AN ENGLISH DEPARTMENT TRANSFORMATION:
AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY OF A HIGH SCHOOL
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT TURNAROUND

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Abstract

In 2003, North Shore Vocational High School was one of the lowest-performing school systems in Massachusetts based on scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam. After many new initiatives were implemented and programmatic structures were changed, particularly within the English department, North Shore slowly began to make progress and transitioned from being one of the lowest-performing schools to one of the highest-performing vocational schools in the commonwealth.

This study employed an interpretive phenomenological case study to examine, through individual in-depth interviews, a focus group interview, a computer-mediated communication interview, and a participant observer reflection the experiences and perceptions of a purposeful sample of participants who taught 10th-grade English and experienced the accountability demands of the MCAS exam throughout the last 13 years. Three individual interview themes, three focus group themes, three department head reflections, one participant observer reflection, and three conclusions suggested that, overall, the improvement was related not only to changes in teachers’ instructional practices, but also to the support provided by the school system. The school implemented the necessary professional development for the teachers to enhance their instructional practice by providing specific sessions geared to the needs of both teachers and students. The professional development sessions were literacy specific based on the department’s MCAS results. In addition, the school provided professional development on the practice of professional learning communities (PLCs). During this time, the teachers learned how to work together. In conjunction with this, the school was able to schedule PLC time during the school day so that the teachers could meet with each other to share lessons, assessments, and instructional innovations.
The following recommendations were made for English departments similar to the one at North Shore Vocational High School based on the themes and conclusions of this study: (1) English teachers need to become knowledgeable in literacy-specific pedagogical practices; (2) schools need to provide literacy-specific professional development to their teachers; (3) educational leaders need to organize professional development on how to effectively function in a PLC; (4) schools need to get creative in their master schedule to create PLC time for their teachers to meet; and (5) teachers need to share their expertise, lessons, and student data to ultimately improve the results of the department and the school overall.

*Keywords:* Literacy, school turnaround, pedagogical content knowledge, professional learning community, professional development, vocational education
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

During 2003, the Massachusetts Department of Education sent members of the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) to examine the programming occurring at “North Shore Vocational High School” (a pseudonym). North Shore, which is a single-school district, was one of the lowest-performing school systems in Massachusetts based on scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam. After the members of the EQA left the school district, many new initiatives were implemented and programmatic structures were changed, particularly within the English department. In light of these changes, North Shore slowly began to make progress and transitioned from being one of the lowest-performing schools to one of the highest-performing vocational schools in the Commonwealth.

According to the EQA report, in 2002, 85.8% of the students at North Shore scored in the Needs Improvement and Warning/Failing categories, and only 67% of the class of 2003 earned a competency determination/diploma. As programmatic changes were implemented, North Shore began to receive attention. During the following year, on June 7, 2004, press release from the Massachusetts Department of Education, then Commissioner David Driscoll stated,

When comparing passing rates at schools for the graduating classes of 2003 and 2004, many vocational schools have shown significant gains. In particular, 77 percent of seniors in the class of 2003 at North Shore Vocational School . . . had met the standard last June, compared to 96 percent of seniors in this year’s senior class. (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2004)

During the 2007 school year, North Shore was selected to present at a national conference put on by Solution Tree on how to implement standards-based, data-driven
instruction to improve student achievement. In 2010, North Shore was one of only three schools asked to participate in the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University in the panel discussion titled “How Do High Schools Become Exemplary?” The discussion was based on research conducted by Ronald Ferguson, who was the co-chair and director of the Achievement Gap Initiative. Ferguson’s research demonstrated the gains and success North Shore had made over the preceding years.

Currently, 13 years after North Shore was placed on “Watch Status” by the EQA board, 100% of North Shore’s senior class has passed all three subject areas, and all students will be receiving a competency determination/diploma. What is remarkable is the fact that the class of 2016 is not the first class to graduate with a 100% pass rate, but is the ninth consecutive class starting with the class of 2007. Additionally, what is truly amazing and what this research examined is the turnaround that has occurred specifically within the English department at North Shore, because for the first time ever, in 2013 100% of the sophomore class passed the English MCAS exam on their first attempt.

**Significance of the Problem**

In 2009, the National Governors Association Center of Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officials came together to create a Common Core Curriculum to be utilized by most states. This was done because, more and more, the American high school is regarded as a place where academic proficiency outcomes are dismal and where students are not being prepared for their future. The results on the 2012 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that the average reading score for elementary-level students is the highest it has been in 30 years, and yet the average score of a high school student has dropped five points since the early 1990s and has remained extremely flat since (U.S. Department of Education, National
Center for Education Statistics, 2013a, 2013b). Additionally, in 2013, a report from the Alliance for Excellent Education noted that one in four high school students are unable to comprehend a passage, and because of this a significant number of students who are graduating from high school are required to take remedial reading and writing courses once they reach college. In addition, the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) places American teenagers 17th among other developed nations in reading skills (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Based on these statistics, it seems as though school systems within the United States are on the brink of a literacy crisis, particularly during the high school years. Due to this literacy crisis, many states agreed to take on the Common Core standards in the subject area of English language arts to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the necessary literacy skills to be successful in not only college and career, but also in life (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2013).

Unfortunately, many high school teachers do not believe that literacy instruction is a part of their content area, even in English classes. Instead, they believe the content or the novel is what should be taught (Moje, 1996). Because of this antiquated belief system, 44% of graduating high school students are not ready for college-level reading, yet regrettably, when the same group of students left the eighth grade, they were on track to be successful in college according to assessments they completed up to that point (American College Testing, 2014). With the demands of high-stakes testing as a constant, teachers feel that they must deliver the content according to the specific needs of the testing rather than focusing on the necessary literacy skills needed to learn effectively (Berry, Loughran, & van Driel, 2008). Yet, student test scores are demonstrating that this approach is not working, as American students lack full mastery of grade-appropriate reading knowledge and skills (U.S. Department of Education, National Center
for Education Statistics, 2013a, 2013b). The results of the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress continue to demonstrate that these approaches are not working. Student reading scores have pretty much remained the same since 2013, with a decrease by one point, but the 2015 scores were actually lower than scores in 1992, the inception year of the exam (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Locally, when it came time to examine the proficiency levels of the students within the English department at North Shore Regional Vocational Technical High School it was evident that the students were following the statistical trends of their counterparts throughout the country. Within the state of Massachusetts, the MCAS exam is given annually to all grade 10 students in the subject area of English Language Arts. As shown in chart 1 and chart 2 below, in 2003 North Shore only had 1% of its student population score advanced on the MCAS English Language Arts exam, compared to the 20% that the state of Massachusetts received, 25% of North Shore’s students scored in the proficient category as opposed to 41% at the state level, 55% scored in the needs improvement category at North Shore and the state had 28%, and 19% of North Shore’s students failed where as the state had 12% fail. In addition to this, chart 3 shows that when the proficient and advanced levels were combined and examined, North shore had only had 26% of its students score at these levels in 2003 as opposed to the state average, which was 61%. By examining this data, it was evidently clear that something had to change. Only 26% of the students were scoring in the proficient and advanced levels and 74% of the English Language Arts students were scoring in the needs improvement and failing categories. In 2003 the students at North Shore were following the statistical trends as shown in the research data on English Language Arts scores and it was clear that there was a significant problem within this department and something, if not everything needed to change.
Chart 1
MCAS Annual Comparison 2003-2016 - % of Grade 10 English Language Arts Achievement Levels - North Shore Regional Vocational Technical High School - (DESE, 2017a)

Chart 2
MCAS Annual Comparison 2003-2016 - % of Grade 10 English Language Arts Achievement Levels for the State of Massachusetts - (DESE, 2017b)

Chart 3
MCAS Annual Comparison 2003-2016 - Grade 10 English Language Arts Achievement Levels - % of Students in Proficient and Advanced Levels - North Shore Tech & the State of Massachusetts Overall - (DESE, 2017b)
Literacy

In the literature, the term literacy has meant multiple things. In general, literacy is known as reading and writing skills, but it also has been defined in two stages as basic or advanced. Basic literacy skills are reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Advanced literacy skills add the ability to draw inferences, synthesize information, and follow complicated directions (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). The literacy skills specifically addressed in the Common Core standards and in this research are known as the ability of the student to read, write, speak, listen, and understand words (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).

Research Question

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological case study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of the 10th-grade English teachers at North Shore Vocational High School as the department transitioned throughout the last 13 years. One research question was utilized to discover this phenomenon:

What are the Grade 10 English teachers’ perceptions of the changes that moved this particular department from a 74% needs improvement and failure rate to a 100% pass rate?

Potential Contributions

The goal for this study was to add to the existing understanding of what makes a successful school turnaround possible, specifically when focused on curricular components associated with literacy (Stake, 1978). This particular department has made such impressive
gains, predominantly in the later part of the last 13 years. It was evident that their success needed to be examined particularly through the eyes of the teachers who experienced the changes. As a former teacher and now as an administrator who directly oversaw the transition, I was aware of the various systems that were put in place, but I was unaware of how the English teachers perceived their experiences of the transition. I felt that by examining what worked, what did not work, and why the teachers believed the department has been so successful I would be able to take this information and share it with the larger educational community as a whole to assist other schools and districts in their own turnaround efforts.

**Positionality Statement**

As the coordinator of curriculum and staff development at North Shore Vocational High School, I have been intrigued by the school’s success on the MCAS exam. I began my career at North Shore as a reading teacher who worked in conjunction with the English department. During this time, I assisted the English department in helping the students pass the MCAS exam. As I transitioned to administration, I was charged with directly overseeing the English department. Within this position, I worked to instill many of the changes that have occurred over the last 13 years. Initially, when I embarked on this research, I wanted to study the school as a whole, but I quickly realized that such a task was too broad. I then decided to narrow my focus to the English department, since as both a reading teacher and an administrator, I witnessed its scores steadily rise. I was aware of many of the changes that were implemented within the department, as I had been involved in implementing them. What I was unaware of was the teachers’ perceptions of the changes. I was interested in what initiatives and/or activities the teachers considered the most beneficial not only for themselves, but also for the school as a whole.
As I moved through the research process, I constantly thought about my position within not only this project, but the school overall. Often in interpretive research, a person’s life experiences begin and end with autobiography because personal experiences are immediately accessible (Denzin, 1989; Van Manen, 1990). Knowing this, I embarked on my research cautiously, being aware of how my bias could impact the overall results if I did not remain impartial. Additionally, as I became more engrossed in the data, I worked to function as a critical listener by allowing teachers to share their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and experiences regarding the changes that have occurred within this particular department and worked to not let my own bias interfere with the results (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Yin, 2009). By doing this, I was able to confront my views while controlling my bias and opinions and staying open-minded and considerate of the data that I was gathering (Machi & McEvoy, 2012).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is the theory of pedagogical content knowledge, which was developed by Shulman in 1986. Shulman (1986) theorized that many teachers know and understand their subject matter (content), but do not necessarily know how to convey that knowledge to their students in a comprehensible way (pedagogy). Shulman (1986) developed the theory of pedagogical content knowledge based on the concept of content knowledge. Content knowledge, he stated, “refers to the amount of knowledge in the mind of the teacher” (p. 9). Shulman (1986) claimed that pedagogical content knowledge actually moves beyond the details or ideas of the content and requires a deep understanding of how to convey those concepts to make the lesson relevant and comprehensible for the students. As Phillips, DeMiranda, and Shin (2009) put it, content knowledge is one’s understanding of the subject matter; pedagogical knowledge is one’s understanding of teaching and learning processes that is independent of the
subject matter; and pedagogical content knowledge is the knowledge of teaching and learning in a particular subject while also acknowledging the learning demands of the students (p. 48). Shulman (1986) furthered this notion by stating that teachers need to be able to not only convey to their students what they are teaching, but also explain why the particular information is important and how it will relate to the other areas of their lives.

Shulman (1986) ascertained that pedagogical content knowledge moves beyond subject matter knowledge and becomes the “knowledge for teaching” (p. 9). Such knowledge can make learning meaningful because it provides the necessary foundations, illustrations, and demonstrations, as opposed to the teacher just dictating facts or reading a story aloud to students (Shulman, 1986). When the teacher clarifies the content and provides a meaningful context, students are more likely to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills.

One of the most important aspects of pedagogical content knowledge theory is the fact that it is not enough for teachers to have knowledge of the subject; they also have to have a toolbox of strategies available in the event a student does not understand what is being taught (Shulman, 1986). Shulman furthered his theory by stating that when students do not understand the lesson or material, a teacher needs to be able to correct the students’ misconceptions of the lesson in a way that makes learning understandable (Shulman, 1986). As Geddis (1993) put it, in order for teachers to be able to effectively educate their students, they need to know many things about the content that they are teaching in order to make it relevant and comprehensible for the students.

Cochran, King, and DeRuiter (1991) furthered the work of Shulman by explaining that pedagogical content knowledge involves teachers taking what they know and understand about teaching and relating it to the subject matter. It is the fusion of knowing what to teach and
knowing how to teach it. Cochran et al. (1991) claimed that pedagogical content knowledge comes about when teachers not only reflect on what they are teaching, but also find various instructional methods to ensure that the students understand the information. Cochran et al. (1991) took the work of Shulman (1986) one step further, as they discovered that inexperienced or novice teachers do not always have a concrete level of understanding or the pedagogical content knowledge necessary for teaching and, therefore, they tend to rely on curriculum materials or textbooks to provide the direction for teaching rather than have a clear agenda to present the information (Cochran et al., 1991). When teachers have pedagogical content knowledge, they are able to determine whether learning will be easy or difficult for the students. Teachers with pedagogical content knowledge take the curriculum and transform it so that students can understand it and can be engaged in their own learning process (Deng, 2007). Teachers who are lacking pedagogical content knowledge tend to ask simple questions that only require recall of memorized facts rather than adjusting their instructional practice to meet the individual needs of the students within the classroom.

In 1987, Shulman built on his prior work by explaining that pedagogical content knowledge comprises qualities that teachers use to assist them in helping the students gain a clear picture of what is being taught. As Phelps and Schilling (2004) put it, content knowledge differentiates between knowledge of the content that is being taught and the specialized and unique teaching skills/pedagogy that a classroom teacher should have so that the students understand the content.

Pedagogical content knowledge theory fits this study because teachers may know and understand various works of literature, but may not know how to get their students to decode this literature in a meaningful way. More importantly, if teachers do not have a full understanding of
how to teach the content, then they most likely will not know how to demonstrate the necessary skills needed to transfer this knowledge base to other pieces of reading and writing that the students may encounter in their lives. Pedagogical content knowledge relies on the understanding of the content area, the way students learn, and the teaching strategies that will ultimately enable students to construct their own meanings within the content area. Many schools spend a plethora of time discussing what they should teach, but with few discussions on how they should teach or what instructional strategies would best engage students (Danielson, 2007). It is important to remember that true education comes from the acquisition of both knowledge and skills; one without the other is meaningless.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This literature review was designed to examine the literacy-based instructional practices of high school English teachers and the effects that these pedagogical practices have on classroom instruction and standardized test scores. This review is organized into three sections: Literacy Instruction in the High School English Classroom, Three Elements in Successful School/Department Turnaround, and Professional Learning Communities and Their Role in School/Department Turnaround. Each section was informed by pedagogical content knowledge theory because it explored the various aspects of classroom practice and expertise that each teacher brought to his or her English classroom. In addition, the literature was examined to determine the impact that the school community has on change and department turnaround. These bodies of literature create a foundation for this study.
Literacy Instruction in the High School English Classroom

The reading scores of high school students within the United States have remained extremely flat since the 1970s (Balfanz, 2009). An in-depth search of information about why the scores have remained flat revealed that strategic, purposeful, and deep reading is lacking in the typical high school English classroom (Schmoker, 2007). Instead, the study of literature is overtaking the classroom—so much so that English educators have come to believe that they are creating the next generation of literary scholars rather than recognizing their real mission of providing students with the skills and strategies necessary to achieve literacy competence (Slater, 2004). While it is essential for cultural competency to be well read and exposed to a variety of literature, it is more important to acquire the literacy skills to make sense of the content. These are the skills that are the most transferable for independent adulthood.

Detailed reading instruction is not something that has always been thought of when an English teacher plans his or her curriculum. Yet, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011) found in its most recent assessment of high school students that the United States ranked 15th in reading among developed counties and showed no gains from prior years. Because of this, it is evident that high school English teachers need to teach specific reading and literacy skills to ensure that students are able to comprehend multifaceted texts (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010). A study conducted by Lawrence, Rabinowitz, and Perna (2008) discovered that when given the opportunity to interact with various forms of literature while also engaging in literacy practices that specifically teach reading, students become empowered and feel more confident in their reading abilities. In light of this finding, instructional choices on behalf of the English teacher can have a significant impact on a student’s standardized test scores. Swanson et al. (2016) and Snow, Porche, Tabors,
and Harris (2007) found that in order to raise test scores, teachers need to understand how to teach reading to adolescents, because the reading skills that were taught to students in the elementary grades are not enough to make them proficient readers at the high school level.

Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2006) determined that literacy instructional practices should be based on a variety of genres, both in reading and writing. Their research also found that a good English teacher is knowledgeable about literacy instruction and realizes that true and authentic reading and writing instruction can only take place in a classroom where students are provided with frequent opportunities to interact with meaningful texts rather than engage in isolated assessment-based learning activities. Marzano’s (1998, 2003, 2007) research also revealed a significant difference between the intended curriculum and what is actually implemented in the classroom. His research found that many students have been gaining basic knowledge, but are not doing well in analyzing, applying, and explaining their reasoning. Marzano showed that students who have a teacher with pedagogical competence to teach literacy skills in conjunction with works of literature have reading/English language arts high-stakes standardized test scores that are 14 percentile points higher than those who have a teacher without that knowledge base. He suggested that English educators would not have to worry about standardized testing again if they made literacy instruction the focal point of their instructional practice.

These findings were corroborated in Schmoker’s research. Schmoker (2006, 2007, 2011) discovered that in classrooms across the country, students were being taught individual reading skills in isolation, with no connection to the literature that was being read. In addition to this, his research revealed that English educators who taught their students to read for meaning by analyzing and synthesizing what they read were teaching their students how to be successful
regardless of the standardized exam. More specifically, he determined that literacy tasks taught in abundance not only promoted significant gains in test scores, but substantially narrowed the achievement gap for all students (Schmoker, 2006, 2007, 2011).

The research on literacy instructional practices in high school has magnified the need for literacy-specific pedagogical practices within the classroom. A study conducted by Lefstein (2008) found that to implement the instructional practices described by Marzano and Schmoker, teachers need to be able to exhibit instructional innovation. Historically, English teachers have been looked at as the authoritative figure within the classroom who imparts knowledge to students. Often, teachers bring with them to the classroom the models that have shaped what it means to be a “teacher” and a “student,” as well as what a “classroom” or even a “lesson” looks like (Lefstein, 2008). In this environment, Lefstein revealed that what typically occurs within a literacy lesson is that the students read the text either aloud or silently. Then the teacher has the students respond to specific questions, either in writing or orally, and the teacher grades the answers as right or wrong. He indicated that this type of teaching imparts specific truths. For literacy instruction to be successful, teachers must be able to draw from content knowledge, pedagogy, and discussion facilitation skills and judgment rather than traditional concepts of teaching. Lefstein (2008) noted that literacy teaching is a demanding activity requiring innovation that provides opportunities for students to not only examine the text, but also examine the thoughts that the text evokes while developing higher-order thinking skills.

Since teachers learn what good teaching looks like in teacher training, to get to the root of the problem one must consider how teachers are trained to teach. Seymour and Lehrer (2006) conducted a study on teacher training, noting that strong teachers learn that in good teaching, two simultaneous conversations should occur in the classroom: first, the students can talk about what
they are learning while attempting to make meaning of the content, and second, the teachers can address the alignment of the students’ perceptions with the actual content standards. Their research recognized that untrained teachers may not realize that it is more important for students to demonstrate what they mean when they state what they have learned than it is for students to regurgitate the correct answers to objective questions.

A study by Grossman (1989) followed two groups of English teachers. One group studied to become a teacher while also earning a master’s degree in the content area of English, and the other group of teachers had expertise in the subject matter of English but no formal teacher training. His research revealed that the teachers without the formal training taught in a more formal or rote way, whereas the teachers who had the teacher training focused on teaching the students and relating the works of literature to their lives. Grossman (1989) also discovered that the trained teachers also opened up the material and provided opportunities for the students to develop their communication and critical thinking skills while also choosing works of literature that were more organized and made sense for the students. The formally trained teachers were ultimately prepared for the misunderstandings and misconceptions that the students had. On the other hand, the teachers who were only trained in the content area struggled with making decisions on how to fully instruct the students and bridge any gaps they had. Often they blamed the students’ abilities and motivation rather than their own level of teaching expertise.

It is also essential teachers are prepared to effectively educate students on the necessary literacy skills not only through preservice training, but also through in-service training. Gillespie, Graham, Kiuhara, and Hebert (2014) studied teacher preparation to support writing instruction. Their results found that 70% of their participants had little to no preparation from their preservice training in college, and 56% of them had little to no preparation even after formal in-
service training. When they surveyed the writing practices of teachers from the United States, Gillespie et al. (2014) also discovered that the teachers gave very few writing assignments that got the students to apply higher-order thinking or multidimensional writing. What was eye opening to the researchers was that the teachers studied believed that their institutions of higher education did not prepare them to teach writing or even how to support learning. In addition to this, they believed that the training provided by their employers was also insufficient. Linda Darling-Hammond (2006) identified through her research on teacher preparation programs that the courses need to be designed to prepare prospective teachers to truly understand the pedagogical practices needed to become teachers of literacy while also teaching them to understand how students learn, particularly in a diverse classroom.

As Seymour and Lehrer (2006) discovered through their research, students learn better when they are taught by a trained teacher. This discovery goes hand in hand with the findings of Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002), who found that the biggest predictor of achievement for students is being taught by a teacher who holds a full certification in teaching and disciplinary knowledge in the content area that he or she is teaching. In addition, compared with students who have a teacher who does not have the certification and knowledge base, students who have a teacher with pedagogical competence to teach literacy will score 14 percentile points higher in reading/English language arts on a high-stakes standardized exam (Marzano, 2007). The problem occurring in student literacy levels relates to the significant difference between the intended curriculum and what is actually implemented in the classroom (Marzano, 2003). In practice, the study of literature is overtaking the high school English classroom rather than the implementation of true literacy instruction. True literacy instruction should be student based—grounded in the abilities that students have when they enter the classroom and then built upon to
ensure that students are learning the necessary skills (Higgins et al., 2006). Yet, more and more students are being taught by teachers who may have the content knowledge but not the pedagogical content knowledge to teach them the literacy skills they need to be successful.

