptions of the conditions for innovation during the time of the introduction of *Writing with Colors* and the resulting effects of these conditions, if any, on the way the educators taught writing during this specific time. Further study could explore the current conditions in Davis, or investigate other innovations that have been developed and best practices that can be shared. Other studies could explore the perceptions of the students present during this time and explore whether they felt *Writing with Colors* or another innovation was significant to their learning.

Another interesting area for further study could be an investigation into hiring practices and the implications of who is hired on the culture of the school. The culture and diversity of both the student and educator populations could be explored in relation to the development of the school culture that allowed for the innovation to be introduced.
Other studies could focus on the performance of subgroups (gender, special education status, English language learner status, socio-economic status) on the standardized writing assessments for those students who used *Writing with Colors* or another innovative program to teach writing. Students could also be asked if they perceived any difference in the way their teachers taught during the period of introduction, adoption, and implementation of *Writing with Colors* in order to examine whether the students were aware of the culture for collaboration as described in this study.
References


