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School Improvement in the Next Level of Work: Struggling for Collective Agency in a School Facing Adversity

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By

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Abstract

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Improving the quality of schools that serve disadvantaged students has been a major focus of reforms for many decades. Overall, the results of these efforts have been disappointing. This may be because school improvement relies upon the development of collective agency, and schools serving disadvantaged students face contexts of adversity that pose challenges for developing collective agency. Collective agency is the capability to use choice and intention to respond to problems in pursuit of desired aims. In an organization, collective agency manifests in beliefs and interaction patterns through which work groups accomplish tasks, address problems, pull together into an affirmed body, and fuel members' satisfaction. Schools serving communities that experience concentrated poverty and racial segregation typically face chronic resource shortages, a negative reputation, high turnover, and student behaviors that challenge teachers' in their core competencies. In the face of such adversities, work groups may develop interaction patterns of defensiveness, helplessness, or fragmenting conflict that constrain collective agency.

Studies of school improvement have long documented such destructive tendencies in challenged schools but tend to offer little insight into how such a school might develop collective agency. Prevailing reform models tend to presume substantial external support or an influx of talented leaders and teachers. However, most schools must make do with limited external support and rely primarily on their existing resources to bring about improvement. In this case, developmental efforts may occur at a more foundational level. However, much school improvement research has overlooked or obscured such efforts because the research proceeds from criteria of improvement tied to an ambitious horizon. This study took a different approach. I sought to make visible the fine-grained processes by which educators' work groups may make any efforts to develop collective agency, even if these efforts do not sustain or add up to criteria of effectiveness often applied in scholarship. For this, I theorized the development of collective agency as a struggle: As groups strive towards desired aims, navigate various developmental challenges, and contend with experiences of adversity, they form interaction patterns that can enable or constrain collective agency. In studying groups' efforts to develop, I looked to gain insights into how to enable school improvement at "the next level of work": proximate steps towards desired capabilities that lay within the zone of struggle.

As part of a research-practice partnership with a Californian district, this study used participant observation over one year with four standing work groups in one challenged middle school. These work groups served various functions that could contribute to school improvement: the instructional leadership team, a subject matter department, the faculty meetings, and staff professional development. Incorporating action research methods, I launched a fifth group formed around an explicit commitment to continuous improvement. From field notes and audio records from over 100 hours of group meetings and 45 hours of reflective conversations with individuals, I traced ebbs and flows in each group's efforts to exert collective agency, identified salient processes involved when collective agency was most enabled or constrained, and compared these processes across the work groups.

I found that, across all five collegial bodies, there were times when overwhelming problems and experiences of failure pulled the groups into defensiveness, helplessness, or conflict that constrained collective agency. These tendencies manifested when groups avoided their core charge, silenced their problems, and became pulled apart by conflict. However, at other times, members made clear efforts to develop collective agency. When collective agency was most enabled, three processes were salient: someone was willing to take initiative, the group focused on a simple task, and the task emphasized affirmation, rather than critique. However, these processes enabled only a fragile collective agency. When group efforts proved insufficient to face up to and master their problems in their full complexity, renewed experiences of failure and overwhelm pulled them back into destructive tendencies.

The findings suggest that school development under conditions of adversity entails a constant struggle. Even amid challenging circumstances, educators strive to try to reach their students, experience accomplishment, and connect each other. However, when overwhelmed by problems posed largely by structural inequities beyond their control, their struggle may, at times, collapse. The findings suggest that school improvement at the next level of work entails reform approaches that recognize educators' positive struggle and find the means to fortify it so as to cultivate a more lasting and expanding collective agency. This is likely to entail incremental development of basic team capabilities and problem solving capacity, providing opportunities for validation and connection, and finding the means to enable authentic affirmation by which a faculty can recognize its worthiness while also recognizing the depth of its struggle.

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Acknowledgments

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While writing this dissertation, the world shook in the grips of a global pandemic, a legacy of racial injustice fueled a major social movement, historic wildfires spread, and our nation's democracy has been tested. These events have created both an odd and perfectly fitting context in which to write about a struggle for collective agency in the midst of adversity. I want to thank all of the front line workers that risk their lives so that we may have health and essential services, all of the people pushing for truth and justice, and all of the students and teachers striving to connect through distance learning. You show us the way forward.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

An Unsettled Search for Improvement in Challenged Schools

Improving the quality of schools that serve students who have historically been "left behind"—typically, poor students of color—has been a major focus for policymakers and reformers for many decades. Starting in the 1990s, policymakers turned primarily to the potential of standards-based reform tied to high-stakes accountability (Elmore, 2004; Fuhrman & O'Day, 1996; Mintrop, 2004). Within the context of neoliberalism and New Public Management (Hood & Peters, 2004; Tolofari, 2005), high-stakes accountability policies presumed that ambitious, clearly defined, externally-mandated performance goals based on student achievement scores, tied to strong incentives, would motivate teachers and students to realize rapid gains in academic achievement (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). Under the federal high-stakes accountability policy of No Child Left Behind, those unable to meet performance demands were treated with a progression of sanctions, ranging from implementation of "evidence-based" interventions to adopting models of turnaround that included replacement of the principal and most of the teaching staff.

By now, the distorting effects and disappointing outcomes of high-stakes accountability have become well-known. Many schools initially flagged as "low-performing" were unable to exit probation (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005), and often those that did manage to "improve" did so strategically by gaming the system, narrowing the curriculum, and practicing educational triage, rather than striving towards more ambitious instruction for all students (Au, 2007; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Figlio, 2006; Neal & Schanzenbach, 2010). Studies of reform implementation (Berends et al., 2002; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; D. K. Cohen et al., 2013; Correnti & Rowan, 2007; Meredith I. Honig, 2006) and turnaround efforts (Huberman et al., 2011; Le Floch et al., 2016; Meyers & Smylie, 2017; Orr et al., 2008) reveal many such efforts have faltered amid lack of "buy in," low morale, and strained capacities to sustain follow through.

In recent years, exuberance for pressure and expectations of rapid improvement has waned, and scholars and reformers have increasingly called for schools to undergo processes of "continuous improvement" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014). Drawing upon evidence that school improvement is more likely when educators function as professional learning communities (Little, 2006; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007), proponents of this approach typically emphasize a "user-centered" process of data-informed problem solving in which teams of educators, sometimes with the help of external agents, identify a focal problem, diagnose it, and identify or design interventions to implement and monitor for impact, making adjustments as they learn iteratively through cycles of inquiry. These include models of "data-driven decision-making" (Datnow & Park, 2014; Park et al., 2012), "improvement science" (Bryk et al., 2015), or "design-based school improvement" (Mintrop, 2016).

In some U.S. states, the promise of continuous improvement has become a centerpiece of the current wave of reforms. In response to the most recent revision of federal accountability policy, the Every Student Succeeds Act, California policymakers shifted away from the "test and punish" approach of NCLB, they opted for a "new accountability" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014) that emphasizes incremental growth and offers external support, rather than consequences,

to the lowest performers. Policymakers hope that this approach can avoid the distortions of earlier accountability policies and foster school cultures that cultivate meaningful improvement through collective learning for continuous improvement (Darling-Hammond & Plank, 2015). In the "California Way" (Henig & Lyon, 2018), state policy charges districts and schools to create a Local Control Accountability Plan, which entails crafting locally-set goals with input from multiple stakeholders, and reporting results on multiple outcomes, including school climate measures as well as test results aligned with the ambitious Common Core State Standards.

An Unsettled Search for Collective Agency in Schools Facing Adversity

The evidence about reform efforts under high-stakes accountability points to a basic, but salient, conclusion: Improvement will not occur unless educators make intentional choices and proactive efforts to do so. As substantial research about school improvement has concluded, policy "cannot mandate what matters" (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 173) because "change is learning" (Cohen & Hill, 1998; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Hall & Hord, 2001; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). School improvement is dependent, therefore, on learners who willingly invest in the risks and demands of confronting problems and proactively strive for improvement. In order to respond productively to high-stakes accountability policy demands, for example, educators had to meaningfully frame data and establish whole staff or teacher team routines for formative assessment, ongoing discussions of teaching and learning, and professional learning (Mintrop, 2004; Park et al., 2012; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). To benefit from implementing reform programs, educators had to forge consensus around a program that was a good fit to their needs and capacities, and understand the program well enough to implement it with fidelity or with integrity when adapting it to their particular contexts (D. K. Cohen et al., 2013; Correnti & Rowan, 2007; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Penuel et al., 2011). In successful turnarounds, educators apparently had to do all of the above, in addition to improving the school climate and implementing structural changes to the distribution of teachers and learning time (de la Torre et al., 2013; Duke & Landahl, 2011; Huberman et al., 2011).

