

On the Path to Becoming a Professional Learning Community:  
Charting Change in one Suburban Middle School

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**Annotation:** This article presents findings from a mixed methods case study of one suburban middle school whose principal had the strategic intent of moving professional staff towards becoming a professional learning community. The findings inform practice about the struggles inherent in, and the practical side of, creating a professional learning community.

**Abstract:** This article presents findings from a mixed methods case study of one suburban middle school whose principal had the strategic intent of moving professional staff towards becoming a professional learning community. Data were collected over a two-year period. A quantitative questionnaire was administered during two consecutive fall semesters, and qualitative interviews were conducted during two consecutive spring semesters. Significant differences in the means between Years 1 and 2 were observed for five of the items on the questionnaire: two of the items showed a mean decrease and three showed a mean increase. The qualitative data are used to elaborate on these data and make visible the inherently messy struggles with changing the culture of a school. Teachers reported being saturated with shared decision-making and a felt lack of agreement on strategies for reaching the vision for school improvement. Despite these struggles, they perceived that shared practice was emerging.

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For more than 15 years, researchers and staff developers (DuFour, 1997; Hipp & Huffman, 2002; Hipp, 2006; Hord, 1997; Joyce, Murphy, Showers, & Murphy, 1989; Leonard & Leonard, 2001; Schmoker, 2004) have implemented, examined, and extolled teachers and other professional staff working together to improve schools by engaging in collegial interactions focused on improving their own practices and increasing student achievement. According to DuFour (2004), collegial school improvement efforts have, at their core, three principal ideas:

1. The central purpose of school is to ensure that all children learn.
2. The school professional staff must work together to achieve the purpose of learning for all.
3. The routine work of schools must be a focused, collective effort aimed at improving student outcomes.

Generally known as *professional learning communities*, these kinds of efforts are believed to be one of the most promising ways to improve student outcomes (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Hord, 2004; Joyce, 2004). Yet, as several authors have noted, our understanding of the construct and the practical workings of professional learning communities remains elusive (Louis, 2006; Pristine & Nelson, 2005).

The purpose of this article is to present findings from a mixed methods case study of one suburban middle school. Specifically, the findings were derived from an analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected between 2004 and 2006. The idea for the investigation grew out of an August 2004 conversation with a teacher (a student enrolled in a graduate course taught by the researcher) and an Assistant Principal from Mason Middle School (MMS). The then new

MMS principal, Dr. Case, was hired to replace a recently retired, long-time principal. Before coming to MMS, Dr. Case had served 6 years as a high school principal, 2 years as a high school assistant principal, 8 years as a department supervisor, and 19 years as a classroom teacher.

During the opening of a school faculty meeting, Dr. Case announced one of his primary initiatives would be the creation of a school-wide professional learning community for improving student achievement. Teachers were to observe each other's classroom practices and the school's weekly professional development time (one half-day) would be devoted to improving student achievement.

Upon speaking with Dr. Case, the author determined his initiative presented an opportunity to responsively engage with a local school. As a non-participant observer, the author gathered a set of data that school personnel could use to formatively assess the community's development and gain an understanding of what might need to be done. As such, the purpose of this mixed methods case study was to explore and to describe suburban middle school teachers' reports, over time (i.e., two full academic years), of their progress toward becoming a professional learning community.

#### A Conceptual Framework for Charting Change in Professional Learning Communities

A professional learning community was defined in this study as a school's professional staff engaging in an iterative process of collegial inquiry, learning, and action based on that learning and directed at improving their own educational practices and student outcomes (Eaker et al., 2002; Hipp & Huffman, 2002; Hord, 2004). Empirical evidence suggests that schools not only struggle with developing structures to support the growth of learning communities but also with acquiring the knowledge and skills to ensure their success (Fellows, 2005; Supovitz, 2002;

Supovitz & Christman, 2005; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). Some have attributed the slow and often unsuccessful growth of learning communities to the multifaceted nature of the problems school personnel face and the complex and changeable internal and external contexts of schooling—physical, social, cultural, political (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003; Pounder, 1998). Others have reported the challenge rests with a long tradition of teachers in the United States exercising significant instructional autonomy, practicing their craft in relative isolation (behind closed doors), and having little formal training in shared decision-making (Enderlin-Lampe, 2002; Little, 1990; Pounder, 1998).

