LIVING THE DREAM: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY AT A COLLEGE PREPARATORY BOARDING SCHOOL FOR UNDERSERVED YOUTH

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Abstract

Teachers working in schools where the majority of the population is underserved students often feel a sense of helplessness. The purpose of the study is to uncover the lived experience of a small group of English Language Arts teachers working in such an environment. Specifically, the purpose is to determine if working within an effective Professional Learning Community (PLC) can help to build individual and collective teacher efficacy. There are eight participants in this study ranging in teaching experience from two to eight years. This research study utilized a phenomenological methodology. This research study found that the single most important factor of the PLC in terms of helping to build a sense of efficacy was the importance of belonging to a team. Based on this small study there are implications for schools that serve underserved students. Among them would be the importance of building effective PLCs in which teachers feel a sense of belonging to a team in order to offset any feelings of helplessness that serving a challenging population can create.

Keywords: Professional Learning Community, Collective Teacher Efficacy, underserved students
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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

The problem of tracking has existed since the fifth century BCE when Plato wrote that society needed to select early the right people to govern in order to keep them from the lesser people and to train them (Turner, 1960). Kozol (1991) wrote that not only are students within schools tracked, the schools themselves are tracked through the funding structure for schools creating schools for the “haves” who live in wealthy districts and “have nots” who live in poor districts. Kozol’s (1991) representation of tracking by real estate and Oakes’ (2005) and Wheelock’s (1992) representation of tracking by schooling manifests in MacLeod’s (2009) work that studied a group of boys in the Clarendon Heights district in New York City, where some of these boys lived limited, and sometimes tragic, lives. Part of this research around tracking and student success identifies the relationship between tracking and teacher expectations. In a seminal research study, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) found that students randomly labeled “intelligent” showed a dramatic increase on new intelligence tests given eight months after the original test compared with students who were randomly not labeled “intelligent.” Based on the work of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) and other researchers who furthered their hypothesis (Reese, 2001; Gay, 2000; Tyler & Boelter, 2008), a few schools and school systems in the United States attempted to detrack their schools. However, the ability to sustain an untracked system of schooling proved to be difficult, if not impossible (Wells & Serna, 1996).

The RJ school (alias) in Maryland is attempting to create a scope and sequence of courses that eliminates tracking. The RJ school groups students heterogeneously except during their intervention and enrichment time. The school accepts students through a lottery system that requires they meet certain criteria of disadvantaged and at-risk as defined by the state legislation
that allows the RJ school to exist. However, creating and sustaining a publicly funded, college-preparatory school that serves sixth through 12th-grade disadvantaged, at-risk youth and groups of students in mixed-ability classrooms, eschewing the tracking of students by any measure, represents a radical change for the majority of hired teachers and staff in the way they approach their pedagogy, as well as changing their educational philosophy. While it is possible that this type of school would attract teachers who are excited to work under these conditions, it does not negate the difficult nature of the mission. The mission of the school is to send every student to a four-year university no matter at what level they began school in the sixth grade. Due to the diverse academic needs of the students there was continued pressure to track students in the RJ school after its first year of existence. At the end of the 2008-9 school year, the math department requested that the mathematics students be tracked by ability. The researcher, who at that time was an English teacher at the school, requested that no students be tracked as it would impact more than the mathematics department. The following year the mathematics students were tracked by ability. Because of the restrictions of scheduling students, the English students were inadvertently tracked as the students were placed in a section with whom they traveled to all of their core classes. The researcher was still an English teacher also now serving as department head during the 2009-10 school year. During the first week of that school year, students would arrive in the researcher’s classroom and announce that they were stupid because they were in the “dumb math class.” At the end of that school year, the school returned to detracked classes. However, the impact of that one-year of tracking was still evident during the school year, 2012-13. As the school continues to analyze the assessment data, the students who were tracked into the lower ability group mathematics class continue to struggle in math. These students often
articulate that they are “dumb” and will never be successful in mathematics. A few of those students will also state that they are “dumb in everything,” and they struggle to pass their classes.

One of the most significant challenges is the feeling that teachers, especially those working in schools that serve disadvantaged and at-risk youth, have little control over their students’ achievement. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study is to discover the essence of the lived experience of individual and collective teacher efficacy for teachers in a professional learning community (PLC) at a publically funded, college-preparatory, boarding school serving disadvantaged, at-risk youth in grades six through 10. A detracked school presents several challenges for teachers as they are tasked to teach college-preparatory coursework to students with a wide ability range. According to Bandura, self-efficacy is “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (Bandura, 1977, p. 79). Bandura theorizes that self-efficacy is, by its very nature, self-reported and can only be assessed anecdotally dependent on the researchers’ assumptions. Collective teacher efficacy generally is defined for this study as “the judgment of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute the courses of action required to have a positive effect on students” (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004, p. 4). In addition to this definition, collective efficacy is defined as “refer[ring] to the individual’s belief in the group’s capabilities” (Bandura, 1997).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this specific problem of practice at the RJ school, that will ultimately only serve 400 students, may be limited. However, finding a reform method that could lead to an increase in collective teacher efficacy and in student achievement is critical for students living in poverty to gain entry into and graduate from a four year university. Even beyond the issue of
poverty, a recent report published by ACT (2008) concluded, “Although the gates of high school are technically open to all students, for more than 80 percent of them, the door to their futures may already be closed” (p. 2).

Through this phenomenological research study, this researcher hopes to gain a sense of how teachers feel in terms of being helpless or having a low sense of efficacy when teaching at-risk youth. Understanding the feelings of the teachers in terms of efficacy will inform the goals of the PLC as the research progresses. Also, this researcher hopes to understand what an increased sense of efficacy means for teachers and then, finally, what a sense of collective efficacy means for teachers. This researcher hopes to understand if the participation in a PLC creates a climate, culture, and/or context that change teachers’ perceptions of their control over teaching and student achievement. It is probable that many factors contribute to teachers feeling in or out of control of their teaching and their students’ learning; discovering if the PLC model is a positive factor will be necessary if this reform model is to become a school-wide initiative.

This researcher has noted that teachers, especially those working in schools that serve disadvantaged and at-risk youth, feel they have little control over their students’ achievement. According to the research, this sense of helplessness leads to lowered expectations for their students and for themselves, resulting in a downward spiral of failure. According to recent literature, “There is a growing body of research . . . that suggests a teacher’s quality of performance and commitment to work is related to his or her level of motivation to influence student learning” (Ware & Kitsantas, 2007, p. 303). Based on this research, there is a connection between efficacy and expectations. Teachers who feel that they have no control over the performance of their students — efficacy — have low expectations, which, according to the research around expectations, lead to student failure (Tyler & Boelter, 2008; Rubie-Davies,
2007; Brophy & Good, 1974; and Harris & Rosenthal, 1985). In classrooms where students are tracked, teachers of lower tracked students have lower expectations and lower efficacy, which leads to student failure. To determine strategies to increase teacher efficacy, several studies have been conducted examining the effect of a transformational leader or leadership on many aspects of schooling, including teacher efficacy (Ross & Gray, 2006; Hallinger, 2003). From these studies, researchers have turned their attention from individual teacher efficacy toward collective teacher efficacy (Ross & Gray, 2006). In a recent report from the National Staff Development Council, researchers determined that teachers lack the time and opportunities to engage in continual and collaborative professional learning that would strengthen teachers’ capacity to build learning communities dedicated to increasing students’ achievement (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). These authors note, “Several national studies on what distinguishes high-performing, high-poverty schools from their lower-performing counterparts consistently identify effective school-wide collaborative professional learning as critical to the school’s success” (Hammond et al., 2009, p. 3).

This phenomenological study considers the lived experience of the English Language Arts (ELA) PLC. This research explores the belief of the ELA PLC in their collective ability to influence the lives of their students. Ultimately, if the PLC creates a lived experience in which the teachers feel an increase in their collective teacher efficacy, this model could become a school-wide initiative to increase the number of teachers from nine to 40. This research uncovers the lived experiences of the ELA teachers at a school that serves students whose families earn up to 300% of the Maryland State poverty rate. The goal is to maintain a high-achieving academic status that should lead to students’ acceptance to and graduation from a college of their choice. According to a report sponsored by the Cooke Foundation, “Among
first-grade students performing in the top academic quartile, only 28 percent are from lower-income families” (Wyner, Bridgeland, & Diuliu, 2007, p. 2). By fifth grade only 56 percent of the 28 percent maintain their high-achieving status, and by high school 25 percent of those remaining fall out of the top quartile (Wyner et al., 2007, p. 2). The difficulty of increasing the number of high school students who score in the top quartile, when they arrived in sixth grade already moving toward the bottom quartile, requires the teachers to have high individual and collective efficacy.

The purpose of the PLC has been to create a culture where teachers feel they are working toward a shared belief in students’ abilities to gain entry to and graduate from a college of the student’s choice. The PLC conducts a collective study of lessons, classes, and student work from which the teachers begin to refine their lessons and grow as professionals. Ultimately, this phenomenological study establishes whether membership in a PLC has a positive impact on the lived experience of a group of teachers’ sense of efficacy — individual and collective.

Positionality Statement

In addition to the limitations this small research study contains, the position of the researcher at that school presents its own critical, ethical challenge as the researcher is the leader of the PLC under study. While the researcher serves as a support person rather than in an evaluative position, there is the possibility that the researcher is looked at as a superior that could influence the answers given by the members of the PLC. In addition, the researcher’s position could lead to bias issues that will be guarded against via the bracketing phase of the research as well as using a researcher journal and member checking. Bracketing is a phenomenological device that provides the researcher with a method of identifying the researcher’s own lived experience with the topic of research. Moustakas (1994) identifies the act of bracketing as a
method to remove your assumptions, personal experiences, commonalities, and any association with the phenomena. The use of the researcher journal provides the researcher with an opportunity to continuously check for bias and expand the bracketing out of potential bias. The use of member checking is a final step toward ensuring that the bias of the researcher has not influenced any of the interpretations of the participants’ interview answers or findings.

**Research Question**

This researcher will explore one research question: What is the lived experience of individual and collective efficacy for members of an English Language Arts department situated in a professional learning community (PLC) at a publicly funded, college-preparatory, boarding school for disadvantaged, at-risk youth in grades six through 10 that is focused on increasing student achievement?

Through this question, this researcher wants to find out if a PLC dedicated to increasing student achievement can have an effect on collective teacher efficacy. This researcher needs to know this because this school serves a population of students who start sixth grade two or four years below grade level in reading and math. These students come from difficult environments, some within their own home, others from a difficult neighborhood, and most from a poor-performing school. The challenges that these students bring to the classroom often lead teachers to feel helpless and at the mercy of outside forces. These same factors also lead the students to feel a sense of helplessness. This lack of efficacy creates a cycle of failure that increases a sense of helplessness that leads to more failure. If, through the collective effort of teachers in a PLC, teachers can increase their own feeling of empowerment leading to student success and to an increase in student empowerment, this cycle of failure could be broken.
**Theoretical Frameworks**

**Professional learning communities.** Over the past half-century, numerous reform movements have come and gone and sometimes come again — such as open concepts (no walls or doors), team teaching, back to basics, student choice, contract grading, small schools, standards-based learning, cooperative learning, real-world application, and 21st-century skills (personal communication, Lease, 2010). While it is possible that the idea of professional learning communities emerged as early as the late 1930’s and early ’40’s (Bullough, 2007, pp. 169–70), the concept was not explored again until the 1960’s, “when researchers . . . offered the concept as an alternative to the isolation endemic to the teaching profession.” The research began to become more explicit in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. Susan Rosenholtz (1989) found, “‘Learning-enriched schools’ were characterized by collective commitments to student learning in collaborative settings” (p. 25). Senge (1990) in his book *The Fifth Discipline* defined a learning organization in the business world as having five characteristics: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning. Systems thinking is defined as a method for identifying patterns and how they can be changed; personal mastery is defined as a commitment to lifelong learning; mental models are defined as personal constructs that determine how a person views the world and acts within it; shared vision is defined as a group of people who shared a goal; and team learning is defined as groups of people frequently interacting and discussing the previous four characteristics (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). During this time, Lave and Wenger (1991) situated PLCs within the concept of what they called “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger (1998) further defined a community of practice as a group whose members share their concerns and passions where they could pursue in-depth knowledge and expertise collectively creating knowledge (Wenger, 1998). Most
recently, Enthoven and Bruijn (2010) concluded that both the ideas of a community of practice and a PLC involved collective learning and professional development. In addition, they determined that communities of practice are less formal than PLCs and that the term “community of practice” was more of an umbrella term than an entirely different entity from a PLC (Enthoven & Bruijn, 2010).

Hord (1997), using Senge’s work, concluded that the characteristics of an effective, educational PLC needed to have supportive and shared leadership; shared values and vision focused on pupil learning, collective learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. In 2008 researchers Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, and Olivier (2008) further refined Hord’s work and identified seven key characteristics of an effective PLC. They added collective learning and application, external factors, and separated supportive conditions into two areas — relationships and structures.

Numerous other research reports concluded that professional learning communities contributed to students’ achievement, but not until DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) publication *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* did PLCs become a significant reform movement.

Unlike many previous reform movements, with the exception of the standards movement, PLCs have had more staying power. This phenomenon may be explained by the significant research conducted through longitudinal studies, case studies, and literature reviews that examine the relationship between PLCs and student achievement (Little, 2006; Morrissey, 2000; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Carmichael (1982), as cited in Morrissey (2000), maintained “students cannot raise their level of achievement until teachers become more effective in their own practice” (p. 3). In the article
“Professional Community and Professional Development,” Little (2006) examined the basic premise that “when a school systematically supports professional learning, it is more likely to be effective with students” (p. 22). Stoll et al. (2006) found indications, however, of a link between PLCs and enhanced student outcomes. Finally, a wide range of statistical data supports the claim that school-based professional learning communities improve teaching and learning (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

The primary reason for this relationship between PLCs and increased student learning can be found in their singular focus on student learning (Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2002; John, 2005; DuFour & DuFour, 2010). Inherent in the success of any PLC is determining which basis works best. For a PLC in the field of education, the answer is clear: student learning. In a PLC, however, attempts at school improvement are judged on the basis of how student learning is affected” (Eaker et al., 2002, pp. 5–6). After working on the creation and implementation of PLCs in several locations, DuFour (2004) published an article articulating the challenges of creating and sustaining a PLC. He realized that this work represented a paradigm shift in education and that requiring school staff to collaborate and focus on learning rather than teaching and holding one another accountable for both was challenging (DuFour, 2004). He identified three big ideas for the success of a PLC — “ensuring that students learn, . . . create a culture of collaboration, . . . and focus on results” (DuFour, 2004). DuFour and DuFour (2010) identified this singular focus as critical to the success of PLCs, “The reason PLCs improve teaching is, paradoxically, because they focus on learning . . . . The dialogue generated from these questions results in the academic focus, collective commitments, and productive professional relationships that enhance learning for teachers and students alike” (p. 81).
Collective teacher efficacy. Ross and Gray (2006) defined collective teacher efficacy as “expectations of the effectiveness of the staff to which one belongs, whereas teacher efficacy refers to expectations about one’s own teaching ability” (p. 182). McCoash and Colbert (2010) refined the definition as “the degree to which teachers believe that their collective efforts contribute to students’ academic success” (p. 23). The work around collective teacher efficacy finds its roots in the work of Bandura (1997), who found that collective teacher efficacy is significantly and positively related to student achievement and that collective efficacy has more impact on student achievement than the students’ socio-economic status. Bandura (1997) expanded his work on collective teacher efficacy and identified four elements — mastery experience, physiological arousal, vicarious experience, and verbal persuasion. Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000) refined Bandura’s ideas and identified four necessary elements for a teacher to build collective teacher efficacy — mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and affective states. They defined mastery experience as teachers experiencing events over which they persevered; vicarious experience is defined as teachers listening to and observing other teachers’ successful experiences; social persuasion includes the teachers’ participation in professional learning communities, professional development, workshops, and informal conversations; affective states refers to efficacious organizations’ ability to cope with stress and conflict in a positive, solution-oriented manner (Goddard et al., 2000).

Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) identified the characteristics of teacher efficacy as teachers who display a passion for teaching, satisfaction with teaching, a growth mindset, a tendency to innovate, and a greater focus on academic endeavors; who hold high expectations for students; and who are more greatly committed to teaching. In addition to identifying the characteristics of teachers with a sense of efficacy, Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) identified
the characteristics of schools with a high level of collective teacher efficacy. The teachers at these schools collectively believe all students can learn and achieve at high levels; teachers can influence the school’s culture; teachers can have a positive impact on student achievement; teachers can manage the curriculum and instruction; teachers can motivate students; and teachers can establish a stable and safe school culture that is proactive rather than reactive. In addition, Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) concluded that teachers at these schools with high levels of collective teacher efficacy share and accept responsibility for student achievement, have high expectations, deliver mastery instruction, and have a high work ethic. In a later study, Ware and Kitsantas (2007) determined that schools with high levels of collective teacher efficacy have eight dimensions: they are goal-oriented, personalize and differentiate professional development, use and develop teacher leaders, embrace multiple responsibilities, share resources, provide and welcome collegial feedback, pursue in-depth study that is shared with the community, and create shared resources as a product for future growth.

Ross and Gray (2006) examined several schools and determined, “Schools with high collective teacher efficacy have higher student achievement than schools with lower levels of collective teacher efficacy” (p. 182). Ross and Gray (2006) also noted a reciprocal relationship between collaboration, effectiveness, and efficacy. “Through joint work teachers . . . enhanced their effectiveness, thereby increasing perceptions about their current success and expectations for their future” (p. 185). Diamond (2007) relates collective teacher efficacy to teacher responsibility, “In contexts high in teacher responsibility, teachers internalize responsibility for students’ learning, adjust their instructional practices to meet students’ needs, and have a high sense of efficacy around their teaching” (p. 65).
These two frameworks – PLC’s and Collective Teacher Efficacy – serve as the lenses through which this study analyzes the school’s PLC and level of collective teacher efficacy. This researcher understands the characteristics of the school’s PLC in terms of the characteristics identified above, specifically whether it contains the five elements identified by Hord (1997) – supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, focused on pupil learning, collective learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. In addition, this researcher uncovers how the members participate in the PLC being studied in terms of their collective teacher efficacy, specifically their participation in mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and affective state (Goddard et al., 2000). Finally, this researcher understands how the eight dimensions of a learning community with high levels of collective teacher efficacy impact the members of the PLC. Ultimately, these frameworks serve as constructs by which to compare the characteristics and elements of a small PLC, and its ability to provide the experiences necessary to building and maintaining a sense of collective teacher efficacy while also providing the characteristics that should be evident in an effective PLC and in a group of teachers with a high level of collective teacher efficacy.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

There is interconnectedness between teacher expectations, tracking, PLCs, and efficacy — both teacher and collective — all relating to student achievement. Each has an impact on the others. The establishment of an effective PLC leads to a sense of teacher efficacy that, if nurtured within the PLC, can lead to a sense of collective teacher efficacy. PLCs increase teacher expectations and provide teachers with the wherewithal to persevere in a detracked school with students performing well below grade level to well above. The following literature review strives to capture the history of work around teacher expectations, tracking, PLCs, and efficacy, ultimately showing the interconnectedness of all four.

Teacher Expectations

Although the research on teacher expectations and its impact on students seems to begin with Merton (1948) and his self-fulfilling prophecy theory, the idea that teacher expectations can influence student performance is as old as Jean Jacques Rousseau’s Emile, first published in 1762. In Emile Rousseau cautioned educators that they should “cease to blame others for your own faults, children are corrupted less by what they see than by our own teaching” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 68).

A little more than 100 years later, in 1892, the Committee of Ten gathered to make recommendations to improve education in multiple respects. In its conclusions, the Committee suggested that secondary mathematics should have the same expectations for all students, presaging the tracking of mathematics that continues today (National, 1894). Its members also recommended that teacher preparation needed to improve if the proposed changes were to be effective, suggesting that teachers’ expectations or beliefs that all students can learn all content
would be required to implement their suggestions (National, 1894). Having laid the foundation, that teachers’ expectations could be a factor in students’ success, educational researchers turned to Merton (1948) and his theory on a self-fulfilling prophecy effect.

In an article in the *Antioch Review*, Merton (1948) explained his theory of a self-fulfilling prophecy effect. Using the banking collapse of 1932 on Black Wednesday, Merton (1948) wrote that the forecast of an event can lead to its fruition. Simply the rumor of a bank’s insolvency led to an insolvent bank. Merton (1948) defined self-fulfilling prophecy as “a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior, which makes the originally false conception come true” (p. 175). Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) took Merton’s theory and applied it to teachers’ expectations in the classroom by conducting research in an elementary school. They gave an intelligence test to the students and then provided false information to the teachers as to the abilities of the students. Students labeled “intelligent” showed a dramatic increase on new intelligence tests given eight months later compared with students who were not labeled “intelligent” (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

During the time of this research on self-fulfilling prophecies and the *Pygmalion* effect, tracking students by ability was becoming an accepted practice in almost all schools in the United States and in countries such as Germany and New Zealand (Brint, 2006). According to William Reese (2001), some of the impetus for tracking came from a belief that the urban poor needed a different, less intellectual education than other students. Reese (2001) wrote that tracking created a tiered system of education that was less intellectual and undemocratic in tone. According to Heinrich Pestalozzi (1969), education is a chain, and the deficiencies of education come from looking at one single link as disconnected from the chain. The combination of
tracking, which infers that students in one track are more or less intellectual than the other track, is a link in a chain connected to teacher expectations (Pestalozzi, 1969).

Another study that looked less at the influence of institutional tracking and more at individual teacher tracking was conducted in 1999 and 2000. Gay (2000) and Gill and Reynolds (1999) identified that middle-grade African American students’ performances could be directly linked to their teachers’ low expectation and to the relationship between the teacher and the student. Tyler and Boelter’s 2008 study examined teachers with high expectations and teachers with low expectations. Tyler and Boelter (2008) found that high-expectation teachers create a more effective classroom environment, while low-expectation teachers tend to lower the curriculum expectations, provide less wait time, give answers, and praise students for behavior rather than academic achievement. Tyler and Boelter (2008) found that low-expectation teachers based their beliefs on prior students’ performance, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and physical attractiveness.

Recently, Rubie-Davies (2007), Brophy and Good (1974), and Harris and Rosenthal (1985) have conducted numerous studies on teacher expectation and a thorough literature review of previous studies. Brophy and Good (1974) identified 17 behaviors from high-expectation teachers and low-expectation teachers. According to Rubie-Davies (2007), Brophy and Good (1974) found that high-expectation teachers gave praise for academic answers and rephrased questions when students were incorrect, while low-expectation teachers accepted poor performance and criticized students more often than high-expectation teachers. Rubie-Davies (2007) also referenced a study conducted by Harris and Rosenthal (1985) in which they identified 31 behaviors of high-expectation teachers. High-expectation teachers provided longer wait time, praised more often, smiled more often, created a friendlier classroom, and provided a
more rigorous curriculum. In her own study, Rubie-Davies (2007) found that high-expectation teachers used mixed-ability grouping, gave ownership to the students, monitored their work closely, provided constant feedback, provided choices, set clear goals, created exciting and interesting activities, and developed a feeling of community in the classroom.

Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Irving, Widdowson, and Dixon (2010) began to move away from the belief that high expectations were only teacher-student related toward a belief that teachers’ expectations should be studied at the level of teacher-classroom. Rubie-Davies et al. (2010) looked at high-differentiating and low-differentiating teachers rather than high expectation and low expectation (2010). High-differentiating teachers believe students’ abilities are fixed, while low-differentiating teachers believe student ability is malleable (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). Consequently, the collective evidence suggests a relationship between teacher expectations and teacher differentiating. High-differentiating teachers use fixed-ability groups, set performance rather than academic goals, provide extrinsic rewards, have negative behavior management plans, and believe they can do little to change their students’ performance (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). Fixed ability groups are where students are placed in classes based on their ability – students reading below grade level in one class, students on grade level in another class, and students above grade level in another class. Low-differentiating teachers use interest-based grouping, include peer support, stress mastery of content, emphasize intrinsic motivation, have positive relationships with students, and believe student mistakes are an opportunity to learn (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). Finally, Rubie-Davies et al. (2010) suggests that the next research that needs to be pursued is the combination of high-differentiating/low-differentiating teachers and high-expectation/low-expectation teachers’ impact on student achievement.
From 1762 when Rousseau suggested that students are most influenced by teachers to 2010 when Rubie-Davies and her colleagues determined that teachers’ beliefs and expectations directly affect student achievement, there has been little research into the additional link in the chain, and that is the impact of curriculum on teachers’ expectations. Further research into the impact of tracking or streaming in connection with teachers’ expectations was and is needed.

**Tracking**

Many educational researchers trace the idea of tracking back to the early 1900’s, but according to Rosenbaum (1976), Plato may have been the first to suggest the need for tracking. Plato wrote that if selecting the right people to govern was the purpose of education, then society needed to select those people early to keep them from the lesser people and to train them. Turner (1960) also referred to Plato as the originator of the idea of tracking, writing that Plato wanted to sort people early into their niche to guarantee the proper training for both the elite and the masses. If Rosenbaum (1976) and Turner (1960) are correct, tracking has been a part of education since the fifth century BCE, and the issues have not changed.

Rosenbaum (1976) defines tracking as “any school selection system that attempts to homogenize classroom placements in terms of students’ personal qualities, performances, or aspirations” (p. 6). Rosenbaum (1976) also defines ability grouping, often used as a synonym for tracking, as a selection process that considers students’ abilities and then distinguishes instruction by the amount and rigor of work needed to prepare students for their place in the world. Part of the problem of tracking comes from the method by which schools prioritize their decisions. Rosenbaum (1976) writes that educational institutes respond first to the needs of the bureaucracy, next to society, and only then to students and parents. For many of the educational researchers who study tracking, it is these upside down priorities that lead to ineffective school
policies such as tracking. Rosenbaum (1976) writes, “Education has institutionalized many practices that interfere with the student’s self-realization and mastery of his or her world, and of these institutionalized practices none is so blatant as tracking” (p. vi). But if schooling is to move away from tracking to a belief that all students can learn at the highest levels by learning from their mistakes, then school policymakers need to determine “what good untracked schools might look like” (Wheelock, 1992, p. xi). Beginning in the 1920’s and continuing through to the 1970’s, researchers explored the questions of which type of grouping would produce the greatest achievement — homogeneous or heterogeneous (Rosenbaum, 1976). As a result of early research, the practice of tracking through programs such as college preparatory and vocational training were removed (Lucas, 1999).

To ascertain what leads to effective detracking or to dismantle the movement to eliminate tracking, three educational researchers — Loveless (1999), Oakes (1985/2005), and Wheelock (1992) — have examined tracking in the 20th century. In Oakes’ seminal work *Keeping Track*, published first in 1985 and then in 2005, along with others, she explores the history of tracking both in how it was implemented and the pressures for its continuation. When public education first began in the United States, students were naturally tracked with only the elite, white children attending school (Loveless, 1999; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 1985/2005; Wheelock, 1992). As the population increased, common schools were created, and tracking began (Loveless, 1999; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 1985/2005; Wheelock, 1992). Oakes (1985/2005) identifies three early methods of tracking — IQ, teacher recommendation, and parent/student choice. The tracking wars began when the Committee of Ten (1894) convened and determined that tracking was anathema to the democratic ideals of the United States and made recommendations for detracking schools (National, 1894). Almost simultaneously, Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*
(1859) sparked the idea of social Darwinism, and school policymakers used this theory as support for tracking (Oakes, 1985/2005). During this same time period, additional pressures on school policy were the idea of Americanization as an answer to the influx of immigrants and the Industrial Revolution with its focus on efficiency (Oakes, 1985/2005). Ultimately, in 1918 the Cardinal Principles tipped the debate to the side of tracking until the late 1900’s.

Beginning in 1989 the following organizations came out against tracking: the National Governors’ Association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Legal Defense Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Children’s Defense Fund, the United States Department of Education’s Civil Rights Division, the National Education Association, the National Council for Social Studies, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Council of Mathematics Educators (Oakes, 1985/2005). Two conservatives joined these liberal organizations — Diane Ravitch and Mortimer Adler — who felt that tracking denied students an education of the Western canon (Oakes, 1985/2005). From these movements against tracking, several detracking reform movements began — High Schools That Work, the Coalition of Essential Schools, the College Board’s Equity 2000 Project, Advancement via Individual Determination — while simultaneously there were individual schools and school districts trying to eliminate tracking (Oakes, 1985/2005). As these reform movements gained footholds across the nation, organizations, primarily focused on talented and gifted students, began to conduct their own research as to the detriments of detracking.

Wheelock (1992) argued that the changing view of intelligence negated the rationale behind tracking because new research found that intelligence is not fixed, and the growth of intelligence depends on the environment to which children are exposed. Out of this argument, competing research began to support or debunk detracking. Loveless (1999), in The Tracking
Wars, examines this research and ultimately debunks the research around the benefits of detracking. However, Oakes (1985/2005) argues that Loveless uses a straw man argument referencing ancient methods of tracking that no longer exist as a method for comparison to tracking during the late 1900’s and early 2000’s.

From this argument came the introduction of choice as a compromise between tracking and detracking. In many states and districts, students and parents were allowed to choose which classes to take. Lucas (1999) argues that choice is a smoke screen for continued tracking. Through the use of prerequisites, lack of awareness by parents of disadvantaged children, and counselor recommendations, students are still tracked, and disadvantaged students are tracked to lower tracks more often than white, middle-class children (Lucas, 1999). Oakes (1985/2005) also writes that “low income students are more likely to attend racially isolated schools where lower-level classes predominate” (p. xi). Not only has choice not eliminated tracking, but also even in schools that claim to have detracked and incorporated differentiated instruction, within-classroom tracking occurs. Teachers simply segregate students into separate groups and give them level-appropriate work, or in response to pressure from parents, schools organize the schedule to place high-achieving students in one period with low-achieving students in another period while still calling the class by one name (Lucas, 1999).

Underlying all of the tracking wars is the inability of school policymakers to articulate the purpose of education. If the purpose of education is to prepare children for the world of work and work requires different skills and levels of knowledge, tracking is the most efficient method (Wheelock, 1992). However, if the purpose of a democratic school system is to prepare productive citizens, then detracking would be most efficient (Wheelock, 1992). Employers argued that employees need higher levels of sophistication in literacy, mathematics, and problem
solving, and a report titled *CODE BLUE* argued that the conditions of too many students required “protection from prejudice and dehumanizing” (Wheelock, 1992). Brain researchers argue that children between the ages of nine and 15 grow rapidly both physically and intellectually and that tracking limits their intellectual growth by providing limited opportunities of intellectual stimulation (Wheelock, 1992). Or, is tracking a new method of segregation, as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Legal Defense Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union, and other liberal organizations argue (Wheelock, 1992)?

Most recently, proponents of detracking have embraced the conclusions of the *21st Century Skills Report*, which concludes that to succeed in the current and future employment environment, all students need to master the four Cs — critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. The new research points to the work in countries outside the United States where children are ranking in the top five to 10 in comparison to other developed nations. In *The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) writes about the results of the elimination of tracking in Finland, which ranks at the top of the achievement ranking by international standards. In addition to detracking its school system, Finland funded schools adequately and equitably; eliminated examination systems; revised national standards and curriculum to focus on high-order thinking, innovation, and inquiry; developed national teaching policies that improved teacher training; supported ongoing teacher learning; and pursued consistent, long-term reforms (Darling-Hammond, 2010). All of the above reflect what the literature has established as necessary to successful detracking. In 1950, Sweden created a comprehensive school system that did not track. The results, after nine years, when compared to a similar school that continued to track was that “bright students suffered no negative
consequences, and the lower-ability students performed better throughout their school years than their peers in the tracked system” (Brint, 1998/2006, p. 217). Yet, despite all this old and new research, tracking continues.

Since the fifth century BCE, tracking has remained intractable. For every study that points to the value of detracking, there seem to be equal arguments for tracking. Within those arguments is the inability to clearly define an effective detracked school and to clearly articulate the purpose of school. What if it is not a matter of how to effectively detrack or a definitive identification of the purpose of education? What if it is simply a matter of belief? In Wheelock’s book Crossing the Tracks: How ‘Untracking’ Can Save America’s Schools, she asks that the reader consider the following, “Imagine, for example, what would happen if we viewed every mind as a source of genius” (1992, p. 284). How do you create an environment that provides the supports necessary to keep teachers’ expectations high while working with students from well below grade level to well above? The research on PLCs identifies them as the environment necessary to keep teachers’ expectations high for all students.