In other words, school improvement depends upon a well-developed base of *collective agency*. At a foundational level, collective agency manifests when groups use their capacity to influence their situations to bring about improvement—or "critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). Collective agency is undergirded by beliefs and interaction patterns that express how an organization has "learned" to solve problems as it adapts to environmental demands and forges internal integration (Schein, 2010). To undertake school improvement is to develop beliefs and interaction patterns that enable groups within the organization to find sufficient capacity and social psychological resources to establish shared aims, proactively strive towards them, and tackle the challenges they encounter when doing so.

As with earlier reforms, and perhaps even more so, current reforms calling for "user-centered" and locally-controlled processes of continuous improvement bank upon schools with an expansive collective agency to confront and systematically tackle problems of practice. However, if most of the reform efforts in chronically low-performing schools have failed, that may be because the conditions that tend to face schools most in need of improvement pose challenges for developing collective agency. Most chronically low-performing schools operate in contexts of severe and persistent adversity. Schools serving communities marked by

concentrated poverty and racial segregation have particular struggles with initiating and sustaining improvement due to severely inadequate resources to meet "extraordinary human needs" (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 24). High-poverty schools tend to feature high rates of teacher and principal turnover—annually, as well as during the school year (Redding & Henry, 2018)—and personnel shortages from unfilled positions throughout the year (E. García & Weiss, 2019). Within this context, teachers serve students who are neglected and marginalized by society and who have underdeveloped academic capacities and experience toxic stress (Morsy & Rothstein, 2019), bringing increased uncertainty into the classroom (Kraft et al., 2015). Adding to these challenges are often local political rifts creating conflict and disorientation (S. J. Ball, 1987; Hess, 1999; Lipman, 1997, 2004; Oakes et al., 1997).

Reviewing decades of attempts to improve schools that primarily serve "left behind" low-income students of color, Payne (2008) concludes that the limited success reflects an enduring tendency of reformers to ignore the peculiar climate that arises in the midst of adversity:

> [These schools] tend to be places governed by an overarching sense of futility and pessimism . . . where there are too few resources, and those few are often badly used . . . where teachers have profound skepticism about 'programs'; where there is a general feeling of instability— personnel come and go, students come and go, programs come and go—all of it presided over by a dysfunctional bureaucracy . . . Giving up on the institutional mission goes hand in glove with giving up on one's colleagues. The denizens of demoralized social spaces do what they have to do but without much heart or hope. (p. 23-4)

An era of high stakes accountability added to the demoralization by subjecting schools to stigmatizing labels of "failure" (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009) and a churn of incoherent, unsuccessful reforms (Hess, 1999; Orr et al., 2008).

Thus, the schools most in need of improvement tend to operate under conditions that pose challenges to educators' core needs and constrain the development of collective agency (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Mintrop & Charles, 2017). Faced with intense difficulties to "reach" their students, compounded by equally intense difficulties to come together as adults to find out a way forward, educators may find themselves at the mercy of vexing and complex problems—daily experiences of failure and overload—that call for a collective response, but yet they bear alone. Amid these conditions, schools may have "learned" that they have little likelihood to prevail over their "problematic situations." To cope with experiences of being overwhelmed, rather than facing up to problems and striving towards improvement, groups of educators may have developed interaction patterns that constrain the development of collective agency—such as externalizing or blaming each other for their challenges and justifying inaction amid a sense of hopelessness and pessimism about the potential for improvement (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Argyris, 1996; Ashforth & Lee, 1990; S. B. García & Guerra, 2004; Turner & Horvitz, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Such responses may not be normatively desirable, but given educators' situation, seem reasonable. Educators serving poor communities of color are confronted by problems that are not readily evaded or solved, and amid recurrent experiences of failure, may not have experienced the capacity to remedy them. Education policies and myths tell us that schools can and should "close the achievement gap" such that most students master rigorous academic content, all while caring for and serving the whole child. However, evidence firmly demonstrates that environmental factors, including social class and levels of concentrated community deprivation, contribute heavily to student achievement (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Reardon, 2011; Rothstein,

2004). Given resource shortages and increasing demands, educators may feel overloaded just from trying to maintain and survive. Subjected to conveyor belt of reforms that, given a track record of poor fit with school needs, may feel arbitrary, educators may experience that they cannot "improve their own lives," but must simply bear their problems as so-called improvement happens "to" them. Under such conditions, people could seek to reduce their experience of overload and failure by avoiding risk, withdrawing effort, and turning to rationalizations that help deflect responsibility for their challenges.

At the same time, educators are professionals with innate desires to good work (Gardner et al., 2008) and satisfy core needs. Educators seek "a sense of success" (Johnson, 2019), efficacy (Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Goddard et al., 2000), progress (Amabile & Kramer, 2011), and to "make a difference" in students' lives (Mintrop & Ordenes, 2017). In the midst of adversity, people do not necessarily succumb but seek resilience—to come together for hope, mutual support, and a proactive striving to lessen shared struggles (Bonanno, 2004; Drury et al., 2009; Gu & Day, 2007; Walsh, 2003). In this way, the challenges posed by adversity may invite destructive tendencies but also can draw out efforts towards collective agency in the quest to prevail over hardship.

In other words, school improvement has a profoundly "human side," mediated through the expression, recognition, and satisfaction of needs and emotions (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2007). Viewed from a "human side," collective agency involves a social-emotional striving for self-worth and well-being amongst people who experience hope, passion, anxiety, and loss. A context of adversity may engender tendencies that constrain collective agency—*and* lure it out, as groups strive towards desired capabilities so as to lessen their suffering and increase their well-being.

In this case, for schools facing adversity, exerting collective agency may be no simple matter. It may be a struggle.

Purpose of the Study

Existing research does not provide much insight to help us understand the struggle for collective agency in challenged schools. That is because, firstly, studies of school improvement have tended to focus on outlier successful examples (Jacobson et al., 2007; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Picucci et al., 2002; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Stosich, 2016) and emphasize the apparent reasons for success, submerging or giving short shrift to any struggles entailed. Research has too seldom delved deeply into places where improvement has proven difficult to understand the reasons why (Meyers & Smylie, 2017; Orr et al., 2008). As Harris and Chapman (2004) point out, "Much of the school improvement work . . . has simply not focused on schools in difficult or challenging circumstances" (p. 420). When it has, typically the research looks to catalogue the various "lacks" and pathologies in the school that render them ineffective (Stringfield, 1998) or "stuck" (Rosenholtz, 1989) or that describe a degraded state of the culture (Anyon, 1997; Lipman, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999).

As a result, when it comes to chronically low-performing schools operating in contexts of adversity, the existing research base offers evidence of defensiveness, helplessness, and fragmentation (Payne, 2008; Stringfield, 1998)—and little signs of collective agency. In this otherwise hopeless situation, the research suggests, collective agency awaits the guidance and push of a bold and talented leader (Jacobson et al., 2007; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). School improvement scholarship has identified certain broad capabilities that appear to be hallmarks in schools that realize improvement, such as

leadership and professional learning communities featuring trust, and collective responsibility (Bryk et al., 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Harris et al., 2003; Lee & Smith, 1996; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis, 2007).

However, the methodologies and frameworks employed in most research have not attended closely enough to the daily interactions of groups operating under challenging circumstances to explain how such capabilities may arise in a context of adversity. Leadership may be important, but it is not clear how to find the determination and courage to exert it in demoralized and stigmatized context, given that anyone who takes responsibility for leading may find their legitimacy questioned as they become associated with all of the school's failures (Payne, 2008). It is also not clear how principals and teachers may come to exert leadership when subjected to a potential flow of directives coming from the outside (Orr et al., 2005) and contending with deeply ingrained professional norms of autonomy (Little, 1982; Lortie, 1975). Compound that with conflict, resource scarcities, stigma, and challenging student behaviors, and the prospect of establishing trust and collective responsibility seems questionable.

A few studies offer evidence that, even in challenged school contexts, there may be strivings to develop collective agency. Turnover and conflict may be high, but some experienced, committed and knowledgeable staff, with established networks of collaboration, may also be in the mix (Orr et al., 2008; Rice & Malen, 2003). Even in challenging contexts, educators may try to seek amelioration of the problems facing them—albeit, in ways that make it difficult for collective agency to sustain (Mintrop & Charles, 2017; Orr et al., 2008).