These findings illuminate what happened during the 1990s when the state of Massachusetts enacted goals to recruit more qualified teachers to the profession. Not only did the state want to attract more professionals to the teaching profession, it also wanted to expand the workforce to include educators who were high achieving in their undergraduate schooling or academically able career changers. By doing so, the state believed it would increase the academic knowledge base of its current workforce (Haverty & Stotsky, 2004). What was missing from this goal was a consideration that effective teachers and educators think about what they are teaching, how they are teaching, and how they can assess a student’s understanding of the material that they are teaching (Costa & Kallick, 2010). Just as Seymour and Lehrer (2006), Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002), and Grossman (1989) demonstrated through their research, students need to be educated by teachers who have been trained to be a teacher. Knowing the content of English does not necessarily mean that the teacher knows how to teach. As Lefstein (2008) put it, the teacher needs to have the innovation to examine the thoughts that the text evokes while developing students’ higher-order thinking skills.

Along with the educational goals of the 1990s came the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, often referred to as Ed Reform. This act instituted many reform efforts, one being teacher licensing. Career changers who had a bachelor’s degree in arts or sciences could take an exam on their reading and writing skills and subject matter and receive a teaching license if they passed. On these particular exams, teachers did not need to demonstrate pedagogical knowledge or ability levels; rather, the state of Massachusetts said they could receive this training through
induction programs and district-based initial licensure programs (Haverty & Stotsky, 2004). This reform act is not in line with the ideas of Schmoker (2007), Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002), Darling-Hammond (2006), Seymour and Lehrer (2006), or Lefstein (2008), who all stated that students need to be taught by teachers who have the pedagogical competence necessary to educate students, particularly when the assessment used for teacher licensing doesn’t incorporate a pedagogy component. As illuminated in the theoretical framework section of this research, Shulman (1998) stated that educators need to learn how to deal with various situations and be able to modify their instructional practice based on those experiences, yet the licensure regulations, particularly for teaching English at the high school level in the state of Massachusetts, do not ensure this.

In good teaching, two simultaneous conversations should occur: students should talk about what they are learning while attempting to make meaning of the content, and teachers should consider the alignment of the students’ perceptions with the content standards (Seymour & Lehrer, 2006). Educators, especially high school English educators, need to learn from experience. It is one thing to have completed the necessary coursework, be knowledgeable in the content of English, and be able to pass a test, but it is another thing to have learned from the experience of practice (Shulman, 1998). A study conducted by Galindo, Stein, and Schaffer (2016) illuminated this belief when they determined that it has been challenging to find teachers with the necessary skills to teach high school English because of the alternative licensing route. Typically, schools that hire the teachers with the least amount of skills are those with the lowest achievement scores, particularly in the area of English language arts. In addition, Hopkins and Heineke (2013) found that educators who have received their teaching license from an alternative pathway received an insignificant amount of pedagogical instruction to teach English
at the high school level. Often the training was conducted in a substantially separate setting that
did not provide opportunities for the teacher candidates to make connections to the curriculum
and the necessary literacy standards; as a result, the teachers often forgot what they learned in the
alternative training once they were in a classroom full of students.

In conclusion, this literature review revealed that success on standardized exams requires
students to be taught more advanced literacy skills that force them to read, write, speak, listen,
and understand words. High school English teachers need to realize that they are no longer the
sage on the stage, but rather a facilitator of knowledge. The teaching profession, particularly in
Massachusetts, needs to examine how teachers are receiving their teaching license and determine
if they have the necessary pedagogical skills to educate students in the high school English
classroom. On top of this, school systems need to be prepared to train their teachers to provide
the necessary skills to be able to read, write, speak, listen, and understand words. As the
literature suggests, if high school English teachers were to teach authentic literacy skills, then no
one would have to worry about standardized tests again (Schmoker, 2007).

**Three Elements in Successful School/Department Turnaround**

In addressing the second question related to school turnaround, it was important to
consider not only the key players in the process, but also the political aspects. Various studies
have focused on the convergence of political pressure, institutional leadership, and teacher teams
for successful school/department turnaround.

**Politics.** Politics began to take hold within the educational process in the early 1980s
when the pressure of educational success became central to the economic success of the United
States (Mehta, 2013). With the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 came the inception of
accountability and standardization within the public school classroom (Spillane & Kenney,
2012). This report stated that as a nation, U.S. school systems were failing their students. The report went on to argue that school systems were not preparing or producing workers able to compete intellectually or globally (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Based on the findings of this report, new agencies were formed to monitor how schools were performing, and the results were used in the form of accountability measures in relation to teaching standards (Spillane & Kenney, 2012). In light of this fact, political leaders campaigned to combat underachievement (Harris, 2006; Spillane & Kenney, 2012).

During this time and well into the 1990s, state departments of education began to take over school districts that were deemed underperforming in an effort to turn them around (Pipho, 1998). Yet, what resulted were inadequate outcomes and very few changes to the school system (Wong & Shen, 2002). The 1990s also brought about a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which took the responsibility of school turnaround away from the state departments of education and shifted it to the actual school districts to oversee individual schools that were underperforming (Childs & Russell, 2017; Hill, 2000).

When NCLB went into effect in 2002, departments of education at the state level did not have the manpower or funding to oversee the process, and therefore schools were left to their own devices to turn themselves around (Brown, Hess, Lautzenheiser, & Owen, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Manna, 2010; Minnici & Hill, 2007; Tannenbaum et al., 2015; Van Gronigen & Meyers, 2017). Turnaround was a major component of NCLB, and yet the regulations gave schools the idea that if they implemented what the regulations were saying, then they would turn around (Finn & Winkler, 2010). NCLB also specified that if a school did not make adequate yearly progress based on test scores in English or mathematics multiple years in a
row, then the schools would be deemed underperforming and turn around would need to be implemented (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010).

Race to the Top was another reform effort that was thought to be a response to NCLB. It was the first to realize that the state department of education could facilitate improvement efforts in underperforming schools with financial motivations (Childs & Russell, 2017). Race to the Top came in the form of a grant program created by the U.S. Department of Education to implement many school reform initiatives, one being school turnaround. Once awarded the grant, states were able to distribute funds to schools to support their efforts in closing achievement gaps and turning around low-achieving schools (McGuinn, 2012). Most recently, the Department of Education has transitioned to another reform effort called the Every Student Succeeds Act, which was passed in 2015 and amends the requirements of NCLB. Particularly, it has eliminated some of the government oversight of school improvement and is leaving the responsibility for turnaround to the state agencies (Tannenbaum et al., 2015).

A 2012 study conducted by Spillane and Kenney confirmed that since A Nation at Risk, politicians have directed their campaigns to the classroom and the notion of accountability and standardization. Because of this, political leaders have come to believe that they can specifically state what and how a teacher should teach, and they have attached rewards and penalties to schools based on test results. Spillane and Kenney (2012) also shed light on the transition of reform efforts over the decades. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) introduced test-based accountability and high-stakes subjects such as English and mathematics within school systems. The school leadership team has to manage all of the mandates while at the same time dealing with daily political and policy pressures. Most school leaders had to figure out for
themselves what to do with a fragmented list of mandates that provided no guidance for implementation.

Fullan (2009) too believed that true reform came about in the early 1980s when accountability systems were being examined. He also found that political pressure began to form since *A Nation at Risk* ultimately stated that we were no longer preparing our students to be successful in a global society. Fullan’s research shed light on the fact that the issue was not limited to American schools, but was global, affecting many other countries such as England, Canada, and Finland. Governments across the world were instilling ambitious standards, accountability, and sanctions for the lowest-performing schools. In England, this type of pressure failed since initiatives were missing the other key elements of leadership teams and teacher buy-in (Fullan, 2009). In fact, student success rates actually plateaued in England for several years. A major issue that Fullan noted, which was not addressed by Harris (2006) or Spillane and Kenney (2012), was the longevity and institutionalization of the reform efforts. He discovered that more often than not, school systems focus on various parts in isolation rather than examining the changes that need to occur within the big picture.

**Institutional leadership and teacher teams.** Harris’s (2006) research suggested that all schools can improve when a strong leadership team is in place. For improvement efforts, the work of a school leader is more often than not challenging and emotionally exhausting. In addition, she examined the role that educators play in the school turnaround process. Students are more likely to do better when their teachers are empowered and when they feel they too can play a significant role in the change process. Another major aspect that emerged from her research was the fact that relationship building is extremely important in the turnaround process. Ultimately, Harris’s research revealed that the leadership team cannot do it alone and that school
leaders must look to the teachers while fostering a sense of community where school improvement is seen as the responsibility of all.

Spillane and Kenney (2012) found that accountability pressure was different within each school depending on the individual’s position. They also addressed the third component of teacher participation in the accountability movement, suggesting that without the cooperation of teachers, the sanctions put forth by the political leaders and government agencies, along with the mandates that the administration was attempting to put forward, would never come to fruition. They discussed the fact that without the cooperation and willingness of the teachers to engage in the real work of instructional coherence and development, there would never be improvement.

Fullan’s (2009) research confirmed the findings of Harris (2006) and Spillane and Kenney (2012) regarding the role of both the leadership teams and the teacher teams in the turnaround process. He attributed the success of school turnaround to the establishment of an environment of professional trust, respect, and supportive and collegial working conditions for both the leadership teams and the teacher teams. He made a compelling argument for the need for capacity building—not only for the teacher teams, but also for the leadership teams—so that true change could occur. Certainly without a strong leadership team, schools are bound to continue to examine the issues in a fragmented rather than holistic way.

Seashore (2009) focused on leadership teams and teacher teams without delving into the political aspects that affect the turnaround process. Her research also provided solid evidence that without the two facets of a strong leadership team and teacher team, true school change cannot occur. Specifically, Seashore (2009) posited that strong school leadership teams are imperative for successful school turnaround, but the change process would never come full circle without the expertise and dedication of the teachers. Her research demonstrated that leaders are
powerful and integral in the change process because they shape the culture within the school building; leaders are not only able to read the climate within the building while stimulating intellectual conversations and collegial interactions, but are able to maneuver around the unpredictability that can occur within a school on a daily basis. Ultimately, she proposed that the success of strong leaders is not that they are able to instill mandates, but they are also able to empower the teachers within the building.

In regard to the teachers and their place in the change process, she came back to the notion of empowerment. Seashore (2009) examined the impact that PLCs had on the morale of the teacher. She attributed strong morale to the feelings of empowerment and sense of collegiality, where teachers feel comfortable enough to share not only ideas and instructional practice, but also failures that may have occurred. By forming a professional community, the teachers are able to learn from each other in a nonthreatening and meaningful way. Her research inferred that many school leaders and teachers know what needs to happen, but there is not a lot of evidence on how to make it happen or how to sustain it once it is put in place. These findings are important to consider, especially when thinking about Fullan’s (2009) research about institutionalizing changes and the longevity of those changes. His research showed that often schools are able to instill changes, but they are not always able to carry them out for the long term to sustain effective change. This is a crucial aspect to examine when considering the research on PLCs.

**Professional Learning Communities and Their Role in School/Department Turnaround**

Most studies conducted on PLCs focus on the fact that it is an opportunity for teacher teams to meet and hold meaningful, intellectual, and collegial discussions regarding student work and assessment data (DuFour, 2007; Hargreaves, 2003; Livesay, Moore, Stankay, Waters, Waff,
During these meetings, the teachers can establish expectations of not only their students, but also of themselves. Moreover, the PLC develops the content of the course/courses and distinguishes between effective and ineffective teaching practices. As a team, the teachers collaboratively analyze data to increase student capacity and success rates (DuFour, 2007; Hargreaves, 2003; Livesay et al., 2005; Schmoker, 2004; Thessin & Starr, 2011). PLCs are considered one of the most favorable professional development opportunities that a school can undertake because they provide opportunities for educators to work together in a collaborative and student-centered learning environment (Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002). When teachers meet regularly and collaborate, they are able to develop high-functioning teams which, in turn, can lead to high-functioning schools and ultimately high-functioning school districts (Thessin & Starr, 2011).

DuFour (2007), often known as a pioneer in the concept of PLCs, fostered the notion that a PLC provides a framework to transform a school. His research established that for a PLC to be effective, a school system needs to provide support, time, and encouragement. Furthermore, the school system as a whole needs to believe in the PLC process and commit to it (DuFour, 2007).

Once the school begins to believe in the process and commits to PLC meetings, the school needs to examine the individual PLC meetings. Within PLC meetings, shared leadership among the individuals is an important component of group success. Carpenter, Bukoski, Berry, and Mitchell (2015) conducted a study of three secondary schools in the Midwest. They interviewed administrators and teachers while also examining their PLC meetings to explore shared leadership configurations. Their research concluded that shared leadership is an essential component of effective professional learning in collaborative groups. It provides opportunities for continuous improvement and therefore shared values and vision because all stakeholders are
involved in the learning process of not only the students, but also themselves as teachers. When teachers establish a common understanding of how the group functions through a defined purpose and values, the collaborative group is able to solve problems associated with instructional practices while also furthering the development of their students and the success of the school overall. When PLCs begin to function with a shared vision, teachers can begin to hold the meaningful conversations that will ultimately lead to school, teacher, and student improvement.

Hargreaves (2003) examined the effectiveness of teacher teams, demonstrating that teachers who have opportunities to share ideas and hold intellectual discussions about student progress can impact student achievement levels more effectively. Additionally, Hargreaves (2003) discovered that when teachers are part of an effective teacher team, they are able to use the team as a model for how to build effective learning communities within their classes. Thessin and Starr’s (2011) research confirmed the findings of Hargreaves (2003). Noting that more and more employers are looking for graduates who can work effectively in teams, the teachers themselves need to know what it is like to function in a productive team (Thessin & Starr, 2011).

Thessin and Starr (2011) revealed that more and more school systems are moving towards ways to foster collegial and continuous conversations while at the same time increasing educator effectiveness by examining student work and assessment data. What their research touched upon that Hargreaves did not was the importance of professional development sessions for the teachers on how to effectively hold a PLC meeting; districts have to teach the teachers how to collaborate, as they do not necessarily know how to work with their colleagues (Thessin & Starr, 2011). As Elmore (2004) so eloquently stated, teachers need to learn how to open their classroom doors and begin communicating with their peers rather than succeeding independently
while holding court as king of their individual castles. Thessin and Starr (2011) also found that for PLCs to work, teachers and administrators must take ownership of the process. They need to be trained on how to work together. Furthermore, districts have to be able to demonstrate how PLCs link to the improvement process and differentiate professional development based on the needs of each school within the district. There is not one standard plan that meets the needs of all schools (Thessin & Starr, 2011).

Schmoker (2004) delved deeper into the notion of professional development, noting that administrators cannot assume that by putting teachers in the same room and providing scheduled time, the PLC will be effective or even productive. His research revealed that effective professional development for PLCs should come from the teachers themselves, who together learn to focus on the fact that an active PLC is not just about sharing, but about recognizing good teaching and student success. The findings of Schmoker (2004) and Thessin and Starr (2011) about the need for professional development are important to consider when embarking on the PLC process.

Mokhtari, Thoma, and Edwards (2009-2010) illuminated the concept of PLCs as a powerful educational tool to enhance student and teacher learning while leading to continuous school improvement. Their research revealed that schools that have undertaken the PLC initiative have witnessed successful results. The teachers involved in the PLC process felt enabled to work in conjunction with the administrative team and felt empowered to state specifically what they believed to be exemplary student work. A major theme throughout their research was the need for a district-wide culture of collaboration for PLCs to work effectively and lead to successful school turnaround (Mokhtari et al., 2009-2010).
Christ, Poonam, and Chiu (2017) furthered the idea of Mokhtari et al. (2009-2010) by examining how four PLC resources—colleagues, facilitators, readings, and videos—were related to outcomes of teacher learning and student learning. Their research showed that PLCs should be focused on learning outcomes and should include readings about instruction while also providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate with their colleagues. Their findings also illustrate the use of videos in PLC meetings, as it was the only resource that predicted teachers’ application of their learning to instruction. Facilitators were used to help provide insight on how to further teachers’ instructional practice particularly after watching a video. Christ et al. (2017) determined that when teachers are able to view videos that are related to instructional practice, they are more likely to immediately apply what they learned into their daily practice. This is different from previous research, which found that discussions with other teachers resulted in the improvement of instructional practice. Lastly, Christ et al. (2017) highlighted the critical role of teacher development through the PLC process and its relation to student success. They determined that school systems can help students learn by helping their teachers learn how to teach, and this happens when teachers apply their new knowledge to their daily instructional practice.

Akiba and Liang (2016) conducted a longitudinal study where they examined the effects of teachers’ learning activities on student growth and achievement over a four-year time frame. Their study examined six different forms of professional development and revealed that professional development sessions where the teachers were able to communicate with each other were more effective in improving student achievement than sessions that did not allow them to communicate. They noted that their results were in line with previous empirical studies showing that PLCs are beneficial to both teacher and student learning. They showed that the PLC time/
professional development sessions that were the most successful focused on how to teach students, what teachers believe about learning, and how they can work hand-in-hand to determine how students can develop new knowledge. What was also interesting was that their research revealed that teachers’ amount of informal communications had a direct effect on student success. This effect was much more noticeable than that from teachers’ participation in formal professional development sessions. Ultimately, their research revealed that informal teacher conversations around teaching and learning have an immediate impact on classroom instruction.

Thibodeau’s (2008) research revealed similar findings related to informal and job-embedded professional development sessions. Thibodeau (2008) conducted a study on a group of high school teachers who formed a literacy-focused PLC. This study was conducted over the course of a school year and examined the collaborative experience of teachers and the positive effects that the group process had not only on the teachers’ expertise, but also on student achievement. Thibodeau (2008) found that the teachers were able to benefit from the collective brainstorming and timely feedback. The teachers in this study noticed an increase in their own capacity to teach and discovered that their practices transitioned from teacher-directed learning to a more student-centered approach. Due to their collaborative group work, the teachers were able to demonstrate an increase in student test scores. The teachers specifically noted that job-embedded professional development and community learning afforded them much more success than they could have achieved from traditional professional development sessions. The continuous and sustained meeting time and collaboration was substantially more beneficial than sitting in a one-day professional development session being a passive learner. The teachers also attributed their success to the opportunity to develop a bond with other teachers based on mutual
trust and respect, while at the same time creating a learning environment based on the needs of each individual within the community. Finally, the group collaboration ultimately gave them a feeling of ownership, control, and responsibility for not only their instructional practices, but also their student success rates.

**Findings and Future Study**

For a department, particularly a high school English department to effectively turn around and raise its test scores, the teachers as a whole need to band together and believe in the vision and mission of school improvement and increased student capacity. English teachers need to focus on literacy rather than the next great American novel, and they also need to open their doors and begin communicating with each other. Teacher pedagogical practices do influence test scores, particularly when literacy skills are emphasized and taught. In light of this, students who are taught literacy skills in their high school English classroom do significantly better than students who are taught literature alone.

Not all teachers are trained to teach literacy. The best training may come in the form of PLCs. For teachers to be successful and the school to experience a real turnaround, the teachers need to be treated like professionals and provided opportunities to talk and learn from each other while sharing important student data and instructional practices. When leadership teams believe in the PLC model and provide teachers with opportunities to discuss their instructional practices, true collaboration develops and the school turnaround process begins to take hold.

Finally, true turnaround occurs when the school system builds the capacity of both the leaders and the teachers. Through capacity building, the system can demonstrate to the staff members that they are key players and stakeholders within the turnaround process. When school leaders empower teachers and provide them with opportunities to hold meaningful conversations,
they are affording opportunities for teachers to learn from each other in a meaningful way that ultimately will lead to increased student success and achievement.

The next chapter discusses the methodology utilized in this qualitative study. It details the rationale for the interpretative phenomenological analysis, as well as procedures for site and participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

This study addressed one research question: What are the Grade 10 English teachers’ perceptions of the changes that moved this particular department from a 74% needs improvement and failure rate to a 100% pass rate?

This chapter discusses the methodologies of interpretative phenomenological analysis and the case study format to investigate the experiences and perceptions of the English teachers of “North Shore Vocational Technical High School” (a pseudonym). It then details procedures for site and participant selection, data collection, data analysis, ensuring the validity and reliability of the data, and protecting human subjects.

**Study Design: A Qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Case Study**

The English department at North Shore Regional Vocational Technical High School is comprised of 13 teachers. Of those 13 teachers, five teachers have functioned in the role of a grade 10 English teacher for at least five years of the 13 years that were examined for this study. In 2003, 74% of the grade 10 English students scored in the needs improvement and failing categories on the English MCAS exam. Five years later, in 2008 the needs improvement and failure rates dropped to 24%. Ten years later, in 2013, the needs improvement rate was at 5%
and 0% of the students failed the English exam. Thirteen years later, in 2016, the final year of this study, the English department had a 7% needs improvement rate and has maintained its 0% failure rate.

The participants of this study were the five English, English special education, and English/reading teachers who have taught at the grade 10 level for a minimum of five years of the 13 years that were studied. The five teachers were interviewed both individually and then collectively in a focus group. The grade 10 level was selected because this is the level that the MCAS is administered in the state of Massachusetts. Within this particular school, the role of department head comes up every year. The department head position is not guaranteed from year to year as the position can be contested. It is a non-evaluative position where the department head functions as liaison between the administration and the teachers and works to support the department as a whole. That being said, three of the five teachers studied for this research have functioned as a department head within the last 13 years. This aspect created another intriguing layer to be studied and therefore, the three department heads were interviewed separately to gauge their understanding and thoughts of the turnaround that occurred within this department.