**Professional Learning Communities**

While the research is compelling that PLCs improve student achievement, it is important to establish what constitutes a PLC and what are the inherent aspects of a PLC that lead to student achievement. Stoll et al. (2006) found that a key purpose of PLCs is “to enhance teacher effectiveness as professionals, for students’ ultimate benefit. This is why our project’s definition suggests that the ultimate outcome of PLCs has to be experienced by students, even though there is an intermediate capacity-level outcome” (p. 229). McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) note that there are “various definitions of ‘teacher learning community’ [that] exist, but they all feature a common image of a professional community where teachers work collaboratively to reflect on
their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, p. 4).

Little (2006) defines PLCs as having “shared values and purposes, . . . collective focus on and responsibility for student learning, . . . collaborative and coordinated efforts to improve student learning, . . . practice supportive of teacher learning, . . . collective control over important designs affecting curriculum” (p. 15). John (2005) hypothesized that the reasons professional learning communities (PLC) increase student learning is that they “produce more good teaching by more teachers more of the time. Put simply, PLCs improve teaching, which improves student results, especially for the least advantaged students” (p. 23). From these studies and literature, several themes emerge as essential to the implementation of an effective PLC — shared vision, commitment to learning through inquiry, and teacher responsibility for student learning.

**Shared beliefs.** Westheimer (1999, p. 75) highlights five features most commonly identified by contemporary theorists exploring community: shared beliefs and understandings; interaction and participation; interdependence; concern for individual; and minority view” (as cited in Stoll et al., 2006, p. 225). Within this definition of community is the idea that a shared belief is the foundation of any effective PLC (DuFour et al., 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006; Eaker et al., 2002; John, 2005; Collinson & Cook, 2007; Ross & Gray, 2006). Collinson and Cook (2007) define organizational learning as “the deliberate use of individual, group, and system learning to embed new thinking and practices that continuously renew and transform the organization in ways that support shared aims” (p. 8). DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) identify the correlation between “clarity of purpose and higher levels of student achievement, . . . the necessity of a consensus about its [school’s] intellectual mission for children, . . . [and] the creation of a purposeful community that was clear on its purpose and
goals” (DuFour et al., 2006, pp. 29–30). McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) identify three key areas of PLCs, including the creation of a “shared language” (p. 7). Stoll et al. (2006) identify five key areas of a PLC, one of which is “shared beliefs” (p. 227). Eaker et al. (2002) describe PLCs as “resting on a four-legged table with one leg representing mission, another leg vision, the third leg beliefs, and the final leg goals” (DuFour & Eaker., 2002, p. 3). Eaker et al. (2002) also identify the “shared mission, vision, beliefs, and goals” as the “foundation of a PLC” (Eaker & DuFour, 2005, p. 3). John (2005) further explicates the importance of shared beliefs in relationship to student learning thusly:

Both of these [Academic Focus and Productive Professional Relationships] are sustained by Shared Beliefs about students, about learning, and about how adults should operate with one another . . . . These three qualities interact constantly to grow the teaching expertise of the staff and directly produce higher student achievement (pp. 22–23).

“Shared Beliefs serve to give people meaning in their work, a feeling of belonging and commitment to one another, and the endurance to keep going when the going gets tough” (John, 2005, p. 25). Implicit within this emphasis on shared beliefs, values, visions, and goals is the idea that there must be a commitment to the shared mission and vision to increase student achievement.

**Teacher responsibility for student learning.** Throughout the literature on PLCs there is a consistent idea that commitment for a shared mission and vision comes from teachers taking responsibility for student achievement (Scott & Teddlie, 1987; DuFour & DuFour, 2010; Little, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Diamond, 2007; and Stoll et al., 2006). In attribution theory there is the premise that “the more personally responsible an actor is held for an act, the greater the use of reinforcement feedback” (Scott & Teddlie, 1987, p. 7). Attribution theory alludes to
the idea that teachers are held or hold themselves responsible for student learning or achievement (Scott & Teddlie, 1987). Lee and Smith (1996) in a longitudinal study found that there were significant gains in student achievement “where teachers took collective responsibility for students’ academic success or failure” (p. 231). Little (2006) takes the idea of teacher responsibility for learning further to include a collective responsibility, “Schools whose staff members espouse a shared responsibility for student learning and are organized to sustain a focus on instructional improvement are more likely to yield higher levels of student learning” (p. 2). DuFour and DuFour (2010) continue this concept when they identify the idea that “we cannot meet the needs of our students unless we assume collective responsibility for their well-being” (p. 104). McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) also suggest that there is a collective or community need for teachers to have “opportunities and commitment to work together to improve instruction for the students in their school [because] . . . improved student learning depends upon teacher learning” (p. 3). Diamond (2007) further expands the idea of a collective commitment for taking student responsibility for learning, an essential aspect of PLCs, to the relationship between taking responsibility for student learning and an increase in teacher expectations for student learning when discussing organization routines being used to reinforce “high expectations for students’ performance and to build a strong sense of responsibility for student learning among teachers” (p. 71).

Hipp et al. (2008) conducted a longitudinal study and from that study identified two schools with successful PLCs. They found that both PLCs incorporated the characteristics of an effective PLC as identified by Hord (1987). The most important finding was that both PLCs were vulnerable to institutional change such as leadership or mission (Hipp et al., 2008). In 2012
Chong and Kong determined that PLCs have a connection to the development of teacher efficacy.

**Efficacy**

**Teacher efficacy.** While the research around teacher expectations and student achievement is vast, there is an additional component of teacher expectations that others have studied, which is how teacher expectations can lead to teacher efficacy, which “refers to teacher beliefs that they will be able to bring about student learning” (Ross & Gray, 2006, p. 179).

Robert Merton (1948) in his article on the self-fulfilling prophecy effect also alluded to the idea of efficacy when he wrote, “More is learned from the single success than from the multiple failures; a single success proves it can be done. Thereafter, it is necessary only to learn what made it work, . . . those revealing words of Thomas Love Peacock, ‘Whatever is, is possible’” (Merton, 1948, p. 190). Several researchers have explored the idea that teacher efficacy leads to high expectations, which leads to increased student achievement (Timperley & Phillips, 2003; Ross & Gray, 2006; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010). Timperley and Phillips (2003) determined that when teachers implemented “new procedures designed to increase communication of positive expectations to low achievers, the project teachers’ expectations for students became more positive” (p. 268). This realization then led to the project teachers feeling that what they “did directly impacted on what children learnt” (Timperley & Phillips, 2003, p. 639). However, when teachers feel that they have no efficacy, their expectations for student achievement plummet (Scott & Teddlie, 1987). Scott and Teddlie (1987) determined, “If teachers feel that student SES (socioeconomic status) is the only important factor predicting achievement, they will not feel that it is within their power to make a difference.” (p. 27). This research suggests that there is a relationship between not only teachers’ expectations for their students’
achievement, but also the teachers’ expectations that they can make a difference. Tsiplakides and Keramida (2010) found that as student achievement increased, teachers’ belief in their ability to impact student achievement grew (p. 23).

Recognizing the importance of teachers having a sense of efficacy, several researchers have attempted to determine what is and what builds teacher efficacy. Hoy and Woolfold (1993) found that the personal attributes and perceptions of the school were key in building teacher efficacy, defined as “a feeling that they can motivate even the most difficult students” (p. 366). They also determined that teachers need to work in a climate where the principal is an instructional leader, there is a focus on academics, and their colleagues have high academic expectations (Hoy & Woolfold, 1993).

Within the work exploring teacher efficacy is the work of researchers demonstrating how an effective PLC can build teacher efficacy. Milner (2002) examined a single English teacher and her sense of efficacy. The primary conclusion of this study was the importance of feedback (Milner, 2002). During a crisis, the teacher depended on the positive feedback she received from students, parents, and colleagues to persevere and maintain her sense of efficacy (Milner, 2002). Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) found that there were six teacher self-efficacy beliefs — instructional mastery, increasingly challenging goals, high levels of planning and organization, increased in class time on academic learning, support for struggling students, and recognition of student achievement. Chong and Kong (2012) concluded that collaborative learning affected teacher efficacy, which led to an increase in student achievement.

**Collective efficacy.** However, the above discussion of teacher expectation and teacher efficacy fails to address the importance of a collective sense of efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004; Ross & Gray, 2006; Diamond, 2007; Lee & Smith, 1996). Tschannen-Moran and
Barr (2004) identified the difference between an individual teacher’s sense of efficacy and collective teacher efficacy. Collective teacher efficacy is a group quality rather than a combined set of individual teacher efficacy. Teacher efficacy is based on individual perceptions, while collective teacher efficacy is based on how teachers perceive the school’s ability to promote high levels of academic achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). School officials with a high sense of efficacy believe students can learn, and they can influence social norms, student achievement, teacher instruction, and provide a stable environment (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Ultimately, they determined that collective teacher efficacy may have more power than individual teacher efficacy, but that there is a positive relationship between schools with high collective teacher efficacy and high teacher efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). These findings confirmed similar findings by Goddard et al. (2000). Ross and Gray (2006) define collective teacher efficacy as “expectations of the effectiveness of the staff to which one belongs, whereas teacher efficacy refers to expectations about one’s own teaching ability (p. 182). Ross and Gray (2006) examined several schools in their study and determined, “Schools with high collective teacher efficacy have higher student achievement than schools with lower levels of collective teacher efficacy (p. 183). Ross and Gray (2006) also noted a reciprocal relationship between collaboration, effectiveness, and efficacy. They state, “Through joint work teachers . . . enhanced their effectiveness, thereby increasing perceptions about their current success and expectations for their future” (Ross & Gray, 2006, p. 185). Diamond (2007) relates collective teacher efficacy to teacher responsibility, “In contexts high in teacher responsibility, teachers internalize responsibility for students’ learning, adjust their instructional practices to meet students’ needs, and have a high sense of efficacy around their teaching” (p. 65).
**PLCs, teacher efficacy, collective efficacy, and student achievement.** Lee, Zhang, and Yin (2011) determined that a PLC positively affects teacher efficacy enhanced by a school environment with collective teacher efficacy. Examined through this lens, the work by Goddard et al. (2004) provides a connection between teacher efficacy, collective teacher efficacy, and increased student achievement by stating that collective efficacy “may positively affect numerous teacher behaviors that tend to increase student achievement” (p. 498). Ross, Hoganhonam-Gray, and Gray (2004) found in a longitudinal study that teacher efficacy during challenging times perseveres when combined with a school with high collective teacher efficacy, especially when the school is focused on teacher and student learning.

Ultimately, the connections between the individual teacher, PLCs, and the school climate lead to student achievement. Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) concluded that student achievement will increase when teachers have a sense of efficacy within a strong school climate focused on a shared mission (p. 194). Prior to these findings, Goddard et al. (2004) concluded that collective teacher efficacy is positively connected to an increase in student achievement (p. 504). Goddard et al. (2004) and Stoll et al. (2006) determined that PLCs enhance student outcomes. Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010) concluded that there is a “significant positive relationship between collective teacher efficacy and student achievement” beyond the influence of a students’ socio-economic state (p. 677).

The research shows that to increase student achievement, there needs to be a climate in which teachers feel a sense of collective efficacy. This results in a sense of individual teacher efficacy, which, in turn, leads to an increase in student achievement. The research also shows that one of the more effective ways to build collective teacher efficacy is through an effective PLC, which can guard against the impact of tracking on teacher expectations. Tschannen-Moran
and Barr’s (2004) study concluded, “Students assigned to low academic tracks foster perceived inefficacy in individual teachers, which can lower the collective teacher efficacy of the school” (p. 195).

The research demonstrates a correlation between teachers’ expectations and student achievement. Teachers with high expectations positively impact student achievement, whereas teachers with low expectations negatively impact student achievement (Merton, 1948; Rousseau, 1762; National, 1894; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Brint, 1998/2006; Reese, 2001; Pestalozzi, 1969; Gay, 2000; Gill & Reynolds, 1999; Tyler & Boelte, 2008; Rubie-Davies, 2007; Brophy & Good, 1974; Harris & Rosenthal, 1985). Rosenbaum (1976), Turner (1960), Wheelock (1992), Lucas (1999), Loveless (1999), Oakes (1985/2005), National (1894), Darling-Hammond (2010), and Brint (1998/2006) indicate that teachers who teach students placed in a lower track tend to have lowered expectations for their students, while those who teach students in advanced classes tend to have high expectations. Building on this research there appears to be a connection between a teacher’s sense of efficacy and his or her ability to hold high expectations for students. Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004), Ross and Gray (2006), and Diamond (2007) suggest that schools where teachers collectively feel a sense of efficacy positively impact the individual teacher’s feeling of efficacy. Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004), Ross and Gray (2006), and Diamond (2007) have found a positive correlation between teachers with high expectations and a collective feeling of efficacy and student achievement. Timperley and Phillips (2003), Tsiplakides and Keramida (2010), Scott and Teddlie (1987), Hoy and Woolfold (1993), Milner (2002), Chong and Kong (2012), Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004), Ross and Gray (2006), and Diamond (2007) throughout their research on efficacy —
individual and collective — there has been demonstrated a positive impact on both through the presence and participation in an effective PLC.

Despite all this research there is still very little research that looks at all five aspects in the unique setting of this research. The school that is the focus of this study is detracked; has a developing PLC; and serves disadvantaged, at-risk youth in a unique boarding school setting focused specifically on preparing students for admission and completion of a four-year university education. This gap in the literature provides an impetus for this research project: to determine how participation in a PLC that is focused on increasing student achievement affects the individual and collective teacher efficacy in the ELA PLC at a publicly funded, college-preparatory, boarding school for disadvantaged, at-risk youth in grades six through 10.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Methodology

**Research question.** What is the lived experience of individual and collective efficacy for members of an English Language Arts department situated in a professional learning community (PLC) at a publically funded, college-preparatory, boarding school for disadvantaged, at-risk youth in grades six through 10 that is focused on increasing student achievement?

**Research design.** A qualitative research design was employed for this study. This research study fit each of the criteria posited by Creswell (2009). This study took place in a “natural setting” in a publically funded, college-preparatory, boarding school serving disadvantaged, at-risk youth in grades six through 10 where the teachers being studied were experiencing the pressures and climate that decrease teacher efficacy and create a sense of isolation (Creswell, 2009). This approach identified the level of teacher efficacy, both personal and collective, using qualitative methods. Limitations to this study — the personal investment of this researcher, the limited sample size, and the subjective nature of the method — required this researcher to implement several checking mechanisms, such as bracketing, member checking, and maintaining a researcher journal.

**Research tradition.** The methodology used for this study was phenomenology. Creswell (2007) defines phenomenology as, “describe[ing] the meaning for several individuals of their lived experience (p. 57). Evolving from the ideas of Husserl (1971), phenomenology has emerged from a primarily philosophical concept into a research methodology that can be approached from a hermeneutic or empirical perspective (Ehrich, 2005).
Husserl (1971) provides the foundational principles and procedures of phenomenological research that remain so in both hermeneutic and empirical phenomenological studies (Ehrich, 2005). These foundational principles include a focus on the lived experience of the research participants and the necessity for researchers to “bracket” themselves from the lived experience (Ehrich, 2005). Husserl proposes that the mind can be separated from the experience (Ehrich, 2005). Several phenomenologists reject this idea and develop what is now an accepted idea that the mind and the experience cannot be separated and that the phenomenon is experienced contextually (Ehrich, 2005). Merleau-Ponty (1962) articulates four characteristics of phenomenological research — description, reduction, essences, and intentionality. Description is of the phenomenon under study; reduction is the separation of the researcher from a priori experience with the phenomenon; essence is the essential meaning of each participant’s experience with the phenomenon; and intentionality is the acknowledgement that the participants are aware of their experience with the phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). From his work, two schools of phenomenological research emerged — the Utrecht School and the Duquesne School (Ehrich, 2005). Max van Manen is associated with the Utrecht School (hermeneutic), and Amadeo Giorgi is associated with the Duquesne School (empirical) (Ehrich, 2005).