Hence, while some research offers glimpses into the potential for schools facing adversity to develop collective agency, existing scholarship is insufficient to understand how efforts to exert collective agency manifest in schools facing adversity. Absent this understanding, reformers continue to operate in the dark about how, and to what extent, the pursuit of improvement unfolds in challenged schools. In order to better understand the struggle for collective agency, more research is needed to move past the axioms of school improvement research and identify and examine emergent efforts and constraining patterns that manifest as schools facing adversity attempt to improve upon their situations. To address this gap, this study uses participant observation to examine the dynamics of multiple work groups in a school facing adversity to understand how collective agency becomes enabled and constrained in a struggle to develop at "the next level of work."

An Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 offers a conceptual framework for exploring the development of collective agency in a school facing adversity. Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) concept of agency, Schein's (2010) concept of organizational culture, and literature on work teams and group development, I conceptualize collective agency as the interactions through which work groups make efforts towards accomplishing tasks, addressing problems, fostering group affirmation, and contributing to members' satisfaction. Consulting literatures on the social psychology of defensiveness, learned helplessness, organizational failure, resilience, school improvement, group development, and work teams, the chapter conceptualizes barriers, horizons of possibility, and enabling and constraining processes for developing collective agency in schools facing a context of adversity. Considering the potential for both enabling and constraining tendencies to arise, I theorize the development of collective agency as a struggle: As groups embedded in a particular organizational and social

environment strive towards desired aims, they navigate a set of group developmental challenges, and contend with experiences of adversity that can invite enabling or constraining tendencies. The conceptual framework is intended to make visible any efforts that various work groups in a school might make towards developing collective agency, regardless of whether those efforts sustain or succeed. These group developmental efforts point the way towards the prospect for school development in "the next level of work": next proximate steps towards desired capabilities that lay within the zone of struggle and offer the potential to develop more sustained and expanding collective agency.

Chapter 3 presents research design. The study employs participant observation over one year with four standing work groups in one challenged middle school in California: the instructional leadership team (ILT), staff professional development (PD), faculty meetings, and the English Language Arts (ELA) department. Action research methods were incorporated when I launched a fifth group, called "the Hub." The chapter describes the rationale for this methodology, criteria for selecting the school as a context for the study, and the strengths and limitations of this research design. The data for the study consist primarily of field notes and audio records collected from over 100 hours of group meetings and 45 hours of repeated reflective conversations with individuals from each group outside of the meetings. The chapter describes how data analysis revealed patterns in the interactions of each work group over time that suggested ebbs and flows in efforts towards developing collective agency and pointed to critical episodes at which collective agency appeared most enabled or most constrained.

The findings are presented in Chapter 4, which is organized in six sections—one for each work group, and one that discusses findings across all groups. For each work group, the findings begin with a low-inference narrative of key events to illustrate patterns across the meetings for the year alongside insights into the meeting events provided during reflective conversations. After the narrative, an analysis examines critical episodes of more expanding or contracting collective agency, and relevant turning points, in relation to salient factors at work based on the conceptual framework. For a visual aid, the ebbs and flows of group efforts towards developing collective agency are represented on a figure showing a curve over time. A final section presents a cross-group synopsis that considers the patterns across the groups and identifies salient factors for enabling collective agency across all bodies.

In Chapter 5, the dissertation concludes with a discussion of how the findings relate to the literature consulted in Chapter 2, what the findings reveal about core dynamics entailed for school development at the next level of work, and the implications suggested about the prospects of school improvement in a context of adversity. The chapter concludes with a consideration of developmental supports needed for school improvement in contexts of adversity, the study's limitations, and implications for future research.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter draws on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) concept of agency, Schein's (2010) concept of organizational culture, and literature on work teams and group development to conceptualize collective agency as the interactions through which work groups strive to accomplish tasks, address problems, forge group affirmation, and contribute to members' satisfaction. Consulting literature on the social psychology of defensiveness, learned helplessness, organizational failure, resilience, school improvement, group development, and work teams, I conceptualize barriers, horizons of possibility, and enabling and constraining processes for developing collective agency in schools facing a context of adversity.

Conceptualizing Collective Agency

The interest in this study is in understanding how school improvement becomes enabled in what Payne (2008) termed "bottom-tier" schools. These are schools that serve "truly disadvantaged" communities (Bryk et al., 2010) marked by high poverty, racial segregation, and educational disadvantage. Such schools tend to have negative reputations—deemed "low-performing" and "intransigent" (Payne, 2008, p. 6) against years of reform efforts.

One lesson learned from years of reform efforts is that school improvement is contingent upon schools to develop and exert collective agency. Agency refers to the capability of actors to exert influence over their circumstances—or "critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). According to self-determination theory, people are fundamentally pressed to exert agency in the search for well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Combining insights from theories about self-affirmation (Steele, 1988; Steele & Liu, 1981, 1983), the need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), social identity (Branscombe et al., 1999; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and efficacy (Bandura, 1997), self-determination theory posits that humans seek growth in order to satisfy core needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). In pursuit of growth, people strive towards valued aims, address problems encountered in doing so, and maintain a positive view of themselves and the groups to which they belong.

Collective agency refers to the capability of groups to respond to problematic situations in pursuit of shared aims and collective well-being. In organizations, collective agency manifests in an organizational culture that reflects how groups have navigated two key developmental challenges: to manage the demands posed by their environment and to forge internal integration (Schein, 2010). Managing demands is fundamentally a matter of accomplishing tasks and addressing problems for the sake of making progress towards organizational goals. Internal integration is fundamentally a matter of forging sufficient social cohesion and affirmation of group values, competence, and esteem to enable organizational members to coordinate action (Branscombe et al., 1999; Forsyth, 2014; O'Reilly III et al., 1989; Rousseau et al., 2008; Sherman et al., 2007). These capabilities develop over time as groups "learn" patterns of interaction that "work" (Schein, 2010). Once formed, these patterns of interaction can become habituated in the organization and thereby constrain and shape how groups respond to new problematic situations. In this way, collective agency is an emergent and temporal capacity that "does not come from nowhere" but "builds upon past achievements, understandings, and patterns of action" in order to "bring about a future that is different" (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 136).

Applied to schools, collective agency is evident in interactions that enable the organization to attenuate its core problems: to improve upon how well teachers reach their students so that they learn (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Goddard & Goddard, 2001), and to pull together as a body of professionals who do "good work" (Gardner et al., 2008).

Constraints to Collective Agency Amid Adversity: Defensiveness and Learned Helplessness

If most attempts to reform "bottom-tier" schools have been unsuccessful, it may be because such schools face a context of adversity that poses difficulties for developing collective agency. In a context of adversity, demands regularly exceed resources and people find their core competencies challenged, producing ongoing stress and a fragile sense of esteem (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hart, 1994; Mintrop & Charles, 2017; Ryan & Brown, 2003; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Amid such a context, people may exhibit defensive tendencies to protect from further loss of competence and esteem. Defensiveness has been used to refer to a "zoo" (Tesser, 2000) of conscious and unconscious self-protective measures. In this case, defensiveness refers to the behaviors that people use to retreat from their aims and problems through acts of active avoidance or suppression of certain topics or tasks, blunt refusal, deflection of responsibility, and hostility (Ashforth & Lee, 1990; Gibb, 1961; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Recurrent experiences of failure and threats to well-being can also invite the development of learned helplessness (Abramson et al., 1978; Seligman, 1972, 1975, 1975). According to this theory, repeated failure can cause people to lose a sense of control over their situation and attribute their problems to causes that they cannot influence. In this situation, they may come to perceive that their actions have no connection to or influence over the adversities they encounter, resulting in a passive orientation. In this case, people cope with the situation "by doing nothing or by simply complying with imposed constraints" (Ashforth, 1990, p. 31). Even if new learning opportunities arise, people who have developed learned helplessness take no action to try to learn because they maintain the belief that such efforts will be futile due to internal or external limitations perceived as pervasive and permanent (Abramson et al., 1978; Seligman, 1975).

Defensiveness and learned helplessness are implicated in the syndrome of burnout (Bakker & Costa, 2014; Cherniss, 1995; Schaufeli et al., 2009), prevalent in the helping professions (Cherniss, 1995; Farber, 1991). When an orientation towards "helping" meets the work structure of street-level bureaucrats—chronic resource inadequacy, non-voluntary clients, and conflicting and ambiguous goals—professionals can find themselves regularly unable to meet demands or to fulfill their clients' needs (Lipsky, 2010). Experiences of overload and low efficacy or failure can provoke active refusal of tasks, hostility towards clients judged as undeserving, or a passive withdrawal from their clients and work (Cherniss, 1995).