Hord (1997, 2004) developed a framework that has been successfully used to examine and document staffs' efforts to create professional learning communities in schools (Fellows, 2005; Hipp & Huffman, 2002; Knutson, Miranda, & Washell, 2005). According to Hord (2004), a professional learning community exhibits the following essential characteristics: (a) supportive and shared leadership, (b) shared values and vision, (c) collective learning and the application of that learning, (d) shared practice, and (e) supportive conditions for the maintenance of the learning community (p. 7). Although these characteristics are presented as distinct constructs (dimensions), they have been found to be developmentally overlapping and intertwined (Hipp & Huffman, 2002; Hord, 2004; Morrissey, 2000). Hord's (2004) five dimensions served as the conceptual framework for this mixed methods case study.

Table 1 contains brief definitions of the dimensions, which are described further below.

Table 1

*Brief Definitions of the Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community (Hord, 2004)*

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Supportive and Shared Leadership

School administrators participate democratically with staff sharing power, authority, and decision-making.

Shared Values and Vision

Staff share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning, and are consistently referenced for the staff's work.

Collective Learning and the Application of that Learning

Staff's collective learning and application of that learning (taking action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs.

Shared Practice

Peers review and give feedback based on observing each other's classroom behaviors in order to increase individual and organizational capacity.

Supportive Conditions

School conditions and capacities support the staff's arrangement as a professional learning organization.

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In Hord's (2004) conceptualization of a successful professional learning community, the dimension supportive and shared leadership is exemplified in a principal who uses a facilitative and collegial leadership style. The leader's paradigm is one of mutual "inquiry, generative problem-solving, dialogue and reflection" (Zepeda, 2004, p. 146). Hord (2004) contended that principals must "recognize the dynamic potential of staff contributions to decision-making" (p. 8). They seek teacher input, engage them in authentic decision-making, and provide them with leadership opportunities (e.g., team leader, committee chair). Effective principals make their thinking visible and explicit, while clearly defining and articulating the parameters of decision-making authority and responsibility (Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Hoy, & Mackley, 2000).

A second hallmark of a successful learning community is shared values and vision. Professional staff not only value students' learning but also value their own learning and that of

their colleagues (Eaker et al., 2002; Hord, 1997, 2004). They have high expectations for students and picture them as academically capable, envisioning a school that supports all students in realizing their unique potential. Vision drives action, and staying focused on a preferred future compels teachers to act (Hord, 2004). Furthermore, research (Ferguson, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Turner & Patrick, 2004) supports the notion that when teachers share a vision of expecting the best of their students, students are more apt to achieve at higher academic levels.

Shared vision is brought to life through staff behaviors that lead to collective learning and the application of their learning, the third characteristic of a learning community (Eaker et al., 2002; Hipp & Huffman, 2002; Hord, 1997, 2004). Success is evidenced through professional staff's focus on learning rather than teaching. The learning is collaborative and based in reflective dialogues and joint inquiry that is designed to identify evidence-based practices for improving teaching and increasing student learning. Researchers (Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002) have found that teachers who do not team up regularly with colleagues are reticent about sharing their experiences and resources with their peers. This type of isolation leads to a diminished capacity for self-directed learning (Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Leonard & Leonard, 2001).

Shared practice, the fourth dimension of Hord's (2004) framework, is focused on teachers regularly and frequently visiting each other's classroom to observe teaching and to provide feedback about teaching and learning based on these observations. Teachers engaged in successful learning communities have indicated shared practice "sustains their personal commitment and effort. They also see that collaborating with colleagues on classroom practice translates into academic success of their students" (Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 338).