Both methods share several characteristics. Both emphasize the importance of description; incorporate bracketing; use of imaginative variation, “which is a reflective process which allows the researcher to discover which aspects or qualities of a phenomenon are essential and which are incidental;” and a focus on the phenomenon rather than the subjective (Ehrich, 2005). However, there are significant differences between the two approaches. One of the most differentiating characteristics of empirical phenomenology is its focus on “the meaning human beings make of their experience” (Van der Mescht, 2004). However, there are other differences.
Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to produce “insights into human experience,” whereas empirical phenomenology’s aim is to produce “accurate descriptions of the human experience” (Ehrich, 2005). The outcomes are different as well with the hermeneutic researcher creating a narrative of the meaning behind the human experience, while the empirical researcher creates a statement that reflects the essence of the lived experience (Ehrich, 2005). The hermeneutic researcher starts with “self” and then looks to the participants, observations, and literature (Ehrich, 2005). The empirical researcher may start with “self,” but then focuses primarily on the participants and interviews with those participants (Ehrich, 2005). Moustakas (1994) summarizes the empirical method of phenomenological research as one in which the researcher “collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomena, and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience of all of the individuals. This description consists of ‘what’ they experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it” (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) calls this description an “essence description.” It is these two differences — the outcome and the data collection — that drives the choice of which method to use for this research study, which was the empirical method.

This study relied heavily on one extensive interview with members of the English Language Arts Department who volunteered for the study with no reference to literature and relied on member checking to verify the interpretation of each interview. The final analysis focused on the essences of the lived experience of the participants, resulting in a general statement.

Participants. This researcher used a non-random, convenient, and purposeful sample of eight teachers. All eight of them are women. Two of them are African-Americans; seven are Caucasians; and their ages range from 22 to 35. They have taught between two to ten years. In
addition to their membership in the English Language Arts PLC, these teachers address the need for “linguistic proficiency,” as identified by Hennie Van der Mescht (2004). The reliance on verbal interviews as the primary source of data collection necessitated the ability of the participants to effectively verbalize their experiences. However, there were several variables that could have impacted the results based on this sampling. Because it is a unique school, they may not have represented a typical cross-section of teachers and may have come with a higher motivation to achieve success than teachers who chose a more traditional work setting. The relative youth and lesser teaching experience of this population of teachers could have also limited the generalizability of this study. The teachers were asked to volunteer for the study; however, anyone who did not volunteer, while still being a part of the PLC, was not involved in the interviews or observations. All who were asked volunteered.

**Recruitment and access.** Because the school for this research is its own LEA, this researcher contacted the head of school to gain permission to conduct this research study at the school (Appendix A). This researcher asked members of the English Language Arts department to participate in this study (Appendix E). This researcher provided an email outlining the research study — its purposes, tools, and techniques — to the members of the English Language Arts department (Appendix E). Their participation was entirely voluntary. This researcher had access to the participants and the site because this researcher is the Curriculum and Instructional Specialist for the humanities at the school.

This study presented several critical ethical challenges. The primary challenge was avoiding bias. There were four qualities of a qualitative researcher to include — a holistic view of social phenomena; systemic reflection on their role in the research; a sensitivity to their personal biography and how it influenced the study; a use of complex, multifaceted, and iterative
reasoning (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) — that could have been influenced by the bias of the researcher. In addition, because this researcher was the Curriculum and Instructional Specialist (CIS), overseeing the ELA department, a member of the founding faculty of this innovative school reform, and the primary creator of the curriculum, remaining unbiased was a daunting task (Eideland, 2006). Bracketing the experience was critical to this study while recognizing the limitations of bracketing oneself from the study (Creswell, 2007). The researcher answered the interview questions prior to conducting the teacher interviews in order to bracket out the personal perceptions of efficacy — teacher and collective — that the researcher held.

Ensuring that the participants felt safe and that they trusted this researcher was critical to the study’s validity. Trust was also a factor when asking for the informed consent forms because each member of the department was required to participate in the PLC but could choose not to participate in the research (National Institute of Health, 2000). While the researcher did not serve any official evaluative function, but only one of support, there was the potential for each teacher to feel that the researcher was a superior. Since the researcher was the CIS for the English Language Arts department, only one invitation was given to each member of the department to avoid any possible feelings of pressure to participate (Appendix B). In addition to the role of CIS, this researcher also served as mentor to a majority of the participants in the study. The CIS did not live predominantly in any specific hierarchy of the school structure, nor was the person in this role a full administrator. The CIS did not conduct evaluative observations, only support observations. Nor did the CIS live fully in the world of the teacher, although this researcher did teach one class. Added to this fine line between administrator and teacher, the CIS’s role as mentor further blurred the line of confidentiality and accountability (National
The use of bracketing, member checking, and the role of the researcher journal is key in guarding against these ethical concerns.

This researcher completed the IRB training protocol. This researcher had already spoken to the head of the school and gained his permission to conduct the research. The school did not have its own specific IRB approval protocol.

**Data collection.** The researcher and the participants answered several questions related to their lived experience in the PLC and their lived experience with efficacy — teacher and collective (Appendix C). The researcher answered the interview questions in order to bracket out potential biases. This researcher conducted one interview with each participant, held one PLC session, gathered field notes during the interviews and observations, and conducted observations (Appendix D). This researcher used multiple sources of data in the form of interviews, observations, and field notes (Creswell, 2009). This researcher observed and gathered field notes during the PLC meeting as well as at least seven classroom observations across each grade level. In addition to the above, this researcher kept a reflective journal as an additional check on this researcher’s own biases, as well as having each participant member check the researcher’s interpretations of the interviews throughout the study.

The PLC meeting took place in one of the teachers’ rooms. Observations took place in each observed teacher’s room. Each interview was conducted in a space chosen by the interviewee. The PLC meeting and the teacher interviews were recorded using a Sony HDR CX210, and the conversations were transcribed by a neutral outside person. The field notes were culled from the school’s observation tool as well as collected during the interviews.

“Husserl exhorts us to put the world in brackets or free ourselves from our usual way of perceiving the world. What is left over from this reduction is our consciousness” (Cohen,
Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 23). Schultz (1967) states, “All projects of my forthcoming acts are based upon my knowledge at hand at the time of projecting. To this knowledge belongs my experience of previously performed acts which are typically similar to the projected outcome” (p. 20). Bracketing is a phenomenological device that provides the researcher with a method of identifying the researcher’s own lived experience with the topic of research. Moustakas (1994) identifies the act of bracketing as a method to remove your assumptions, personal experiences, commonalities, and any association with the phenomena. Creswell (2007) endorses bracketing as well as a way to “set aside their [the researcher’s] experiences as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (pp. 59-60). Consequently, prior to the study, the researcher answered the interview questions in an effort to bracket out the researcher’s biases.

Throughout the study, this researcher needed to re-examine the research instruments and research questions to ensure they were still applicable and adjusted them as necessary. This past year the school had less turnover than in previous years; however, there was always a risk that any one of these teachers would leave during the study. In addition, the school is a startup school, and administration also has been fluid. All data collection tools and results were confidential, and this researcher used member checking as a data collection tool to ensure that the participants felt their views had been portrayed accurately and that their anonymity had been protected.

**Data storage.** Pseudonyms for all participants in the study, including the name of the school, were used to protect their anonymity. All of the transcripts, observations, field notes, reflective journal, meeting agenda documents, documents used at the meetings, and school data were stored on password-protected computer devices, including an iPad and MacBook Pro. This
data was also stored using a personal, secured Carbonite account. Any hard copies of data were scanned and saved electronically, with the originals being stored in a locked container at this researcher’s home. All data will be saved and stored for seven years from the completion date of the study.

**Data analysis.** The researcher taped the one lengthy interview of each teacher in a location chosen by him/her. Moustakas (1994) articulates that in a phenomenological study a thorough and long interview is the conventional method for collecting data. Next, the interviews were transcribed by an outside, neutral person and analyzed by the researcher for “significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 25). Moustakas (1994) defines this procedure as horizontalization. The researcher identified each of the significant items, also known as invariant constituents, highlighting themes that captured an element of the phenomenon (Moustakas 1994). An invariant constituent are the statements from each interview that are substantive and add to the understanding of the question asked. The researcher considered two questions in order to determine whether an answer was an invariant constituent: “1) Did the expression capture an element of mattering that was necessary and sufficient, which aided in the understanding of the phenomenon? 2) Was it possible to label the expression?” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). If the statements did not meet the criteria, the data was eliminated (Moustakas, 1994).

Next, the relevant invariant constituents were clustered into themes. After clustering the invariant constituents, as a form of validation, they were checked using two additional questions: 1) Were the expressions completely and clearly articulated in the complete transcript? 2) Were
the expressions “compatible” and clearly communicated? If the expressions were not compatible or clear, they were eliminated (Moustakas, 1994).

From these invariant constituents, the researcher wrote a thick description, or as Creswell (2007) labels it, a textual and structural description of the lived experience of each participant. Ultimately, from the two descriptions — structural and textural — a “composite description that presents the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon, called the essential, invariant structure” was written (Creswell, 2007, p. 27). Finally, the participants were asked to member check the written descriptions of their interviews.

**Trustworthiness.** This researcher used member checking and maintained a researcher journal to maintain the trustworthiness and validity of the study. This researcher built trust with the participants as their CIS, which was confirmed in their responses. The use of member checking was the best tool available to ensure their answers were as authentic as possible. While it was always possible that mortality could have been a factor, it was not a concern for this study. The observation tool was used by all levels of administration and the primary part of a faculty member’s final evaluation each year. In addition, the observation tool was adapted from a respected expert in the field of education — Kim Marshall — who has used these observation categories across the nation’s schools with numerous faculties (Marshall, 2010). This researcher addressed the threat of researcher bias previously and, by bracketing the researcher’s own lived experience, utilizing member checking, maintaining a journal, and including a written narrative of this researcher’s experience of efficacy within the PLC, ensured that the bias potential was held in check.
Chapter Four: Report of Research Findings

This research study was designed to examine the lived experience of individual and collective efficacy for members of an English Language Arts department situated in a professional learning community (PLC) at a publicly funded, college-preparatory, boarding school for disadvantaged, at-risk youth in grades six through 10 that is focused on increasing student achievement. The researcher and the participants answered several questions related to their lived experience in the PLC and their lived experience with efficacy – teacher and collective (Appendix C). This researcher answered the interview questions in order to bracket out potential biases. This researcher conducted one interview with each participant, held one PLC session, gathered field notes during the interviews and observations, and conducted observations (Appendix D). This researcher used multiple sources of data in the form of interviews, observations, and field notes (Creswell, 2009). In addition, this researcher kept a reflective journal as an additional check on this researcher’s own biases, as well as having each participant member check the researcher’s interpretations of the interviews throughout the study.

After the verbatim transcription of the eight recorded interviews, the researcher read and reread the transcripts several times, horizontalizing each statement (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). Next, the researcher established a list of meaning units that were then arranged into themes (Moustakas, 1994). Textural descriptions were written that included the exact words of each participant. After reflecting upon these textural descriptions, a structural description was written (Moustakas, 1994). The final step was the composition of one composite, textural-structural description of all the participants’ experiences. This composite description integrated “all individual textural, structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).
All participant names are aliases in order to assure confidentiality. Their profiles are below.

Table 4.1

*Description of Study Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Years at RJ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>Five</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>Seventh</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Seventh</td>
<td>Three</td>
<td>Four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitney</td>
<td>Eighth</td>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>Four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Eighth</td>
<td>Five</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Ninth</td>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Tenth</td>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants agreed to participate in the interviews, PLC meeting, and observations via one email invitation sent in May. All eight English Language Arts teachers agreed to participate.

In accordance with Moustakas’ (1994) first stage, the *epoche*, all preconceived ideas about the PLC and its influence on teacher and collective efficacy could not be completely eliminated due to the tremendous investment in the mission of the team and school by the
researcher. However, conducting a single interview where the researcher asked very few, if any, follow up questions but instead stayed within the confines of the interview questions created prior to the interviews reduced any influence during the interview that the researcher had. In addition, the researcher made entries into the researcher journal after each interview in an attempt to bracket out any preconceived notions the researcher might hold.

After completing the *epoche*, a textural description was used to communicate precisely the lived experience of the participants including verbatim examples from the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). During the interview, the participants answered the questions with very little explanation of each question given by the researcher, again in an effort to reduce any influence the researcher might have had on the participant. These textural descriptions were followed by structural descriptions for each participant where the focus shifted to how the participant’s answers related to the themes identified by the researcher through multiple readings of the verbatim transcriptions of the interviews. Finally, there was a composite textural-structural description that synthesized the meanings and essences common to all the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

**Participant 1: Cathy**

**Textural description.** When asked about teacher efficacy, Cathy’s responses primarily focused on relationships. Asked if she believed she could overcome a student’s house or home environment with her good teaching, she stated, “Yes, I think it’s all making a connection with that child and letting them know that, yes, you come from a home like this, but you can go to this other place with your education.” Asked about the ability of the teacher to influence achievement, she answered:
Yes, . . . and I feel that way because if the teacher is, is one who has built great relationships with students and goes above and beyond each day to make sure that the students are getting the curriculum that they need, then the students will do well.

In response to the question about her ability to positively influence struggling students, she responded, “Yes, . . . and that is by building a relationship with them, encouraging them, maybe highlighting their strength and showing them how they can use their, their strength in this area of academics.” Beyond the importance of relationships, Cathy, in response to a question about how much the school environment influenced her ability to help students achieve to their fullest potential, stated:

It influences it greatly. . . . You know at RJ it is all about achieving, going to college and academic success. And then I, . . . when I could see a lot of kids that, that did, enlighten them, it did make them want to strive. For example [name of student] he went on that Maryland trip, and it turned him around, and he focused more on his academics because he was like, “I want to go to college. It’s something I wanna do.” So having that culture of higher education, RJ has really taken hold of some students and inspiring them to reach . . . high.

In response to questions focused on collective efficacy, Cathy referenced the discussions during the team meetings. In response to a question about if the ELA teachers felt confident that they could motivate their students, she answered:

Yes, I feel that they are very confident. The great thing about working with our teachers at the RJ school is that they are able to come together and play off of each other’s strengths within the English Language Arts content area.
When responding to the question about the belief of the ELA department that all children could learn, she stated, “Yes, I do believe this is quite evident in their classrooms. When you walk in it’s quite evident in the discussion during content area meetings.” And then in response to the question asking if the ELA teachers tried other methods to teach students until they got the concept, she answered:

Yes. That is the great thing about RJ. You have being in sixth grade, having the seventh grade teacher and the eighth grade teacher till that student finally goes, let’s just say, story elements or characterization or something like that, yeah.

When asked about PLCs, Cathy emphasized the ideas of team and support. Asked if the ELA teachers were consistently involved in discussion and making decisions about school issues, she responded, “Yes, and that is, mainly takes place on training time. Of course, some ELA teachers eat together and spend time together. We’re always, you know, we, we’re always discussing different issues and things.” Then in response to a question about decision-making through groups and across grade levels, she answered, “We were always informed upfront and you (the researcher) never made decisions without asking us first.” In response to the question about the proactive and supporting nature of the ELA department chair, she responded, “Yes, she is very proactive. I remember on, she would come around on Mondays and Fridays to, excuse me, anything we needed to make it through the day. Always offering advice when asked.” And finally, in terms of the department chair sharing responsibilities and democratically participating with the ELA teachers, she responded, “Yes. Always willing to come in, and teach something. I remember, you (the researcher) taught words with the grammar book, you treated us as a student and we had a grammar lesson. Yes.”
In response to questions about supportive conditions, Cathy returned to the concept of relationships and feeling safe. When asked about the culture of respect and trust among the ELA teachers, she answered, “I think within the ELA department we knew that we were, . . . safe with each other, and that what we discuss stayed amongst us.” In response to a question about recognition of outstanding achievement, Cathy responded:

Yes. You (the researcher) did a great job of not only, acknowledging the academic achievement, but also, teacher-student relationship. Where you would see a change in a student maybe that’s based upon a particular teacher, having a great relationship with them.

For the final question focused on individual and collective efficacy, Cathy returned to the idea of safe meetings when, in response to the question about where efficacy — individual and/or collective — felt stronger than others, she stated:

I feel like when we were in [teachers’ name] room and we would have our meetings and you would say, “This is a safe place. Just get everything off your chest,” and we would just go at, . . . you know, just release some things that were going on — we knew that that’s where it stays, unspoken.

**Structural description.** Throughout Cathy’s interview, four meaning units emerged — the importance of relationships (student and colleague), the value of support from the team and the department chair, the influence of expectations, and the culture of safety. Cathy communicated feeling safe to discuss challenges with the ELA department and to ask for or accept support from her colleagues and chair. She discussed the importance of building relationships with students in order to overcome the challenges of their house and home environment. In addition, she communicated the impact the school’s expectation that all
students attend a four-year university had on her students and her teaching. Throughout the interview the importance of belonging to a team, formally and informally, emerged as an important factor in her feeling of efficacy.