Defensiveness, Learned Helplessness, Conflict, and Fragmentation in Failing and Threatened Organizations

Some degree of defensiveness is "normal" in organizations (Argyris, 1985), exhibited in tendencies to avoid conflict, embarrassment, and anxiety (Schein, 2010). However, studies of failing and declining organizations (Cameron et al., 1987, 1988; M. W. Meyer & Zucker, 1989; Payne, 2008), and organizations facing threat (Staw et al., 1981; Turner et al., 1992; Turner & Horvitz, 2001) offer insights as to how a context of adversity can engender a more pervasive defensiveness that constrains collective agency. When an organization's "way of doing things"

(Schein, 2010) is insufficient for effectiveness, its reputation and esteem may suffer, and confidence and morale drop (Cameron et al., 1987; Cannon & Edmondson, 2001; Kanter, 2006). In the public sphere, organizations can become permanently "failing" when they survive regardless of whether adequately meeting clients' needs (M. W. Meyer & Zucker, 1989; Payne, 2008). When low performance becomes chronic, organizational defensiveness may take root in the culture as group interactions become focused on deflecting responsibility for problems and justifying low expectations (Ashforth & Lee, 1990; Cameron et al., 1987; M. W. Meyer & Zucker, 1989; Payne, 2008; Staw et al., 1981; Turner & Horvitz, 2001).

Under conditions of chronic failure, organizational conditions may also cultivate what Martinko and Gardner (1982) described as "organizationally induced helplessness." If organizational members have "learned" that work outcomes are due to factors beyond their control, they may develop tendencies towards passivity marked by a withdrawal of effort (Martinko & Gardner, 1982) and "neglect [of] the fundamentals" (Saxena & Shah, 2008, p. 29) such as by allowing unproductivity to go unaddressed. Organizational members may continually define the work as hopeless (Payne, 2008) and express pessimism about their organization or group's chances for improvement, stymying esteem and confidence (Mone et al., 1998).

Studies of organizational decline and threat also suggest that adversity constrains an organization's collective agency by promoting fragmentation, rather than integration. A primary reason is that threatening circumstances can provoke a heightened degree of micro-political and interpersonal conflict (Cameron et al., 1987; M. W. Meyer & Zucker, 1989; Payne, 2008; Turner & Horvitz, 2001). When circumstances challenge core needs, people look for scapegoats (Ashforth & Lee, 1990; Cameron et al., 1987; M. W. Meyer & Zucker, 1989), including from within the organization. In permanently failing organizations, poor conditions foment a negative image of the organization and prompt high rates of turnover, and members jockey for scarce resources (M. W. Meyer & Zucker, 1989). If embedded in such an environment for a longer time, members may invest the deteriorated conditions with meaning, sanctioning and sabotaging those who attempt to improve conditions (Payne, 2008).

The salience of organizational leadership can be heightened under conditions of threat and decline. In the face of an external threat, organizational defensiveness can manifest in the form of rigidity, marked by strict adherence to existing protocols, silencing of dissent, and a tightening of hierarchy that centralizes decision-making (Mellahi et al., 2002; Staw et al., 1981). In this case, the organization's collective agency may depend on formal leaders taking initiative and exerting authority to help to stabilize and provide direction during a crisis, and weaknesses in leadership may make the organization vulnerable and be particularly disabling. Studies of organizational failure reveal leadership breakdowns to be a major factor (Cameron et al., 1987, 1988). If leaders are unable to help the organization handle the crisis, or if failure is perceived as likely, organizational members may attribute threats to internal incompetence, leading to leadership instability, lowered cohesion, and increased dissension (Staw et al., 1981).

If failure persists but the leaders remain, leadership may become increasingly difficult to exert as leaders find themselves the target of scapegoating and their legitimacy questioned (Cameron et al., 1987; Payne, 2008). In this case, leaders may contribute to learned helplessness by adopting a "laissez faire" style, retreating from responsibility, ignoring breakdowns, and allowing poor behavior to go unchecked (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Skogstad et al., 2007).

In sum, defensiveness, helplessness, conflict, and fragmentation manifest in interaction patterns that can constrain the development of collective agency. Instead of enabling the organization to address its problems so as to make progress, group interactions tend to silence

problems, deflect responsibility for problems, avoid action in the face of problems, and become resigned to problems as unsolvable. Instead of enabling the organization to become more affirmed and integrated, group interactions tend to foster fragmentation as people blame each other, sanction or sabotage those who show initiative, and perpetuate denigrating beliefs about the organization. At the same time, groups may develop justifications to render their situation acceptable.

The Context of Adversity Facing Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities

The environment and work of schools serving disadvantaged communities is rife with conditions that can challenge teachers' core competencies and pose experiences of failure and overload. Public sector organizations face an increasing imbalance between resources and demands, following a neoliberal era of disinvestment from social institutions combined with rising economic inequality and segregation and increasing public expectations (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; GAO, 2016; Kantor & Lowe, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Lipsky, 2010; Orfield & Yun, 1999; Schram & Soss, 1998). With a reliance on extrinsic incentives (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009), high-stakes accountability policies in education subjected teachers to new forms of control and "intensification" of their work (Valli & Buese, 2007), dramatically increasing demands as well as the risks of failing to meet them. The public shame of "probation" (Mintrop, 2004) and singular emphasis on achievement tests was "traumatic" (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996) for teachers of historically low-achieving students, who found their professional esteem crushed and deeper commitments devalued (S. J. Ball, 2003; Day, 2002). In many schools identified as "persistently low-performing," stigma and pressure generated a downward spiral as disillusionment and exhaustion set in (Hess, 1999; Little, 1996; Valli & Buese, 2007), the most committed teachers left (Mintrop, 2004), and professionals became demoralized (S. J. Ball, 2003; Lasky, 2005; Payne, 2008; Santoro, 2011).

These adverse environmental conditions combine with vexing problems that challenge teachers' core competencies in the classroom. To satisfy their needs for competence, teachers seek efficacy—being able to "reach" their students (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001, 2007), feel they are "making a difference" (Mintrop & Ordenes, 2017), and have "a sense of success" (Johnson, 2019). However, students who are neglected and marginalized by society tend to bring their own experiences of adversity into classrooms, including underdeveloped academic skills and the challenges of living in poverty, facing racial discrimination, and living in dangerous neighborhoods (Kraft et al., 2015). Students coping with these experiences can find schools alienating, manifesting in behaviors that teachers find difficult, disrespectful, and rejecting (Lipman, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). As a result, teachers experiences serious difficulties to "reach" many of their students (Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Goddard & Skrla, 2006).

Teaching is an emotional practice requiring an investment of "core selves" in the work (D. W. Ball, 1972; Hargreaves, 1994, 2000; Nias, 1987, 1996), making the disclosure of professional struggles not merely a technical challenge, but a gamble with their "moral integrity" (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 262). Meanwhile, reform policies and discourses tend to discount difficulties to meet students' needs as "excuses" (Farber, 1991; Goldstein, 2014).

Taken together, these experiences can create an intensely distressing experience of adversity for teachers on a regular basis.

Defensiveness, Helplessness, Conflict, and Fragmentation in Schools Facing Adversity

The literature on schools serving educationally and socioeconomically disadvantaged students indicates the prevalence of tendencies that can constrain collective agency (Payne, 2008). Studies of such schools abound with depictions of educators deflecting responsibility for problems (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). Feeling unfairly "blamed" for systemic problems and vulnerable to threats to self in work that is strongly emotional (D. W. Ball, 1972; Hargreaves, 1994, 2000; Nias, 1987, 1996), teachers may deflect responsibility for their difficulties onto society or bad policy (Mintrop, 2004; Olsen & Sexton, 2009) or other teachers or administration (Achinstein, 2002; Mintrop & Charles, 2017), or turn to "deficit discourses" to ascribe their professional struggles to supposed innate deficits in students or families (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; S. B. García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 1997). Facing overload and exhaustion from resource shortages and increasing demands, teachers may refuse or avoid focus on their tasks, such as by changing the subject or distracting the group (Levine & Marcus, 2010; Mintrop & Charles, 2017). In chronically low-performing schools, educators may become resigned to their situations amid despair and hopelessness (Anyon, 1997; Payne, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999).

As in other threatened and failing organizations, the behavior of school leaders plays an important role. In schools facing the possibility of sanctions from accountability policies, leaders may constrain collective agency with rigidity (Daly, 2009; Mintrop, 2004; Olsen & Sexton, 2009), going too far in tightening control from the top and suppressing dissent. Or, under conditions of chronic failure, leaders that retain their position can come to perceive little potential for change or too much risk in challenging the faculty, and instead hope to maintain peace by turning a blind eye to disorder and unproductivity or becoming themselves resigned to low expectations about the potential for improvement (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Mintrop, 2004; Stringfield, 1998; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993).