Reporting the results from a case study of a single elementary school, Zepeda (2004) stated that, along with other initiatives, instituting a voluntary peer-coaching program (one form of shared practice) helped to move the school toward becoming a professional learning community. Specifically, the author stated that teachers sharing practice “and what it entails—inquiry, generative problem solving, dialogue, and reflection—provided the foundation for the work” (p. 150) accomplished at the school. Nevertheless, Morrissey (2000) determined that “shared personal practice is limited, even in highly functioning leaning communities, and tends to be the last of the dimensions to develop” (p. 9). Other research has resulted in similar findings (Fellows, 2005; Hipp & Huffman, 2002; Hord, 2004). Finally, Knutson et al. (2005) found a significant connection between leader behaviors and the development of a school culture that supported teachers’ shared practice, as measured by the School Professional Staff as a Learning Community Questionnaire (SPSaLC; Hord, 1996).

The supportive conditions dimension includes both a school’s physical (structures) and human capacities. Hord (2004) and others (Eaker et al., 2002; Kirtman, 2002; Tschannen-Moran et al., 2000) have suggested that school improvement efforts are buttressed by organizational structures that facilitate teachers regularly meeting, for example, to examine student work and the connections between student achievement and their own classroom practices. Concerning human capacities, collegial relationships based in trust are fundamental, and considered a necessary pre-condition, to developing a successful professional learning community (Hord, 2004; Louis, 2006). Moreover, tangible structures and a culture of trust serve as the foundation for the development and maintenance of other dimensions (Hipp & Huffman, 2002).



## Methodology

The purpose of this investigation, exploring and describing suburban middle school teachers' reports (over two years) of their school becoming a professional learning community, suggested combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods in a single case study would be most effective (Creswell, 2003). Yin (2003) stated a case study design is preferred when the aim of the investigation is to explore a contemporary event and relevant behaviors over which the researcher has no control, as was the situation in this study. To enhance the credibility of a case study, Yin recommends using evidence from two or more sources that converge on the same set of facts or findings. Also referred to as triangulation, corroborating evidence may be obtained from different individuals, types of data, or mixed methods of data collection (Creswell, 2005). According to Creswell (2003), researchers that use mixed methods for collecting data should address the sequence for implementation of the methods, the use of a conceptual framework, the priority or weight given to the quantitative or qualitative approach, including data collection, analysis, and integration of findings.

Concerning the sequence for methods implementation, data were collected over a two-year period in four phases and included two administrations of a quantitative, paper-pencil questionnaire and two sets of qualitative, in-person interviews. The SPSaLC (Hord, 1996) was administered to all MMS teachers during two consecutive fall semesters; in-person interviews were used to collect qualitative data from self-identified volunteers during two consecutive spring semesters. Following Creswell's (2003, 2005) advice, a review of the literature guided the selection of the conceptual framework (Hord, 2004), questionnaire (Hord, 1996), development of the interview guide, and analysis of the qualitative data. Finally, relatively equal importance was given to the quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The thick descriptions and

examples obtained through the interviews were intended to corroborate and elaborate on the survey data, with integration and interpretation of the entire analysis occurring when all data had been collected.

### *Instrumentation*

*Quantitative measure.* The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory granted permission to use the SPSaLC (Hord, 1996). The SPSaLC is a self-administered paper pencil questionnaire that contains 16 items. The items are coded to, and unequally distributed across, the dimensions of Hord's (2004) framework (e.g., some have two items, while others have three items). Each of the items contains three descriptors arrayed along a continuum of practices from antithetical to exemplary professional learning communities. Respondents are asked to circle the number on a scale, from a low of 1 (antithetical) to a high of 5 (exemplary), indicating the extent to which they perceive their school exhibits a particular practice (descriptor). According to Hord, Meehan, Orletsky, and Sattes (1999), results of the field reliability and validity tests were satisfactorily met, indicating that the SPSaLC was a useful gauge of staffs' perceptions of their school as a learning community. The field test was conducted with 690 teachers representing 21 schools. Satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients were found at both the full group (+.94) and the individual school levels (ranged from a low of +.62 to a high of +.95). For a more detailed description of the development and validation of the SPSaLC refer to the Hord et al. reference.