This research comprised the case study format while integrating an interpretive phenomenological analysis. The case study examined the student test data, individual interviews, focus group interviews, and computer-mediated communication interview. Within this case study, I utilized an interpretive phenomenological analysis to examine how the participants made sense, understand, and believe their experiences led to the turnaround of this English particular department.
Through reflective interviews, the research question was utilized to identify and understand what led to the turnaround of this particular school (Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). By employing a qualitative method, I was able to draw conclusions and construct meaning while giving a voice to the participants within the study (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative methodologies involve discovering the meaning and processes of social events in context, while also exploring the significance that the events had for the stakeholders involved (Esterberg, 2002). Often, qualitative studies begin by asking “how” or “what” questions in order to gain a deeper understanding of what is occurring within the particular study (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). This study utilized both types of questions to gain a better understanding of what has occurred within this particular high school, while also examining how the English teachers viewed and perceived the changes.

A qualitative research method provided me with the opportunity to explore their world while also examining the understanding and the experiences of the study participants (Mason, 2002). It is grounded in the interpretivist perspective of how the world is interpreted and experienced. This qualitative case study aimed to describe and explain the particular phenomenon by exploring the various points of view and experiences of the participants, while also examining the meanings that they assigned to these experiences during the last thirteen years (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). By employing the qualitative method, I was able to make conclusions and construct meaning while giving the participants a voice (Merriam, 2009). The qualitative method in itself is based on the idea of discovering the meaning and processes of social events in context, while also exploring the meanings that they had for the stakeholders involved (Esterberg, 2002). The method can be utilized to examine a persons’ experience and their feelings regarding a particular phenomena. Within qualitative research there are three parts,
there is the data which in this study comes from interviews, there are the procedures that are used by the researcher when examining and interpreting the data, and then there is the coding of the data where the researcher takes all of the information gathers and sorts it in to various categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Dezin and Lincoln (2011) take this idea one step forward when they explain that the three different labels that make up qualitative research including, ‘theory, method, and analysis; or ontology, epistemology, and methodology’ (p. 11). Ontology is the study of being and what reality is, where as epistemology studies what is means to know (Gray 2014). They go on to explain that the researcher will engage in the research with a set of ideas based on his or her background. This is referred to as the theory or the ontology. From here the researcher established the questions that will be asked, which are referred to as the epistemology. (Dezin and Lincoln, 2011) Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe (2002) describe that epistemology helps to clarify the structure of the research, what evidence is gathered, and the philosophy that the researcher will use and not used. Then the researcher will then examine the data, which is again referred to as the methodology (Dezin and Lincoln, 2011, p.11).

A qualitative case study explores a phenomenon by utilizing multiple sources and a variety of lenses to ensure the researcher has a true understanding of what actually occurred (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The case study methodology was utilized within this study because it examined a program, event, or process of multiple individuals. It aimed to describe and explain the particular turnaround of this English department by exploring the various points of view of the participants, interventions that were put into place, and the programs that were developed during the last thirteen years (Yin, 2003). As VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007) state, a case study is a relevant research approach that carefully examines a phenomenon by collecting evidence and analyzing the data. The interpretivist paradigm of a case study, which is what this
study utilized, emphasizes the anecdotes of the teachers involved as they explain what they experienced from their own point of view within the last 13 years. By utilizing the case study format I was able to examine what occurred in this particular school through its natural setting and I have presented the findings as it has been shared by the participants (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Norum). Ultimately, the case study approach provided the foundation to I describe what occurred within the department while also educating the readers on lessons learned from the English teachers who participated in the department turnaround. (Naumes & Naumes, 1999).

The interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology was utilized because it is inductive in nature and does not include a single step, but rather it includes the movement of the individual participant’s experiences to that of the whole group. It describes the experience, then interprets the experience, while working to understand the participant’s point of view and then ultimately, focuses on the meaning within the context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Overall, IPA is the study of a person’s interpretation of their experience. It is phenomenological because it focuses on the participant’s perception of what happened rather than making judgments of particular events (Smith, Flowers, & Osborn, 1997). “Phenomenology is the philosophical study of being” (Larkin, Thompson, 2011, p. 102). Another theoretical influence of IPA is symbolic interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism is influenced by phenomenology and it believes that the meanings that people make should be at the forefront of what the researcher does and those details should be collected through a process of interpretation (Smith et al, 1997). IPA is idiographic in the fact that it focuses on the details and is not abstract (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). It is also idiopathic in the fact that the interview data is analyzed entirely
on its own before the researcher moves onto the next interview (Watson, McKenna, Cowman, Keady, 2008).

This case study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach as it examined the experiences of the 10th-grade English teachers over the course of a 13-year time frame. It aimed to describe and explain the particular phenomenon by exploring the various points of view and experiences of the participants, while also examining the meanings that the participants assigned to these experiences (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Through this study, I examined what occurred in this particular English department in its natural setting and presented the findings as stated by the participants (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2009; Norum, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). I explored how the participants made sense of the turnaround and how the particular experiences affected their perception of the change (Smith & Osborn, 2007). To gain a clearer understanding of what occurred, I functioned as the key instrument in the collection of data while also interpreting the findings (Stake, 1995). Due to my position within the building, care was taken to not overgeneralize the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I am an administrator in the building who directly supervises the English department. During the 13-year time frame, I was instrumental in bringing professional learning communities to the school as well as deciphering the types of professional development that the teachers needed based on the English MCAS exam data. The interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology was utilized because it is inductive and considers the relation of the individual participant’s experiences to those of the whole group. It describes and then interprets the experience, while working to understand the participant’s point of view, ultimately focusing on the meaning within the context (Smith et al., 2009) while examining the phenomenon within a real setting by ascertaining the perceptions of the teachers involved (Yin, 2005).
Site and Participant Selection

The study site was the single school district of North Shore Vocational High School. North Shore, located north of Boston, Massachusetts, educates approximately 1,300 students from 11 different communities. This particular school was selected because of the transformation it has made with its students, particularly in the area of English language arts. Both the superintendent and school principal gave permission to use the site for this research study (see Appendix A).

I employed purposeful sampling to select participants, rather than random sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994), in order to gain the most relevant information (Maxwell, 2005). The teachers selected for the interviews and the focus group were chosen based on the grade level that they taught and their tenure during the turnaround process. Since the English MCAS is taken in 10th grade, teachers who previously and/or currently taught Grade 10 were invited to participate in the study to explore their thoughts, ideas, and experiences about the change process (see recruitment letter, Appendix B). This group provided a sample of teachers who experienced the accountability demands of the MCAS exam throughout the last 13 years. In addition, those invited to participate in the study had been a part of the institution during most if not all of the turnaround process and had been key players in the change process; as such, they provided insight and information about what occurred within this department (Maxwell, 2005).

Participation in this study was voluntary. As Seidman (2006) noted, since the “interview participants must consent to be interviewed . . . there is always the element of self-selection in an interview study” (p. 51). In addition to the individual interviews, a focus group interview was employed with the same five participants. The focus group provided the opportunity to discover the dynamics between the group members while also monitoring participation by all members,
whereas the one-on-one interviews provided opportunities to dig deeply and elaborate in a nonthreatening environment (Creswell, 2007). Finally, a separate interview was conducted with three department heads of the English department to examine their focus when leading the department as it turned around throughout the last 14 years.

**Data Collection**

Through this study, I examined the participants’ perceptions and experiences “to identify and interpret the relevant meanings that are used to make sense” (Reid et al., 2005, p. 22) of the turnaround of the English department, while also adding to the experience of the reader by improving his or her understanding of school turnaround (Stake, 1978). Within an interpretative phenomenological analysis, it is crucial to allow the participants to share their experiences in an individual discussion (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were the primary source of data (Seidman, 2006; Smith et al., 2009; Yin, 2009). The interviews were collected through in-person interviews of the selected teachers, a focus group session with the same teachers, and short interviews with three department heads. For this case study, I chose to explore the following data: interviews, focus groups, computer-mediated communication interviews, and achievement level/MCAS test score examinations.

**Teacher interviews.** I utilized a modified version of Seidman’s (2006) interview protocol for the interview component of the study. The interviews of the teachers lasted 65 minutes, where the specific topic of the session and questions were prepared ahead of time (see Appendix D). During each interview, I provided participants with the opportunity to describe their experiences and perceptions of the turnaround of the English department and to reflect on what had occurred within the department during their tenure at North Shore (Seidman, 2006, p. 17).
Prescheduled semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers at a location of their choosing. All chose to meet at North Shore, which provided me with an opportunity to understand the environment in which the turnaround occurred (Naumes & Naumes, 1999). Because the interviews were in person and one-on-one, I had the opportunity to dig deeply and elaborate in a nonthreatening environment (Creswell, 2007). All interviews were recorded to ensure that no information was missed and so that direct quotes could be utilized (Seidman, 2006).

**Teacher focus group.** I employed Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, and Fadden’s (2010) approach for the focus group section of the study. The focus group interviews occurred with the same English educators at North Shore that took part in the individual interviews. Although participation was voluntary, all interviewees agreed to participate. The focus group interview was able to occur because the participants in the group held a community of interests that provided the researcher with the opportunity to collect information (Goldman, 1962; Rubin & Rubin, 2012) while also providing the group with the opportunity to provide open and honest feedback (Kitzinger, 1995) in a naturally occurring meeting (Palmer et al., 2010). By interviewing in a group setting, I had the opportunity to examine the flow of information from the participants rather than a unidirectional flow of information that can occur during an individual interview (Goldman, 1962). The focus group also provided a setting where experiences and perceptions were interwoven into both social and contextual relationships (Palmer et al., 2010).

The focus group interview was a carefully planned 50-minute discussion in which I structured the roles of the participants, the purpose of the group, and the time frame of the session. I followed Goldman’s (1962) four objectives of a group depth interview: objectivity,
reliability, validity, and intensive analysis. Within the group, the participants had the opportunity to influence each other by sharing their thoughts and, by doing so, provided me with as much evidence as possible (Goldman, 1962). The focus group was held after the individual interviews to further explore the comments made by various individuals (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). As such, it added an extra layer of analysis that would have been missed from the individual interviews alone (Palmer et al., 2010).

**Department head interviews.** The interviews of the department heads took place via email, where I asked three questions to determine their experiences being a department head at North Shore during the turnaround of the English department. By conducting this short interview online utilizing a computer-mediated communication format, I was able to acquire a complete picture while also providing the department heads with the opportunity to be self-reflective and more candid than they would be in person (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

**Data Analysis**

In an interpretative phenomenological analysis, the intention is to understand the participants’ perceptions, while also engaging in an interpretative relationship with the transcripts individually and collectively (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Throughout the process, I had to interpret the data, ensuring that I understood what it was truly saying (Creswell, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). For the focus group data, I worked “alongside the individual interview data to develop a parallel commentary on the co-constructive qualities . . . in the context of a group discussion” (Palmer et al., 2010, p. 105).

The interview recordings were transcribed. I read each transcript multiple times and then systematically tracked what experiences and perceptions were important for the participants and what they stated about those experiences and perceptions (Palmer et al., 2010). On each
transcript, I used the left-hand margin to annotate comments that were interesting or significant. On the right-hand margin, I documented emergent themes. I then converted these initial notes into succinct phrases or codes that captured what the participant was saying (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). According to Saldaña (2009), a code is a “short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). The coding of the data took place in two cycles, with the second cycle using portions of the same units and reconfiguring some earlier codes (Saldaña, 2009). I utilized the coding process developed by Palmer et al. (2010) that was more collectively positioned and worked together with the interpretive phenomenological analysis process. I essentially took apart what the participants were saying line by line to identify themes, categories, patterns, group patterns, dynamics, and idiographic accounts (Creswell, 2009; Esterberg, 2002; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009; Stake, 1995).

Through the analysis process, I synthesized, grouped, and regrouped the data into recurring ideas to determine themes. The goal of this process was to tell a story that illustrated the data by comparing and contrasting the patterns to make sense (Smith et al., 2009; Yin, 2009). After developing an initial listing of themes, I considered any theoretical connections between them (Smith & Osborn, 2007), ensured that they linked to the actual words of the participants, and then ordered them. During the examination of the themes, I noted any convergences and divergences in order to recognize the differences and similarities of the participants’ explanations (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Within the focus group component, I took these principles and followed the eight steps established by Palmer et al. (2010) when working with focus group data in an interpretative phenomenological analysis. I took the participants’ perceptions and experiences and examined
them in relation to a group setting. I took what the participants stated and examined them in relation to the role that I played in the group discussion and then examined them in relation to the relationships that the teachers had not only with each other, but also with their peers outside of the focus group, as well as with the school as a whole. I then examined the story that each member told to determine the main story while analyzing the specific language that was used. I returned to the primary perceptions and experiences that the teachers initially identified and reorganized them based on the impending work. I concluded the process by integrating the themes across the individual interviews and the focus group interview. After analyzing all transcripts using this interpretative process, I created a final table of six themes, each with three subthemes.

In summary, Creswell (2009) described an iterative analysis process. I employed all six steps in his process in an iterative fashion:

1. Prepare. I reviewed audiotapes and Word documents that were transcribed from the interview sessions.
2. Examine data. I gained a sense of the information that the participants shared while reflecting on the overall meaning conveyed.
3. Begin analysis and coding. I organized the data into segments by taking the sentences and phrases used by the participants and segmenting them into categories that captured their essence (Saldaña, 2009; Smith et al., 2009).
4. Generate descriptions. I utilized the coding process to generate descriptions and turn them into themes.
5. Turn themes into a narrative. To allow the findings to emerge, I took the themes and turned them into a narrative that logically represented the responses of the participants.
6. Interpret the data. In this step, I was mindful of my own background and the various experiences within the institution that I brought to the table, as it was an important part of the interpretation process.

Validity and Reliability

During the research process, all participants were asked the same questions. The following protocol was used to ensure consistency:

1. Participants were informed of the study and any risks associated with participating.
2. Participants signed a consent form validating their participation.
3. Interviews were held in locations that were comfortable for the participants to ensure that no one felt threatened in any way.
4. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.
5. All data were coded for themes.

In addition, a rich, thick description was utilized to enable transferability and provide readers with the opportunity to match their own situation to the research context, thus ensuring both the reliability and validity of the research (Merriam, 2002). Finally, reflective journals and analytic memos were kept to check credibility while promoting investigative thinking through continual reflection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Ezzy, 2002).

Protection of Human Subjects

The study was approved by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board. I submitted the details and procedures of the study, which was used to document the activities and initiatives that have occurred over the last 10 years at North Shore Vocational High School and was not used for evaluative purposes.
I was aware that there may be a possible conflict because I function as the coordinator of curriculum and staff development and am often responsible for conducting the teachers’ evaluations. The participants were assured that their participation, or lack thereof, would not negatively impact their teaching evaluations in any way.

Protections were incorporated to ensure the safety and protection of all participants. Those protections began with obtaining informed consent from each participant (see Appendix C). All participation was voluntary, and a consent form was provided to ensure that the participants were aware of the various elements of the project. The consent form contained the following information:

- The right of the participant to voluntarily withdraw at any time
- The purpose of the study and the procedures used during data collection
- The protection of the participant’s confidentiality
- The known risks associated with study participation
- The expected benefits to accrue to the participant

The form was signed by each participant.

All consent forms, notebooks, and transcripts were kept in a secure cabinet along with information sheets, audio files, and a flash drive to ensure that participants’ names would not be revealed. All data were held on my password-protected personal computer. All files were held in a locked cabinet in my home. The safeguarding of confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms were means to protect the anonymity of the participants.

**Summary**

This study was conducted to discover the perceptions of the 10th-grade English teachers as this particular department moved from “Watch Status” to a top-performing vocational school.
A qualitative methodology of a case study with an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the teacher interviews was selected as the best approach to thoroughly examine the experiences and perceptions of the teachers who underwent the transformation at this particular department. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was selected because it focuses on how people make meaning of their individual life experiences by taking personal accounts and pairing them with the researcher’s own interpretations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Chapter 4: Research Findings

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological case study was to explore the key components that contributed to the turnaround of an English department within a vocational high school. Specifically, I focused on the experiences of five 10th-grade English/reading teachers—two women and three men—and three who functioned as a department head throughout the turnaround of this department. Individual interviews provided rich descriptions of the participants’ perceptions. Four interviews were conducted over a three-week time frame during the summer of 2015, one interview was conducted in the spring of 2016, a focus group interview was conducted in the winter of 2017, and a computer-mediated communication interview occurred with the department heads in the spring of 2017. In addition, to the interviews, I also functioned as a participant observer throughout this study. I am in the role of supervisor and have been the supervisor of this department since the summer of 2006. Whenever a participant references their “supervisor” they are referring to me.

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the data gathered through the study. I begin with profiles of the participants and their experience in becoming an English teacher at North Shore. I then move onto the three major themes that materialized from the data within the
individual interviews, I then present three themes that were identified through the focus group interview and I conclude with a description of each of the three department heads and the data that emerged when they discussed what they kept at the forefront of their mind when leading the department. All of this data was then analyzed to examine the overall perceptions and experiences of these teachers and to share this information with other struggling high school English departments.

**Participant Profiles**

*Brody* had worked at North Shore for eight years as a reading teacher. As an undergraduate, Brody majored in English with a concentration in writing. He then “went in to industry and worked for a little while [in the insurance business] and then went back and got [his] Masters”. He obtained a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction with a focus on literacy, after which he started teaching first and second grade. Later he was a reading specialist for fifth and sixth grade. Brody stated that when he first arrived at North Shore, he had a “rocky transition trying to navigate the expectations of Grade 10.” When asked if he felt prepared to teach grade 10 English, he shared that it was, “a change from working at the elementary level or grammar school level…also, moving to a reading based program was different because I had created more curriculum at the other school”. He felt isolated from the other grade-level teachers as he was working solely with the other reading teacher in the building. During his second year at North Shore, the school introduced professional learning communities (PLCs), and he was able to meet with the other 10th-grade English teachers. At that point, he began to understand the expectations for the grade, and the team began to formulate goals, particularly related to the 10th-grade state exam, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Once these meetings began, Brody felt that he was better able to align his reading-
based program with the skills and strategies that the other 10th-grade teachers were instilling within their English classes. Brody also shared that in addition to the PLC meetings, he felt that his own research helped him improve his teaching abilities. He explained that:

I did a lot of technical book reading to try to figure out what is the best thing to do…I’m always trying to see if there is something that I can do better and sometimes that involves taking online classes, courses that I have to go to, professional development, conferences, all that kind of stuff. I think North Shore really backs making yourself a better teacher.

Brody was a department head initially for the Title 1 department. When the school merged Title 1 reading with the English department to form the English Language Arts and Literacy Department in 2010. Brody became the department head for this department and remained in that position until the fall of 2016.

Brody recalls a time when the department was:

Not in a great place and we really needed to step up our game. That’s where we started out with scope and sequence writing and lesson writing. I think the following summer we worked on MCAS summer program curriculum. Myself, I’ve always volunteered to do as much as possible when it comes to being involved in the English department and even though I am a bit segregated being in the reading program I wanted to always be a part of the English department and know what is going on.

Caleb had taught at North Shore for eight years; the school offered him his first teaching job out of college. He was an English major with 12 education credits, “but not the right courses to count as an education minor”. During Caleb’s first two years at North Shore, he taught 11th grade and began working in the school’s MCAS tutorial program. The program introduced him
to the MCAS exam and the expectations of the 10th-grade team, “it was during that program I was introduced to the testing and some of the practice tests that had been in place at North Shore Tech”. He switched to 10th grade his third year, but still had very little knowledge of the Grade 10 English curriculum and how to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to pass the state exam. It was not until he started to work with the 10th-grade PLC that he felt he was able to “acclimate to teaching a Grade 10 course.” He shared that:

By the time I moved down to 10\textsuperscript{th} grade our supervisor had provided PLCs in-service during our school day and that really gave me a chance to hear experienced teachers talk about the 10\textsuperscript{th} grade and what was going on and how to do things to help students prepare for the MCAS because I [had] never seen it [the MCAS] before working here.

Additionally, Caleb expressed how the professional development that the school provided really “unlocked everything” for him and the department. During those professional development sessions:

We started to look at the practice test trends and we saw that our students were struggling in nonfiction and anything beyond a basic understanding of text on the old Massachusetts standards. Their open response scores were 1 out of 4, their long composition scores were 12 out of 20. So our supervisor reached out to someone who she thought was a reading expert and brought her in to talk with the English department, the department heads at the time, and some of the special education teachers and we really sat in a room for two days and talked about how we take a test and how we as teachers are successful at testing or reading and how we can translate that for our students and really unlock unfamiliar material…In
addition we also had a trainer from the DESE come in at the same time and he ran a workshop teaching us how to score the test, which was something that the school hadn’t used either…I think looking at those workshops that might have been in the same year really unlocked so many keys for the teachers and how we can approach teaching our students how to be successful.

Additionally, while working in 10th grade, Caleb obtained a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction and he used this experience to further his knowledgebase and hone in on his pedagogical practices. In fall 2016, Caleb became a department head for the English department at North Shore.

*Tayla* had taught at North Shore for seven years. A 25-year teaching veteran, Tayla obtained a master’s degree and completed a teaching fellowship to master teaching techniques and learn to analyze student work. Her first teaching job involved educating English teachers in another country:

Right after I got married I move to Japan. That is where I got a lot of my first experience of teaching in the classroom. I was working in the classroom with Japanese English teachers. The point was to start engaging students in a real conversation…while there I learned about out ESL [English as a Second Language], we learned a lot about motivating students.

Although she had a master’s degree, she did not have a teaching certificate right away, “when I got serious about teaching back in the United States, I took a class at Salem State, but there weren’t any jobs here” so she moved out of state to teach in a private school in California:
My first job was actually history and social studies and language arts at a private catholic school. While I was there I found a program at Fresno Pacific University that would use my private teaching experience as part of my class because a lot [of programs] wanted public school experience… So I went to Fresno Pacific took classes, and got my Master in education there. Then eventually, to get my credential I had to move to public school.

Once Tayla received her teaching credentials she then moved to a public school system, where she taught English for seven years. During this time, she learned the expectations related to an English curriculum in which the students must pass a state-mandated test. Additionally, she worked on various curriculum committees that designed and assessed practice exams, and she commented that this time helped her become a better teacher, “That in itself was a great experience because I was the girl who was teaching the other teachers how to do those tests so I was pretty ready to teach, just doing that in itself, I was pretty ready [to teach 10th grade English].