Regardless of a context of adversity, the institutional environment of schooling can predispose schools to defensiveness, conflict, and fragmentation. Organizational structures tend to strongly limit deviations from ingrained practices (Sarason, 1982), especially when these practices afford educators legitimacy as "real school" (Metz, 1989). Professional norms of individuality and autonomy amid loosely coupled organizational structures make teachers' work largely independent (Hargreaves, 1994; Little, 1990; Weick, 1976) and create barriers against the exertion of leadership, particularly amongst colleagues (Donaldson et al., 2008). Organizational conditions also tend to invite unproductive conflict. A weak technical culture in the profession (Lortie, 1975) and a plurality of professional ideologies and educational purposes (S. J. Ball, 1987; Kliebard, 1987; Labaree, 1997) can easily turn pedagogical discussions into unresolvable conflicts over values or personal attacks. In secondary schools, jockeying for resources and status amongst departments tends to cultivate a "balkanized" culture (Hargreaves, 1994).

"Bottom-tier" schools can experience additional difficulties that further fragment the organization and make it difficult to establish group affirmation. High-poverty schools serving communities of color tend to have high rates of faculty and leadership turnover (E. García & Weiss, 2019) which can make it difficult to maintain membership long enough to establish cohesion, as seen in Lipman (1998). Schools facing pressure from accountability policies tend to exhibit weak social ties (Finnigan & Daly, 2012). Amid resource scarcity that invites conflict, educators can struggle to forge even basic collegiality, breeding distrust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Louis, 2007) through tendencies towards gossip, bullying, betrayal, and sabotage (Payne, 2008). In such an environment, despite facing formidable problems of student behavior and

learning that call for a collective response, teachers may take advantage of loose coupling and protect themselves from the conflict and chaos by keeping to themselves, opting to "shut my door" (Mintrop, 2004, p. 92) rather than forge more collaborative relationships with colleagues.

Searching for How Collective Agency Develops in a School Facing Adversity

The above discussion reveals how educators in schools serving socioeconomically disadvantaged can develop tendencies that constrain collective agency. However, the interest in this study is to understand how collective agency *develops* in such contexts. If the pull of adversity invites defensiveness, helplessness, conflict, and fragmentation, then how do groups of educators become enabled to face up to their problems and pull together to improve upon their situation?

The Possibility of Resilience

In seeking to answer this question, one might turn to literatures that describe possibilities for agency in adverse conditions. The literature on resilience offers one such possibility. An established body of research on resilience (Bonanno, 2004; Gu & Day, 2007, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 1985; Walsh, 2003; Wang & Gordon, 1994) demonstrates that, in the midst of adverse circumstances, people can exert and sustain agency. Studies of resilience have examined individuals and groups with more positive outcomes "than expected" in response to adversity to identify distinguishing characteristics and contributing factors. Studies of children who experienced adversities like chronic poverty, family instability, and stressful life events and demonstrated educational attainment, stable employment, and good health find that these children tend to have a stable sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, an internal locus of control over their challenges, and access to secure relationships with supportive adults and experiences of success (Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 1985).

Some scholars have extended the concept of resilience to families and communities who face socioeconomic hardship, war, or cultural oppression and demonstrate successful collective action and well-being. This research has found that such families and communities tend to feature a strong sense of community and solidarity supported by authoritative leadership that helps members recognize adversity as a shared challenge, frame manageable problems over which they feel a sense of control, maintain open emotional expression, and cultivate hope (Hernández, 2002; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Norris et al., 2008; Walsh, 2003).

In one of the few studies of teacher resilience, Gu and Day (2007, 2013) described teachers that reported sustained high motivation and effectiveness over the course of their careers. They found that such teachers drew upon commitments to serve and experiences of efficacy to prevail over challenging circumstances. Teachers working in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools reported that a "team spirit" was "essential," and their resilience weakened when experiencing "poor relationships with school leadership and colleagues" and "deteriorating pupil behavior" (Gu & Day, 2013, pp. 28–29).

These findings show that agency *can* develop under adverse circumstances, and reveal some factors that appear to help. However, for the purposes of understanding *how* collective agency emerges amid conditions that challenge it, these insights are limited. While scholarship defines resilience as a developmental outcome (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 1985), the research is mostly retrospective and focused on individuals, families, or communities that appear to have already attained a sustained capacity for agency and positive

outcomes. As such, these studies provide little insight into developmental processes by which collective agency emerges amid a context of chronic experiences of failure.

The Possibilities of Improved Outcomes and Professional Community

A vast literature on school improvement offers further possibilities for collective agency in schools. This literature includes bodies of research about effective schools (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Rosenholtz, 1985; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), processes of change in schools (Fullan, 2003, 2007; Fullan & Quinn, 2015; Louis & Miles, 1990; Stoll & Fink, 1996), implementation of reforms and policies (Berends et al., 2002; Bryk et al., 2010; Coburn, 2006; Cohen et al., 2013; Datnow et al., 2002; Honig, 2006; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001; Spillane, 2004) and the workings of professional communities (Achinstein, 2002; Hord, 1997; Little, 1982, 2003; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Stoll et al., 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Westheimer, 1998).

Scholarship on school improvement has yielded an array of factors associated with success and effectiveness. Nearly ubiquitous across the studies are findings that school improvement hinges upon capable and determined leadership. In particular, the literature describes school improvement as largely dependent upon instructional and transformational leaders that establish an inspiring vision (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; H. M. Marks & Printy, 2003), "craft coherence" amid an incoherent system (Fullan & Quinn, 2015; Honig & Hatch, 2004), engage in strategic planning while maintaining a "bias for action," provide professional learning to help teachers improve their instructional practices (Fullan, 2007; Knapp et al., 2014; Louis et al., 2010), and cultivate "buy in" for adopted reforms (Datnow, 2000, 2005).

Another key finding is that improvement is more likely in schools that act as professional learning communities (PLCs), referring to a faculty or group of teachers that regularly dialogues and problem solves together about teaching and learning (Bryk et al., 2010; Hord, 1997; Little, 1982; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Stoll et al., 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). In a review of decades of research, Stoll et al. (2006) identified key characteristics associated with effective PLCs, including: shared values and vision, collective responsibility for student learning, reflective dialogue and inquiry that deprivatize practice, and collaboration. Popular practitioner guides for creating PLCs recommend that the above characteristics be harnessed to an action and results orientation, promoting experimentation in the classroom in pursuit of improved student learning outcomes (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The scholarship about PLCs has largely emphasized groups with advanced capabilities that wrestle with the full complexity of teachers' work. Little (1990) argues that meaningful collective learning that results in improved teaching calls for PLCs to move beyond simpler forms of interactions of "swapping stories" and "sharing" to more complex joint work that presses against professional norms of autonomy and individualism (Little, 1990). Thriving PLCs are described as those that contend with teachers' authentic problems—as distinct from cases of "pseudocommunity" (Grossman et al., 2001) or contrived collegiality (Hargreaves, 1994) in which conflict is avoided and superficial collaboration "performed" for the sake of legitimacy or compliance. Accordingly, some research has found that effective PLCs feature a strong base of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Louis, 2007; Stoll & Louis, 2007), while other research has highlighted how deeper collective learning arises in groups that are open to dissent and productive conflict (Achinstein, 2002; de Lima, 2001).

As with the resilience literature, the above findings suggest that schools can develop and reveals factors that appear to help, such as: "strong leadership" offering "coherence," or "professional community" that engages in inquiry and is marked by "trust" and "productive conflict." It seems likely that such factors could play a role in the emergence of collective agency in a challenged school. However, each of these factors denotes a capability that develops over time within a particular context, and the grain size of many of the studies limits their insights as to how such capabilities may come to develop in a school facing adversity.

Some studies provide evidence of correlations between particular factors and outcomes, but say little about the process by which these factors may come into existence. For example, Teddlie and Stringfield (1993) used survey data to examine correlations between various school-level factors and student outcomes and collected several days of observational data at matched pairs of outlier effective and ineffective schools. They found that effective schools serving students from a low socioeconomic status reported high academic expectations for students and had principals that played a strong instructional leadership role, while ineffective schools reported low expectations and little perceived responsibility for or influence over student outcomes, and had principals who were more passive. In one of the most far-reaching school improvement studies, Bryk et al. (2010) conducted a longitudinal mixed-methods study of nearly 400 elementary schools undergoing local control reform in Chicago. Bryk et al. (2010) found improvement to be a product of a system of supports that influenced teachers' classroom instruction, including school-based professional community, relational trust, and coherence—all of which were catalyzed by local school leaders who served as the main "driver for change" through strong instructional leadership and management (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 45).