*Qualitative measure.* The interview guide was loosely based on Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique (CIT). For each of the five dimensions of the conceptual framework (Hord, 2004), interviewees were presented with a brief description of the dimension and then invited to recall and describe recent situations related to the dimension. They were then asked to

respond to five questions, prompting then to make judgments about that situation (Table 2 contains a sample question). This process was repeated for each dimension of the framework.

Table 2  
*A Sample Question from the Interview Guide: Shared Practice*

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Definition: Peers review and give feedback based on observing each other's classroom behaviors in order to increase individual and organizational capacity.

I would like you to recall and describe a recent whole-school learning opportunity.

- What led up to the situation?
  - What was an outcome of this opportunity?
  - What was especially effective or ineffective about this opportunity?
  - What should happen differently the next time and why?
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### *Procedures*

The author received approval from the University's Human Subject Committee to conduct the investigation. By design, and to protect participant confidentiality, the researcher did not code the questionnaire and related materials in any identifiable way. Hereafter, the word "teacher" is used in lieu of the phrase "professional staff." It refers to those school employees (other than the principal and vice principals) in a position requiring a certificate issued by the State Board of Education (e.g., teachers, guidance counselors).

Importantly, during the first year of the study, Bellwood Public School District had two middle schools. A third middle school opened in the second year of the study. This led to some MMS professional staff and students transferring to the new school and a decrease in the number of grade level teams. Table 3 depicts these changes. The number of school administrators remained constant—Dr. Case, the principal, and two assistant principals.

Table 3  
*Changes in Student Enrollment, Professional Staff, and Grade-level Teams*

|                          | Year 1 | Year 2 |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|
| Student Enrollment       | 1123   | 966    |
| Professional Staff (FTE) | 113.2  | 94.5   |
| Grade-Level Teams        | 11     | 10     |

*Administration of the SPSaLC: Years 1 and 2.* In the fall of Year 1, copies of the SPSaLC and study materials were distributed to all teachers ( $N = 113$ ). To increase the response rate, follow-up emails were sent two and four weeks after the first distribution. Sixty teachers (53%) returned the questionnaire in Year 1. The second administration of the SPSaLC took place one full year later. Procedures for disseminating the study materials were modified in Year 2 to improve the survey response rate from Year 1. The SPSaLC was distributed to all teachers in attendance at a monthly faculty meeting ( $N = 80$ ; school administrators were not present). Seventy-two individuals (90%) returned the questionnaire.

*In-person interviews: Years 1 and 2.* In the springs of Year 1 and Year 2, eight volunteers were chosen on a first-come first-served basis from survey respondents who had expressed an interest in participating in the in-person interview portion of this study. Participation in the interviews was voluntary; no teachers volunteered to participate in both interviews. All interviews were conducted onsite and audio-taped. Each interview took between 35 and 45 minutes and the interview guide was followed each time. As Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggested, this researcher used a conversational approach when interacting with the participants. Similar to the normal turn-taking routines that are found in everyday conversations, “questions and answers follow[ed] each other in a logical fashion” (Rubin & Rubin, p. 12). Member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), a form of summarizing and confirming the participants’

responses to ensure accuracy and to obtain a more complete understanding of participant meaning, was also used. This process gave participants an opportunity to validate the interview data, allowing the researcher to analyze the interviews in progress.

Table 4 depicts the number of participants for each year and phase of the study.