**Quinton** started out majoring in English as an undergraduate. He took a leave of absence and returned to major in psychology, with a minor in social work. After graduation, he began his career as a behavioral aide in a residential facility, where he worked for two years with students who had mental health issues. He explained that it was a:

DYS facility that I really enjoyed. I did that for a couple of months and it just exposed me to a different population, it was young kids. It was a locked facility, very structured, a very strict policy. These kids were there because they had to be. The next step was jail, but there was an academic component to it as well and at that point I really hadn’t
thought about the educational piece, I was still thinking of the mental health social work piece.

From there he got a job as a behavioral aide at a residential facility:

Again there was an academic component where they went to school as well. All the kids were on IEP [Individualized Education Plans]. I started in the residential part and I was provided the opportunity to fill in over in the educational component which then led to a classroom and I loved it, I absolutely loved it…it was a great experience.

From here he moved to an alternative high school on a teaching waiver; as he stated, “I had no formal education as far as in the education field.” While working at this school, he pursued his Master degree in special education. He stayed in this job for 10 years. He then got a job at North Shore to be the English teacher for special education students. When he arrived at North Shore, he realized that there was a large learning curve to manage the day-to-day activities. When he was hired, he knew he was unaware of the expectations for the 10th-grade program. As he stated, “I may not have known [what to do] the day that I was hired and that day I may not have been prepared, but when school started, yes [I felt prepared] and I feel over the years I feel very equipped to teach grade 10.” He explained that he feels very:

Fortunate to work with people since I’ve come here in grade 10 even up until this day that its worked where it is a collaborative effort. Both of my co-teachers [we] have always brought stuff to the table so I do feel as if I have been prepared…I feel qualified [to teach grade 10]. I feel as if there are still things I learn year-to-year. I think that’s one of the things about working with this grade 10 team is that they’re constantly rechecking and assessing and then sharing that information which is key.
Quinton concludes by saying that:

I think you can see it, I see, I think you can see it across the board, the English department is probably one of the best prepared and I’m not saying that because you are interviewing me, I think it is a fact and I think there is a variety of reasons [why].

_Eleanor_ started teaching at North Shore out of graduate school and had been at the school for 19 years at the time of the interview. Her bachelor’s degree was in English. She stated that she “never went to school intending to be a teacher; it just grew organically out of what my interests were.” She decided to stay at the college and obtain a master’s degree in education. She indicated that her first years at North Shore were very isolating. She was handed a book and that was it. As she put it, “it was trial by fire.” Although she was confident about the content, she was not confident about the pedagogy. She felt that graduate school was “a bit disconnected from what was really going on in the classroom.” Her unofficial mentor helped her get acclimated, as teaching was very isolating back then. As she put it:

Teaching seemed to me an isolated event. You’re in your classroom, rarely did you speak with anybody. There was no such thing as common planning. There was no such thing as professional learning communities. The department meetings were about business of the day and that is it, they were not about best teaching practices or sharing anything that anyone was really doing in the classroom. It just seemed that the whole environment was sort of you do your own thing and pretty much that’s it.

She felt that it wasn’t until the inception of PLCs years late that the 10th-grade team began to feel like a collective unit with camaraderie built on student learning. She explained that years later:
I think the whole process it was a whole environmental shift when years later we have focused on student learning, we are focused on best teaching practices, everybody is a team, we were not a team back then. It wasn’t ELA back then it was all kinds of separate things…now there is an atmosphere of camaraderie.

Eleanor believed that the transition of the department has made her a better teacher:

It allowed me to work as part of a team, it allowed the time to share ideas, to share curriculum, technology has [also] helped out with the Google Drive, Google Docs, [and] everybody has access to everybody else’s materials. To get to meet with the 10th grade teachers and discuss what they’re doing and allow you to have your own input. So yeah, definitely if it didn’t and it was a closed environment then we wouldn’t have done anything, but its been anything but.

Additionally, Eleanor was a department head from 2005 until the fall of 2011.

**Individual Interview Themes**

The goal of this interpretative phenomenological case study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of the 10th-grade English teachers at North Shore Vocational High School as the department transitioned throughout the last 13 years. The data that was collected from the individual interview component of this case study was gathered to share the participant’s perceptions and experiences as they explained the phenomena of the English department turnaround from their own point of view. The following three themes emerged from this data: **Theme 1: Shifting Away from Isolation, Theme 2: Facing a Trial By Fire – Learning What to Teach, and Theme 3: Teaching as Professional Work (Student learning, Student Success, right experts).**
Theme 1: Shifting Away from Isolation

The participants revealed that the teaching profession in general can be very isolating. When many of them began their teaching career, they were given the keys to their classroom and then left to teach on their own. Since they began teaching, the participants believed that the culture of the English department at North Shore has shifted away from this isolation into an atmosphere of sharing.

Each participant described his or her first experiences within the English department as isolating. Initially, this did not seem as an anomaly. Brody and Caleb referenced that embedded within the culture of teaching, teachers historically have taken on the role of the sage on the stage; they like to be the king of their castle. As Brody put it, “Teachers like to be master of their own islands.” Traditionally, they like to be the one with all the answers, imparting the knowledge and truths to their students. Caleb took the idea one step further by stating, “Fundamentally, I think we all need to be willing to accept that we are all not masters of the subject.” He believed that the culture of teaching needed to shift away from the individualized islands of years ago and transition to one of sharing. Eleanor revealed that this English department was no different from that old belief system:

Look[ing] back at the differences between then and now, . . . teaching seemed to me an isolated event. You were in your classroom [and] rarely did you speak with anybody. . . . It just seemed that the whole environment was that you did your own thing . . . and everyone was a bit shut in.

Tayla recalled that “the first year we started tutoring, we did it in our own classrooms [rather than tutoring in the tutoring lab with our peers]. That was all fine, . . . [but] shortly after, the very next year, . . . sharing became easier to do. . . . That was much more instrumental.”
Eleanor described the difference between the old and new environment by saying, “There was no collaboration. Everyone was in isolation. Now it is just different. . . . [Back then] there was no discussion, there was no collaboration . . . Now we have a discussion; . . . now we are reflective.”

Quinton also expressed that “when I first came in, I feel like I was out of the loop, very removed. I didn’t attend PLC [meetings] because of my schedule. . . . It left me at times feeling very alienated and isolated; I’ve hardened up over the years.” All five teachers revealed that once the school moved away from isolation and teachers started to talk about student learning, the shift in the department began. The school began the implementation of the PLCs. The master schedule was adjusted and time was allotted for the teachers to meet and begin holding conversations regarding instruction, assessment, and student learning.

According to all of the participants, the integration of PLCs was undoubtedly the biggest contributor to the department’s turnaround. Initially, the department was provided one 42-minute period three days a week every other week to meet in a PLC. Then they were able to meet for one 42-minute period every day, every other week. The teachers were then provided the time to meet for one 42-minute period every single day. Now due to scheduling changes and conflicts, not everyone gets to meet as consistently as they initially did. The view of the importance of the PLC was so intense that Brody stated, “I would not be where I am today without the PLC.”

The participants described the willingness to have conversations with each other as a key component of an effective PLC. Eleanor stated, “In the old environment . . . there was no collaboration. Everyone was in isolation. Now it is just different. Now, since we share a vision, [we] share objectives, share assessments, share lessons. I think it has been huge.” This transformation, according to Eleanor, was dependent on “the willingness to have open
conversations about best teaching practices [with each other].” Eleanor added what makes this work so important is that: “It’s not just what happens in the classroom when the students are there. It is also what happens when the students are not there as well. It is just a whole collaboration piece that is so important.” Commenting on this open conversation, Tayla said that in the PLC,

You look at what the students were struggling with and talk about how to approach it. . . . It is nice to know what you need to work on and then sit there in the PLC and talk about how we are going to do that. It is pretty big.

Caleb, too, believed that “the open dialogue [has been] tremendous for the culture of the English department.” Quinton added: “We have had time to collaborate, and that is huge. You know, just hearing this worked with me or that worked with me or try this or use this, that has been huge, huge, huge, for any level of success.” Brody was in full agreement:

Communication is huge. You need to figure out what strategies are best for the test, but also best for your school and your school setting and how do you interweave them into what you are already doing in your English classroom by communicating with your group. Working together to be on the same plane so everybody is using common vocabulary, everyone is working toward the same goal.

Brody described the early PLCs by stating:

Initially, you got into that room and you’re just trying to figure out what are we supposed to be doing here? Who’s supposed to talk first? Does the senior person talk first? As far as I am concerned, that was early on in my career here, so I just stepped back and listened for the first year or two of the PLCs. Then, as I felt stronger and had more of a sense of what we were supposed to be doing and moved up in my role in the English department,
then I felt more comfortable sharing my ideas and making suggestions and what not. I think, initially, we’re all trying to figure it out. And as we said, “All right, this is what we’re going to talk about,” or just talked about the different lesson plans that we were running and that they weren’t working or were working and started sharing ideas, after having daily meetings, it eventually became a much more smooth process. You knew somebody was taking minutes and might be the leader of the group for the day, and then you’d talk about whatever the topic is. Or figure out, next week we need to rewrite a common assessment for Lord of the Flies, or whatever it is.

The teachers explained that within their PLC they were able to discuss student issues. They shared not only lessons and assessments, but also student struggles. They believed that this communication has been integral to their success. No longer were they functioning in an environment of isolation; rather, they were able to work together and draw from the strengths of everyone on the team. As Brody put it:

The PLC was definitely an intricate, a very important component [of the turnaround]. I think it kept me in the loop of sharing ideas with my peers, making sure I’m on track with what I’m doing, bouncing things off of other colleagues, just really making sure my kids are getting everything they need.

Collectively the teachers began to draw on the strengths of everyone within the group. The participants believed that each day within their PLC meeting they could all learn from each other and they understood no one person was an expert, but collectively as a whole they were pretty close. Eleanor illuminated this idea when she shared her experience in the PLC was one where she drew on the strengths of her peers to make her the best teacher she could be:
The whole collaboration piece is so important. . . . People have different areas of expertise. When we share those, it makes everyone stronger; the whole group is stronger. When you have a close-knit team that is in charge of the kids’ performance on the test, you have to draw on the strengths of everyone, and you have to be willing to say you have a weakness somewhere so that you can improve. So the attitude of everyone is just changed [from where it was when they began teaching at North Shore]; it is just more of a team effort than before.

Caleb stated that PLCs “have given us an opportunity to communicate with other teachers about things we’re seeing as shortcomings or successes. . . . That gives us the ability to talk about successful materials or programming that we found worked.” He added:

It just takes a teacher to grab a new file and say: “What about this?” And I say: “I haven’t done that in a year; let’s do that together.” And to have a conversation and open dialogue is tremendous for the culture of the department. . . . [Now] there’s this consistency of language and dialogue about how we teach the subject. . . . So, personally, it really gave me so much more confidence as a teacher.

Brody shared that the PLC provided him with the opportunity to “[sit] in the room and . . . listen to what everyone was doing.” He spoke about drawing on others’ strengths; within the PLC he was able to “borrow ideas from what the English department was using in their curriculum and listening to the positives and negatives of what was going on.” In addition, he indicated that the PLC helped him “create relationships with multiple teachers, and definitely I learned a lot of different things from the different people. . . . I think we learn best from each other.”
Tayla conveyed the value of “just having us all in the same place at the same time looking at the same stuff.” Quinton explained that “we all may have our moments where we get off topic, but we are talking about students, curriculum, planning, tests, quizzes, MCAS—I don’t care what it is; it’s about making it better for the students for them to be successful.” Tayla learned that within a PLC, “sharing becomes easier to do.” She explained her experience in the PLC:

We got along great and we were all very highly motivated teachers. We shared hands down. No one was shy; [everyone was] pretty generous with their stuff, so it was an easy atmosphere to do that in. I think that in itself was probably the big thing. Hearing what other teachers were doing, what worked . . . it was nice to have other teachers to talk to and bounce idea off of.

As the PLCs evolved and teachers showed that they were willing to have open conversations and build on the strengths of others, the participants began to examine student data to determine what worked and what needed to change within their instructional practice. Through this process, the teachers realized that they each bring something different to the table and that if they are willing to open up and share their expertise, then collectively they are working in the best interest of their students while also enhancing their own instructional practice. No longer do they need to work in their individual silos focusing on that individual area of strength they can now mutually work towards a common goal on improved student learning.

The teachers revealed that this camaraderie and willingness to be open and share their materials to increase student learning is not typically commonplace. For a department to be as
successful as this English department has become, the teachers need to be on the same page, working according to the same mission, and ultimately sharing the same vision.

The participants highlighted the importance of trust within the team, which involved a focus on the goal, of student achievement and not their own individual egos. Eleanor described that the teachers collectively created an atmosphere of trust and camaraderie as being a place where they could be “very honest about the profession. Everyone was there for the right reason, egos aside. We want the students to do well, [and we worked to figure out] what do we need to do to have the students do well.” Brody echoed this feeling of trust, that was created overtime noting that team members

Push me to be better . . . and I trust have my back at all times. . . . It was just the dynamic of the group; we just all had the students’ success in mind, and there were no egos. It was just [a group of people who] shared their best teaching strategies [with each other].

Quinton reiterated the thoughts of both Eleanor and Brody by saying that he believed that the atmosphere within the 10th-grade team was “respectful, collaborative, honest, truthful, I’m just thinking teamwork, and resourceful.” He went on to state that there were no egos within this group of teachers, so much so that he believed that “they are open to ideas, whether it’s my ideas or other people’s ideas. And sometimes I even think: Did I just sound stupid? They still respond to me. . . . The truth of the matter is that they have the students’ best interest at heart.”

Caleb shared that this process provided opportunities for the teachers to “come in and feel open and welcome to any materials, insight, or help.” He also indicated that working in the PLC provided opportunities for the teachers to:

Build relationships with the staff in the English department and the special education department in a way that we can talk to one another openly and honestly and . . . share
materials or ideas. Even talk about a particular student who has particular needs and try to get ahead of some of the stuff [where] in other schools and other districts teachers are still [feeling] so isolated.

Tayla concluded by stating that teachers should “trust [their] fellow teachers, because some have really good ideas.” Once teachers check their egos at the door and realize that everyone is there for the same reasons, then they can begin to share their best practices in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental environment rather than hoard all of their knowledge to themselves.

The participants also described how the transformation process of this department provided them with opportunities to share best teaching practices, which is something that they did not do before when they functioned in an environment of isolation. Quinton commented:

It was all about sharing the ideas. . . . I think it is a huge thing that administration has allowed [this sharing] to happen and continues to allow this to happen, and I think that [the sharing has had] a very big impact on the English department success.

Brody explained:

Again, the PLC has helped me to create relationships with multiple teachers, and I definitely learned a lot of different things from different people that I work with and how I envision my classroom and how I want my classroom to work.

Eleanor compared the past with the current environment, highlighting the sharing that now takes place and its importance:

In the old environment, again, there was no collaboration. Everyone was in isolation.

Now it is just different since we share a vision, share objectives, share assessments, share
lessons, and share technology. I sound like a broken record, but it’s all about sharing the vision, being on the same page, collaborating, a willingness to admit you are not an expert in all teaching areas, and to adopt other people’s strategies and best teaching practices that have worked.

Tayla commented that, as PLCs became more regular, sharing became easier. “There was always: ‘Hey, this is what I did.’ . . . We shared hands down. . . . It was nice to have other teachers to talk to and bounce ideas off of.”

Caleb noted that this sharing could be especially important for new teachers or teachers adjusting to a new curriculum: “Having experienced teachers . . . next door, sharing a co-teacher, especially an instructor who had been in the 10th-grade classroom . . . was instrumental for me to grasp the curriculum.”

Thus, as the teachers evolved and worked together, sharing became easier. Once this happened, the teachers began to realize that not only were the materials a resource for their teaching, but their peers were a resource as well and this would never have happened had they not invested and believed in the process of a PLC and believing in each other.

Eleanor explained that the most valuable improvement in the English department was the realization that “everyone in the department . . . is the top resource.” Tayla informed fellow teachers that they should “be open to what other people are doing. Steal good stuff from other teachers.” She went on to state, “I think this is a hard one because I think some teachers have a hard time changing.” Caleb noted, “We have just come so many leaps and bounds [from where we were when we worked in isolation]. . . . The material wealth is there.” Brody described the resources he encountered; he worked in a department with “a lot of fantastic brains, and a lot of [them] have a unique perspective and different ideas. And if you put all of [them] into one room,
they end up feeding off of each other.” Quinton explained that he felt that he “has some really
great models. I learned from my peers. I think as an overall staff, we provide kids with every tool
they absolutely [need] from administration down to the para [professional] s.” The teachers
believed that they learned from each other. They wanted teachers in other schools to realize that
the materials they need might just be in the mind of their next-door neighbor an not jus in their
own.

The teachers within this department believed they had become successful because no one
had an ego. Rather, their peers had their best interests in mind at all times. Once the teachers
began to feel this sense of camaraderie, they could begin to share best practices. They could learn
from each other, recognizing that they all had good ideas. The process of teaching has
transitioned since the teachers began at North Shore. Initially, they were given their curriculum
and left to teach without any assistance; ultimately, it was a trial-by-fire experience. They
articulated that to be successful, school systems need to shift away from this isolation where
teachers are masters of their universe and do not share their materials or lessons with their peers.
They did note that the change wasn’t something that happened overnight. It took time for the
teachers to be comfortable sharing their ideas.

Talking about teaching did not always come easily for teachers, especially when they had
been working in an environment of isolation for so long. Sharing might not be easy at first, but
the teachers need to also be aware that individually they might not know everything, but
collectively they can be an extremely knowledgeable team of teachers. These English teachers
began their careers working in individual silos, doing their own thing, but as they implemented
PLCs and began sharing ideas and their expertise their standardized scores began to rise.
Theme 2: Facing a Trial By Fire – Learning What to Teach

For most of the participants, North shore was their first experience teaching English at the high school level. Many of them expressed that when they started teaching they were aware of the content of English and the works of literature or how to write an essay, but they were not necessarily confident in how to get the students to understand that literature or how to get the students to produce that essay in a meaningful way. The teachers undoubtedly expressed that they had the content piece down, but they were severely lacking the pedagogy piece.

The participants discussed their first experiences with teaching 10th-grade English at North Shore. For Caleb and Eleanor, North Shore was their first teaching job. Brody, Quinton, and Tayla had taught before, but North Shore was Brody’s first experience teaching at the high school level and North Shore was Quinton’s first experience in a public school system. All except Tayla described their initial teaching experiences as a trial by fire. Eleanor explained that she was “given a rank book and [the principal] said ‘see you later’ and that was it; it was kind of trial by fire.” She went on to state that she “felt prepared in [English] content, but not in pedagogy.” She explained that she was unsure of “how to get students to learn what I was attempting to teach them. . . . I didn’t know how to make it [English content] relatable to a student.” Caleb also discussed not knowing how to teach 10th-grade English. He described, “I was pretty isolated. I was given a half-inch binder of the scope and sequence and told to teach, so I was kind of thrown in there to the wolves.” He also went on to state that when he volunteered to teach in the after-school MCAS program, he “was introduced to the testing and practice testing that happens at North Shore . . . so I had some knowledge, but not a lot.”

When Brody first started teaching 10th grade, he also felt unclear about what to teach. He elaborated by saying:
The first year was not a rocky transition and not a super smooth transition, but it was different trying to navigate what the expectations of Grade 10. . . . I was a little more separate from the English department [as the reading teacher]. . . . We [Brody and the other reading teacher] didn’t get to meet with the English department . . . to be able to understand the goals of the department.

Tayla, on the other hand, was an experienced teacher but felt that she/the other English teachers were “left to our devices” when beginning to teach 10th-grade English. Quinton echoed the sentiments of his peers, saying, “I really didn’t know what I was getting into when I first got hired. I didn’t know what my responsibilities would be per se.” He went on to state that it was “a lot to manage the day to day . . . and acclimate. Thankfully, I felt supported by everyone, but . . . you’ve got to get through it . . . on your own.”

Although each teacher’s experience was different, the participants’ interpretations were initially the same; they knew the content and they were given the scope and sequence of the curriculum, but they were not given directions on how to teach it. They were missing the pedagogy piece. As Tayla stated, they were left to their own devices on how to convey the content to the students, and as Eleanor described, not everyone knew how to convey the content to the students in a meaningful way. Quinton took a positive spin on the situation by saying that he “felt supported” and he was “glad they [the teaching responsibilities] were what they were because I don’t know if I would be happy in any other position.”

When many of the participants started teaching, they were not sure what to do or how to get the students to interact with the content. Brody explained his attempt to teach the students how to use the departmental graphic organizer: “At that point, I didn’t understand [it] at all, so I
was trying to teach it to the kids, but they were actually teaching it to me.” Eleanor also faced challenges when she started teaching:

I felt prepared in content knowledge, but not in pedagogy, not exactly how to get students to learn what I was attempting to teach them. I felt I had expertise in the content, but how to make it relatable to a student, how to teach effectively—I felt that grad school was a little bit disconnected from what was really happening in the classroom.

When Caleb started teaching, he was given a half-inch binder of the scope and sequence and was told to teach. It was not until he moved to 10th grade and joined the PLC that he could “hear experienced teachers talk about the 10th grade and what was going on or how to do things to help the students.” Quinton expressed that when it came time for tutoring:

I was the only one tutoring my kids unless someone picked them up, so for me I was just like: Okay, what do they need the most? And [I was] kind of just scurrying [and saying]: All right, I am going to do this with them or that with them. Now it is nice [because we have] two people doing different things, but using the exact same language. There is no disconnect for the students.

Not everyone faced uncertainty when it came to teaching Grade 10 English at North Shore. Tayla had taught for many years prior to coming to North Shore, so she did not comment on uncertainty about conveying the content, though she did express that she had years of experience in learning how to teach. This undoubtedly provided her with the foundation to be not only comfortable with her teaching abilities, but also successful with her own teaching practice.

After dealing with uncertainty and then attending both in-school and out-of-school professional development sessions and working together in the PLC the participants’ knowledge base and focus on teaching began to change and they transitioned to a mindset of literacy.
Literacy then gave them the focus that they were looking for and it became the foundation for all of their instructional units.

As the teachers evolved and embraced the mentality of literacy, they began to see the importance of it within their English content instruction. Eleanor adeptly described the transition to literacy within the department, which involved teaching reading and writing together:

The old vision was that it saw reading and writing as two separate disciplines. So they were taught in isolation. Grammar and vocabulary were taught out of context, separately from grammar books. . . . [Now] reading and writing are taught together and [this approach] allows students to buy in to the philosophy where they should write like a reader and read like a writer. We are English language arts now, so the whole approach and mindset of literacy, the importance of language, I think, is stressed, whereas before it was sort of taught in isolation.