**Participant 2: Jenny**

*Textural description.* In response to questions focused on teacher efficacy overall, Jenny felt that she had control over student achievement, although she identified several challenges that interfered with her efficacy such as expectations and outside systemic issues. For example, in her response to the question about when a student did better than usual, she answered:

> Obviously I’m excited and happy for them, but sometimes I’m also surprised. It’s hard not to get stuck in that web of like this is what a student should be. And yet, the surprises are great because then they remind you that the students are capable of anything.

In addition to the topic of teacher expectations, Jenny identified that success was an abstract idea for her students when answering a question about her ability to overcome a student’s house or home environment. She stated:

> I think I can to a point but some students aren’t ready and students aren’t there yet, especially sixth grade. . . . Some of them haven’t quite accepted the fact that they will be successful or they can be successful or they will go to college, . . . such an abstract idea.

Beyond the challenge of expectations and comprehension of the mission, Jenny identified the challenge of having too many students in response to positively influencing struggling students. She stated:

> I have a harder time, I think I’ve learned this year maybe, with that. I think I was overwhelmed with the number of students, so anybody that was struggling academically,
I don’t feel I gave them the attention I wanted to. I feel like I did my best to pick up on when they’re struggling academically look at the signs, the obvious signs.

Yet, despite the challenges of an abstract mission and an overwhelming number of students, when asked about which had more influence — her classroom or their house or home environment — she stated:

I do have some sort of impact on my students. I do think my classroom holds much more weight than I actually gave it credit for because I felt like I couldn’t compete with home, and now that home is eliminated for the most part, I still see success for my students. So, I think my classroom can hold a lot of weight if my expectations, that I have consistent expectations, which I try my best to do.

When asked about collective efficacy, Jenny spoke to the strength of the ELA department in response to the question about if the ELA teachers had what it takes to get children to learn.

She stated:

I’ve never worked with such a strong team . . . . I feel that each year they’re gonna be challenged, and they’re gonna be . . . . The teachers are very strong and knowledgeable and motivated and just very prepared. And it takes a certain person to teach here and they’re the right people and I feel very confident about them.

In response to the question about ELA teachers overcoming negative outside influences, she returned to the idea of the strength of the team.

I think they can. I think we have. You know, we’ve talked about it a lot but we’d rely on each other so that’s how we can do it. So no one is an island. No one is experiencing these things on their own . . . . Everyone who’s here is here for the right reason . . . . The children are the priority.
When asked about the PLC and shared supportive leadership, Jenny spoke to the strength of the team again. When asked about decision-making, she stated, “If it was ELA, us, we met as a team and discussed.” And in terms of accessibility to key information, she stated that:

Yes, well, I mean, key information about what we’re actually teaching and what we need, and if we can’t find it, we have you (the researcher). We have each other; I do think we have access to what we need to teach.

A similar feeling of the team emerged when Jenny responded to the question about the ELA department sharing responsibilities and democratically participating. She answered:

Yes, definitely. We sit in our meetings . . . . I feel like our meetings are discussion. They’re not, you talking at us. It’s us discussing. And there are times where I feel like you could sit up there and talk at us because you are the Department Chair and if there’s something that has to be done, you do tell us that, and we need to know that, . . . if there’s something that needs to be decided, I do feel like it’s a discussion.

A similar theme of collaboration was communicated when Jenny answered the question about decision-making across grade levels:

Definitely did more of it outside of my grade level where I was going to Whitney or to Julie and I probably was going to them even before because I think that we taught very similarly about lessons or the way we were going to present things so I would go to them a little bit more.

In response to the question about the ELA department chair being proactive, Jenny responded:

Yes, definitely, because I feel like you’re one of the few people that if I email and say, I, either it’s a question . . . . Even though it has nothing to do with you, but if I have a question, you either find me the answer or find someone who will, or it does have
something to do with you, you’re . . . I mean, I don’t . . . it never goes unanswered . . . .

It’s such simple communication skill . . . that makes me feel like I’m being heard and that I have, someone to talk to or ask or go to, which is very helpful in this environment.

In terms of the questions related to shared personal practice, Jenny focused on the team and department chair and the encouragement received from them. When responding to the question about opportunities for ELA teachers to observe peers and offer encouragement, she stated:

I think the best part of that question is offer encouragement because I don’t . . . I think we feel, you (the researcher) coming in and visiting us, which is great because that’s what you do, is offer that of, “You are on the right track. You’re gonna be okay,” which is really nice to hear some days.

In response to the questions about the ELA teachers providing feedback about student achievement, Jenny focused on the team meetings:

I think in our team meetings we do. You know, we’ve talked about some of our best practices or here’s how we handled this, you know, or we talk about DGP and some of us are really loving it and really getting into it.

In response to the questions over supportive conditions, Jenny spoke to the strength and safety of the team. In response to the question about culture and respect, Jenny stated, “Yes, . . . I think people are very open and honest in our meetings . . . . I’ve seen many people cry because that’s where you are but that’s a place of safety.” In response to the idea of sustained and unified efforts, Jenny again referenced the importance of the team:
I would say the majority of the team, yes, I think most of us cares so much that even though we . . . . As a team people continue to do that . . . . We’re beaten down but we have not given up. We’re exhausted but we will keep going.

Finally, in terms of individual and collective teacher efficacy, Jenny spoke to the idea that the department chair supported the team by buffering them from external pressures. In response to the question about collective efficacy, she stated:

I feel like we’re also a very strong team that we don’t have a lot of external . . . . And I could be wrong because maybe again, you buffer that or you take care of that before it gets to us, but I’ve never felt like . . . as a team we are [at the mercy of external factors].

**Structural description.** Throughout Jenny’s interview, one meaning unit dominated — the strength of the ELA team despite many challenges. In her answer to questions about efficacy, Jenny spoke to the difficult expectation tied to the mission of the school when confronted by an overwhelming number of students. However, ultimately, she did feel that she had power within the four walls of her classroom. In the questions about collective efficacy, the dominant meaning unit, the strength of the ELA team was prevalent. In response to all seven questions, Jenny mentioned the importance of the team stating that this was the strongest team she had ever worked with, and the importance of knowing the next teachers were strong and committed. She talked about how the team relied on one another and feeling like “no one is an island.”

In response to the question regarding the elements of the PLC, Jenny again focused on the team and its strength. She noted that the team had a voice in decision making, that when making decisions, they had each other, and that, when seeking answers, the department chair would find them or give guidance as to where to find them. She spoke to the team providing
encouraging feedback that allowed her to persevere through the challenges of teaching a large group of sixth graders. And finally, she spoke about the trust and respect of the team that created a safe environment within which to persevere. Most poignantly she said, “We’re exhausted, but we will keep going.”

In terms of the final question about efficacy — teacher and collective — Jenny spoke of the buffer the team provides from the external negative forces, and that this buffer of support allowed her to feel that she had control in the classroom.

**Participant 3: Heather**

**Textural description.** When responding to questions about teacher efficacy, Heather focused on her ability to create a safe environment where children were successful.

I try to create an environment in my classroom that’s sort of removed from the experiences outside of it . . . . I feel like I’m pretty successful with creating an environment where, where they can sort of be separate from those other environments.

In her response to another question about her ability to positively influence struggling students, the concept of a safe environment emerged, “You know having them feel like they are on the same page with me, having a good relationships with the kid so that they feel safe and that they feel comfortable in taking risks in my classroom.” When asked about the school environment, Heather noted the outside challenges presented by the school. “When you are dealing with an environment where students are not held to a behavioral expectation and have no . . . consequence for it, then you spend a lot of time deescalating situations.”

Yet, when asked which has more influence in her classroom, she answered “Me.”

In terms of collective efficacy, Heather noted the strength of the ELA team:
Because they’re competent human beings . . . a group of people that are knowledgeable enough . . . to try another way until they’re successful, . . . a group of people who are very interested in, you know . . . working with it until they get it right.

When asked about the ELA team having what it took to get children to learn, Heather again acknowledged the strength of the team:

I would say that being able to . . . well, first of all, the idea of grit and sort of the willingness to go at it from lots of different angles. The group of people that they have to support each other.

When responding to the question about ELA teachers being willing to try other methods when children didn’t succeed, Heather again referenced the strength of the team, “I know that all of my peers in the department go out of their way to offer extra help to students who are struggling.” In addition to the strength of the team in terms of collective efficacy, Heather spoke to the impact of the expectations presented because of the school’s mission, “I think all the teachers relate the level of expectations of the kids is higher than probably what would be expected of these kids in a different situation.”

In terms of the PLC and the idea of a shared and supportive leadership, Heather again referenced the strength of the team. In terms of decision-making, she responded:

Everyone is engaged in discussion about curriculum and, you (the researcher) know what we teach and how we teach it . . . .Our team is very vocal. I think that you let us make decisions and have the critical conversations about why it is that we are doing what we are doing.

The strength of the team was prevalent in Heather’s answers to questions about shared and personal practice. “As far as offering encouragement, there is, you know, we do that in our
meetings, and then I think people go out of their way to find time too . . . . We have conversations and encourage each other.” When asked about ELA teachers providing feedback Heather responded, “I feel that we do that sort of more informally than we do some of the other things . . . . I think people seek out each other’s advice.”

When discussing the idea of supportive conditions, Heather spoke to the systemic expectations of the ELA team.

There has been so much, I guess, turnover, . . . . There have been many people that have come in, and we still have that, so it does seem to be sort of be something that is expected within this group of people.

The idea of expectations reappeared during the questions about efficacy as it related to being a member of the ELA department. “If I didn’t have a group of people with similar ideas that were working for similar goals, uh, I think I would feel a lot less confident about the work that I was doing.” And, again in response to the question about the context when you felt collective efficacy, Heather referenced expectations. “I think that the ELA team has similar expectations for students.”

**Structural description.** Throughout Heather’s interview two meaning units emerged — the strength of the ELA team and the impact of their expectations. When speaking to the concept of her own efficacy, she articulated the challenges of working in a school that no longer had the same high expectations as the ELA department. Yet, when addressing the questions about collective efficacy, she focused primarily on the strength of the team and the idea that the team as a whole demonstrated grit because of the expectations of the team. While the previous two interviews alluded to the stark contrast between the expectations of the ELA team in terms of meeting the mission of the school and the schools’ systemic challenges, such as number of
students in the classes, Heather’s interview explicitly stated that her sense of efficacy was tied directly to the team and the team’s expectations and not as directly impacted by the systemic challenges of the school.

In reference to the PLC, Heather again voiced the importance of the team and the discussions the team participated in both at meetings and informally. Heather connected the power of the team to the feeling of safety, respect, and trust found among the team members. In addition to those qualities, Heather also commented on the support she received from the team as well as the chair.

In her final comments around the general idea of efficacy — teacher and collective — Heather focused on the expectations inherent in belonging to the ELA team, but she also returned to the disconnect between the expectations of the ELA team and the school.

Participant Four: Natalie

Textural description. In response to questions regarding efficacy, Natalie spoke to the importance of the environment specifically in response to the question about what had the most influence, “My classroom . . . because I think that in my classroom I maintain a very positive environment . . . . I think it’s the environment you create and the way students feel when they come into it.” Continuing to comment on her sense of efficacy in terms of influencing struggling students Natalie stated:

I think I have a very acute ability to develop personal relationships with students, and I think that they trust me. They are a lot more willing to try hard if they feel like they’re doing it for somebody that cares about them and has something invested in them personally.
When responding to the questions about collective efficacy, Natalie focused on the strength of the team. When commenting on how she handled challenges in her classroom, she stated, “We would help each other to get through that, and I think that people would then leave those meetings or those situations with helpful advice, . . . that as a group we created that environment.” In response to the question about the ELA teachers having what it takes to get children to learn:

Yes, because they care passionately about their students . . . and [they have] an awesome curriculum and instructional specialist (the researcher) and team leader who is fully willing to answer any question that they have, and I think that those things together create a winning team.

When responding to the question about trying other methods until students learn, Natalie answered, “The whole department is pretty ruthless when it comes to like failure is not an option, like we [say], . . . ‘I better find a way to make this work.’”

In response to questions about the PLC and shared and supportive leadership, Natalie returned to the idea of the team. “I think that the nature of the department is such that we are all leaders. We all really cared, so there is involvement in that.” In response to questions about the leadership of the PLC, she responded:

Because the department chair (the researcher) is very open and honest when things are going on in the school and keeping the team abreast of the most recent information . . . maintaining integrity of the curriculum even when maybe that’s not what’s going on school-wide.

When answering questions about supportive conditions within the PLC,
Natalie again referenced the strong team, “Because whenever anybody’s doing something cool or that’s new or exciting, innovative, and, you know, just do a great job at something, it was highlighted readily in email, in department meetings.”

In response to the general questions about efficacy, Natalie again returned to the team, “I mean the group helps . . . . We all have always had the same message. The same ideas . . . high expectations.” Her final thought spoke directly to the strength of the team.

But in our department, we have always emphasized that [it would be difficult], and people that kind of didn’t drink the water right away eventually would come around because it was sound reasoning, so like we had meetings, and we hung out together, and we talked and all those things helped.

**Structural description.** Throughout Natalie’s interview, two meaning units emerged — expectations and the strength of the ELA team. In terms of efficacy, while Natalie had a powerful sense of her own individual efficacy, it is apparent in the conversation about collective efficacy that her individual efficacy was directly connected to the collective efficacy of the ELA team. Like the other participants, she alluded to the disconnect between the team’s expectations and the school’s, and how the team’s expectations were more influential than the school’s.

In terms of the PLC, Natalie’s responses again referenced the importance of the team and the discussions the team engaged in, whether in formal meetings or informal dialogue, with team members. She also expressed the importance of recognition among the team for work that each did and the importance of sharing those triumphs overtly so as to share them with the team and perhaps influence others to strive for recognition as well.
Finally, in terms of the general questions about efficacy, Natalie made a strong statement as to the influence the team had over new members because the expectations of the team are based on “sound reasoning.”

**Participant Five: Whitney**

**Textural description.** In response to all the questions around teacher efficacy, Whitney stressed the importance of expectations and safety. While several teachers felt proud when a student did better than expected, Whitney tied it to her ability “to push them constantly.”

Whitney believed her classroom had the most influence over her students:

> I have proof that a child from the worst situation possible . . . they’re the ones that just strive, I would say most, because they look for that comfort zone . . . . When I can provide that in a classroom . . . we see potential that other people don’t get to see often.

In response to the ability of the teacher and the teacher’s ability to have an influence over achievement, Whitney returned to the idea of pushing the students. “I think the ability of a true teacher somebody who, who realizes that like shows them their potential and shows them how they’re just so impressionable and moldable that, uh, it pushes the students.” And again in response to her ability to influence a struggling student, Whitney spoke to expectations. “It’s like my side mission that all of my learners, like whatever you’re struggling with, how do we teach you to overcome it.” In response to the final question about teacher efficacy, Whitney again emphasized the importance of expectations.

> I could say that in my classroom, and I can push, through academics and through, through just sparking the interest in them, I can, push them to their full potential and make them realize that there is, there’s a whole other world out there.
When responding to questions about collective efficacy, Whitney focused exclusively on the strength of the ELA team:

We have a team that makes me do better and feel better. We have a team that truly trusts and believes in children, and we’re not afraid, I think, I think your leadership (the researcher), it helped . . . . I know that you have my back, and I know my teammates have my back . . . a strong team that we aren’t afraid to do what’s right.

Whitney most clearly articulated the connection the strong team had on the students. “The ELA team especially, because we, we worked so hard to just see every potential through and to prove it to everybody else that they, you know, that the kids really, really do trust us.” Whitney stated in response to the ELA teachers believing every child can learn:

I think that the ELA team is the one who gets the most passionate, and we are the ones that, you know we’ll slam the hand on the table and get irate and get angry because we, we see what other people are forgetting . . . that a test score does not mean that the child can’t learn.

Keeping with the idea of the impact of the strong team, Whitney answered the question about overcoming negative outside influences, “We are the ones that refuse to back down. We are the ones that step in and just take over, . . . we’re not only on an academic ELA mission.” Finally in response to the question about trying other methods until students do learn:

We are the ones coming up with the ideas of different ways to get them to learn or the Saturday event, or the night events, or all right, this isn’t working so let’s try this or try this, and other teachers come to the ELA teachers on their teams and ask for ideas. And, we all have that respect for each other and the, that community feeling that, like we’re . . . we’re in it. Let’s try this, let’s try this.
When answering questions about the PLC and shared supportive leadership, Whitney tied the strength of the team to the quality of the leader (the researcher).