Table 4  
*Numbers of Study Participants Years 1 and 2*

|                                 | Year 1        | Year 2        |
|---------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| SPSaLC Respondents - Fall       | <i>n</i> = 60 | <i>n</i> = 72 |
| Interview Participants - Spring | <i>n</i> = 8  | <i>n</i> = 8  |

#### *Data Analysis*

Data from the Year 1 and the Year 2 administrations of the SPSaLC (Hord, 1996) were entered into the SPSS 11.0 for Mac OS X. The scale on the SPSaLC instrument was treated as an interval scale (Wright, 1997). As previously noted, participation in the study was voluntary, the questionnaires were not coded in any identifiable way; therefore, samples were not paired. A statistical analysis of the data from Year 1 and Year 2 administrations was conducted using the t-test for independent samples. The independent samples (or two-sample) t-test is a test for comparing means for two groups of cases (Coladarci, Cobb, Minium, & Clarke 2004), when samples are collected independently of one another, as was the case in this investigation.

Procedures associated with qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) were used to analyze the interview data, consisting of verbatim transcripts and field notes. Transcripts were physically organized and divided into meaningful segments. Each transcript was read several times to generate categories, themes, and patterns. With each reading, findings were compared to the conceptual framework Hord (2004), modified, and refined. Finally, data displays were

created and occurrences of major themes were counted (quantizing; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## Results

Significant differences in the means between the years were observed for five of the items on the SPSaLC (Hord, 1996); two of the items showed a mean decrease (Items 1b, 2a), and three items showed a mean increase (Items 2b, 4a, 4b). In all cases, these differences fell within respective confidence intervals and are highly unlikely due to chance. Quantitative and qualitative findings are presented for these five items. They are discussed within the structure of the dimension of the conceptual framework being assessed, with the results pertaining to the survey items showing a mean decrease presented first, followed by the results for those items showing a mean increase. The interviewee quotes below are representative of participant responses and are presented as expressions of the themes that emerged.

### *Supportive and Shared Leadership*

Hord's (2004) notion of supportive and shared leadership and the related SPSaLC items (1a, 1b) focus on the principal sharing "leadership—and thus power and authority by inviting staff input and action in decision-making" (p. 7). Examination of the results for the SPSaLC items for this dimension revealed the teachers showed a mean decrease in their reports about the *principal involving entire staff in decision-making* (Item 1b), producing a mean difference between the years of .36, (with t-test value equal to 2.978 for 128 df,  $p = .003$ ). An analysis of interviewee responses did not corroborate these results. The qualitative findings present a somewhat different and informative picture of Dr. Case's supportive and shared leadership. Further, these data provide some additional ideas about what may have been happening at MMS.

All Year 1 ( $n = 8$ ) and Year 2 interviewees ( $n = 8$ ) indicated Dr. Case actively shared leadership, providing many authentic opportunities for the entire faculty to give input and take action in decision-making. Both groups of teachers provided rich examples of how Dr. Case routinely sought teachers' opinions and used a variety supportive structures through which all teachers could become involved in discussing and making decisions about most school matters. Interviewees in both years made several references to Dr. Case's "open door policy", which allowed teachers to "walk right in without an appointment," as a way he invited input. One teacher reflected, "I go into his office often to talk to him about whatever, sometimes just a friendly chat, but sometimes it's concerning an overall school concern." Furthermore, the interviewees overwhelmingly asserted that teachers could choose the level of their involvement in decision-making along a continuum of opportunities:

There's plenty of opportunity for people to give input. There are faculty meetings in which the principal often has an open forum, especially for those really important issues that need to be discussed by the whole faculty. . . . There's often an opportunity for people to stand up and speak their minds. Also, a lot of committees that teachers could sign onto. With the team structure, I feel like if someone wasn't comfortable voicing their opinion in a large meeting, they could always talk to their team leader who could then carry out their concern to the team leader meetings. . . . I think, in general, it's effective.