Brody commented on encouraging students to be readers within his classroom. He was able to implement literacy instruction through choice reading, which provided opportunities for his students to find their own interests, learn to read for pleasure, and develop their fluency skills:

My goal is to get [my students] to be readers. We started a whole push, but a whole push for choice reading. I think that letting the kids choose their own high interest books to read on the side or during class for a certain amount of time daily, weekly, whatever it is. The choice reading has really made an impact or difference with the kids. I want my students to be able to read, to want to read. . . . Harboring in on the things to fix has really helped our curriculum to open up for choice reading, for more complex texts.
Quinton too explained that “choice reading . . . [and] the literacy committee based on school wide goals that go across the curriculum” were activities that moved his instructional practice to one of literacy and not just the content of English.

Implementing literacy within the English classroom was not second nature for all of the teachers. Professional development was instrumental in providing a foundation. Caleb indicated that the professional development workshops had assisted him with the transition to a literacy based instructional approach:

Looking at both those workshops [one on reading and one on writing]—I think they might have been the same year—it really unlocked so many keys for the teachers and how we can approach teaching our students to be successful.

Tayla, on the other hand, came to the school with a knowledge base and background in reading and metacognition. She perceived that “just getting the students aware of the process of reading and how it plays out in their heads” was helpful to her instructional practice.

The participants expressed that when they first started teaching, they were unsure of what to do and they were teaching literacy skills in isolation. This was self-defeating, whereas incorporating reading and writing in conjunction with each other has led to successful results. The teachers specifically mentioned choice reading as being influential in fostering a mindset of literacy among the students because it provided an opportunity for the students to find a love of reading while also developing their reading skills. By believing in the process of literacy within the high school English classroom, the teachers were beginning to collectively teach what truly matters for their students.

Eleanor used the phrase, “teaching what matters” when discussing the teaching strategies she used, which contrasted with teaching to teaching isolated literacy skills.
Teaching strategies that are working that we didn’t do before are journals—they definitely helped the kids with their writing. Choice reading is definitely helping the kids with reading comprehension and their interest. We are teaching what matters rather than teaching to the test.

Similar to choice reading, wherein students chose what to read, teachers implemented journal writing, which allowed the students to write on a subject of their choice rather than being forced to write to answer a question provided to them on a test in a classroom assignment.

“What matters” related back to the students. Brody explained the process by stating that “in the PLC we just worked constantly, paying attention to what’s going on with the kids, . . . what is going on in the classroom, and what we have to teach them. . . . I want them to be successful.” In teaching what matters for the students, Tayla found the greatest success with the reading apprenticeship program: “I would say [to low-performing schools]: Examine that approach, the metacognitive approach, where your student readers are interacting with the text as they read.” Tayla believed that such an approach would provide the biggest results in a school turnaround, specifically for an increase in reading scores. By interacting with the text, students are learning how to think about the reading process while they are reading.

Caleb acknowledged that teaching what matters was a large goal. He shared that teachers can break it down and access available resources:

There are resources from other districts [that] are open and communicating. That is where we started: looking for rubrics that were posted from other districts. . . . The state website has so much information that even if you can’t control all 600 students in Grade 10 or 8, that you can focus on your 60 students. And if you analyze the testing data, as we’ve
done, you can pick something, one thing at a time to push and to do well so that your students feel a sense of accomplishment as well.

Quinton concluded this idea best by saying that teachers need to “remember that it’s about the kids”:

Try everything that you can. They are here because they want to learn. [The teacher should] provide them with all of the tools that you possibly can [and] continue to let them know that you are . . . here to give them an education.

The participants unequivocally believed that literacy instruction was what truly mattered within their classroom. No longer were they teaching works of literature in isolation or even teaching in isolation; rather, they were weaving meaningful literacy practices such as journal writing and choice reading into their instructional practice to ensure that students had a true understanding of what they were reading. What all the teachers stated was that none of this would have been possible without the backing of the administration. As Caleb put it, the “administration usually backs up whatever need [we] might [have]. I think that’s big. That’s a big part of the success of the grade 10

Some of the teachers shared that when they first entered the profession, they were not confident in how to convey the English content to their students. As time has evolved, the school offered professional development in both reading and writing. These sessions led to a mindset of literacy within the department, with a focus on teaching reading and writing together rather than separately. The teachers believed that once they were on the same page, working towards the same vision and goal, then the department began to significantly change and the true turnaround effort began to take hold.
Theme 3: Teaching as Professional Work (Student learning, Student Success, right experts)

The participants outlined the shift that needs to occur to move teachers from an environment of isolation to one of collaboration for student learning. Quinton said: “It’s about the kids, and if I can learn more to better them, then it is going to be good in the end.” Eleanor commented on the difficulty in the transition for veteran teachers:

Everybody [the other English teachers] seemed . . . reluctant to say they couldn’t do something well, so it really held [the department] back. It was a whole environmental shift when years later we have focused on student learning; we are focused on best teaching practices.

By Caleb’s second year, there were many new teachers in the department. He believed that their presence “opened the idea that we can communicate and share ideas with each other. . . and talk about the 10th grade and what was going on or how to do things to help students prepare for the MCAS exam.” Caleb noted that “teachers should be open to suggestions,” but recognized that “some teachers have a hard time changing.”

Tayla considered data analysis a key to student learning. She stated, “Just looking at what students were struggling with and talking about how we are going to approach it . . . was pretty big.” Brody also believed that data analysis is an integral part of a focus on student learning. He revealed that when the group began to look at what they’re [the students] doing and how we can improve, . . . analyzing the data helps you to figure out where the students are falling off and then you can start to talk about how else to improve it [your teaching].

The participants also described the various professional development sessions that they attended as being the major key to change in the department and enhancement of their teaching
practice. Caleb indicated that the professional development sessions that the school provided “really unlocked so many keys for teachers on how we can approach teaching our students to be successful.” Quinton explained that the professional development put the group “on the same page. . . . We now have a common language, common scoring. . . . There is consistency.” Brody described the “common professional development” as one of the keys to developing a high-performing English department. He commented that their professional development sessions turned into a “think tank” where the teachers all had “ideas bouncing off of each other.”

Eleanor shared her thoughts that the current professional development is “much more in tune with our needs”:

Now [the school] surveys us: what are we interested in, what are the gaps. Before it was, these are your options, and you took them because you had to. Everything is just in line with one another; everything is focused in the right direction whereas before there was just arrows pointed everywhere and you just kind of muddled your way through.

Tayla, on the other hand, credited professional development prior to coming to North Shore as a key to success in her instructional practice. She participated in a reading apprenticeship program based on the metacognition of learning. Tayla explained that the program taught teachers how to “get students aware of the process of reading and . . . aware of what’s going on in their heads.” She then described a class wherein she implemented the reading apprenticeship material; she “had some of the students analyzing a Shakespearian sonnet, and afterward you’d thought it was an honors class.”

The participants also discussed the role of analyzing data with their PLC. Tayla explained:
The PLCs played a very important role in [the transformation], but some things that we did in the PLC helped that. You know, the data analysis. Just looking at what students were struggling with and talking about how we were going to approach it. . . . It’s nice to know what you need to work on and then sit there in PLC and talk about how you are going to do that.

Caleb noted that the PLC provided “an opportunity to communicate with other teachers about things we’re seeing as shortcomings or success. This gives us the ability to talk about successful materials or programming that we found has worked.” Quinton also stated that by analyzing student data, “we are constantly assessing what can we do differently, what’s working, what’s not working, and I think that is key to any practice.” He went on to state that “I think you can see it across the board: the English department is probably one of the best prepared [because of PLC].”

Brody also discussed the analysis of data within the PLCs:

As time evolved, [the PLC] looked at what we are doing and how we can improve and then [we] analyzed the data [to] figure out where we [were] falling off and then [we] started to talk about how else we can improve.

Brody shared that as a PLC, the teachers created common assessments. Since then, they’ve moved to analyzing the data to improve results:

Now, several years later, we’ve already got our common assessments. When it comes to the point where we have to give [the actual assessment], we think back to last year: Does this need to be changed? Do any questions need to be altered? Now it is a more refined discussion [in the PLC], where it’s not so much creating of documents and items; it’s thinking back to the year before [to determine]: Did this delivery method work versus this
method? Who did it best? And we have those conversations while we’re teaching. . . . I think it facilitates knowing what to do better next year. . . . The amount of numbers that we look at in the English department, and it’s pretty ridiculous considering we’re not numbers people.

Eleanor highlighted several important aspects of a PLC: “sharing a vision, being on the same page, collaborating, a willingness to admit that you are not an expert in all areas of teaching, and adopting other people’s strategies and best teaching practices that have worked.” She added that “the data-driven piece is important, and I think that will probably [continue] to evolve in the future.”

The participants identified that once their PLC meetings were up and running, they felt that collectively they had to continue the transition and not only talk about what to teach, but now they needed to talk about how to teach and how to be able to adapt and evaluate one’s teaching based on student data. This was not second nature for the teachers; the school district decided that in order for the department to continue to make progress then professional developmental providers had to be brought in.

The participants universally described that the school brought in professional development providers who were knowledgeable in both reading and writing. Caleb explained:

Our supervisor reached out to someone who she thought was a reading expert and brought her in to talk with the English department, the department heads at the time, and the special education teachers, and we really sat in a room for two days and talked about how we take a test and how we as teachers are successful at testing or reading and how we translate that for our students and really unlock this unfamiliar material.
Caleb also attributed the departmental success to the fact that the school brought in a gentleman who “ran a workshop teaching [the teachers] how to score the test. . . . None of the teachers had been trained in how to score before.” Quinton also believed that this professional development session was instrumental: “I have attended plenty of workshops [on my own], but [the writing workshop] was one of the best ones.” Tayla shared that she believed that all of the professional development helped prepare her to teach 10th grade. She stated, “Every year there were trainings on MCAS. We were not left out in the cold. The school is very good at providing . . . workshops and . . . information. The whole [professional development program] prepared us.” Brody corroborated what Caleb stated, remarking, “There are definitely some experts in Massachusetts that have helped us combine our thoughts.” Brody went on to state that he specifically believed that “pulling in the right experts, people who are knowledgeable, people who have specific knowledge of the tests, . . . can help people figure out what strategies those students are going to need.” Brody noted that the writing-specific training was extremely useful because “we knew what the scorers were looking for on the long composition, and hearing him talk about how the essays were graded helped us to analyze the data more of where we needed to improve.” He cautioned that professional development needs to be strategic and “not haphazard” and added that the trainers “helped the [other teachers] to buy into what we were doing because they are not delivering it in a negative manner.”

Eleanor also indicated that the training programs with reading and writing experts had helped her become a better teacher:

At the beginning I was guilty of . . . formulaic writing where [the students] don’t understand why they are writing and they are just filling in a mad lib, which has its merits
with very low students. . . . Then realizing that writing is organic and that they will arrive at that on their own given the proper instruction.

Overall, the teachers described the various professional development opportunities as providing them with the insight necessary to enhance their instructional practice. Eleanor stated that the professional development “just broke everything down into simple terms.” Quinton explained that the professional development gave them a common language and helped him to “look at different types of writing beyond going to the DESE [Department of Elementary and Secondary Education] website or beyond looking at my students’ writing, but I actually could be exposed to different types of writing to get a different view.” Brody explained that he liked to learn: “I like to figure out if I am not understanding something or if my students are not. I try to get them to understand how I can get them to understand how to break down . . . something.”

Brody also indicated that the writing professional development “helped [the teachers] to become better graders of the essays, which then helped [the teachers] to analyze the data more [to determine] where they need to improve.” He also explained that the professional development “enhanced the things [he did] in [his] classroom as far as the long comp. I don’t know that I, [had] a firm grip [before]. That wasn’t the focus of my teaching”. Tayla noted that professional development taught her “techniques on how to show students how to analyze work for themselves, what types of questions you can ask to responses and different things like that.”

Caleb explained that when the school provided professional development on PLCs, That really gave me a chance to hear experienced teacher talk about the 10th grade and what was going on or how to do things to help students prepare for the MCAS because I had never seen it before working at North Shore.
He went on to explain that the professional development also “gave us a chance to just approach the teaching in a similar way. This is the breakdown, here’s the steps you can take to get there, to approach the question or the prompt or whatever.”

When it came to teacher pedagogical skills, the various professional development sessions proved to be useful in enhancing instructional practice. As Caleb shared:

I started like a brand new teacher out of undergrad, so my experience with English was as a student and a college English student. Literary analysis looked completely different from what the high school expectation was. I came out like oh, I’m going to do all the same things I learned in high school, and our students aren’t necessarily prepared for that, or the way that I was teaching it wasn’t for them… having these directed workshops on really how to teach English for high school students has been really helpful.

Eleanor too felt that professional development sessions enhanced her instructional practice, since the training helped her to learn how to break down tasks:

The first thing is you assume everybody’s going to be able to do what you can do, and then when you figure out they can’t, you’ve got to backpedal and figure out how you’re going to make it manageable. So [I learned how to break] everything in little segments and steps.

Thus, each participant believed that professional development played an integral role in the transition process. With the help of the right professional development providers, they were able to find the keys that unlocked the teaching process and in turn helped their students become successful. The professional development sessions that the school organized provided the teachers with opportunities to enhance their teaching practice while also unlocking the keys to
student success. As a collective group, they were able to develop strategies and commonalities within their teaching so they could build off of one another in a meaningful way, not only for their instructional practice, but also for their students. Once the teachers realized that the professional development sessions were providing them with the necessary skills to be successful in the classroom, they gained insight on how to effectively instruct their students and, therefore, turn the department around.

**Summary of the Individual Interview Themes**

It is evident that from the themes that emerged through the individual interview data that North Shore has come a long way. Thirteen years ago, the teachers functioned in an environment of isolation where they did not communicate and did not share best practices. As time evolved a shift occurred to move them from an atmosphere of isolation to one of collegiality and solidarity. Within this environment, they all knew they were working towards the common goal of increased students learning and capacity. They began to teach what matters. This shift in thinking occurred because collectively they believed not only in the PLC process, but they also believed in the professional development providers who began training them on how to be better teachers. Embarking on a new professional development program can be intimidating. As the participants stated, the professional development cannot be haphazard; it needs to be strategic. To achieve optimum success and seamless integration, both the topic and the presenters need be selected carefully. The participants viewed their providers as experts in their field and therefore respected the learning process. As a group, they embarked on new territories and acquired skills to enhance their instructional practice, and they believed that they were able to gain insight to enhance instructional practice and learn the necessary skills to ensure student success. As Caleb stated, the professional development on PLCs gave him a chance to learn from his peers.
The participants shared that for a PLC to be successful, the teachers need to be willing to have open conversations about best practices. To do so, the teachers need to be able to draw from the strengths of everyone, and they need to work as a team to analyze student data. If this is done collectively, the PLC can determine where the students are falling off and how teachers can enhance their instructional practice. Participants agreed that the professional development and the integration of PLCs into their daily schedule was ultimately the most significant force that transformed their department.

**Focus Group Data - Bumps in the Turnaround Process**

Another component of this interpretive phenomenological case study involved a focus group interview where all five participants were gathered together and they collectively shared their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences and they underwent the turnaround of this department. A major element that the participants identified during the focus group interview was the fact that the rise to the top does not come without its share of bumps in the road. The teachers discussed that even now, well over a decade later, there were still issues that are holding them back from being the best they could be. The three themes identified are **Theme 1: Not consistently being a part of the PLC meetings, Theme 2: Administrative mandates, and Theme 3: Quality versus quantity.**

**Theme 1: Not Consistently Being a Part of the PLC Meetings.**

Eleanor described the importance of the PLC meetings:

I think the more time that you get to collaborate, the better your teaching is going to be, period. . . . But if teaching and learning is the most important thing at the school, if the
student is the most important person at the school, then you have to give us professional
time to collaborate.

This sentiment was shared by the entire group. Equally, the teachers shared that PLC time
really helped them enhance their teaching skills. Brody shared that, “it [PLC time] lifted the
burden of everything so you could concentrate on what is important, which is the teaching and
learning stuff.” Tayla explained that “the more involved you are in the [PLC] process, the better,
. . . [because] the lesson planning together . . . and the pacing together was just good.” All of the
participants thoroughly believed in the PLC process, and yet as the years changed and schedules
changed, so did the teachers’ availability for attendance at PLC meetings. As Caleb shared
within the focus group interview, a bump within the turnaround process, present until the time of
the interview, was that “as new teachers shift in and out of PLCs, the dynamics change. We
really have to work at maintaining this is what our department believes in, . . . PLCs . . . are
good.”

Quinton, being the special education English teacher in the group, shared his struggles
with not always being present during the PLC meetings. When you are not in the meetings,

You are lost and then it is like: “What happened? What do you mean? Huh?” Then: “Oh
my God. What am I responsible for now?” Then I have to get the kids, to do what? It just
brings up a whole litany of stuff.

As Caleb went on, he said he believed that “without the direct PLC, we’re putting ourselves even
more out there and strapping ourselves with a little bit more trying to maintain those
relationships and that authenticity for the kids.”

Brody explained his own struggles at the time of the interview:
I feel like, I don’t want to say I’ve struggled, but I feel a little disconnected. I know what my focus is. I’ve been in PLC for several years now. I know where the school’s going. I know the strategies. I know what we want to do with the English department, but not being in those daily or every couple of day meetings, it’s sad.

The group also shared that due to schedule changes through the years, the number of participants and the frequency of the meeting changed, which led to changes in the dynamic of the group as well as the work that occurred within the group. Caleb explained:

I think it was better when it was four or more people. Obviously, it’s a lot harder when we’re 15 to get everyone an opportunity to talk. That takes some work and practice to get everybody’s voice in at least once. But when we are at four or more, it was this perfect little group. . . . I think now that there are some paired-off PLCs that, while they may appreciate the time, they’re not getting as much done, or they’re not feeling the same way that we did when we had four or five people in a group.

Brody elaborated on this idea because at the time of the interview he was not able to participate in the larger PLC due to scheduling conflicts. He expressed:

This year, I have PLC with one person, one day, every other week. She’s awesome, but I don’t know that I have the same feel as I had last year. I know that what was going on in her zone and the level and struggles she had. I felt I could contribute to how to tweak her curriculum to meet the needs of many of my students who were in her classroom. So, that part is good. But I don’t know, curriculum-wise, that we did anything. I don’t even know if she’s in PLC at all with anybody else, and neither am I. So neither one of us could really bridge what was going on in a different place. I’m glad I got to sit with my colleague, but it just wasn’t the same feeling as years prior because there’s not a ton of
people to contribute, just the two of us. How’s it going? What strategies do you need to use?

Overall, all of the teachers expressed that not being part of a consistent PLC that met daily had hindered not only their connection to the rest of the department, but also the expectations of what they should be teaching. If a small group met and made a curricular change, the other teachers needed to be informed, rather than, as Eleanor put it, making changes “on the fly” or only making surface-level changes and not changes that could truly impact student learning. As Tayla put it:

When you don’t sit in a room five days a week, every week, for 42 minutes, you’re never going to get past that part where you’re not afraid to say: Hey, I don’t think that’s how you should deliver it to the students.

Eleanor concluded this subtheme by sharing that as a group these particular teachers:

Have a good relationship where it works, but I feel like I wished it were more time for us to sit down and really figure out some of the interstices of the lessons with the unique needs of our students. . . . You’re always focused on what’s the next—oh, we have to do the mid-year. You’re always focused on the next big thing. You don’t get to those other discussions. . . . If we only have one time every other week [to meet, you are like]: Okay, it’s your time for this common assessment. There’s no time to talk about the lessons. It’s just the common assessment.

For each PLC meeting, regardless of the size of the group, the teachers were responsible for taking and sharing the minutes of their meeting. By doing so, they were informing their colleagues of what occurred within their meeting and what changes were made to any of their unit plans. This was a good strategy that was created to keep everyone on the same page, but it
did not come without its own struggles. This leads to our next bump in the turnaround process, administrative mandates.

**Theme 2: Administrative Mandates.**

The participants described that when they started the turnaround process they encountered bumps in the road, particularly when it came to not only completing the required paperwork, but also making the paperwork be meaningful, useful, and manageable. Caleb explained:

> I think we initially had bumps learning to write minutes that were essential or objective. . . . We would get into the funk of like, “Uh, everything’s piling on us, and this is the worst.” So we really had to learn how to really adjust our minutes and come up with solutions. Thinking on our feet or critical thinking. Attaching a worksheet, so if [another teacher] wasn’t there, [they] would get it. [Or], we would get emails from [administration] saying, you can’t write minutes like this, or someone else should be writing the minutes if this person has to write them this way. We’re not saying we can’t have those conversations, but it’s our frame of mind as we push it out to people who aren’t there. How they’re going to read it years later and interpret whatever [we created].

The group also shared that not only was minute writing a bump in their turnaround process, so were particular aspects of the tutoring process. Brody explained:

> I think, as far as the tutoring thing goes, I think the tutoring passes were horrible, but we moved away from that. I think the tutoring log is a struggle sometimes. I’d almost be more comfortable if we just documented the kids who didn’t show because 90% to 95% of the time my kids are all there. It’s the two students that keep skipping that I’m
spending an enormous amount of time on. Instead of tutoring [the ones who are there], I might be documenting that they’re here.

Eleanor also shared the same sentiment:

I was also going to say that I don’t believe in that part of it, but that’s kind of a data struggle that I’d really just rather be able to send a form that says this kid was not here, and that it automatically goes upstairs, and someone else can chase the kid. Instead of having to write referrals and all this stuff, I think it should just be this is a no-show. If that kid happens to no-show two or three times in a row, there should be some sort of a consequence. But that part of tutoring is, I think, a struggle.

Caleb explained that the bumps he encountered also had to do with having to go to the tutoring lab to actually do the tutoring. He explained:

I didn’t want to go to the tutoring lab. I still don’t necessarily want to go there every time, especially with our larger groups. I think that, again, it’s a struggle to have these fragmented PLCs, or that we’re so inundated with so much to do, especially this year, that it feels overwhelming and I’m sacrificing my teaching to do, sometimes, all the documentation. So, it’s a real battle in my head. Am I going to do something good for teaching and for my students today, or am I going to get this piece of paperwork checked off on the list of what I need to do for the tutoring chart or whatever. It’s this constant, what kind of time do I have in the day? Some of my better days are when I say, “Oh, I didn’t even check my emails until fifth period,” and I taught for three periods.