We always are able to make an informed decision based off of, you, your honesty and uh, your knowledge of just this, this is what it is, this is what is happening: ... you provide us with, with avenues and have choices.

In response to the question about the chair being proactive, Whitney answered, “It’s above and beyond anybody I’ve ever worked with us.” When asked about decision-making, Whitney answered, “It is always open; it is always a discussion; it is always a group practice situation.”

For questions focused on shared personal practice, Whitney referenced the encouragement provided by the department chair.

But you always, you always provide us and encourage us, the, the opportunities to go in and observe even just ... for a sixth grade teacher to go into an eighth grade teacher, ....

You’re constantly encouraging us to do that.

A similar message about open dialogue appeared in response to the question about providing feedback. “It is constant open dialog and it’s, you are, you are always available and have a wealth of knowledge.”

The importance of the department meetings appeared in every response to questions about supportive conditions:

You know our meetings, .... They last forever because we have to keep getting back to the agenda because we do truly enjoy each other ... a heightened level of respect .... There is trust .... I can go to any of the other teachers, and they’re willing to help and show.
A similar focus on the importance of the meetings was articulated in response to the question about recognition. “We start every meeting with, with our positives and our shout outs and, I think we all are happy to give each other kudos and to, to learn from each other.” In response to the question about the ELA teachers being unified in efforts to change the culture of the school, Whitney focused again on the strength of the team.

When we come, we, we, come hard and we, . . . every single one of us is a united front, and I think that, you know, I think it is intimidating to people who have to deal with us because you don’t want to be stuck in the room with the ELA teachers because we’re gonna let you know something.

In response to the general questions about efficacy, Whitney addressed both the teacher efficacy and the collective efficacy. In terms of teacher efficacy:

I think that there is proof that no matter, no matter how hard you (the researcher) work and no matter, no matter how hard and how much you provide us with things, it is a, it is up to the individual to take into use.

In terms of collective efficacy:

With the ability, the trust, the comfort, and the understanding that we are all, we are all different individuals, but as a team, we are a really strong force, and we all believe in each other and want to learn from each other, . . . but you can rise above, every other influence that’s happening.

**Structural description.** Three meaning units emerged from Whitney’s interview — expectations, the strength of the ELA team, and the importance of the ELA meetings. In terms of teacher efficacy, Whitney focused primarily on expectations and her ability to push the students, but when asked about collective efficacy, it was apparent that the strength of the team
increased her ability to have high expectations of her students. The ability to dialogue with other team members with similar expectations provided the strength to continue to push the students to be better than others outside the department perceived them to be.

In response to the PLC questions, the importance of a strong leader and meetings in connection with the strength of the team was evident. For each question about the ELA team, Whitney’s answers echoed her answers to the question about collective efficacy focusing on the strength she gained from the meetings. The difference in this section of the interview was apparent in terms of the influence the department chair (the researcher) had on the quality of the meetings, creating an environment of trust and respect where open and honest communication was valued.

Finally, in the general question about efficacy, Whitney articulated perhaps the strongest statement highlighting the strength of the team and its relationship to the collective efficacy of the team, which, for Whitney, directly resulted in an increase in her own sense of efficacy:

With the ability, the trust, the comfort, and the understanding that we are all, we are all different individuals, but as a team, we are a really strong force, and we all believe in each other and want to learn from each other, . . . but you can rise above, every other influence that’s happening.

Participant Six: Julie

Textural description. In terms of teacher efficacy, Julie was the only ELA teacher who did not feel her classroom held the most influence over the student. In response to the question about which had more influence, she stated, “A student’s dorm house because they spend the most time there, . . . and I think that that’s where they could either be steered down the path towards academic success, or where they’ll be allowed to stray from it.” When asked if she was
able to overcome a student’s house or home environment, she again was the only teacher who felt that she could not. “No, because I think that a student needs a consistent support system.” And finally she spoke to the one student she tried to help — meeting him during lunch, after school, any time she could, and “he did not overcome his barriers last year.” When asked about the influence of the school environment, she spoke to the “disorganization and a lack of direction and the lack of focus on academics during the evening.”

In terms of collective efficacy, she acknowledged the strength of the team, “The ELA teachers are incredibly motivated, . . . adaptable, enthusiastic, and dedicated.” However, she believed that the outside influences of the house and home environment were more powerful, “But I don’t think that they alone can overcome all influences.”

When asked about the PLC and shared and supportive leadership, she emphasized the power of discussion within the department, “Able to discuss . . . we have input . . . we make a lot of decisions as a team.” But, as with the previous two categories, Julie felt that, “I don’t feel that we make key decisions about general school issues cause I don’t feel that the teachers are given that power or voice.”

In terms of shared personal practice, Julie again was the only ELA teacher who felt that the team lacked time to observe, offer encouragement, or provide feedback. “Not as a rule. It happens spontaneously . . . . I think the team could benefit from having a direct discussion of struggles, and sharing like specific strategies and suggestions for each other.”

However, in response to question about supportive conditions, Julie did feel it existed, but again could be better:
Yes [there is a culture of trust and respect] because there is a culture of positivity on the team. We rely on each other for support. We talk openly and honestly. We’re all dedicated, and we all share the same goals.

However, in terms of recognition, Julie felt, “Not enough.”

While Julie, throughout her interview, felt less efficacy, in the final general questions, she responded, “I have felt more supported and motivated to be successful because of my membership on the ELA team . . . . I feel more comfortable making mistakes and learning from them because I know I have the support of the team.”

**Structural description.** Throughout Julie’s interview, two meaning units emerged — lack of teacher efficacy and strength of the team. In terms of her own efficacy, Julie felt that she could not overcome the outside environment of the student. Her example of the one student she tried to help seemed to permeate her feeling of efficacy. When discussing the collective efficacy, she expressed similar beliefs in the ELA department as a group of dedicated teachers, but still felt that their strength was not enough to overcome the negative factors present in the after school program or the students’ home environment.

When discussing the PLC, she did express a feeling of support, albeit perhaps not intentional and focused support. Yet, when asked the general questions about efficacy, she expressed feeling braver because of her membership in the team and the support she garnered from the team.

**Participant Seven: Nancy**

**Textual description.** In response to the two questions about which had more influence over student’s achievement — the classroom or the house and home environment — Nancy focused on the importance of building rapport.
I feel that all three play a role, but I think that the classroom has the most influence over their success, because if I can develop, a certain rapport with the students then that will help them along with success.

In response to the second question, “Yes, but I think that it’s more than that, . . . additional support needs other than academic. They do need to feel that they are cared about, and that they are important.” In response to the question about the school environment, Nancy still felt that she had control as long as she had the support of one other person:

I have never been able to do that completely alone. So I usually need at least one person in the school, kind of like a support person. A person that I can kind of talk to or that I can go to, . . . but other than that I think that what goes on in the classroom is pretty much under the control of the teacher.

In terms of collective efficacy, Nancy addressed the strength of the team and the role expectation played in collective efficacy:

I think that the English teachers at this school, have the support that they need and have the tools that they need in order for their students to be successful, and I think that, that support and those tools give the English teachers the confidence.

In terms of getting children to learn:

Yes . . . because we do know what the goal is, and we are all willing to move towards that goal, and I do have confidence and trust that the English teachers genuinely care about the well being and the success of the students.

In response to questions about the PLC and shared and supportive leadership, Nancy focused primarily on the role of the leader (the researcher) and the lack of shared leadership in the school. In response to the question about discussion and decision making about school
issues, Nancy answered, “No, Nope, nope, and nope. I think that there are private discussions, that there are small group discussions, but I do not think that those discussion, make it to the right people and influence change.” In response to questions about the department chair, Nancy felt, “She will do a lot of the work. . . . She does delegate, but she also does a lot of the work and a lot of that is just because of understanding the schedule of the teachers.” In terms of participating democratically within the ELA team, Nancy felt, “Yeah. I think that there is definitely, an opportunity for the teacher to have a voice and to have a say so.”

When addressing the questions about supportive conditions there was a focus on just trying to figure things out and stay afloat:

I think that all of us have the same desire for change, and I think that all of us even agree on the types of changes, . . . but with a lot of new teachers. . . . I’m still trying to figure out, how to go about making those changes.

In terms of the general questions about efficacy, Nancy spoke primarily about her feeling of being respected and having the freedom to teach her way:

So I have enjoyed, the freedom of being able to take the skill that needs to be taught and just kind of teaching the way that, that I think is best. I felt the freedom to kind of deliver my lesson plans in the way that I thought best . . . of feeling trusted professionally.

Only once in the interview did Nancy reference or speak to the team, and its role in a feeling of collective efficacy:

It just seems like everyone equally, respects each other’s work and opinions, and gives their full attention, and, seems like people are pretty sensitive to what other people think and have to say . . . so the environment just kind of allows for an honest sharing to take place.
Structural description. Four themes emerged from Nancy’s interview — the importance of relationships, importance of the team, the freedom to teach, and the lack of school based decision-making. In terms of rapport, Nancy repeatedly connected her sense of efficacy to her ability to build rapport with her students. While Nancy limited her circle of support to at least one person when specifically answering the question about support, in her responses to other questions, she did identify the importance of being a member of the ELA PLC. This idea of the importance of belonging to the team was most present in her answers to questions around collective teacher efficacy. The value she places on having the freedom to teach the way she feels is best was articulated primarily in the general efficacy questions. However, she felt, more than all the other participants that the school culture did not function in the same manner as the ELA PLC. She, more than any other participant in the study, articulated the dysfunction of the school as a barrier to student achievement, yet still felt that, as a teacher, she had the most influence over her students.

Participant Eight: Beth

Textural description. In response to questions about efficacy, Beth noted the importance of going beyond just teaching. “Yes, but I think that it’s more than teaching. I think that if a student has a challenging home environment sometimes that requires mentoring.” A similar idea emerged when asked about influencing struggling students. “Yes, because just like before, you have the good teaching, and then you have the good mentoring.”

When asked questions about collective efficacy, Beth referenced the importance of having a strong team. “I think they’re [confident], all of the teachers at this school are pretty vocal about their successes, and they learn from each other and they share best practices.” When asked if the ELA teachers had what it took to get children to learn, she responded:
Absolutely, . . . I mean we come together, and we talk about these fabulous things that are happening in our classrooms, and we sort of share that and bounce ideas off of one another, not just at the same grade level but, you know, across grade levels.

In response to the question about overcoming negative influences, Beth expressed the power of high expectations. “Successful teaching is the goal and student learning is the goal and those things are still happening even though there are so many challenges in those places that you talked about.”

When asked about the PLC, Beth again alluded to the presence of a strong team. Specifically when asked about decision-making, “I think more than any other group or PLC, . . . I think that the ELA teachers are so focused, and because we work together and talk to each other, I think that more things are happening, yeah.” In terms of supportive leadership, Beth spoke about the amount of encouragement and discussion present in the leader of the PLC (the researcher). In answer to the question about being proactive, Beth responded:

More so than any other adult in the school that I’ve observed . . . figuring out what she needs to do to help the teachers be successful teachers . . . facilitating discussion about like best practices . . . encouraging us to maintain open relationships.

When responding to questions about shared and supportive leadership, Beth articulated the value of being a member of a strong team. In response to the question about feedback, she stated, “Yes, and they do so constantly . . . Whenever we have meetings we share with each other things that are working, and our challenges, . . . we all sort of just discuss, and that’s also valuable.”
In terms of shared personal practice, Beth spoke about the importance of meetings and discussions. In her answer to the question about a culture of trust and respect, she referenced the ELA meetings:

Yes, and I have not ever seen that culture in another school here. I’ve, I’ve never seen it before. Because I, I feel it, when I walk into an English meeting, I feel like I could discuss my concerns about the school or about my even my personal life, and probably, you know, would feel safe doing that.

When discussing the idea of supportive conditions, Beth referenced the value of discussion primarily:

There have been so many discussions about how we can improve the school, in our meetings and also just amongst friends in casual discussions . . . . If the discussion does go towards what is happening in school, it’s always with the goal of what can we do to fix this.

The importance of a strong team was the focus of Beth’s answers to the general efficacy questions. In response to her own efficacy, Beth responded:

I feel like I’ve worked towards change, but that change, that goal, would not have happened without the group and without the department head, or chair, . . . because I wouldn’t have even thought to set that goal . . . . I chose to make that goal because I saw what my team members were doing in creating positive change, and as a group I feel like, we feel like, we are more powerful when we are together, like we are a positive force.

In response to her feeling about collective efficacy, she referenced a team member who we helped avoid termination last year. “As a group we’ve, we've rescued, and we rescued
someone who was in trouble.” Finally when articulating in what context she had felt collective efficacy, she spoke of the power of the team:

I created a goal of wanting to have a stronger voice . . . . I don’t know if I would have agreed to that position if I wasn’t a member of this team, because with, the ELA team at the school is so proactive that it inspired me and wanted me to be a part of that change, and so I figured if I accepted this position that at least I would have an opportunity to share my voice and represent other people and make sure that everyone was heard.

**Structural description.** Throughout Beth’s interview, two meaning units emerged — the importance of a strong team and discussion. In terms of efficacy, Beth talked about the characteristics of the ELA team as vocal, open, sharing, knowledgeable, and trusting. She connected the power of the team to the high expectations that each member held for their students and each other.

In terms of the PLC, the two meaning units again played a dominant role in her answers. Throughout her answers to the questions about the PLC, she spoke of the ELA teachers as a unit discussing and working to determine the best way to work for positive change in both the school and the students.

Finally, her discussion of efficacy in general returned to the importance of the ELA team and the role it had played in her own goals of becoming a grade level team leader. She spoke of the desire to have a voice because she had observed the other members of the team having a voice in the decision-making of the school.

**Composite Descriptions of Themes**

The last process in phenomenological investigation according to Moustakas (1994) is the synthesis of meanings and essences in “a unified statement of the essences of the experience of
the phenomenon as a whole” (p. 100). Since the essences are only representative of one point in time, the interview, they can never be complete (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, the composite description in this study represents “how the co-researchers as a group experience what they experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 142). Through a discussion of each of the themes that emerged from the textural and structural descriptions, relationships between and among those themes will be illuminated. After the discussion of the composite themes, the researcher analyzes the one theme that emerged from all of the participant’s interviews — the power of belonging to a team.

Table 4.2 highlights the themes that emerged from each of the textural and structural descriptions representing those that were common between each participant and those that were different.
Table 4.2

*Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Cathy</th>
<th>Jenny</th>
<th>Heather</th>
<th>Natalie</th>
<th>Whitney</th>
<th>Julie</th>
<th>Nancy</th>
<th>Beth</th>
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<td>Themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Importance of Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong Relationships</td>
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<td>Culture of Safety</td>
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<td>Effective Meetings</td>
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<td>Lack of Efficacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom to Teach</td>
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<td>School-based decision making</td>
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Although only one theme emerged from every participant interview, one other theme emerged from four of the participants — the influence of expectations. One possible explanation for this trend is the number of years each participated in the PLC — four — with the exception of Heather who had only been on the team for two years. Yet, Heather is an anomaly as she is the teacher who the team worked to improve her classroom management in order to save her job the year before the study. This close experience with the team and their hours of work with
Heather may have increased her exposure to the importance of the mission of the school that translates into the high expectations they hold for students.

Beyond the influence of expectations, the theme of relationships emerged from Cathy and Nancy. While it is beyond the scope of this study, the only commonality these two teachers held was that they were African-American. It would require further study to determine if this is the cause for that theme to emerge. One other theme emerged from two interviews — the importance of meetings. Whitney and Beth both expressed the importance of the monthly PLC meetings and the role those meetings took in increasing their sense of efficacy. The only commonality from the scope of this study would be the number of years these teachers had taught. Only one other member — Nancy — had taught for a similar length of time. Again, determining the cause of this common theme would require further study.