The qualitative data suggest one possible explanation for the mean decrease over time in survey respondents' reports of the principal involving entire staff in decision-making (Item 1b) may be found in Year 2 interviewees' perceptions that the parameters of decision-making authority and responsibility were, at times, unclear (i.e., who would make final decisions, about which decisions). Seven interviewees expressed some "frustration" through their assertions that

the school administrators, having considered teacher input, should have simply made definitive decisions. One teacher stated, “We certainly do dialogue as a larger faculty. Things are opened up. Issues are raised, concerns are raised, solutions are discussed but never decided upon and, therefore, nothing is actually done and that’s frustrating.”

Nevertheless, several Year 2 interviewees acknowledged that Dr. Case had made his thinking visible and explicit with “his leadership style” of deliberately seeking teachers’ opinions and having faculty committees develop solutions to solve the school’s problems. In recounting a story about a whole school meeting about closing the achievement gap, that evolved into a discussion about how to support improvement in student behavior, one teacher explained, “In the end, people were asking for direction and Dr. Case said that’s not his style to just give direction right there. He would take all of our advice, move it to a committee, which is the equity and excellence committee.” This leads to a second possible explanation for the mean decrease in survey respondents’ reports of the principal involving entire staff in decision-making. By Year 2 MMS teachers may have become “saturated” with sharing in decisions. This impression emerges from what six Year 2 interviewees described as shared decision-making at MMS turning into “too much of a good thing,” a notion not put forth by Year 1 interviewees.

### *Shared Values and Vision*

The dimension shared values and vision, and the items in the SPSaLC (2a, 2b) that assess the extent to which teachers perceive their school exhibits this attribute, focus on teachers having “an unwavering commitment to student learning that is consistently articulated and referenced in the staff’s work” (Hord, 2004, p. 7). An analysis of the quantitative data for the SPSaLC items (2a, 2b) related to this dimension in comparison to the qualitative data revealed the following.



Survey respondents reports showed a mean decrease in a *vision for improvement being discussed and shared by all* (Item 2a), producing a mean difference between the years of .42 (with t-test value equal to 2.593 for 130 df,  $p = .011$ ). Year 1 interviewees most often used phrases in the vein of “all students can learn” and “we do whatever it takes to help them learn” to describe the vision for improvement in MMS. Similarly, Year 2 interviewees frequently used the expression “closing the achievement gap” when they talked about the vision for improvement.

Themes that emerged from the qualitative data showed both Year 1 and Year 2 interviewees perceived MMS teachers, “for the most part,” shared the vision. In qualifying what was meant by “for the most part”, a first year interviewee asserted, “sharing a vision, as with most things, exists on a continuum.” In other words, teachers had individual, unexplored mental models of what the vision was, and therefore its implementation would naturally differ from person to person. This sentiment was expressed by all second year interviewees in what one teacher described as teachers “not always agreeing on strategies for how they might reach this vision.” Furthermore, both groups of interviewees attributed, at least in part, the felt lack of agreement on strategies for reaching the vision for school improvement to the nature of middle school adolescent students’ developmental needs. One of the teachers suggested:

There is the shared vision. But, the reality of the situation is that it’s tough . . . Especially, I think that . . . the sixth, seventh, and eighth graders are so different. They are vastly different from sixth to eighth grade and the philosophies you have to use are very different.

In contrast to the mean decrease in reports of the vision for improvement being discussed and shared by all, survey respondents showed a mean increase in their reports of *the vision always being focused on student learning* (Item 2b), producing a mean difference between the

years of  $-.81$  (with t-test values equal to  $-4.551$  for 130 df,  $p = .000$ ). The qualitative data overwhelmingly validated this finding. Interviewees from both years indicated staff frequently discussed the vision for students' learning in a variety of forums (e.g., faculty meetings, team meetings). When asked about teachers always being focused on students, a first year interviewee said teachers did this "to a fault" and further described the faculty as "reflective practitioners who took their jobs very seriously." Another interviewee noted "faculty are very focused on student learning and this was exemplified by the long hours they worked, including weekends." Finally, interviewees often spoke about having a strong focus on the day-to-day implementation of the vision. A second year interviewee observed, "We discuss detail. You know, this is what works here. . . . My personal goal is always to get them reading and it all fits." The quantitative and qualitative findings showed that study participants had a strong, collective commitment to a deep purpose, student learning.