Missing from such studies is the tracing of processes through which such factors come into existence, sustain, or fall apart. What group interactions enabled instructional leadership or professional community to emerge in some schools and interfered with its emergence in others? Some more in-depth school improvement studies have aimed at describing processes of interaction and development in teacher and school groups. However, for the sake of understanding how development occurs in the real world of schools facing adversity, the insights of much of the process-oriented research about educator groups are limited.

Much of the in-depth research conducted at the group level with educators has focused on well-established groups and those operating in more advantaged contexts (Achinstein, 2002; Dooner et al., 2008; Grossman et al., 2001; Horn & Little, 2010; Little, 2003; Sherin & van Es, 2009; Westheimer, 1998; Wilson & Berne, 1999). For example, Little (2003) conducted a close study of teacher group interactions to find out how classroom practice became "visible" and how the discussion "opened up" or "closed down" opportunities to learn. However, the study sampled for school teams that "consider themselves collaborative and innovative" and "profess a clear task orientation" (Little, 2003, p. 915)—suggesting groups that had already developed collective agency. Achinstein (2002) and Westheimer (1998) conducted ethnographic case studies of teacher groups, but purposefully sampled for schools demonstrating professed commitment to, and high rankings on survey instruments for, teacher community. Grossman et al. (2001) studied interaction processes through which professional community developed over 18 months in the context of a book club they started for teachers in an urban high school. Their rich account illustrates dynamics of development that enabled a successful community to emerge—but in a context of relatively low adversity. Their account shows tendencies towards conflict avoidance and slight personal tensions, but does not indicate that their teachers faced chronic experiences of overload, failure, or fragmenting conflict.

Other process-oriented research has focused on high-poverty urban contexts, but most often this has been case studies that describe broad processes in schools, not fine-grained group interactions. For example, Mintrop (2004) conducted case studies of several high-poverty, low-performing schools facing the threat of sanctions under accountability policies. This study found that the threat prompted some school principals to exert more control and direction in ways that enabled organizational learning, while others responded with overbearing rigidity or struggled to respond strategically amid overwhelming problems with student discipline and disorder. These findings revealed broad patterns of development in the schools and showed how these depended on existing levels of staff cohesion and principal skill, but the study did not study close-up the fine-grained processes by which collective agency came to emerge (or fall apart).

Other such case studies have focused on schools that had already realized substantial improvement and success prior to the research (Jacobson et al., 2007; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Stosich, 2017). For example, Stosich (2017) studied leadership practices at three high-poverty schools to understand which kinds of frames most motivated teachers to change their practices to align with ambitious instructional expectations, but purposefully sampled schools with experienced leaders that already had a history of improvement.

Louis and Kruse (1995) offer an exception with a set of five longitudinal case studies following the processes of how professional community developed in schools serving high percentages of poor students of color. However, their findings revealed little development. The cases were selected as "promising settings" (p. 208) given structural reforms, curriculum redesigns, and available external assistance. Of the five cases reported, one was a small nontraditional alternative high school (of about 100 students) created as a lab school for inquiry learning, another was a high school with a troubled history that was now the site of fully-fledged professional development school, another was formed as a "break the mold" magnet school that was "among the most radically different schools in the United States" (p. 134), one was a more traditional middle school, and one was a K-8 school with a university partnership. From their analysis of the schools' efforts to develop across these five cases, the researchers found that evidence of emerging professional community in two, while others had efforts that "withered," "failed," or showed no movement. They concluded, "Overall, not even an optimist would claim that the results are more than a half-full cup" (p. 208). From these findings, they concluded that professional community hinged upon a set of preconditions: openness to improvement, trust and respect, shared expertise, efficacy, and leadership. But the research did not reveal how such preconditions might arise in schools facing long-term experiences of failure and internal strife.

Finally, there is process-oriented research that has focused on the implementation of specific models of improvement. Two models that have been widely applied to "chronically low-performing" schools are turnaround and comprehensive school reform (CSR). Turnaround models look at the "dysfunctions" posed by internal dynamics and presume that the process of improvement begins by tearing down the organization, replacing most of its teachers (with presumably stronger and more motivated ones), installing a new (presumably stronger) leader, and implementing a series of substantial reforms quickly in search of dramatic and fast improvement (Huberman et al., 2011; Meyers & Smylie, 2017; Peck & Reitzug, 2014). CSR models look at limitations in organizational capacity and expertise and presume that improvement proceeds through a massive infusion of resources in the form of externally designed programs and provision of ongoing training (Berends et al., 2002; D. K. Cohen et al., 2013; Datnow et al., 2003).

Studies of these popular models of school improvement do not turn out to be particularly helpful for understanding how school development unfolds for most schools serving disadvantaged students. In the first place, this is because both models have demonstrated only limited cases of improvement (Aladjem et al., 2010; Berends et al., 2002; Borman et al., 2003; D. K. Cohen et al., 2013; Datnow et al., 2003; de la Torre et al., 2013; Meyers & Smylie, 2017; Murphy & Meyer, 2008; Peck & Reitzug, 2014). In the second place, this is because both assume the availability of substantial external resources that turn out to be difficult to secure. Turnaround presumes a labor pool of highly motivated and expert teachers and leaders awaiting their chance to make a difference in a difficult school, and CSR presumes extensive external support. In many cases of attempted turnaround, however, efforts were unsuccessful because it was quite challenging to fill teaching positions with talented personnel, newly installed leaders were not necessarily more skilled than those they replaced, and the process drove out some committed and talented teachers and contributed to turnover that exacerbated standing problems with staff cohesion and fragmentation (Dickey-Griffith, 2013; Mintrop, 2004; Peck & Reitzug, 2014; Rice & Malen, 2003). In many cases of CSR, programs were adopted without considering fit to existing capacities (Berends et al., 2002; D. K. Cohen et al., 2013; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Payne, 2008). Massive programs with insufficient support from the district or from external agencies (or support that dried up) left schools unable to fully implement or maintain changes (Berends et al., 2002; D. K. Cohen et al., 2013; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000).

The paucity of successful cases of either model reveals that the presumptions that undergird them are far from typical in "chronically low-performing" schools. Strong leaders are not necessarily waiting in the wings, and sources of external support are often too fleeting or paltry to match the size of school improvers' ambitions.

Thus, what is missing from the knowledge base is an understanding of the fine-grained dynamics of development under the more typical scenario facing schools that serve disadvantaged communities. The findings of the school improvement literature suggest that expansive and sustained collective agency is possible—when there is strong leadership and the capabilities of an effective professional learning community or when there is substantial external support and intervention. But the findings also tell us that most urban schools and districts are likely to face conditions that challenge the development of such capacities: scarce resources that provoke internal strife and overload, instability from turnover, precarious leadership, a history of failure, limitations in their expertise, and students that they find hard to reach. In most cases, they cannot rely on substantial external support or the promise of an influx of new talent. Rather, they must find a way to develop collective agency on their own, within the limitations of their existing material and social resources. School improvement research has rarely examined developmental processes inside of challenged schools to understand how people experiencing failure, negative judgment, and conflict might come to "trust" each other. "Strong leadership" may indeed be helpful, but it is not clear how such leadership develops if a climate of failure that casts doubt upon leaders' legitimacy (Mintrop, 2004; Orr et al., 2005; Payne, 2008).

A More Realistic Possibility? A Struggle for Collective Agency

Thus, advancing the knowledge base about school improvement calls for research that seeks to understand: What do groups of educators in "bottom-tier" schools do to try to develop, when they must work with what they have? Given that adverse conditions may have pulled them into constraining tendencies of defensiveness, helplessness, conflict, and fragmentation, how do they become to be enabled to pull together and face up to their problems?

Existing literature on resilience and school improvement cannot answer these questions not only because of a dearth of in-depth process-oriented research, but also because of a tendency to focus on "grand" horizons that are far from the current state of typical low-performing schools. Studies of resilience and school improvement tend to set out with specific and ambitious criteria of group accomplishments: positive outcomes despite adversity, significant gains in student achievement, and trusting groups that productively deliberate and accomplish complex joint work. This limits the findings of many studies to identifying factors and processes in relation to substantial or sustained success, and noting the absences, lacks, and insufficiencies of those factors and processes in lower performing or more challenged contexts.