The participants also explained that the sharing of resources could be a struggle at times. The school has transitioned over the years to be very technology focused, and the teachers have been guided to use all of the technology means possible. Teachers often created materials
electronically and shared them with each other electronically via shared drives or folders. As a result, there were many folders and many locations housing materials that had been shared. Caleb confirmed this when he stated:

I think as a whole, the grade 10 team still uses those foundation things that we created when we first started the turnaround process. Even as the book shifts or is changed based on what the teacher wants to teach, they still can go back to that warehouse of common assessments that we created seven years ago. They can choose not to use them. They can use part of them. But they’re there. Now with new PLCs or new technology, the teachers are creating those things. We just have to go back to having them in one location because right now they’re in lots of different technological places and warehouses.

Brody elaborated on this notion:

I think part of that, though, is we created the folders to house everything, and we have the Google groups to house different conversations and different worksheets and whatnot. We had conversations where those folders were, but I feel like we had it in one location in one PLC. This is what set it all up for everybody. Then you share it, and then it seems like a great idea, and then people just forget where things are.

Eleanor takes it one step further by saying that often times:

It is easier when you’re sitting across [from a person and you say]: “Hey, do you know that worksheet you told me about?” [The other person says] “Yeah, I’ll send it right over to you.” Rather than sitting at my desk, going “Where was that worksheet?” I’ll just create a new worksheet because it seems easier at the time rather than trying to navigate: Is it in the shared folder, shared resources, which is all easy. But it’s so much easier when you’re like, “Hey, where is everything?”
Even though the teachers encountered these bumps during the turnaround process, they have been able to muddle their way through and make the necessary changes. What is an interesting conclusion to this particular theme is the idea conveyed by Caleb:

I think it sounds like the things that were created by administration for us to use around some of these implementations is where we continue to have a struggle with “Is this what’s good or what’s right?” whereas the things we created as a department, we’re more likely to keep and keep using, for whatever reason.

I think this is particularly important to keep in mind when embarking on the turnaround process. Teacher-created bumps, like the sharing of resources, were certainly something that had gotten in the way of their progress because the teachers were unsure of where materials were located, but administrative mandates seemed to be more of a nuisance for the participants. This idea flows into the final subtheme of quality versus quantity.

**Theme 3: Quality Versus Quantity.**

Through the turnaround process, the participants discovered that it came down to the quality of their instruction, not just the quantity of their instruction. Caleb kicked off this subtheme by expressing:

When we first started it, we were doing a long composition a week, and it wasn’t with direct instruction. But that was too cumbersome, and it wasn’t working. No matter how many we did, or how we framed it, or what we were grading them on, it wasn’t producing
a better essay for the kids. They felt disconnected, and what words were even calling them were very disjointed.

Over the years, the teachers have learned what works for their students and what doesn’t work. Quinton reiterated this idea, explaining what he did when he taught his students:

Looks at things . . . as quality versus quality, not necessarily [using] four full novels, but if you taught three novels and the kids walked away really getting it, then that’s more important than four novels, but did they really get it. Could they write about it?

This is a bump that the teachers needed to discover along the way. Should they be teaching everything stated in the curriculum or by administration, or should they teach what is best for their students? Brody shared what he discovered:

That [it is] super-important just having the flexibility. There are some lessons I do, or argumentative writing steps that I just completely know it’s not going to work for the group, so I’m just going to take those steps out. I’m not going to do them. I’m going to do it with this group because I know it’s going to work. You know how it is. You have to teach to who’s in front of you. You create a plan, but you’re not teaching to a piece of paper. It has to be fluid, and would Hamlet work with one group, and then it wouldn’t work with another group. So, you have to be able to cater to the kids’ needs and interests, I think. Make it worthwhile.

Eleanor concluded this subtheme by commenting, “We were overloading the kids back then at the beginning. Crank [the work] out, the more the better, the more the better. Then we said: Slow down. We shouldn’t be doing that much, but if you do it in steps.”

As a group, the grade 10 teachers evolved and grew together to determine what was right for their students. As Tayla put it, “[We know] how we can get any kid to be successful as long
as we’re approaching it any number of ways. So, there is really not [one] set way; we just have to know all the variables to help them do better.”

Summary of the Focus Group Data.

Throughout the turnaround process, the teachers encountered some bumps. The most significant bump was the lack of consistent PLC time. As the teachers’ schedules changed through the years, so did the PLC meeting schedules. The teachers expressed that they believed it was integral for the teachers to continue to believe in the PLC process regardless of the group dynamic. They added that the PLC was one of the most important instructional tools that the school had to offer. The teachers also expressed that as the years evolved, so had the mandates. Some still remained in place and often caused the teachers more strife than they believed it was worth. At times, the teachers believed that the paperwork requirements got in the way of their teaching of the students. Finally, the group felt that the final bump they encountered in the turnaround process was discovering that what was important was the quality of their instruction rather than its quantity. They had been charged with many mandates throughout the years and discovered that some were not benefiting the students. Rather, they discovered that true instruction comes down to the quality of their curriculum, rather than the quantity of the written curriculum. As stated by Tayla, it should be the most important thing that the “kids walked away really getting it. . . . That’s more important: . . . Did they really get it?”

Role of the English Department Head in the Turnaround of North Shore

At North Shore, the department head is a position posted at the end of each school year for the upcoming year. It is a full-time teaching position that is open to the entire school and pays a yearly stipend with five days per diem on top of that. The teachers do not have any release time
during the day for department head duties, but they are not responsible for a homeroom. The reason for this was to ensure that they were available to help any substitutes who may be in and to make sure that their teachers were all situated for the day. As shown in the participant profiles section, the English department had three department heads during the time period examined in this study. The three department heads were questioned separately to gather information on what each focused on while being the department head at North Shore. Additionally, the three department heads were questioned on what they kept at the forefront of their mind when leading the department and considering student needs.

**Eleanor.** Eleanor was a department head at the start of the turnaround process and was one for six years. She shared that her main focus as department head was to do her best to make sure the “department was moving in the right direction, that the curriculum was sound and our instruction was based on best teaching practices.” She also tried to create and foster a comfortable, peaceful environment so that everyone would be willing to “share their knowledge and resources with one another, as teachers can be possessive at times.” She recalled that in 2011 the English MCAS scores were beginning to plateau a bit, and they were having difficulty moving into the proficient, advanced categories. As the department head, she worked with the administrative team to create new structures to propel the department further. Many of these structures are still in place today. Some of the structures were administering practice tests and using the data in after-school and in-school tutoring sessions; replacing a tutoring period with a PLC period “so teachers can effectively analyze test data and assessments to inform instruction”; and providing quality professional development on teaching writing. When it came to the students, she stated that as a department they learned that they “would be more successful if they
embedded test prep into their teaching rather than just giving practice tests in isolation or spending time teaching students how to take the MCAS exam.” She concluded by stating:

All of these recommendations were applied to a certain degree and proved to be effective. It is a remarkable example of collaboration based on a shared vision and a willingness to work together for a single purpose, which was to improve student performance.

Brody. Brody began by saying that his focus was to get the teachers to collaborate with each other, whether it was in a PLC meeting or by communicating via technology utilizing a Google group. He stressed that he believed that the teachers did not always have enough time to meet. Because of this, certain members of the department worked hard to have informal meetings either during lunch or on the fly in between classes. He furthered this idea by saying that typically the teacher that did this additional collaborating had already established collegial communications with his or her colleagues in prior PLC meetings. The goal was to help facilitate creativity among the members of the department by providing information using a Google group. Brody believed that the “Google groups helped the team to be more aware of information, common assessments, and possible activities, but the Google groups did not necessarily foster strong interpersonal relationships.” In addition, he worked to get the teachers meeting and sharing as often as possible: “I always tried to get through my after-school department meetings as quickly as possible (sometimes timing myself) in order to give PLC time to the group.” When it came to the students, he believed that there was and still is a common goal of creating literate students, and each teacher should be able to achieve that goal through the stories that the teacher is invested in and through the methods that they know best. Brody believed that another thing that was successful during his time as a department chair was that he and his direct administrator were often on the same page and “had created a trusting, respectful relationship that helped foster
a positive environment for the department.” They were both avid readers and interested in improving teaching practices:

We would discover books and share them with each other. From there, I would bring ideas to the English group or to my grade-level group (which also latched on to some of these new ideas) who would then filter these ideas to other members of the department. Some of the books helped to shape the idea of the choice reading program that was implemented in the English department, but it appeared that the information was coming from the teachers and teacher discoveries and not as a mandate from the administration. Not to say that mandates are not a good thing—they are necessary. But the choice reading idea spread like wildfire because it seemed to come more from the teachers than “from above” and the teachers were more receptive to the idea because (a) it is just a good idea and (b) it wasn’t “another thing they are telling me to do,” and (c) reading creates readers which creates literate students and all English teachers know this. Even if it is hard to find time to squeeze in all of the things that we need to cover in the year, reading never seems to be a wasted time.

Caleb. Caleb was in his first year as a department head of the English department and had already made some changes, particularly with the grade 10 program. He facilitated the process of changing the test for their summer reading project to incorporate one common text, and he made “big steps in technological advances” by integrating JoeZoo and Google Sites such as e-portfolio, external keyboard access, and Google Classroom. Overall his focus for the year was to challenge the department to try new things and take some risks in their instructional practice. He worked to check in with each member of the department every day during homeroom time. He wanted to make sure that every voice within the department was heard, and
he wanted to make sure that teachers have a chance to change things that they feel need to be changed while also feeling “supported and encouraged to take instructional risks.” He concluded by saying:

My personal belief is that we teach what we love, what we get excited about. So that means encouraging teachers to embrace what they want to teach and do that. This trickles into the students as they engage with the subject matter. Teachers who are excited about learning make students who are excited when they are learning. When we make personal connections and build professional relationships with each other, we continue to build trust and opportunities to take educational risks for our students.

**Summary.** There was a common focus among the three department heads, which was to ensure that the teachers they served were working together and taking risks to enhance their instructional practice. They each kept improvement at the forefront of their minds by devising systems to enhance instruction, whether it was professional development, tutoring, technology, or collaboration through PLCs. Ultimately, what all three kept in mind through their leadership activities and initiatives was to ensure that collectively, the entire department worked toward “the single purpose to improve student performance.”

**Participant Observation – Supervisor Thoughts**

As I stated in the introduction, I have functioned as the supervisor of the English department since the summer of 2006. In this role, I am not only responsible to evaluate the English teachers, but I am also responsible to examine their teaching schedules, professional development sessions, and student data. When I began, the department functioned in an environment of isolation as identified through the individual interviews. The English department was so isolated that English literature was taught totally separate from English
composition. A teacher could have different students in his or her comp class than they did in their lit class and both classes ran as a standalone class for a single period. After careful examination by the administrative team we decided to combine the two classes into a double period class where comp and lit were combined into a single English class. Within a year or two after taking the position, I started to hear a lot about the idea of professional learning communities. I found a professional development session on the topic and with the approval of the superintendent, we had all administrators and department heads attend the same professional development session on PLCs and the power of what they can accomplish within the classroom. In a way we formed our own PLC to attend. From here the concept of embedding PLCs into the master schedule began to take hold. At first it was a rocky transition, getting people to open up and talk about their teaching and to not use the time unproductively to complain about what was occurring within the building or even the department. As the years progressed and the teachers developed relationships their PLC meetings improved and became that much more authentic and engaging. They truly began to plan their instructional units together. It was at this time that we saw that our MCAS scores became very stagnant and even started to drop. I was charged with figuring out what we can do to change things. I began to examine the MCAS test itself and what I discovered was that it really wasn’t an English test at all. It was a reading comprehension test. I then began to examine what was occurring in the classroom and I realized that the teachers were teaching the various works of literature within the curriculum, they were not teaching the literacy skill necessary to pass the exam. The more I examined and the more I read I realized it wasn’t the teachers fault at all. They were trained in English; they were not trained in how to teach reading. This is when I contracted with a professional development provider who taught the English teachers how to teach reading. It wasn’t a one hit wonder session either, it was a
sustained session where she worked with them as a group and then she also worked with them individually in a coaching type model. In addition to this session, I had a few teachers come to me to tell me that they had attended a wonderful session on writing that was put out by the department of education. I contacted the presenter and found out that he was the person who taught the scorers how to score the MCAS exam. We were lucky enough that our schedules matched and for two days he came in and worked with the entire English department to share his expertise. The teachers took the information learned at both of these sessions and really transformed it into what we have today. These teachers truly value their PLC time and have advocated for additional time because they believe in the power that it has to transform what happens within their classroom. They analyze the data and seem to enjoy it. Their scores certainly speak for themselves. One thing to keep in mind is that this doesn’t happen without the support of the superintendent, the principal or the school committee. Funding needs to be made available. Being the grant writer for the district I was able to write in most of the professional development sessions into various grants that were put out by the DESE, but on top of this the district also had to be willing to cover the cost of some sessions as well as make room in its master schedule for the PLC time to be available.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented six major themes - three from the individual interviews and three from the focus group interview, the perceptions of the department heads as well as myself, the supervisor. All of the themes emerged from the participants’ lived experiences in the turnaround of this particular English department, as well as the turnaround perspectives of the three department heads and the supervisor. The themes were examined, and three conclusions were developed. These conclusions inform the main research question of the study: What are the
Grade 10 English teachers’ perceptions of the changes that moved this particular department from a 74% needs improvement and failure rate to a 100% pass rate?

The three conclusions are as follows:

1. Teachers need to be open to learning new things and sharing ideas.
2. Schools need to provide time for teachers to learn from each other and together.
3. Literacy instruction should be at the forefront of instructional practices within the English classroom.

**Teachers need to be open to learning new things and sharing ideas.** The participants revealed that one of the changes that helped the school become high performing was the shift from a mindset of isolation to a team-based approach. Four of the participants stated that when they arrived at North Shore, they were unsure of how to convey the content to students. They were given the curriculum or scope and sequence and told to teach. One participant had the students show him how to utilize the graphic organizer being used by the department because he was unsure of what to do and did not have anyone he felt comfortable asking. It was not until the professional development sessions focused on the teacher’s pedagogical practices and the inception of the PLCs that the environment started to change and student scores began to rise. Participants also stressed that isolation is often a feature of the teaching profession. Teachers are handed the keys to their classroom and provided the curriculum; the students show up and teaching begins. This mindset does not lead to productivity. Once the teachers began working together and became comfortable with each other, they began to learn from each other and started sharing lessons, assessments, and instructional practices. The teachers expressed that as they embarked on the PLC process, they had their fair share of growing pains, where they were
unsure how to communicate or what to communicate about, but as time evolved and they were provided with additional PLC time, they began to grow and develop as a high-functioning team.

The teachers also stressed that the professional development that the school provided was a major impetus for the changes that were occurring. All participants discussed the professional development sessions offered to them, whether curricular or pedagogical. They stressed that teachers need to be open to information, because these professional development activities helped them not only implement particular pedagogical practices, but also function as a team by accepting input and offering constructive feedback to each other. The teachers also stressed that when they entered the classroom, they did not necessarily know how to convey the content to their students; rather, they thought they could use the experiences that they had had in school as a starting point for their instructional practice. They quickly realized that this would not be possible. This is where the professional development came in and provided the teachers with the pedagogical skills that led to the turnaround of this department.

Ultimately, the teachers interviewed believed that for a school to be successful, teachers need to be open to learning new things and sharing ideas. As one participant stated, “Your peers have good ideas, and you shouldn’t be afraid to use them and learn from them because ultimately the students are the ones who will benefit.”

Schools need to provide time for teachers to learn from each other and together.

Another significant finding is related to the school’s role in the process. The school system needs to provide time for teachers to learn from each other and to learn together. Specifically, school systems need to devise opportunities within the master schedule for teachers to hold regularly scheduled PLC meetings, and they need to provide the necessary professional development to the teachers on how to function in a PLC. As the teachers said, it was not until they took part in a
professional development session on PLCs that they were able to hear experienced 10th-grade teachers talk about their teaching and what was going on within their classes. School systems need to invest in PLC-specific professional development sessions so teachers learn how to share ideas, lessons, assessments, and student data.

As the years progressed, the teachers enhanced their skills as a team and further developed their proficiencies in the PLC process. They did this by examining what works best. They looked at the previous year’s assessments and lessons to discuss what worked, what did not, and what needed to be tweaked. This demonstrates that they refined their skills as a team over time, but this refinement would not have happened if the school had not made the initial investments in their skills as high school English teachers as well as valued team members, thereby facilitating the collaborative communication process. The major bump that the teachers shared with the PLC process was the fact that as schedules changed, so did the opportunities to consistently participate in a PLC. One teacher stressed, “If teaching and learning is the most important thing at the school, if the student is the most important person at the school, then you have to give us professional time to collaborate.”

Finally, the study site made an investment in the PLC process and provided varied professional development opportunities for the teachers. This ongoing effort is something that the literature stated was needed for a true turnaround. Often, schools provide “one-hit wonders” of professional development without providing continuous initiatives throughout many years. The school in this study recognized the value of the paradigm shift and made a long-term investment in the development of a collaborative, collegial teaching staff. They started with professional development on PLCs and then provided opportunities for the teachers to meet with
each other during the school day. The sustained practice of investment in teachers’ time and learning process resulted in a 100% pass rate on the MCAS exam.

**Literacy instruction should be at the forefront of instructional practices within the English classroom.** The teachers discussed how prior to attending professional development on literacy, the instructional practices at North Shore were fragmented. One participant noted that when she first began teaching at North Shore, reading was separate from writing. Now, teachers are guiding their students to write like a reader and read like a writer. The department has made literacy the most important curricular practice within daily lessons. The teachers implemented choice reading, where the students have opportunities during class to find the joy in reading. The teachers also have introduced journaling to encourage students to feel comfortable with the writing process. Overall, the teachers in this study believed that the professional development sessions on reading and writing were the keys to unlock their instructional practices.

This finding aligns with the previous finding, in that the school needs to invest in training teachers how to incorporate literacy instruction into their daily practice. Two of the five of participants trained in the content of English did not enter the classroom with their own literacy toolkit. The school provided them with training to think metacognitively about their own reading processes, and then as a group they worked to discover how to translate that knowledge to their students. The school also brought in a writing expert who had taught the scorers of the writing portion of the MCAS. He taught the English department of North Shore how to score the exam themselves. As a result, the teachers were given a sense that they were never left out in the cold. Consistently, year after year, they were provided with professional development sessions that gave them the necessary strategies to ensure that their students were successful.
This finding demonstrates that it is one thing to be knowledgeable in the content area of English, but it is another to be knowledgeable in literacy. The students need to be able to read and write effectively—a goal not always achieved at the high school level. Often teachers focus their lessons on works of literature or on how they were taught in their own English classroom as a high school student and not on how to understand a work of literature, how to break it down and then be able to write about it. This is a focus that this particular school has undertaken, resulting in a significant rise in scores.

Through this study, I sought to discover how the 10th-grade teachers at this vocational high school perceived the changes that occurred that allowed the department to transition from “Watch Status” to become a high-performing English Department. The six themes and three findings outlined in this chapter suggest that, overall, the improvement was related not only to changes in teachers’ instructional practices, but also to the support provided by the school system. In conjunction with this, the school has implemented the necessary professional development for the teachers to enhance their instructional practice by providing specific sessions geared to the needs of both teachers and students.

The professional development sessions were literacy specific based on the school’s MCAS results. In addition, the school provided professional development on the practice of PLCs. During this time, the teachers learned how to work together. In conjunction with this, the school was able to schedule PLC time during the school day so that the teachers could meet with each other to share lessons, assessments, and instructional innovations. From year to year, the teachers’ PLC time changed based on scheduling. The teachers stressed that the years where they were provided with consistent, daily PLC time were the most successful, and they found that
these meetings “lift the burden of everything so [they] can concentrate on the teaching and learning stuff.”

In addition to what the school provided, the participants demonstrated that they believed in the PLC and the professional development process and were willing to work together to enhance their instructional practice. They also stated that the professional development on literacy-specific instructional practices was instrumental in raising their students’ test scores. This English department was able to drastically raise students’ test scores, to the point where all passed the MCAS exam on their first attempt. This study demonstrates that through a team effort, schools can make instructional and programmatic changes if all the stakeholders are fully invested.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

Many departments hope to achieve a turnaround; for some departments, that can mean an increased graduation rate or a movement from a state rating of low-performing to a rating of high-performing. For the department examined in this study, turnaround involved moving from “Watch Status” (in danger of failing) by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to being known today as a high-performing English department when judged by the same criteria. This study focused specifically on the perceptions and experiences of the 10th-grade English teachers within this department, the three department heads, as well as the supervisor because each person had a significant role in the turnaround and each had a story to share. This proof of their success was evident in the fact that exactly one decade after the department was put on “Watch Status,” 100% of the 10th-grade students of
North Shore passed the English Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam on their first attempt.

Utilizing the interpretative phenomenological case study approach, I explored the lived experiences and perceptions of five 10th-grade English teachers, three of which were department heads during the time frame studied and myself, the supervisor as we all underwent the turnaround of the English department at the North Shore Regional Vocational Technical High School. One research question guided this study: What are the Grade 10 English teachers’ perceptions of the changes that moved this particular department from a 74% needs improvement and failure rate to a 100% pass rate?

This chapter begins by discussing the themes in relation to the theoretical framework. The chapter goes on to discuss the interpretations of the study in the context of the literature, as well as limitations of the study, implications for practice and research, and my journey as a scholar-practitioner.