### *Shared Practice*

The essence of shared practice "involves the review of a teacher's behavior by colleagues and includes feedback and assistance activity to support individual and community improvement" (Hord, 2004, p. 7). There was a mean increase in MMS teachers' reports of *regularly visiting and observing peers' teaching* (Item 4a), producing a mean difference of  $-.82$  (with t-test value equal to  $-5.420$  for 126.654 df,  $p = .000$ ). MMS teachers also showed a mean increase in their reports of *providing feedback based on observations* (Item 4b), producing a mean difference of  $-.77$  (with t-test value equal to  $-3.569$  for 122 df,  $p = .001$ ).

Qualitative validation of shared practice is evident in interviewees' stories, which also provide a more informative picture of how shared practice was emerging at MMS. In Year 1, all interviewees ( $n = 8$ ) reported Dr. Case introduced an objective aimed at implementing "school-

wide collegial observations of one another's classroom teaching." Similarly, all Year 2 interviewees ( $n = 8$ ) indicated the principal continued to encourage peer-to-peer observations. Both groups of teachers talked about how Dr. Case had put into place structures to support observations by his encouraging teachers to schedule substitute teachers for their classes so that they could observe other teachers. Nevertheless, interviewees in both years reported people were not fully availing themselves of this opportunity. One teacher reflected: "You could put in to have a sub come in. Dr. Case really encouraged that. Unfortunately, our team didn't get to participate as much as we would have liked."

Five first year interviewees indicated they had observed or been observed by another teacher. In Year 2, all of the teachers reported participating in peer-to-peer observations. Further, all teachers who had engaged in this process perceived that observing peers was extremely beneficial in helping them to reflect on their own practice. An interviewee remarked:

It was revitalizing. It was a younger teacher and he kept going back to the central question that he had written on the board. I realized that I forget to do that. I write it up there but I don't tie the lesson back to it.

Despite positive perceptions about the felt benefits of sharing practice, Year 1 and Year 2 interviewees suggested that, for the most part, the MMS teachers were struggling with implementing collegial observations. In particular, both groups indicated they wanted specific guidance and professional development about how to carry out classroom peer observations, including pre-conference and debriefing. Furthermore, all Year 2 teachers implied shared practice largely "remained hard to get hold of," citing a variety of reasons why, the most common being reports of teachers feeling as though that they simply could not fit a visitation into their schedule. One teacher stated, "It was like forcing us to do one extra thing during the

day which none of us had the time or the wherewithal to do.” Another interviewee described some tentativeness with a process that felt like “supervision;” “Teachers don’t like [observing their colleagues]. They’re nervous about that. I felt nervous because I’m not a supervisor.” Finally, half of the second year interviewees suggested administrators should articulate expectations about the number and frequency of observations, holding teachers accountable. One interviewee said:

I do think it needs to be more. We almost need a timeline or deadlines or some accountability. Seems like things are a little too nebulous. We know what Dr. Case’s expectations are; we know what his values are. But, he needs to lay it on the line. Tell us what he wants from us exactly and then, if he doesn’t get it, hold other teachers accountable, more or less, if we don’t do it.

### Conclusions and Implications for Practice and Research

This article presented findings from a mixed methods case study of one suburban middle school whose principal had the strategic intent of moving professional staff towards becoming a learning community. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected over a two-year period.

The quantitative data confirm what Stoll, McMahon, and Thomas (2006) put forth: “Every school is likely to exhibit particular PLC characteristics and processes—that is, to be more or less well developed in these respect—and that this development can proceed and recede over time” (p. 621). The qualitative data help further our understanding. They make visible the inherently messy struggles with changing school culture and provide us with a portrait of the practical workings of the developing professional learning community at MMS.