But, as Little (2003) points out about professional community, such prospects paint an "optimistic premise" that have proven hard to come by in most urban schools. To understand what enables development in schools serving the "truly disadvantaged" and suffering from experiences of failure, research is needed that looks closely at the processes in educators' work groups and is not limited to those associated with sustained success and effectiveness. Such research needs to account for efforts to develop more foundational capacities—efforts that may be tenuous and not necessarily arrive at or even approach the "grand" horizons but are nonetheless significant signs of developmental striving. For that purpose, a study that focuses on the emergence of collective agency—rather than resilience, improvement, or professional community—offers a more open angle. From this angle, the research becomes sensitive to any efforts a group makes to exert agency, regardless of whether those efforts sustain or add up to overall effectiveness.

A few exceptions in the school improvement literature offer insights into more nuanced processes that might be involved when collective agency emerges in a "bottom-tier" school. A closer look at one of the "unsuccessful" cases in Louis and Kruse (1995) provides clues. Rollow and Bryk (1995) focused on a school in a "truly disadvantaged" neighborhood with a history of an embattled and demoralized faculty and failed efforts at reform. In this case, the researchers partnered with the school in an effort to "catalyze" professional community by hiring a long-term respected teacher as a literacy coordinator position and offering a series of professional development workshops. At first, the new literacy coordinator found that her colleagues viewed her with suspicion and jealousy, and teachers balked at requests to "do homework" for the professional development workshops. With "bribes" and offers to help teachers with their homework, the literacy coordinator "ingratiated" herself to her colleagues, introduced opportunities to role play new instructional techniques, and visited teachers in their classrooms as they tried them out. Over time, the teachers developed trust, appreciated to develop new competencies, and began to open up about their teaching problems, describing the literacy coordinator as a "lifesaver." However, these developments receded in the second year when the literacy coordinator shifted attention to another group of teachers, causing the original group to become resentful. When she returned to that group, they had reverted back to their prior practices, and rather than being able to pick back up where they left off, she had to reestablish trust all over again. Meanwhile, the principal became jealous when she read a positive portrayal of the literacy coordinator in the researchers' report. In retaliation, she made her hurt feelings known to staff, and piled extra duties onto the literacy coordinator. As the principal's anger became known, teachers grew less engaged and more silent during meetings.

Mintrop and Charles (2017) used action research over one year to study how a group of teachers worked together to address a core problem of student discipline in a school in distress. Within an organizational environment marked by high turnover and fragmentation, the group of

teachers at first accepted facilitators' suggestions with little discussion, agreeing to a simple intervention to address student tardiness. However, subsequent meetings revealed little follow through. After a few months of uneven participation, heated and personalized conflicts erupted when members disclosed deeper aspects of problems with student behavior. Others denied that they faced those problems and accused each other of poor practices. By mid-year, student misbehavior escalated. After an incident in which a student assaulted a teacher, the group suddenly abandoned their prior conflicts and agreed to a plan to adopt a "zero tolerance" policy. When their attempts to enact this policy were ineffective, the group issued an ultimatum to the administration: either intervene with "out of control" students or lose teachers' cooperation. The administration balked, accusing the group of abdicating its professional responsibility, and the group looked likely to disband as teachers considered their options for leaving the school.

The above cases open a window into potential nuances and tenuousness in the development of collective agency under conditions of adversity. The cases show how groups get pulled into defensiveness, helplessness, and fragmentation—but also strive at times towards desired capabilities. Rollow and Bryk (1995) show a group with a fragile sense of affirmation and trust—but also one making efforts to develop competence as literacy instructors and to connect with each other in their struggles. Mintrop and Charles (2017) show a group stuck in passivity and then in conflict that was able to quickly cohere and develop a collective strategy when experiencing a severe problem experienced as a shared urgency—albeit, a strategy beset by limitations that suggested low likelihood of actually mastering the problem.

Such evidence suggests how efforts to develop collective agency may emerge in a struggle—as adversity pulls groups into deflections, despair, avoidances, and conflict but also presses groups towards efforts to connect, prevail over suffering, and find well-being.

Understanding the Emergence of Collective Agency through Work Group Development

To understand this struggle to develop collective agency, established literatures on group development (Forsyth, 2014; Smith, 2001; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Wheelan, 2005) and work teams (Cannon & Edmondson, 2001; S. G. Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Edmondson, 1999; Gersick, 1988; Hackman et al., 2000; Hackman & Morris, 1975) offer useful insights. These literatures describe interaction processes that enable and constrain a group in developing capacities at a smaller grain size. At the level of the group, the development of collective agency is indicated in how the group navigates developmental challenges to accomplish (ever more complex) tasks, address problems, to become affirmed as a competent and worthy body, and to contribute to members' well-being (S. G. Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Edmondson, 1999; Hackman et al., 2000; Wheelan, 2005).

The literature on group development (Forsyth, 2014; Smith, 2001; Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Wheelan, 2005) reveals defensiveness, helplessness, conflict, and fragmentation to be typical in groups that are immature or in an early stage of development. Tuckman and Jensen (1977) proposed that groups reach a stage allowing for productive work after undergoing early experiences of forming, storming, and norming. Elaborating on Tuckman & Jensen's (1977) model, Wheelan (2005) posits that groups mature in phases. At first, members' fears of rejection promote dependence on the leader and avoidance of the group's work so as to avoid the conflict necessary to develop consensus about their task. In a subsequent phase, members begin to voice opinions and raise concerns, inviting conflict as members call into question the group's purpose and values and establish their status and acceptance in the

group. If able to weather and resolve these conflicts, members develop clarity and consensus about their norms, roles, and tasks, and trust and safety increases. At this point, the group becomes more autonomous from its leader, more willing to accept responsibility for its work, and more secure in the group's competence, and the group can better focus productive effort on its tasks, undertake more complex tasks, and solve problems together.

A related body of research about work teams (S. G. Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Edmondson, 1999; Hackman, 2002b; Hackman et al., 2000; Hackman & Morris, 1975) describes processes of development that enable successful performance for groups in organizations. The literature firstly points to some key structural pre-requisites. For one, an effective team is usually designed around a clearly defined and compelling direction and purpose that connects to interdependent tasks that pose the opportunity for members to bring their expertise to bear on work that has consequence for the organization (Hackman et al., 2000). An enabling organizational context ensures that selection of members is intentional so as to bring the right dispositions and expertise to accomplish the tasks, teams are allocated sufficient autonomy and authority to work on such tasks, and teams are provided rewards, regular sources of feedback, and coaching to support their performance (S. G. Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Hackman, 2002b).

Gersick (1988) observed and studied the transcripts of eight real-life work groups in six organizations and found that external pressure to perform can facilitate work team development. In this study, naturally-occurring teams working within existing organizations were formed around a clear charge to develop a particular product by a particular deadline that required interdependent decisions. Under these conditions, Gersick (1998) found that development occurred in waves of punctuated equilibrium as interpersonal dynamics interacted with task timelines: phases of stability and unproductivity shifted rapidly into non-linear episodes of storming, norming, and working—depending on the life cycle of the product being created and how closely deadlines loomed.

Beyond external conditions and structural pre-requisites, the work team literature suggests that effectiveness is a matter of internal processes. A key process is exertion of focus and effort to strive to accomplish a group task (Hackman et al., 2000; Hackman & Morris, 1975). To support task focus and effort, teams need to develop norms, protocols, and role designations that are an adequate match for their work. Norms should favor maintaining an "active" rather than passive or reactive stance towards their work, willingness to face up to and address their internal challenges, and interpreting feedback from a learning stance (Hackman, 2002a). Effective performance also relies upon running efficient and effective meetings. Effective performance usually depends on a well-planned agenda and processes for self-monitoring during meetings (Tropman, 1987). However, presuming the team has compelling work that has consequence, it probably cannot do all that needs to be done during single meetings. The team thus needs processes for recording decisions and identifying and allocating action items to be completed outside of meetings and checked for follow up in future meetings (Tropman, 1987).

Group performance also hinges upon how groups handle complex tasks and complex problems. Effective performance on complex tasks calls for work groups to bring to bear appropriate expertise—or help members to develop it—and respond with task structures and strategies that are appropriate for the task (Hackman et al., 2000; Hackman & Morris, 1975). The problems that groups face will likely be ill-structured and complex (Jonassen, 2000), calling for expertise that enables groups to understand and adequately respond to the complexity. This includes capability to define and frame a problem, diagnose causes, and determine a solution that reduces complexity sufficiently to allow for action while adequately responding to the challenge

(Jonassen, 2000; Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). Absent such expertise, problems may seem beyond reach or chosen strategies may be inadequate, leading to experiences of failure and being overwhelmed.