**Themes in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of pedagogical content knowledge provided the backbone of this research. Shulman (1986) believed that teachers might know and understand the content they are teaching, but they do not necessarily know how to teach that content to their students. The themes of this study support this theory. Within the first theme, *shifting away from isolation*, individually, the teachers shared that being in a profession that was historically isolating did not help to advance their teaching abilities. They were given the curriculum, but not told how to teach it. Eleanor specifically shared that she felt that graduate school was a bit disconnected from the real world. The teachers expressed that when they entered the classroom they were going to teach from what they know, how they were taught in high school and the way that they
learned in college. It wasn’t until they were in the classroom did they begin to quickly realize this wasn’t necessarily how things were going to go. Initially, they felt all alone and very isolated from their peers as common planning and professional learning community meetings were not something that was embedded within the culture of this department and therefore, their teaching and their lessons were also isolated. It was just as Cochran et al. (1991) stated, when they discovered that inexperienced or novice teachers do not always have a concrete level of understanding or the pedagogical content knowledge necessary for teaching, they tend to rely on curriculum materials or textbooks to provide the direction for teaching rather than have a clear agenda to present the information (Cochran et al., 1991). The teachers articulated that it wasn’t until they participated in their literacy-based professional development sessions and began planning with their peers in a professional learning community (PLC) did they begin to expand their pedagogical expertise and enhance their teaching abilities. These initiatives transitioned the culture of the department to one where the teachers were no longer teaching from their isolated classrooms; rather, they were now collaborating with and learning from their peers. This theme also falls in line with the views of Cochran et al. (1991), who indicated that pedagogical content knowledge comes about when teachers not only reflect on what they are teaching, but also find various instructional methods to ensure that the students understand the information. These particular teachers were able to find appropriate methods during their PLC time and therefore enhance their teaching abilities.

The first focus group theme, *not consistently being a part of the PLC meetings* takes the feeling of being isolated one step further. Collectively, the teachers expressed that a bump that they are currently encountering is the fact that not all of them are able to participate within their PLC meetings. The teachers have come to a point, that they have really developed their
pedagogical content knowledge where they know what to teach, and they feel confident enough in knowing how to teach, but they feel that being a part of the community discussing their teaching on daily basis, still has such a positive impact on what goes on within their classroom. This theme is aligned to the ideas expressed by Timperley (2008) when she stated, being a part of a professional learning community “is an integral part of professional learning that impacts positively on students…a community gives teachers opportunities to process new information while helping them keep their eyes on the goal” (p. 19). Over time the teachers have developed their teaching abilities, and the results prove that what they are doing is successful for their students, but the teachers still need that community time to process new information regarding each group of students while also analyzing test data based on their particular population from year to year.

The second individual theme of this study was, *facing a trial by fire – learning what to teach*. The teachers expressed that when they arrived at North Shore, they were unsure how to convey the content to their students. They were given the curriculum, but they were uncertain of what to do with it. The teachers in this study believed that the professional development sessions that the school provided on reading and writing were the keys to unlock their instructional practices. This research discovered that prior to this professional development, two of the five participants trained in the content of English did not enter the classroom with their own literacy toolkit for teaching. In light of this, the school provided the teachers with training to think metacognitively about their own reading and writing processes, and then as a group the teachers worked to discover how to translate that knowledge to their students. This finding aligns with Shulman’s (1986) theory, which argues that pedagogical content knowledge moves beyond subject matter knowledge and becomes the “knowledge for teaching” (p. 9). The teachers within
this study expressed that the professional development sessions on reading and writing helped the department transform to where it is today.

The second collective theme of this study was *administrative mandates*. This theme correlates to the theory of pedagogical content knowledge theory because the teachers expressed during their focus group interview that through the turnaround of this department many initiatives and mandates were put upon them. Some they created on their own and others they were told they had to do. What this research discovered is that the mandates or initiatives that they put upon themselves were often found annoying, but they put up with it and worked around it to try to find solutions. The ones that were put upon them by administration were perceived as a nuisance and not always best for their teaching or for their students particularly when it came to the paperwork requirements. The teachers believed that they had to examine if something was good or right for their teaching and their students. This themes aligns to the thoughts of Phillips et al (2009) when they stated that, content knowledge in itself is one’s understanding of the subject matter of English; pedagogical knowledge is one’s understanding of teaching and learning processes that is independent of the subject matter; and pedagogical content knowledge is the knowledge of teaching and learning in the subject of English while also acknowledging the learning demands of the students within each classroom. Overtime, the teachers have enhanced their teaching skills so much that now they are able to sit back and really reflect on what is good for teaching and their own instructional practice and therefore are really examining their pedagogical content knowledge to determine if what they are being told to do will really enhance what and how they teach and therefore positively impact the knowledgebase of their students.

The third and final individual theme of this study was, *teaching as professional work (student learning, student success, right experts)*. The teachers within this study stated that it
was not until they took part in a professional development session on PLCs were they were able to hear experienced 10th-grade teachers discuss their teaching and what was going on within their classes. The teachers also expressed that over time they were collectively able to discuss what worked, what did not, and what needed to be tweaked within their instructional practice. This was possible because the study site provided the time for and made an investment in the PLC process. This finding also aligns with pedagogical content knowledge theory as identified by Phelps and Schilling (2004). As Phelps and Schilling (2004) put it, content knowledge differentiates between knowledge of the content that is being taught and the specialized and unique teaching skills/pedagogy that a classroom teacher should have so that the students understand the content. By providing time for the teachers to work together, the school established opportunities for the teachers to collectively develop their craft while also building their repertoire of specialized and unique teaching skills. This time to meet and discuss teaching and student learning brought awareness of both teaching of the subject matter and the learning demands of the students which is a key element of pedagogical content knowledge theory.

The third and final collective theme of this study was that of quality versus quantity. The teachers in this focus group discussed the fact that it is extremely important to be able to have the flexibility to educate based on their students needs. They felt that there have been times in the process when they have been told what to teach and they believe that they truly have to create their lesson plans based on the students who are sitting in front of them. When teaching they need to be able to make decisions based on what the students need verse what they are supposed to teach. The teachers in this study are demonstrating that they have built their pedagogical content knowledge so much so that they are doing exactly what Cochran et al. (1991) stated that good teachers who have a strong pedagogical content knowledge do. They
not only reflect on what they are teaching, but also find various instructional methods to ensure that the students understand the information. Geddis (1993) explained that when it comes to pedagogical content knowledge teachers need to be able to effectively educate their students and they need to know many things about the content that they are teaching in order to make it relevant and comprehensible for the students. In this theme the teachers make it evident that they now have a true understanding of what their students need to know and be able to do to be successful and that maybe when they started they did not, but overtime it is certainly something that has become embedded in the way that they teach.

The final component of this study had to do with my own perspective as the supervisor of this English department. After analyzing the MCAS exam and the MCAS results I determined that the test was really a reading test and not an English test. I also knew that teaching English is very different than teaching reading and I wasn’t sure if the teachers knew how to teach the necessary literacy skills to pass the exam, so I brought in different professional development providers to train them. What this training did is build the teachers pedagogical content knowledge. As Shulman (1986) theorized, many teachers know and understand their subject matter (the content of English), but do not necessarily know how to convey that knowledge to their students in a comprehensible way (pedagogy). These teachers knew their English content, but they didn’t necessarily know how to take the works of literature and convey it to their student by utilizing the literacy skills and strategies needed to be successful on the exam.

Pedagogical content knowledge theory grounded this research and provided the structure and framework to examine what each teacher brought to his or her classroom and department. These five teachers have collectively demonstrated that they might not have started with the best pedagogical content knowledge, but overtime they have significantly developed and enhanced
their teaching abilities. They also demonstrated that through collaboration, professional development, and literacy instruction, they were able to develop their own pedagogical content knowledge thus ensuring that all students have understanding of the content that is being taught to them while effectively making their lessons relevant, comprehensible, and meaningful for their students (Shulman, 1986).

**Interpretations and Relevance to Literature**

The themes of this study reiterated those of studies mentioned in the literature review, specifically that of Seymour and Lehrer (2006), who examined how teachers were trained to teach. Their research found that untrained teachers might not realize that it is more important for students to be able to actually understand what is being taught rather than just regurgitating the correct answers to objective questions. Most teachers within this study were initially unsure of how to convey the content to the students. They stated that it was not until they participated in professional development sessions geared toward the specific literacy practices of reading and writing that they began to feel confident in their teaching. This theme aligns with the conclusions of Higgins et al. (2006) and Marzano (1998, 2003, 2007), who stated that a good teacher is knowledgeable in literacy and has the pedagogical competence to teach specific literacy skills in conjunction with the literature being read in class. Eleanor provided a good example when she claimed, “grad school was a little bit disconnected from what was really happening in the classroom” and that she had “expertise in the content, but not in how to make it relatable to the students.”

The participants’ responses also echoed the findings of Fullan (2009), Harris (2006), and Spillane and Kenney (2012), who discovered that department turnaround requires teacher teams with a working environment of mutual respect and understanding. This was a key component of
the turnaround process for all of the participants. All stressed that when they started working as a team, they began to see the shift within the department. Seashore’s (2009) research also illuminated what the participants shared regarding department turnaround. She discussed a feeling of collegiality, where teachers feel comfortable enough to share not only ideas and instructional practice, but also failures of their students and of lessons. The participants credited the success of their department to their focus on student learning and regular meetings to examine student data and determine how to improve student success.

The participants also conveyed the ideas of Thessin and Starr (2011) when they discussed that schools need to provide support for a successful turnaround. Teachers cannot be told that they need to work together and then be put in a room and expected to start working. The participants explained that the school-provided PLC-specific professional development that was extremely helpful as they began to transition from a department of isolation to one of collegiality. As Caleb shared, the professional development “gave me a chance to hear experienced teachers talk about the 10th grade and what was going on or how to do things to help students prepare.”

Throughout the study, the participants cited PLC meetings as the biggest contributor to the turnaround of the department. As DuFour (2007) and Mokhtari et al. (2009-2010) revealed in their research, PLCs can be a powerful educational tool to not only enhance student learning, but also provide a framework to transform a department and a school. The participants in this study expressed that over time they began to feel a sense of camaraderie and trust in the service of students’ best interests. They credited the success of the department to the fact that as a team, they focused on student learning and examined student data to identify trends and determine appropriate instructional modifications. These themes are also in alignment with the study of
Thibodeau (2008), who discovered that the teachers in her study attributed their success to the opportunity to develop a bond with other teachers based on mutual trust and respect, while at the same time creating a learning environment based on the needs of each individual within the community.

The teachers’ experiences echoed those found in the literature about successful school turnaround. Studies have shown that literacy instruction has one of the biggest positive effects on student success, and implementation of literacy skills in conjunction with the content knowledge could alleviate the need to worry about standardized test scores (Marzano, 1998, 2003, 2007; Schmoker, 2007). In addition, the literature on PLCs also connected to the isolation experiences of the teachers, who are often viewed as the sage on the stage or the king of their castle, and the fact that success comes from teachers working together in a PLC. As Talbert and McLaughlin (2002) and Dufour (2007) stated, PLCs are considered one of the strongest professional development opportunities that a school can offer because they provide opportunities for educators to work together in a collaborative and student-centered learning environment that ultimately has the power to transform schools. Finally, the teachers expressed that once they participated in the professional development sessions provided by the school, they were able to hone their craft and begin to teach what mattered: the literacy skills necessary for students to succeed. Once ingrained, these authentic literacy skills foster higher levels of intellectual thought as the students develop a sense of automaticity with abstract thought such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Overall through this research three conclusions were developed that directly align to the literature. The three conclusions were: Teachers need to be open to learning new things and sharing ideas, schools need to provide time for teachers to learn from each other and together,
literacy instruction should be at the forefront of instructional practices within the English classroom. The first conclusion, *Teachers need to be open to learning new things and sharing ideas* is fully aligned to the study conducted by Grossman (1989). He studied two groups of teachers, one group that went to school to be a teacher and the other that did not. His research revealed that formally, trained teachers were ultimately prepared for the misunderstandings and misconceptions that the students had and the teachers who were only trained in the content area struggled with making decisions on how to fully instruct the students and bridge any gaps they had. This piece of literature correlates directly to the first conclusion found within this study. The teachers need to be open to learn new things to ensure that their students have a full understanding of the material. By doing this it will only continue to enhance the abilities of the department overall and thus provide opportunities for greater student growth and achievement. The second conclusion, *schools need to provide time for teachers to learn from each other and together* aligns to the literature on PLCs. As Dufour (2007) put it, a PLC provides a framework to transform a school and a department. The teachers of this study expressed that PLCs gave them such confidence in their teaching and provided them with the capabilities to open up and hold meaningful conversations regarding not only student data, but also their own instructional practices. Therefore, as Mokhtari, et al (2009-2010) put it, PLCs are a powerful educational tool to enhance student and teacher learning while leading to continuous school and department improvement. The third and final conclusion was *literacy instruction should be at the forefront of instructional practices within the English classroom*. This conclusion directly aligns to the literature on literacy in the high school English classroom. Once these teachers participated in the literacy based professional development sessions their individual teaching abilities improved and because of this, collectively the department improved overall as well. This particular
English department now has a mentality that is very much in alignment with the ideas of Schmoker (2007) when he stated that if high school English teachers were to teach authentic literacy skills, then high school English departments would never have to worry about standardized tests or test scores again.

**Implications for Practice and Research**

Department turn around is not an easy endeavor. It takes commitment, trust, perseverance, and teamwork. It is not an isolated event, activity, or even a classroom lesson, but a strategic communion of pedagogical training, instructional skills, and content knowledge. It is a promise to the students within the classroom that they are worth it, that their teachers care about their success, and once their teachers believe in this then department success will unquestionably fall behind. Based on this philosophy, I believe the following should be examined in future research when it comes to investigating high school English department turnaround. It would be interesting to see if the perceived experiences of the teachers examined for this study would be replicated within another vocational high school or even a comprehensive high school. Focusing on this study site, it also would be significant to investigate the experiences of other teachers within this high school who worked in different grade levels or content areas to examine if they perceive effects from the changes within the English department or if their departments had other experiences with the systems put into place over the last 13 years. Similarly, the experiences of the administrators of this school could be examined to determine the decisions that were made during this time frame. A variety of questions could be addressed: Why did they do what they did? Why did they bring in the specific professional development providers? What were their thoughts and perceptions of the turnaround experienced by both the students and the teachers? Did they feel the turnaround was as successful as the
teachers did? Did they encounter any union issues? Would they go back and do anything differently?

The themes of this study suggest that English language arts educators need to make a concerted effort to implement literacy skills into their daily instructional practice. All of the teachers studied had a background in English and therefore knew the content, but overall they did not necessarily have the literacy skills to teach 10th-grade students who needed to pass a state-mandated exam. For the students to develop the skills necessary to pass the state exam on their first attempt, the teachers needed to be able to provide both reading- and writing-specific instructional practices necessary for the students to be successful, while incorporating higher levels of thought and moving beyond simple comprehension and application exercises. Literacy skills need to be placed at the forefront of all high school English classes. No longer is it the responsibility of the elementary school teacher, it is the responsibility of all teachers, especially the high school English teacher.

Another theme of this study suggests that teachers need to be able to collaborate to learn from each other and share ideas, lessons, and assessments in a consistent manner. Not all teachers come to the classroom with the necessary pedagogical skills, but as a whole the teachers do have the skills necessary to convey content knowledge. To help teachers develop pedagogical skills, schools need to provide time for pedagogy-specific professional development where the teachers can learn together. The teachers in this study stated that the reading and writing training that was provided to them was instrumental in their success, not only individually, but also as a department. Once this professional development was concluded, the teachers could take the lessons learned and begin to share best practices with their peers. What was significant was the
fact that schools need to realize that it is one thing to know the content but it is another thing to know how to convey the content to students in a meaningful and understandable way.

In light of this, educational leaders need to create an environment of sharing and learning among the teachers. Schools need to start with professional development on how to work as a team, how to function in an effective PLC, and how to discuss the work that occurs within each classroom. From there, administrators need to create a master schedule that provides consistent time for a PLC where teachers can meet, plan, and discuss the work of their students to ensure that all students are progressing appropriately. Ultimately, the English teachers need to be willing to work hard and learn not only from an outside professional development provider, but also from their peers, both veterans and novices alike. When team members are open to sharing best practices, they begin to realize that they are all each other’s best resource.

Based on the review of the literature and the theme of this study, I make the following recommendations for English departments similar to the one at North Shore Vocational High School:

1. English teachers need to become knowledgeable in literacy-specific pedagogical practices. It is one thing to know the content of English, but it is another to know how to teach students how to read and decode what an author is saying and then be able to write about it in a meaningful way. It is recommended that teachers ensure that they are educated on literacy in the high school English classroom. Teachers should not only attend professional development on how to implement literacy within their classroom, but should also stay current by reading trade publications with a particular emphasis on literacy skills in the high school English classroom to ensure that they are as knowledgeable as possible.
2. School systems need to understand that not all English language arts teachers are natural literacy teachers. Teachers need to be taught how to implement the literacy practices within their classroom and integrate higher-level thinking skills. If school systems want to ensure that this is happening and that all teachers are working on the same goals and delivering the same information, they need to provide the necessary professional development sessions during the school day. This is the only way that they can guarantee that all teachers are learning the same information. It is recommended that educational leaders coordinate in-school literacy-specific professional development, where they get all of the English teachers together in the same room for a day or multiple days of training. By doing so, they are ensuring that all teachers are not only learning the same material, but are learning the process together and thus flushing out ideas in a meaningful way not only for themselves, but also for the school as a whole.

3. Schools need to provide professional development on the PLC model. This program has significantly changed the culture of the English department at North Shore. This research showed that not all teachers are accustomed to sharing information, and teaching as a profession can be very isolating. Through professional development on PLCs, teachers can begin to learn the process of opening their doors to hold meaningful, intellectual, and collegial discussions regarding student work and assessment data while also learning how to function in a productive team (DuFour, 2007; Hargreaves, 2003; Livesay et al., 2005; Schmoker, 2004; Thessin & Starr, 2011). It is recommended that school systems take on a PLC initiative and embark on the process with professional development sessions on how to be a functioning member of a PLC, how to establish meeting norms so that everyone is a valued member of the team and their thoughts and ideas are heard, and,
most importantly, how to share not only their lessons and ideas, but also the work of their students. By learning how to share, not only will teachers discover how to individually move their students forward, but collectively the group can understand how to move the school as a whole forward.

4. Schools need to provide time within the master schedule for the teachers to meet. This department has shown the impact that these meetings have had on students’ test scores over the years and how teachers have been able to refine their pedagogical skills as a collective unit. The teachers shared that when they were provided with 42-minute meetings each day, they felt the most connected to their peers and were the most successful in their own teaching. It is recommended that schools recreate their schedule to provide daily PLC time. PLC meetings were implemented within this school because the administrators took away a duty that the teachers had to contractually do and instead gave them meeting time. If schools do not have duties built in, it might be worth examining the master schedule to maneuver classes and schedules. A school might want to extend homeroom one day a week to provide meeting time or have regularly scheduled early release time for the students to provide time for the teachers to meet as a collective unit. The teachers did express that as schedule changes occur, so did the opportunity to participate in PLC meetings. Schools might want to examine the options of videotaping or audio recording the PLC meetings so that the participants who were not able to attend the meeting still feel connected.

5. Teachers need to believe in themselves and each other, and they need to be open and willing to learn new skills. This may be a cultural shift for some. It is recommended that educators begin sharing their lessons and ideas. Initially, that may be hard, but teachers
can start with just one assignment. They can share that one assignment or they can work together in their PLC to develop a common lesson that all educators will implement and then bring the data back to the next PLC meeting to share how the students did and their experiences with implementing the lesson. By doing so, they will be opening the doors to increased student achievement and beginning the process to move the department and the school forward.

As the educational leader/supervisor of this department, I was able to work with these teachers as they transitioned through the turnaround of this English department. I was able to examine tests and analyze scores and determine what professional development was necessary. I was able to bring the concept of PLCs to not only this department, but also the school overall. As time evolved, this department had and still has the most PLC time throughout the entire building. This is because of the fact that not only do I believe in the process, but so do the teachers, the principal, and the superintendent. All stakeholders are aware of what a powerful tool this is for a teacher’s instructional practice. For myself, going forward, I need to work harder at ensuring that all team members are able to attend most if not all PLC meetings. As the teachers expressed in their focus group interview, one of the bumps that they are currently encountering is not having consistent PLC meetings due to scheduling issues. I need to work to ensure that the teachers are afforded this valuable time because if they do who knows how much higher their students scores will go.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand how the 10th-grade English teachers at North Shore Vocational High School perceived the changes involved in the department’s transition from “Watch Status” to a top-performing high school English department. The results
revealed that the participants perceived the professional development sessions focused on reading and writing as key. This study provided opportunities for the participants to describe the transformation in their teaching practices and abilities after attending the professional development sessions. In addition, this study revealed that the PLC model was the platform that this department needed to break down the barriers of teaching isolation, while opening the doors to meaningful discussions on instructional practice, student learning, and assessment data.

Ultimately, this study revealed that the school created an environment with a shared vision based on the literacy-based professional development and the PLC model. Once this environment was created, the English department transitioned from a mindset of isolation to one where teachers set aside their egos and shared best practices, recognizing that each teacher was a valued resource.

As this study revealed, once collaboration begins, powerful changes can occur. These findings revealed that while not every teacher enters the classroom with the same pedagogical content knowledge, a teacher’s level of expertise could change for the better with the appropriate level of training and professional development. The study recommended that school systems open the doors and stop the perpetuation of a profession of isolation. Schools must encourage teachers to work collaboratively to determine best practices while also providing consistent time for teachers to do so.

**Personal Reflection: My Journey as a Scholar-Practitioner**

As I was concluding this research, I came across this quote from Herbet (2010): “The zeal of scholarly work, when placed within the confines of practice, will sustain the flames of learning, even as one moves through change” (p. 33). I found this to be appropriate, as I believe it sums up my experience as I moved from being a practitioner and then a scholar to becoming a
As a practitioner, I am an administrator who directly oversees the English department at North Shore Vocational High School. Through this research, I found it extremely eye opening to learn about the 10th-grade English teachers’ perceptions of the turnaround process that occurred within this department. It was validating to hear the teachers’ thoughts on the support that they have received. The findings of this study revealed that the school needed to make a concerted effort to consistently provide professional development for the teachers within the English department. In light of this, I am going to work to continue to ensure that all teachers are provided with the necessary pedagogical professional development as well as specific professional development on how to function as an effective team member to ensure that all PLCs continue to function properly.