All other additional themes were unique to each member of the team. For Cathy the importance of having a culture of safety emerged. As a teacher of sixth grade boys, the number of fights she had experienced the year of this study was significantly higher than previous years and may have contributed to her focus on safety. For Nancy, her feeling that she had the freedom to teach came directly from her previous experiences working in schools where the curriculum was dictated and, in some cases, scripted. Outside the PLC, Nancy felt that the decisions being made were coming from the top down and not allowing input from teachers. Nancy had chosen to live on campus and was required to work a specific number of hours outside the regular school day with children. In order to gain housing on campus, she had been asked to submit a proposal of how she would work with students. However, none of the proposals were honored at the beginning of the year, and each teacher living on campus was assigned students and given mandates as to how and when to work with them. This may explain
why Nancy was more attuned to the decision making process than the others. Finally, Julie was the only teacher who consistently felt that there was a lack of teacher efficacy, despite having indicated a sense of collective efficacy. The most significant difference between Julie and the others is that she had been a special educator at RJ prior to moving into a general educator position in the ELA team. Although she had moved from special education, her focus all year had been on her special education students. On more than one occasion, the researcher met with Julie to encourage her to embrace the philosophy of the department and teach to the highest third of the class while providing support during the intervention period, coach class, and after school. However, Julie’s comment about having spent many hours with one student who ultimately failed was telling. Her sense of efficacy was reliant on that one student’s success and as a result she did not feel that she had control over student achievement. Across the interviews, one main theme dominated the responses — the power of belonging to a strong team.

No matter the level of efficacy — teacher or collective — all eight participants referred to the power they garnered from being a member of the ELA department. For Julie, the only teacher who did not feel that her classroom had the most influence over the achievement of students, she still, in reference to collective efficacy, spoke to the strength of the ELA team. “The ELA teachers are incredibly motivated . . . adaptable, enthusiastic, and dedicated.” It may be relevant to note that Julie had only been a member of the team for four months before the interview and had transferred from a team that lacked cohesiveness. Even Nancy, who focused primarily on her sense of efficacy as it related to the freedom she felt as a member of the team, when discussing her feeling of collective efficacy, articulated the power of belonging to a team that knows the goal and, as a collective group, is moving toward that goal. Despite her feelings of frustration about the school environment, she did still recognize the strength of the ELA team.
Cathy also referenced the strength she received from belonging to the ELA team, but her primary focus was on the feeling of safety she felt as a member of the team, which may speak to the power of belonging to the team from a different perspective than the others. Oddly, Julie, who expressed the most frustration with the systemic issues of the school, referenced the power of belonging to the team, primarily in regards to collective efficacy and the elements of the PLC, more often than all the others.

The five other participants held similar feelings about the power of belonging to the team. Heather and Natalie described a team that collectively has “grit” and is “ruthless.” Beth and Whitney shared a common belief that being a member of the team had made them better teachers willing to voice their opinions and work for change. While Beth focused on the collaborative nature of the team, Whitney and Natalie commented on the importance of being on the same page as a team in terms of expectations for student achievement. Both Natalie and Whitney emphasized the role the leader played in the development of a strong team providing support and encouragement. Whitney’s statement about the general efficacy encompassed much of what each of the other members of the team expressed:

With the ability, the trust, the comfort, and the understanding that we are all, we are all, different individuals, but as a team, we are a really strong force, and we all believe in each other and want to learn from each other, . . . but you can rise above, every other influence that’s happening.

Overall, the strength of the team seemed to buffer all but one of the teachers, Julie, from the systemic issues at RJ. Despite feeling that the power of the team enhanced her sense of efficacy, Julie never fully felt that she had control over the external factors in her students’ lives. Her experience spending dedicated time with one student who ultimately failed to be successful
at RJ colored her feelings of efficacy. However, based on the differences within the team and
their responses, there appear to be other factors beyond the scope of this study that created
various levels of efficacy and resulted in a variety of themes emerging from each participant. For
example, this study did not fully examine the previous teaching and personal experiences of the
participants, their interactions with the administrative team beyond the CIS, or the relationship to
the efficacy questions and the participants’ position in terms of their assigned grade level. For
example, does being certified in special education affect your sense of efficacy; does being a
team leader and meeting outside the PLC affect your sense of efficacy; and/or does teaching
sixth graders versus teaching high school students affect your sense of efficacy?

Chapter four examined the results of the eight participant interviews, creating a textural
and structural description for each participant. Next, those textural and structural descriptions
were synthesized into a composite description where the themes that emerged from the textural
and structural descriptions were examined looking at their relationships between and among the
various themes. Eight separate themes emerged, high expectations, strong relationships, a
culture of safety, effective meetings, lack of efficacy, freedom to teach, school-based decision
making, and, ultimately, the one overarching theme, the power of the team.
Chapter Five: Research Findings and Educational Practice

After interviewing the eight members of the ELA PLC, creating a textural and structural description from the transcripts of each interview, and finally creating a composite description from those descriptions, one theme emerged — the power of the team. In this chapter, the researcher revisits the research question, the purpose of the study, as well as how the research findings are situated in the literature review and theoretical frameworks. Ultimately, this chapter considers the implications of the research within the context of the ELA PLC as well as implications for further research.

Research Question and Significance of the Study

The research focused on one question: What is the lived experience of individual and collective efficacy for members of an English Language Arts department situated in a professional learning community (PLC) at a publicly funded, college-preparatory, boarding school for disadvantaged, at-risk youth in grades six through 10 that is focused on increasing student achievement?

The significance of this study stems from research that states that teachers, especially those working in schools that serve disadvantaged and at-risk youth, feel they have little control over their students’ achievement. According to the research, this sense of helplessness leads to lowered expectations for their students and for themselves, resulting in a downward spiral of failure. The first research to study the effect of teacher expectations on student achievement that led to the exploration of teacher efficacy and student achievement was conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) and then further studied by Brophy and Good (1974), Harris and Rosenthal (1985), Rubie-Davies (2007), Tyler and Boelter (2008), and Rubie-Davies et al. (2010). Each of these research studies found that the expectations of the teachers impacted the achievement of
their students with students of high expectation teachers preforming better than students with low expectation teachers.

This researcher chose to use the empirical method of phenomenological research. Moustakas (1994) summarizes the empirical method of phenomenological research as one in which the researcher “collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomena, and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience of all of the individuals. This description consists of ‘what’ they experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Moustakas (1994) calls this description an “essence description.” Moustakas (1994) defines essences as:

The essences of any experience are never totally exhausted. The fundamental textural-structural synthesis represents the essences at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon, (p. 100).

In an effort to discover the essence of the lived experience of individual and collective teacher efficacy for teachers in a professional learning community (PLC) at a publically funded, college-preparatory, boarding school serving disadvantaged, at-risk youth in grades six through 10, eight members of the ELA PLC were recruited via one email outlining the purpose of the study and the participant expectations. The researcher used a non-random, convenient, and purposeful sample of eight teachers.

During the time of the research on the effect of teacher expectations other researchers were exploring the effect that tracking had on teacher expectations. One researcher, Wheelock (1992), conducted the most extensive research on tracking and its effect on teacher expectations finding the same thing that Rosenthal and Jacobson (1986) found that teachers who believe the
students they teach are of lower ability tend to have lower expectations for those students that leads to lower achievement by those students. In a research study conducted by Brint (1998/2006), he followed students in a school system without tracking and one with tracking and found that the students in the detracked school system performed better overall than the students in the tracked school system.

From this research on teacher expectations and tracking, researchers realized that teachers needed an environment that would support their efforts to hold all students to high expectations. The research around PLCs seems to establish that effective PLCs create the needed environment. The work of researchers Scott and Teddlie (1987); DuFour and DuFour (2010); Little (2006); McLaughlin and Talbert (2006); Diamond (2007), and Stoll et al. (2006) all determined that teachers who are members of a PLC feel a collective sense of responsibility for the achievement of their students. Almost simultaneously, other researchers were examining the correlation between teacher expectations and teacher and collective efficacy. Timperley and Phillips (2003); Tsiplakides and Kermida (2010); Scott and Teddlie (1987); Hoy and Woolfold (1993); Milner (2002); Chong and Kong (2012); Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004); Ross and Gray (2006); and Diamond (2007) found that teachers who have high expectations for their students have a greater chance of feeling a sense of efficacy both teacher and collective efficacy. In addition, researchers examined the relationship of belonging to a PLC focused on student achievement to teacher efficacy. Timperley and Phillips (2003); Tsiplakides and Kermida (2010); Scott and Teddlie (1987); Hoy and Woolfold (1993); Milner (200); Chong and Kong (2012); Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004); Ross and Gray (2006); and Diamond (2007) all found that there has been a positive, demonstrated impact on both teacher and collective efficacy through the presence and participation in an effective PLC. Based on all the above research, this researcher
hoped to determine if the PLC created a lived experience in which the teachers feel an increase in their collective teacher efficacy. If so, this model could become a school-wide initiative to increase the number of teachers in PLCs from eight to 40 at RJ.

**PLC Lens**

Although numerous themes emerged throughout the study, only one — the power of belonging to the team — was strongly expressed by every participant that relates directly to one of the theoretical frameworks — PLC — used in this study. The qualities of an effective PLC are centered on the idea of a shared, supportive, and collaborative team. Even for the two teachers who felt the least amount of efficacy, their sense of collective efficacy was tied directly to their membership in the ELA PLC.

Table 5.1

*Presence of the Qualities of an Effective PLC*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Supportive and Shard Leadership</th>
<th>Shared Values and Vision</th>
<th>Collective Learning</th>
<th>Supportive Conditions</th>
<th>Shared Personal Practice</th>
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<td>Natalie</td>
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<td>Julie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
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</table>
Within this theme the qualities of an effective PLC as articulated by Hord (1997) were highlighted — supportive and shared leadership; shared values and vision focused on pupil learning, collective learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. With all eight of the participants commenting on the feeling of supportive conditions, it emerged as the strongest quality of the PLC. For Cathy and Whitney it was found in the PLC meetings. Cathy stated, “I feel like when we were in Natalie’s room and we would have our meetings and you would say, ‘This is a safe place. Just get everything off your chest,’ and we would just go at it.” Whitney commented, “We start every meeting with, with our positives and our shout outs and, I think we all are happy to give each other kudos and to, to learn from each other.” For Jenny and Heather it was belonging to the team that created the supportive conditions. Jenny stated, “We’d rely on each other so that’s how we can do it. So no one is an island.” Heather commented, “As far as offering encouragement, there is you know, we do that in our meetings and then I think people go out of their way to find time . . . . We have conversations and encourage each other.” For Natalie the supportive conditions came directly from the CIS, “They [the ELA department] have an awesome curriculum and instructional specialist and team leader who is fully willing to answer any questions that they have.” For Julie the supportive conditions were more personal, “I have felt more supported and motivated to be successful because of my membership on the ELA team . . . . I know I have the support of the team.” For Nancy the supportive conditions were centered around student achievement, “I think that the English teachers at this school, have the support that they need and have the tools that they need in order for their students to be successful.” For Beth the supportive conditions led her to set a challenging goal for herself, “I feel that I’ve worked towards change, but that change, that goal, would not have happened
without the group and without the department head, or chair . . . because I wouldn’t have even thought to set that goal.”

The next most frequently referenced quality by seven of the participants was the quality of shared values and vision within the PLC. For Cathy it was specifically the mission of the school as a whole that the PLC embraced that served as the shared value and vision and created a sense of collective expectations. Cathy articulated, “You know at RJ it is all about achieving, going to college, and academic success.” For Heather and Natalie it is the high expectations presumed by the PLC that is the shared value and vision. Heather commented, “I think all the teachers relate the level of expectation of the kids is higher than probably what would be expected of these kids in a different situation.” Natalie stated, “I mean the group helps; . . . we all have always had the same message, the same ideas, . . . high expectations.” For Whitney it was the common value and vision of the PLC around what determines academic success, “We see what other people are forgetting . . . that a test score does not mean that the child can’t learn.” For Julie and Nancy it was less about a specific topic and more about the team as a whole. Julie stated, “We’re all dedicated, and we all share the same goals.” Nancy commented, “Yes . . . because we know what the goal is, and we are all willing to move towards that goal.” For Beth the shared values and vision emerged from the PLC discussions, “If the discussion does go towards what is happening in school, it’s always with the goal of what can we do to fix this.”

Six of the participants, only one less than those who commented on shared values and vision, specifically commented on the supportive and shared leadership qualities of the PLC. For Heather, Whitney, Julie, and Nancy it manifested in the area of decision-making. Heather stated, “I think that you let us make decisions and have the critical conversations about why it is that we are doing what we are doing.” Whitney stated, “We are always able to make an informed
decision based off of, you, your honesty and, your knowledge of just this, this is what it is, this is what is happening . . . You provide us with, with avenues and have choices.” Julie stated, “We are able to discuss . . . We have input . . . We make a lot of decisions as a team.” Nancy stated, “Yeah, I think that there is definitely, an opportunity for the teacher to have a voice and to have a say so.” For Natalie it manifested in her description of the department, “I think that the nature of the department is such that we are all leaders.” For Beth it manifested in the way in which the CIS interacted with the department. “More so than any other adult in the school that I’ve observed, . . . figuring out what she needs to do to help the teachers be successful teachers, . . . facilitating discussion about, like, best practices, . . . encouraging us to maintain open relationships.”

Only three participants directly mentioned the quality of collective learning — Natalie, Whitney, and Beth. For Natalie and Beth the collective learning took place during the PLC meetings. Natalie stated, “We would help each other to get through that [classroom challenge], and I think people would then leave those meetings or those situations with helpful advice.” Beth commented, “They [teachers] learn from each other and they share best practices.” For Whitney the collective learning expanded beyond the PLC and occurred constantly, “We are the ones coming up with the ideas of different ways to get them [students] to learn . . . and other teachers come to the ELA teachers on their teams and ask for ideas.”

The least referenced quality of an effective PLC was that of shared personal practice. This finding may be a result of the emphasis on the team and could potentially be an area of further study. For Cathy it was found in the meetings, “The great thing about working with our teachers at the RJ school is that they are able to come together, and play off of each other’s strengths within English Language Arts content area.”
Collective Efficacy Lens

As to the lens of collective teacher efficacy, membership in the ELA PLC created an environment in which the four necessary elements of collective efficacy were present — mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and affective states (Goddard et al., 2000). In terms of mastery experience defined by Goddard et al. (2000) as teachers experiencing events over which they persevered, all of the participants articulated the struggles the students experienced in the hours after school, whether at home or their dorm house, and with the exception of one participant, Julie, they felt that their classroom had more influence over the achievement of their students. For most of the teachers the idea of mastery experience came in their responses to the question about overcoming a student’s house or home environment. Cathy felt, “Yes, I think it’s all making a connection with that child and letting them know that, yes, you come from a home like this, but you can go to this other place with your education.” Jenny articulated, “I do have some sort of impact on my students. I do think my classroom holds much more weight than I actually gave it credit for.” For Heather it was her classroom environment where she felt mastery experience:

I try to create an environment in my classroom that’s sort of removed from the experiences outside of it . . . . I feel like I’m pretty successful with creating an environment where, where they can sort of be separate from those other environments.

For Natalie mastery experience manifests in the personal relationships she develops with her students, “They are a lot more willing to try hard if they feel like they’re doing it for somebody that cares about them.” For Whitney mastery experience comes from providing safety for challenged students, “I have proof that a child from the worst situation possible, . . . they’re the ones that just strive, I would say most, because they look for that comfort zone . . . when I can
provide that in a classroom.” For Nancy it was her ability to build rapport where she found mastery experience, “If I can develop a certain rapport with the students then that will help them along with success.” For Beth mastery experience came less from her role in the lives of students and more in the role she played in helping the team save an ELA member from termination, “As a group we’ve, we’ve rescued, and we rescued someone who was in trouble.” Even Julie, in answer to the final two questions, expressed a feeling of influence over her students’ achievement, “I feel more comfortable making mistakes and learning from them.”

All of the participants expressed the importance of meeting to listen to other teachers and their successful experiences, which is the definition of vicarious experience (Goddard et al., 2000). However, each also expressed the need to take advantage of opportunities to observe each other more, which is the second aspect of vicarious experience as defined by Goddard et al. (2000). While all of the participants commented often about the value of meeting with the PLC, the comments from Heather, Natalie, and Whitney captured the feelings of all the teachers.

Heather stated:

Everyone is engaged in discussion about curriculum and you (the researcher) know what we teach and how we teach it . . . our team is very vocal. I think that you let us make decisions and have critical conversations about why it is that we are doing what we are doing.

Natalie commented:

But in our department, we have always emphasized that [it would be difficult], and people that kind of didn’t drink the water right away eventually would come around because it was sound reasoning, so like we had meetings and we hung out together, and we talked and all those things helped.
However, Whitney expressed it best when she said:

You know our meetings . . . they last forever because we have to keep getting back to the agenda because we do truly enjoy each other, . . . a heightened level of respect, . . . there is trust . . . . I can go to any of the other teachers, and they’re willing to help and show.