Sorting out the quantitative and qualitative results revealed Dr. Case's efforts, with respect to seeking teacher input and providing authentic opportunities for them to make decisions, were perceived to be insufficient. Teachers at MMS conveyed a need for him to clearly establish decision processes and rules. Moreover, teachers appeared to be saturated with sharing responsibility for decisions. There was an expressed desire for Dr. Case to assume more responsibility in the actions and operations of making decisions.

Donaldson (2001) stated participants in shared leadership and decision-making "are both 'shapers of' and 'shaped by' one another" (p. 41). Through the development and implementation of a professional learning community, everyone must assume a share of influence and take on responsibility for continually learning new ways of acting (Hipp & Huffman, 2002; Meyers, Meyers, & Gelzheiser, 2001). In practice, teachers and principals will likely need to learn about the various processes they can employ in making shared decisions. They will also do well to explicitly articulate the procedures and rules to be used for making decisions and to deliberately build individual and group skills (capability) to execute those procedures (Enderlin-Lampe, 2002; Meyers et al., 2001). Participants in shared decision-making must also be sensitive to each other's tolerance and preference for more or less involvement in some areas of decision-making over others (Anderson, 2002). As Leonard and Leonard (2001) posited, "effective collaboration requires sophisticated skills that do not simply materialize when teachers come together, either voluntarily or otherwise. Collaborative skills need development" (p. 394).

The comparison of quantitative and qualitative data showed MMS teachers perceived they were acting on a shared vision of school improvement, for the most part. Senge (2006) tells us vision is linked to deep organizational purpose and shared vision emerges from ongoing dialogue and collective inquiry that aligns individual purpose and vision with organizational

purpose and vision. Interviewees expressed a felt tension, however, about aligning individual mental models and identifying the best strategies for attaining a shared vision. This tension may have been created by tacit recognition of a gap between their present realities and their preferred picture of the future. In practice, it is important to recognize that our acknowledgement of the present realities leads to the creative tension needed to produce *real* individual and group learning and deep organizational change. The vision is what compels teachers to act and change (Hord, 2004). Creative tension serves as the catalyst.

Finally, both quantitative and qualitative data suggest MMS is moving toward developing into a professional learning community in which teachers are opening doors and sharing their practices with colleagues. Similar to the teachers in a study conducted by Leonard and Leonard (2001), the interviewees from MMS indicated they valued shared practice. The qualitative data also show individual teachers are following a typical developmental trajectory with regard to how people relate to and understand an unfolding change. Borrowing from Hall and Hord's framework (2001) for categorizing individual stages of concern related to the adoption and implementation of innovations, it can be seen that interviewees' reports of tentativeness and that of their colleagues with implementing peer-to-peer observations could be categorized as running the gamut of typical patterns of concerns—self, task, and impact.

It is evident the development of a professional learning community at MMS is emerging in fits and starts—"proceeding and receding over time." Louis (2006) asserted, "It is this subtle and hard-to-define nature of change that we as researchers typically fail to communicate to practitioners, perhaps because we are afraid that they will become discouraged and choose not to try" (p. 485). Researchers should continue to explore and describe the inner workings of individual schools' efforts toward becoming learning communities. The more evidence we have

about their evolution, the better we will understand whether professional learning communities are making a difference. As can be seen here, the path to deep, sustained change is hard to define. Once charted is not forever shaped. It advances and re-forms with each action. “As we begin, we conclude. As we evolve, we conflict. As we understand, we act as one” (Torres, 1994, p. 113).

### Limitations of the Study

The single case study design is both a limitation and strength. The findings from a case study cannot be generalized to the larger population; they can only be generalized to theory and the phenomenon under investigation, the development of a professional learning community. As was true in this case study, unanticipated events may occur while a study, which is examining contemporary events and relevant behaviors, is in progress. In an effort to increase participation, distribution of study materials was modified in Year 2. As such, this represents a further limitation.

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