I also found it interesting that regardless of the level of expertise that the teachers brought to the classroom, they all learned something through the turnaround process of this department. The educators either learned how to implement literacy pedagogical practices into their daily instructional practice or how to function as a team member while working towards a common goal of increased student achievement. I was surprised to learn that regardless of the level of licensure that teachers entered with, they did need some form of professional development on literacy in the high school English classroom. This finding solidifies Shulman’s (1986) theory that having content knowledge does not equate with having pedagogical content knowledge—and it is the pedagogical content knowledge that makes learning meaningful. As Deng (2007) stated, a teacher with pedagogical content knowledge can take the curriculum and transform it in a way to ensure that the students can understand the material while also being engaged in their own learning process. As the results of this study have shown, this school is moving in the right direction, and the teachers and administrators as a team are making a significant difference in the
lives of the students who enter this building each and every day. Finally, as a practitioner, I found it extremely interesting to hear the negatives that the teachers brought forward, such as the paperwork issues that they encountered or the lack of PLC time due to scheduling conflicts. These negatives—or bumps, as they were referred to—made me think about how I as the administrator can help fix some of these issues to ensure that I am providing the teachers with as many resources as possible.

As a scholar, it was eye opening to see that the literature backed up my own conclusions on implementing literacy into the high school English classroom and on the importance of the PLC model for the overall success of a school. At North Shore, no longer were the teachers working in isolation or teaching literature and composition separately; instead, as Eleanor put it, the teachers were teaching the students to read like writers and write like readers, and because of this, literacy became embedded into the culture of this department. This research examined the perceptions and experiences felt by the teachers who took part in the change. As an administrator and as a scholar, it was gratifying to hear that the systems that I worked to put in place were not only successful in the eyes of the educators, but they also were validated in what the research had to say. As Talbert and McLaughlin (2002) put it, PLCs are considered one of the most favorable professional development opportunities that a school can undertake because they provide opportunities for educators to work together in a collaborative and student-centered learning environment. The teachers believed that the professional development that I organized was meaningful and was instrumental in making the school so successful. Going forward, I plan to continue to embed literacy into not only this grade level, but all grade levels within the English department, because as the literature revealed, if high school English teachers were to teach
authentic literacy skills, then no one would have to worry about standardized tests again (Schmoker, 2007).

Finally, as a scholar-practitioner, this research aroused the sleeping giant in me, causing connections to be made between my professional work and scholarly work, and therefore I began to integrate theory and practice (Herbet, 2010). It was not until I started this research that I became aware of pedagogical content knowledge. The process of becoming a scholar-practitioner fused my practical experience of being an educator with my scholarly experience of being a student just as my knowledge base of pedagogical content knowledge began to form. I was aware of content knowledge and I was aware of pedagogical knowledge, but I was unaware of pedagogical content knowledge and the impact that it has on an educator’s expertise. I believe that this is an integral component of teaching and has a significant impact on how a student learns. Therefore, whenever I conduct an interview, I am going to make sure that I create questions based on the theory of pedagogical content knowledge, and I am also going to instill pedagogical training for all teachers within my building, not just the grade 10 English teachers.
References


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Appendix A:
Site Permission Request

To the Superintendent of Schools

March, 2015

Dear Mr. DeRosa:

As you know, I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Northeastern University and am in the process of completing the dissertation stage of the program. My research is focused on the turnaround of the English department at North Shore Vocational High School (North Shore). Over the last decade, North Shore has shown significant gains on the MCAS exam, particularly within the English department.

Through a qualitative approach, I will investigate the turnaround of the English department through the perspectives of the English teachers that participated in the turnaround of the school. Their stories, incorporating their perceptions of the school factors leading to the turnaround, potential leadership qualities, and resources that were of particular value, will lead to meaningful insight into the key elements of this transformation. The research process will involve designing questions and procedures, collecting data at North Shore, and developing general themes inducted by the analysis of data. Through an interpretative phenomenological analysis model, interviews will be conducted with Grade 9 and 10 English teachers. This will lead to the identification of specific initiatives and potentially culture-changing events that led to the school’s turnaround.

I believe this interpretative phenomenological analysis will serve to benefit North Shore as well as other underperforming schools. The goal is to outline how the success at North Shore might be replicable in service to other underperforming schools.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at 617-610-3344 or via e-mail at fay.ke@husky.neu.edu or contact the chairperson of my committee, Dr. Karen Harbeck at Northeastern University, at 781-321-3569. Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request for permission.

Sincerely,

Kelly A. Fay
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University, Boston, MA
To the School Principal

March, 2015

Dear Ms. Lynch:

As you know, I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Northeastern University and am in the process of completing the dissertation stage of the program. My research is focused on the turnaround of the English department at North Shore Vocational High School (North Shore). Over the last decade, North Shore has shown significant gains on the MCAS exam, particularly within the English department.

Through a qualitative approach, I will investigate the turnaround of the English department through the perspectives of the English teachers that participated in the turnaround of the school. Their stories, incorporating their perceptions of the school factors leading to the turnaround, potential leadership qualities, and resources that were of particular value, will lead to meaningful insight into the key elements of this transformation. The research process will involve designing questions and procedures, collecting data at North Shore, and developing general themes inducted by the analysis of data. Through an interpretative phenomenological analysis model, interviews will be conducted with Grade 9 and 10 English teachers. This will lead to the identification of specific initiatives and potentially culture-changing events that led to the school’s turnaround.

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If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at 617-610-3344 or via e-mail at fay.ke@husky.neu.edu or contact the chairperson of my committee, Dr. Karen Harbeck at Northeastern University, at 781-321-3569. Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request for permission.

Sincerely,

Kelly A. Fay
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University, Boston, MA
Appendix B:

Participant Recruitment E-mail

May, 2015

Dear Colleagues,

My name is Kelly Fay and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University and the coordinator of curriculum and staff development at North Shore Vocational High School. As part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a study about the factors that have led to the turnaround of the English department over the last decade at North Shore.

I am inviting you to participate in this research study. You have been asked to participate in this research study because you have a wealth of knowledge about the English department and your insight will be helpful in obtaining information regarding the English department’s turnaround. Your input regarding the school initiatives and departmental practices will be helpful in obtaining information for this interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Please be aware that agreeing or not agreeing to participate in this study will have no consequences on your work within the school or as a teacher at the school whatsoever. Also, any participation in the study will be completely confidential; names and other personal information will not be used.

Please respond via e-mail to fay.ke@husky.neu.edu if you are interested or have any questions. Thank you in advance for your time.

Kelly Fay
Appendix C:

Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Investigator Name: Principal Investigator, Dr. Karen Harbeck
Student Researcher, Kelly Fay

Title of Project: Remarkable Transformation: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of a High School English Department Turnaround

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have been asked to participate in this research study because you were part of the English department turnaround that occurred over the last decade. I believe you have a wealth of in-depth knowledge about the school, and your insight will be helpful in obtaining information regarding the English department’s turnaround.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research study is to identify and describe, as perceived by the Grade 10 English teachers, the key factors that contributed to the transformation of the English department at North Shore Vocational High School. Through the interpretative phenomenological analysis model, interviews will be conducted with faculty members. This will lead to the identification of specific initiatives and potentially culture-changing events that led to the department’s transformation.

What will I be asked to do?
The researcher will be looking for you to participate in an interview session that will be audiotaped. Your participation is voluntary, and you can opt out at any time.

Where will this take place and how much time will it take?
Individual interviews will take approximately 65 minutes each. The interviews will take place in a location of your choosing.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are several risks involved in being a participant in this study:

• There may be a possible conflict because I am your immediate supervisor; however, your participation in this study will not have any effect on your employment, evaluations, or job placement within the North Shore school district.

• There is the potential of revealing information about your own personal experiences with the turnaround process.

• Due to the fact that such a small population of teachers is being interviewed, people may be able to decipher who you are.
Will I benefit by being in this research?
There are no direct benefits for you. However, potential benefits may include the awareness of knowing that you helped to add to the current body of knowledge about school turnaround. In addition, another benefit could be the satisfaction of knowing that other schools that are in danger of failing might learn about the activities and the various supports that were put into place to turn this school around.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in the study will be confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for all study participants. Only the researcher will be aware of the participants’ identities. The data collected for this study will be kept by the researcher, including audiotapes, and will not be shared with others. All audiotapes will be destroyed following transcription.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. The researcher would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as Northeastern University to see this information. No identifying information will ever be shared with people at North Shore Vocational High School.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
You are not required to take part in this research study. If you do not want to participate, you do not have to sign this form.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
By participating in this research study, people may be able to decipher who you are based on the small population of teachers being interviewed. The harm that you may suffer because of this will be questions regarding your thoughts and ideas on the turnaround of North Shore. If this does happen, you will be able to direct the person to myself so that I will be able to answer the questions that he or she may have. By doing so, I will be actively working to take the burden and stress off of you.

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

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Kelly Fay
10 Miller’s Farm Rd.
Billerica, MA 01821
Cell: (617) 610-3344
E-mail: fay.ke@husky.neu.edu

Dr. Karen Harbeck
College of Professional Studies
360 Huntington Avenue
Northeastern University, Boston
Phone # (781) 321-3569
E-mail: k.harbeck@neu.edu
Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, Tel: 617-373-4588, e-mail: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

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

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

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

____________________________________
Research Participant (Printed Name)

Research Participant (Signature)        Date
Appendix D:

Interview Protocol

Interviewee (Title and Name): ________________________________

Interviewer: Kelly Fay _______________________________________

Date: ______________________________________________________

Location of Interview: _______________________________________

Previously attained background information (assume this has already been collected)

Interview #1 (Individual Interviews)

My name is Kelly Fay and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am presently working on my dissertation. I am also the coordinator of curriculum and staff development at North Shore Vocational High School. I have held this position for 9 years and have worked in the education profession for over 15 years.

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the experience of the transformation of the English department at North Shore Vocational High School. This research project focuses on student and school success, with a particular interest in understanding how English teachers view the key factors that have contributed to this success. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into how the English department became so high-performing. Hopefully this will allow us to identify actions, strategies, and use of resources that can be recommended for replication at other underperforming schools.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audi-tape our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. The tapes will be transcribed and a pseudonym will be used to label the tapes. I will be the only one privy to transcripts and information, and the tapes will be destroyed after they are transcribed.

To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me. [Provide form.] Essentially, this document states that (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. [Allow time to review form.] Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form? I would also like to audiotape this interview and have a consent form related to this as well. [Provide form.]

We have planned this interview to last approximately 65 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?
**Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about your preservice training prior to working at North Shore.
   a. Did you feel prepared to teach 10th-grade English?
      i. What prepared you to teach 10th-grade English?
      ii. Did the school do anything to prepare you to teach 10th-grade English?
2. Please describe your experience in the transformation of the English department at North Shore Vocational High School.
3. In your opinion, how did the English department at North Shore Vocational High School become high performing?
4. What strategies or resources do you perceive were particularly valuable in the improvement of the school?
   a. What strategies or resources do you perceive were helpful for you?
5. Tell me about the working relationship you have with the other 10th-grade English/reading teachers.
6. What does it mean to you, after investing years working at this school, to see the gains the department has made?
7. What advice would you give to an English teacher of a low-performing school?

**Interview #2 (Focus Group Interview)**

As you are aware, you have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as a collective group of teachers who have a great deal of information to share about your experience in the transformation of the English department at North Shore Vocational High School. I would like to remind you that this research project focuses on student and school success, with a particular interest in understanding how English teachers view the key factors that have contributed to this success. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight on your perceptions and experiences of how the English department became high performing. Hopefully this will allow us to identify actions, strategies, and use of resources that can be recommended for replication at other underperforming schools.

We have planned this interview to last approximately 60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Before we begin, I would like to explain that pedagogical content knowledge theory is the theory that grounds this research. Pedagogical content knowledge essentially takes your knowledge of the content of English and transforms it into the everyday lessons that you teach. It is essentially the art and science of teaching English. I would like to spend a good portion of this interview focusing on your own pedagogical content knowledge, both individually and collectively.

**Interview Questions**

1. In our first interview, we discussed both your preservice training prior to coming to North Shore and the professional development that the school offered once you were here. Can you now tell me about your perceptions of your pedagogical content knowledge after you attended the professional development sessions on reading and writing in the English classroom?
a. Did your perceptions of teaching English change? Please explain.
b. Did the professional development enhance your pedagogical content knowledge? If so, how?
c. Looking back, what can you say you didn’t know about teaching English prior to those professional development sessions?

2. Collectively, you all stated that you believed instituting professional learning communities (PLCs) was a major contributor to the success of the department. Did your PLC meetings enhance your own pedagogical content knowledge?
   a. If so, how?
   b. If not, why do you believe that?
   c. Were there any bumps in the road when embarking on and moving through the PLC process?

3. As the department transitioned, what initiatives, mandates, or expectations were instituted to turn the department’s scores around?
   a. What worked for you?
   b. What didn’t work for you?
   c. Do you believe any affected your pedagogical content knowledge?

4. Collectively, what changes has the department been able to sustain?
   a. Were those changes developed within the department?
   b. Were there changes developed by the administration?
   c. Why do you believe the department was able to sustain those changes?
   d. Were there changes that could not be sustained? What were they?
      i. If so, why do you believe this happened?
      ii. If so, do you believe something could have been done differently?
   e. Were there times that you did not believe in the process because of the changes?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share about the turnaround of this department?

**Interview #3 (Computer-Mediated Communication Interview/Email Interview)**

You have been selected to be a part of the third component of this research project because you have been or you currently are an English department head at North Shore Vocational High School. You have been identified because you can offer an additional layer of information when it comes to identifying the perceptions and experiences of the members of the grade 10 English department.

**Interview Questions**

1. What did/do you focus on while being the English department head at North Shore Vocational High School?
2. What did/do you keep in the forefront of your mind as the department turned around?
3. What did you keep in mind when it came to student needs during the turnaround?

**Debriefing Statement**

Thank you so much for participating in this study. Your participation was very valuable to this research. I understand that you are very busy, and I very much appreciate the time you devoted to participating in this study.
This study examined the key factors and initiatives that contributed to the turnaround of the English department at North Shore Vocational High School throughout the last decade.

You are reminded that your original consent document included the following information: Participation in this study is voluntary, and your participation or nonparticipation will not in any way affect other relationships (e.g., employer, school, etc.). You may discontinue your participation in this research program at any time without penalty or costs of any nature, character, or kind. If you have any concerns about your participation or the data you provided in light of this disclosure, please discuss this with me. I will be happy to provide any information that I can to help answer questions you have about this study.

If your concerns are such that you would now like to have your data withdrawn, and the data is identifiable, I will do so.

If you have questions about your participation in the study, please contact me at 617-610-3344 or my faculty advisor, Dr. Karen Harbeck, at 781-321-3569.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, Tel.: 617-373-4588, e-mail: n.regina@neu.edu.

Please again accept my appreciation for your participation in this study.
Appendix E:
The Lack of Pedagogical Focus in Teacher Preparation, Testing, and Licensure in Massachusetts

The literature reviewed in chapter 2 clarified that teachers’ understanding of pedagogy is distinct from their understanding of subject-area content. As background for this study, this section reviews the requirements of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for educational preparation, testing, and teaching licenses, with a focus on English teachers and literacy specialists. This section also indicates the type of licenses held by the study participants.

Education coursework. The University of Massachusetts Secondary Teacher Education Program’s English Education pathway indicated that an individual can become a teacher by blending both theory and practice in three different pathways: a bachelor’s of arts, a post-bachelor’s program, or a master’s or specialty program (University of Massachusetts, 2017). The university listed 17 required classes, of which only two—reading process/teaching reading and writing/evaluating writing—were not content based (University of Massachusetts, 2017). This particular course of study does not integrate pedagogical skills into its program. Rather, it is heavily content based. The significance that this poses for this research is the fact that if students go through this program to be a teacher, they will certainly be trained in content, but ultimately will not be trained in the art and science of teaching, which is actually how to teach. Most of the educators interviewed for this project stated that when they entered the classroom, they felt confident in their content knowledge, but not on how to convey that content to their students. At first glance, they may seem uneducated, but that is not the case. The participants interviewed were in fact educated and qualified to teach based on standards of the state of Massachusetts. As shown in the next section, individuals can take a test, and as long as they are knowledgeable in
the content and literate enough to pass the Communication and Literacy Skills test, then they are considered qualified to teach according to the standards set forth by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Additionally, if educators are able to pass the necessary exams, then they are considered highly qualified, even if they have no knowledge of the pedagogy necessary to teach.

**Tests for teacher certification.** In Massachusetts, individuals have to take examinations to be licensed as a teacher. Interestingly, these exams also do not require significant knowledge of pedagogy. The Communication and Literacy Skills test, for example, has subtests for reading and writing. The reading subtest has 42 multiple choice reading questions, and the writing subtest has 35 multiple choice writing questions, seven short-answer sentence correction items, and two open response questions (Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure [MTEL], 2017a). The reading test is weighted evenly at 16.7% for each set of questions. The questions cover the following information: meanings of words and phrases, main idea and supporting details, writer’s purpose and point of view, relationships among ideas, critical reasoning, and approaches for outlining, summarizing, and graph interpretation (MTEL, 2017b). For the writing component, the multiple-choice component is worth 50% and the open response is worth 50%. Within the multiple-choice section, questions on establishing and maintaining a main idea are worth 15%; sentence construction, grammar, and usage, 10%; spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, 10%; and revising sentences containing errors, 15%. For the open response component, a summary exercise is worth 15%, and a composition exercise is worth 35% (MTEL, 2017b). The item analysis of this particular exam shows that pedagogy is not a requirement to be successful. Literacy skills are all that are assessed on this particular exam, and they are what the educator possesses, not the skills necessary to teach literacy. It should be noted that this exam is the
constant between all license areas throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Every individual has to pass it in order to be a teacher, regardless of the area of expertise.

In addition to the Communication and Literacy Skills test, English teachers take the English subject matter test, which comprises 100 multiple-choice questions (worth 80%) and two open response questions (worth 20%). Within the multiple-choice section, the language and literature section (worth 51% of the total grade) assesses items such as understanding American literature from the colonial period through the end of the 19th century and understanding literary theory and criticism. The rhetoric and composition section, worth 17%, assesses the understanding of the composition process and written language conventions. The multiple-choice section on reading theory, research, and instruction (worth 12%) assesses understanding of reading processes and research-based theories related to reading and the role literature plays in promoting reading proficiency. The open response addresses the integration of knowledge and understanding (MTEL, 2017c). This item analysis again illuminates that this exam is also content based and not pedagogical based. Both of these exams, as well as the coursework previously discussed, show that the requirements to be an educator in the state of Massachusetts do not require pedagogical expertise. As shown in the participant profiles, it is clear that most of the teachers entered the profession with little pedagogical experience and only content knowledge. It was not until the school or previous schools provided the appropriate professional development sessions that the teachers began to enhance their practice, and because of this their perception of their own teaching abilities improved.

The next section discusses the various levels of licensure in the state of Massachusetts. Once educators complete the necessary coursework and pass the appropriate exams, they are eligible to apply for a teaching license. A perusal of the licenses offered for English educators
through the state of Massachusetts revealed that there are three levels depending on previous schooling and experience. The first two, preliminary/provisional license and initial/provisional with advanced standing license, are considered entry level, and the third, professional license, requires previous teaching experience. All three license levels are considered highly qualified by the state of Massachusetts.

**Levels of licensure.** All teachers in Massachusetts are required to hold a license in the area that they teach. There are different routes to becoming a high school English teacher, and additional work is required to become a high school reading teacher.

**Preliminary/provisional license.** The first level of licensure is a preliminary/provisional license. This level is available for the English license and the special education license, which is called moderate disabilities. To receive an English license, individuals need to hold a bachelor’s degree, receive a passing score on the Communication and Literacy Skills test, and receive a passing score on the English subject matter test. This particular license allows the teacher to teach Grades 8 to 12 (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016a, 2016b). A teacher who works under this license is considered highly qualified and is able to teach high school English. Of my participants, only Caleb held this license at the time he started working at North Shore, and he had no prior experience teaching at the high school level.

**Initial/provisional with advanced standing license.** The second level of licensure is available for English teachers, reading teachers, and special education teachers. To receive this level of licensure, English teachers need to hold a bachelor’s degree, receive a passing score on the Communication and Literacy Skills test, receive a passing score on the English subject matter test, and complete an approved program for teaching English (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016c). Those with this license are also eligible to teach
Grades 8 to 12 and are considered highly qualified. Brody, Tayla, and Eleanor were the teachers who held this license as they entered North Shore. Tayla was the only one who had experience (seven years) teaching high school prior to teaching at North Shore. The other two, Brody and Eleanor, had never taught at the high school level before. Eleanor never taught before and Brody taught at the elementary level. Brody had a specialty license of reading, which requires additional coursework. What should be noted is that all three teachers entered North Shore with this license, but all three had very different backgrounds when it came to their pedagogical expertise for teaching high school English, as only one of them had taught high school English before.

*Reading teacher license.* Teachers with a reading teacher license are considered specialists in the state of Massachusetts. To receive a reading teacher license, teachers need to hold a bachelor’s degree, receive a passing score on the Communication and Literacy Skills test, receive a passing score on the reading specialist subject matter test, complete an educator preparation program in the area of reading, hold an initial teaching license in another field, and have taught under that license for at least one year (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016c). Those with this license are eligible to teach all grade levels, kindergarten through Grade 12, and are considered highly qualified. Brody is the only educator who held this particular license. What is interesting to note is that this license is the only one that will allow the educator to teach any grade from kindergarten to grade 12. That being said, Brody held this license and he did have pedagogical expertise, but he had it only at the elementary level. He did not have any experience teaching at the high school level prior to coming to North Shore.
**Professional license.** A professional license is the final level of licensure that a teacher can receive. To obtain this license, an educator needs to hold an initial level of licensure, needs to have taught for at least three years under that initial license, needs to have completed a one-year induction program with 50 hours beyond the induction year, and needs to complete coursework either in a program or in the academic discipline (e.g., English, reading, or special education) for which he or she is seeking the license. This particular license allows the teacher to teach Grades 8 to 12 and to be considered highly qualified (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016a). Quinton is the only participant in this study who held this license, as he was an English educator who solely taught special education students. In Massachusetts, individuals do not have to have the content license to teach in a specific special education content area, but instead have to hold the special education license. Quinton felt confident when he entered the classroom in regards to his pedagogical skills because he taught at an alternative high school prior to coming to North Shore, but he did not have the pedagogical content knowledge for teaching English, as he had never been a grade 10 English teacher.