The necessary element of social persuasion is inherently present in an effective PLC as it is defined as teachers’ participation in professional learning communities (Goddard et al., 2000). While all the participants discussed their participation in the PLC, Julie and Heather captured this element of social persuasion best. Julie stated, “I feel more comfortable making mistakes and learning from them because I know I have the support of the team.” Heather articulated, “If I didn’t have a group of people with similar ideas that were working for similar goals, uh, I think I would feel a lot less confident about the work that I was doing.”

Finally, the necessary element of affective states is reflected in the participants’ responses as they discussed the power of their membership in the ELA PLC, specifically the collective voice of the ELA teachers (Goddard et al., 2000). While not every participant explicitly referenced a feeling of a collective voice, one participant did. Whitney stated:

I think that the ELA team is the one who gets the most passionate, and we are the ones that, you know we’ll slam the hand on the table and get irate and get angry because we, we see what other people are forgetting . . . that a test score does not mean that the child can’t learn.

Beyond the four necessary elements of collective teacher efficacy, the singular theme, the power of belonging to a team, illustrates the characteristics of schools with a high level of collective teacher efficacy. Schools with high levels of collective teacher efficacy have teachers who believe all students can learn and achieve at high levels; teachers can influence the school’s
culture; teachers can have a positive impact on student achievement; teachers can manage the
curriculum and instruction; teachers can motivate students; and teachers can establish a stable
and safe school culture that is proactive rather than reactive (Tschannen & Barr, 2004). With the
exception of the final characteristic — teachers can establish a stable and safe culture that is
proactive rather than reactive — the teachers in this study all expressed their belief in students,
their collective voice in providing solution oriented ideas, their direct impact on student
achievement, their control over the curriculum and its delivery, and their ability to motivate
students. Unfortunately, the final characteristic was more problematic in terms of establishing a
stable and safe school, but they did express their ability to create a stable and safe classroom.

Implications for Future Research

There are several implications for future research. First, is to replicate the practices of
the ELA PLC in the other departments of the school and determine if it is the structure of the
PLC and/or the leader that increases teachers’ collective efficacy. In each interview where the
participants answered the questions focused on the role of CIS (the researcher), their answers
suggested that the leader of the PLC had a significant impact on their sense of efficacy. In the
research conducted by Hipp et al. (2008), they found that PLCs were vulnerable to institutional
change such as leadership or mission. Since the interviews indicated a strong connection
between the leader of the PLC and the participant’s sense of efficacy, further research may need
to include leadership as a theoretical framework.

Second, is to replicate the practices of the ELA PLC in the new RJ schools being opened
in two other states, and not only determine if the leadership is integral to the success of the
department, but to determine if different populations of students impact the effectiveness of the
PLC.
Third, because this study did not look at student achievement specifically, the findings of Dufour and Dufour (2010) around the connection between an effective PLC and student achievement was not concretely found. Further research should include looking at student work from members of the PLC at the beginning of the school year and then at the end.

Fourth, as other schools take on the unique qualities of the RJ school, similar research in other school settings with more participants would help in determining if this was just one unique PLC within one unique school with a few unique teachers, or if the systemic nature of an effective PLC is the one factor that is necessary to increase teacher and collective efficacy.

When this research study began, the researcher posited that, if, through the collective effort of teachers in a PLC, teachers can increase their own feeling of empowerment leading to student success and to an increase in student empowerment, this cycle of failure could be broken. Although limited due to its small sample size, this research study has determined that teachers do have a sense of collective efficacy through membership in an effective PLC. Then it is possible that creating effective PLCs in schools that serve students of poverty could lead to breaking the cycle of failure that children of poverty experience.

Conclusion

Having worked in schools serving disadvantaged and at-risk youth for over 13 years, the researcher had witnessed the sense of helplessness that teachers feel in terms of increasing student achievement. The researcher had witnessed and personally experienced the battle to hold high expectations for these students. From this experience, the researcher began this study to answer the following research question: What is the lived experience of individual and collective efficacy for members of an English Language Arts department situated in a PLC at a
publically funded, college-preparatory, boarding school for disadvantaged, at-risk youth in grades six through 10 that is focused on increasing student achievement?

From the work of Bandura (1977), the definition of individual teacher efficacy states that it is “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (p. 79). Collective efficacy is defined by Bandura as “the judgment of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute the courses of action required to have a positive effect on students” (Goddard et al., 2004, p. 4).

Using the theoretical frameworks of PLCs and collective teacher efficacy, the researcher examined the ability of the PLC under study to create an effective PLC as defined by Hord (1997). According to Hord (1997), an effective PLC exhibits these six traits — supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, focused on pupil learning, collective learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. All six traits were exhibited in the PLC under study. In addition to the theoretical framework of PLCs, the researcher considered the framework of collective efficacy. Collective efficacy exhibits four elements — mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and affective states (Goddard et al., 2000). As was the case with the traits of an effective PLC, the eight members of the PLC under study exhibited the four elements of collective efficacy.

In addition to considering the theoretical frameworks of PLCs and collective teacher efficacy, the researcher conducted a literature review. Using the studies that examined teacher expectations as a foundation, the researcher traced the connections between teacher expectations and tracking. In 1762 Rousseau suggested that students are influenced by teachers’ expectations. Over the next 250 plus years other researchers including Rubie-Davies and her colleagues studied Rousseau’s’ claim and determined that teachers’ beliefs and expectations
directly affect students’ achievement. Connected to the research around teacher expectations, was the research examining tracking and its impact on teacher expectations. From Rosenbaum in 1976 to the seminal work by Wheelock (1992), the consequences of tracking on teacher expectations and student achievement have been examined.

From this research on teacher expectations and tracking, researchers realized that teachers needed an environment that would support their efforts to hold all students to high expectations. The research around PLCs seems to establish that effective PLCs create the needed environment. From the work of researchers such as Scott and Teddlie (1987) to DuFour and DuFour (2010), researchers have shown that effective PLCs create an environment where teachers who are members of the PLC feel a collective sense of responsibility for the achievement of their students.

From the research examining PLCs, the researcher reviewed the research that was happening almost simultaneously concerning the correlation between teacher expectations and teacher and collective efficacy. From Scott and Teddlie (1987) to Chong and Kong (2012), researchers found that teachers who have high expectations for their students have a greater chance of feeling a sense of efficacy — both teacher and collective efficacy.

Finally, many of these same researchers — Scott and Teddlie (1987) and Chong and Kong (2012) were examining the relationship of belonging to a PLC focused on student achievement to teacher and collective efficacy. These researchers found that there has been a positive, demonstrated impact on both teacher and collective efficacy through the presence and participation in an effective PLC.

After conducting a thorough literature review on teacher expectations, tracking, PLCs, teacher efficacy, and collective efficacy, the researcher chose to use the empirical method of
phenomenological research in an effort to discover the essence of the lived experience of the individual and collective efficacy for teachers in a PLC at a publically funded, college-preparatory, boarding school serving disadvantaged, at-risk youth grades six through 10 using eight members of the ELA PLC.

After a single interview of each of the eight members of the ELA PLC, the researcher determined that one theme dominated all others — the power of belonging to the team. This sense of belonging that came from membership in an effective PLC appears to have created a strong sense of collective efficacy among the PLC’s members. The finding that belonging to a strong team positively contributes to a teacher’s sense of collective efficacy could have far reaching implications for the importance of developing PLCs in schools across the country.

From this research there are four implications for further research — to replicate the practices of the ELA PLC in the other departments of the school, to replicate the practices of the ELA PLC in future RJ schools, to include an examination of student work in a similar study, and to replicate the research in other non-RJ schools who serve a similar population with a similar mission.

When this research study began, the researcher posited that, if, through the collective effort of teachers in a PLC, teachers can increase their own feeling of empowerment leading to student success and to an increase in student empowerment, the cycle of failure that students of poverty experience could be broken. Although limited due to its small sample size, this research study has determined that teachers do have a sense of collective efficacy through membership in an effective PLC. If this holds true in larger settings, then it is possible that creating effective PLCs in schools that serve students of poverty could lead to breaking the cycle of failure that children of poverty experience.
References

ACT (Ed.). (2008). *Forgotten middle: Ensuring that all students are on target for college and career readiness before high school*. Iowa City, IA: ACT.


doi:10.1080/00220973.2011.596854


doi:10.1080/09650791003741822


doi:10.1080/03057640320000122005


John Adams' promise: How to have good schools for all our children, not just for some. (2005). *Research for Better Teaching Inc. & TEACHERS.*


Dear Institutional Review Board:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I, Khalek Kirkland, give Kim Worth permission to conduct the research titled, “Living the Dream: The Lived Experience of an English Language Arts Professional Learning Community at a College Preparatory Boarding School for Underserved Students” at the SEED School of Maryland. This also serves as assurance that this school complies with requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research.

Sincerely,

Khalek Kirkland, EdD.
Proud Head of School
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Kim A. Worth
Northeastern University
PO Box 1130
Harpers Ferry, WV
25425

Date:

Dear:

I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation on how teachers experience efficacy – teacher and collective, and how teachers experience participating in a Professional Learning Community (PLC). In the exploration of the teachers’ stories of their lived experiences, there will be an authentic potential to gain a deeper and more complete insight into the role of a PLC as it informs teacher and collective teacher efficacy.

I am hoping that you will assist me by participating in one taped interview, one observation, and one PLC meeting. The unstructured interview will take approximately 90 minutes or longer. Furthermore, I would also like to ask you to volunteer to engage in member checking my interpretations of your interview responses by asking you to read over my interpretations and verifying that they are representative of your experiences. Your participation is voluntary and you name will not be revealed to anyone other than the interviewer and the Dissertation Chair. If for any reason you do not wish to continue, you may stop at any time.

If you choose to participate in this interview, please sign below. If you have any questions, please contact me at 301-639-5912 or at worth.ki@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Kim A. Worth

I consent to be interviewed by Kim Worth, and also for the audiotaped interview and observations to be utilized and published in a dissertation. I understand that my identity will be kept confidential, and that the purpose of this interview is to examine how I experience teacher and collective efficacy and being a member of a PLC.

__________________________________________
Participant Date

__________________________________________
Person Obtaining Consent Date
Appendix C

Unstructured Interview questions

Teacher Efficacy (Adapted from The Teacher Efficacy Scale (Gibson & Dembo, 1989))

1. How do you feel when a student does better than usual?
2. Which do you feel has more influence over student achievement – your classroom, their house, or the student’s home environment?
   a. Why?
3. Do you feel that you can overcome a students’ house or home environment with your good teaching?
   a. Why or why not?
4. Do you feel that the ability of the teacher influences the achievement of their students?
   a. Why or why not?
5. Are you able to positively influence struggling students?
   a. Why or why not?
6. How much does the school environment influence your ability to help students achieve their fullest potential?
   a. Why or why not?

Collective Teacher Efficacy (Adapted from the Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004))

1. Do you feel that English Language Arts (ELA) teachers at this school are confident they will be able to motivate their students?
   a. Why or why not?
2. Do you feel that ELA teachers in this school have what it takes to get children to learn?
   a. Why or why not?
3. Do you feel that ELA teachers in this school believe every child can learn?
   a. Why or why not?
4. Do you feel that ELA teachers in this school can overcome negative outside influences that may come from their need for discipline, their experiences in their houses, or their experiences at home?
   a. Why or why not?
5. Do you feel that the opportunities provided at this school help ensure that these students will learn?
   a. Why or why not?
6. If students don’t learn something the first time, do you feel that the ELA teachers in this school will try other methods until the students do learn?
   a. Why or why not?
7. Do you feel that the quality of the school facilities here really facilitate the teaching and learning process?
   a. Why or why not?

Professional Learning Community (PLC)
Shared and Supportive Leadership

1. Do you feel that the ELA teachers are consistently involved in discussion and making decisions about school issues?
1. Do you feel that ELA teachers have accessibility to key information?
   a. Why or why not?

2. Do you feel that the ELA department chair is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed?
   a. Why or why not?

3. Do you feel that the ELA department chair shares responsibilities and democratically participates with the ELA teachers?
   a. Why or why not?

4. Do you feel that decision-making takes place through committees and communication across grade levels?
   a. Why or why not

Shared Personal Practice

1. Do you feel that there are opportunities for ELA teachers to observe peers and offer encouragement?
   a. Why or why not?

2. Do you feel that the ELA department teachers provide feedback and share ideas and suggestions for improving student achievement?
   a. Why or why not?

Supportive Conditions

1. Do you feel that there is a culture of trust and respect among the ELA teachers?
   a. Why or why not?

2. Do you feel that outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly among the ELA department?
   a. Why or why not?

3. Do you feel that ELA teachers exhibit sustained and unified efforts to embed change into the culture of the school?
   a. Why or why not?

General questions

1. What have you experienced in terms of individual and collective efficacy as a member of the ELA PLC?

2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of individual and collective efficacy.
## Appendix D

### Planning, Preparation, and Instruction

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<th>Look Fors</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Feedback or Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Designs lessons focused on measurable outcomes</td>
<td>Agendas, enduring understandings, and essential questions posted</td>
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<tr>
<td>aligned with unit goals, based on diagnostic and</td>
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<td>on-going assessment data.</td>
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<td><strong>Differentiation:</strong></td>
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<td>Designs and implements scaffolded lessons that</td>
<td>Differentiates by content, process, and/or product</td>
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<tr>
<td>target different learning needs, styles, and</td>
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<td>interests.</td>
<td>Provides accommodations</td>
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<td>Addressing pre-requisite skills</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyzes data from assessments, draws conclusions</td>
<td>Checks for understanding during and after instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>creates and implements an action plan to address</td>
<td>Clarifies and unscrambles confusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>concerns.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement:</strong></td>
<td>Clear and appropriate language to explain material</td>
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<tr>
<td>Designs and implements lessons that are relevant</td>
<td>Uses real world and relevant connections</td>
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<tr>
<td>and that will motivate students to actively</td>
<td>Incorporates higher order questions and skills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>think, discuss and use ideas and skills being</td>
<td>Student discourse</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>taught.</td>
<td>Students asking higher order questions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Environment and materials:</strong></td>
<td>Use of technology</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizes the classroom and appropriate</td>
<td>Student work posted in classroom</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>materials to support unit and lesson goals.</td>
<td>Use of multicultural materials and resources</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organized student and teacher materials</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Safe and inviting classroom environment</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relevant and updated bulletin boards in and out of the classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tenacity:</strong></td>
<td>Provide opportunities for students to persevere</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes responsibility for students who are not</td>
<td>Navigating obstacles to student success</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>succeeding and provides additional instruction.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
# Classroom Management Observation Tool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Look Fors</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Feedback or Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships and Respect:</strong></td>
<td>Consistent expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Fair and respectful towards</td>
<td>Give positive feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>- students, builds positive</td>
<td>Deescalates negative behavior (CPI)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- relationships, commands</td>
<td>Redirects students in a non-confrontational manner</td>
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<td>- respect, does not tolerate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- disruption.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Routines and responsibility:</strong></td>
<td>Beginning and ending class routines</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Teaches routines and has students maintain them, develops students’ self discipline and teaches them to take responsibility.</td>
<td>Procedural routines</td>
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<tr>
<td>- and teaches them to take</td>
<td>Effective and timely transitions</td>
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<tr>
<td>- responsibility.</td>
<td>Students monitors themselves and one another</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Repertoire and prevention:</strong></td>
<td>Purposeful movement around classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Uses various discipline “moves”, can get and maintain attention, and has a confident presence.</td>
<td>Effective tone</td>
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<tr>
<td>- and has a confident presence.</td>
<td>Commanding body language</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Incentives:</strong></td>
<td>Recognition of effective effort</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Uses incentives wisely to</td>
<td>Reinforcing positive behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>- encourage and reinforce student</td>
<td>Acknowledges and rewards core values</td>
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<tr>
<td>- cooperation as necessary.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Dear (name of potential ELA teachers),

Attached is an informed consent form asking if you would be willing to participate in a doctoral project. The project will involve one long audiotaped interview lasting approximately two hours at a site of your choosing. The project will involve an audiotaped PLC meeting that will be transcribed by an outside, neutral, hired transcriber. The project will involve at least one classroom observation using the school’s observation tool. All documents will be stored on a password protected computer or in a locked storage container located at my home. All voluntary members as well as the school will be given aliases to be used in the project’s paper. All documents and tapes will be destroyed immediately after the successful completion of the doctoral defense except for the signed informed consent forms, which need to be kept for three years. The proposal could be published on the Proquest doctoral project site. Please sign and return the informed consent form as soon as possible. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Kim Worth