Group development and team effectiveness also hinges upon managing interpersonal dynamics so as to create the conditions for productive task communication and group affirmation. Members are unlikely to face up to and disclose problems, particularly those that expose failures and limits to competence, if they lack trust and psychological safety—insecure of their belonging in the group and fearful that disclosure will be met with rejection or ridicule (Cannon & Edmondson, 2001; Edmondson, 1999, 2003; Schein, 2010). If seeking to avoid conflict or perceiving that speaking up may subject them to negative judgment or sanction, members may keep concerns silent (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pacheco et al., 2015). Groups can actively encourage disclosure and cultivate psychological safety by encouraging members to voice concerns and responding with mutual support (Edmondson, 1999).

Groups can also increase members' sense of belonging and group affirmation by using communication that seeks to build bonds, identify affinities, and appreciate strengths (Forsyth, 2014; Wheelan, 2005). However, this does not mean groups should merely aim for "harmony." Fostering trust and psychological safety hinges upon weathering conflict. Avoiding conflict is usually a sign of an immature and usually minimally effective group, as moderate levels of task conflict are important to successfully define and perform tasks, particularly more complex tasks (Jehn et al., 1999; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Trust and psychological safety increase *after* groups enter into and see they are able to resolve conflicts (Wheelan, 2005). However, groups whose members harbor discrepant core values can become stuck in personalized conflicts that remain unresolved, which can create rifts and inhibit maturity or productivity (De Dreu & Vianen, 2001; Jehn et al., 1999; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Interactions need to be managed to minimize the use of mistrusting or attacking language that prompts others to feel threatened and foments personal conflict (Gibb, 1961; Jehn et al., 1999; Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

Even in so-called self-managing teams, group productivity usually depends upon leaders that provide guidance and direction to the team's work (Hackman et al., 2000; Stewart & Manz, 1995), particularly if the group has yet to develop strong self-regulation (Wheelan, 2005). However, uncertainties about the right balance of authoritative versus democratic leadership may pose tensions that cause leaders to retreat to more a passive or "laissez faire" style, which can be detrimental to productivity (Lewin et al., 1939; Stewart & Manz, 1995).

Limitations of the Literatures on Group Development and Work Teams

The literature about work group development suggests possibilities of the fine-grained processes through which collective agency may become enabled and constrained in educators' work teams, but there are several ways in which this literature is limited for understanding such processes in educators' work teams in schools facing adversity. For one, studies about groups operating in a context of adversity are sparse. A limited scholarship about groups facing threat suggests some possibilities. The most well-documented patterns of group development under adverse conditions are threat rigidity (Staw et al., 1981; Turner & Horvitz, 2001), group think (Janis, 1971), and defensive social identity maintenance (Branscombe et al., 1999; Sherman et al., 2007; Turner et al., 1992). As discussed earlier, rigidity presents as a tightening of hierarchy and control, strict adherence to existing standard protocols, and suppressing dissent. Groupthink is an extreme form of group conformity in which members suppress concerns and avoid

disagreement. Social identity maintenance is a response to an external threat that diverts effort away from work tasks and towards affirming and asserting positive traits of the group.

It is unclear whether these patterns will arise in a group facing chronic conditions of adversity. All three patterns describe responses to discrete experiences of threat amongst groups with some apparent existing capacities. Rigidity has been documented in low-performing schools facing threat of sanction (Daly, 2009; Mintrop, 2004; Olsen & Sexton, 2009), but presumes a salient pressure to perform and existent level of involved leadership and established protocols that can become heightened. In the event of a chronically low-performing school in which years of failed reforms have accumulated and instability has invited disorder, there may not be sufficient pressure, leadership, or protocols to allow for rigidity. In groups that see failure as likely or have already experienced failure, new experiences of threat may prompt retreat of leadership and invite dissention and further disorder (Staw et al., 1981). Groupthink presumes some existing level of group cohesion that can heighten under threat, but in a school that operates regularly amid conditions of scarcity and failure, tendencies towards fragmentation and conflict may have precluded such cohesion in the first place. Social identity maintenance presumes a sense of identification with the school or group and recognition of the source of the threat as external. However, in "bottom-tier" schools, internal conflict and scapegoating may promote faculty to disassociate themselves from their work groups and perceive a threat as coming from within (M. W. Meyer & Zucker, 1989; Payne, 2008; Staw et al., 1981).

Much of the research on group development and work teams has taken place under conditions that are quite different from that of real-life work groups in schools. Many foundational group development studies focused on groups that were not organized in a work setting (Smith, 2001)—such as therapy groups and student groups in the university (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Bion, 1961). Much recent work has concentrated on ad hoc groups formed in controlled settings for experimental research (Sherman et al., 2007). Work team studies have tended to be more focused on real-life groups but usually ones that operate in institutional contexts that are quite different from that of K-12 education. For example, Gersick's (1988) study include teams of graduate students, a community fundraising agency committee, a bank task force, a hospital administration team, a team of psychiatrists and social workers, and a university faculty team. Edmondson's studies of psychological safety have focused on nursing and surgery teams in hospitals and teams of varying functions in a manufacturing company (Edmondson, 2004)

Thus, the explanations offered in existing research about how effectiveness and maturity are enabled tend to presume the presence of forces that cannot be presumed in educational organizations. Teachers' work tends to be organized around deeply ingrained professional norms of autonomy, equality, privacy and individualism (Little, 1982, 1990) amid loosely coupled organizations (Weick, 1976). This context presents special challenges for finding the impetus for groups facing difficult circumstances to press towards collective task accomplishment and group affirmation. The same norms can constrain educators' ability and willingness to exert or accept leadership (Donaldson et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2014), as can the restrictions posed by collective bargaining agreements (Strunk & Grissom, 2010).

An era of standards-based reform and accountability may have brought some increased goal clarity (Elmore et al., 1996; Fuhrman & O'Day, 1996), but teachers' work remains beset by endemic ambiguities and uncertainties (D. K. Cohen, 2011; Kraft et al., 2015) and a weak technical culture (Lortie, 1975; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). Accountability policies may have increased pressure to perform (Daly, 2009; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009) but usually concentrate

heavily on test scores. Test scores hardly capable of capturing the full scope of goals in educators' work (Labaree, 1997). Hence, defining tasks and criteria of successful performance may remain particularly challenging for work groups in a school.

Moreover, for schools having endured many years of failed reform now facing the softer touch of new "supportive" approach marked by local control, as in California (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016), incentives and external pressure to perform may be weak relative to the pull of legitimacy and rules in highly institutionalized and bureaucratized organizations (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Rowan, 1982; Sarason, 1982). Hence, educators' groups may be formed more in relation to, and find their interactions pulled more towards, rule-following and keeping up appearances than towards a concern for quality and results.

There also may be particular difficulties to handle complexity in educators' work groups. Educational problems are wicked (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019; Timperley & Robinson, 1998), tied to factors rooted outside of schools—including poverty, community violence, and racial segregation (Bryk et al., 2010; Rothstein, 2004)—as well as complex problems of student and adult learning and behavior. Given fast-paced work amid resource scarcity, teachers tend to recognize and tackle the problems immediately in front of them (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Lortie, 1975), and an era of high-stakes accountability exacerbated the predilection for "quick fixes" (Goertz & Massell, 2005). Teachers in lower-performing urban schools tend to have less expertise than in other schools (Goldhaber et al., 2019). Unable to reach their students and not understanding why, while in an organization suffering from overload and stigma, teachers may keep silent, deflect, or resign themselves towards problems, rather than seeking to understand, diagnose, and take action. Alternately, in the face of complexity and overload, problem solving may be enabled by downshifting problem complexity through the frame of available and conventional solutions (Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). In lower-capacity schools, educators may get past defensiveness and helplessness by pinning their hopes on relatively simple interventions that they perceive the capacity to implement (Mintrop & Charles, 2017).

Thus, to understand how collective agency develops in schools serving disadvantaged students, research is needed that explores how groups that may not be structurally set up for, nor feel pressed to seek, "maturity" or "effectiveness," and face complex problems for which they may have insufficient expertise, become enabled to focus on task accomplishment, address their problems, and pull together with a sense of affirmation.

Summary of Conceptual Framework

From the above review of literatures, I conclude that understanding how school development occurs under conditions of adversity calls for research that attends to the fine-grained and dynamic ways that work groups attempt to develop collective agency—even if their attempts do not work out, sustain, or add up to effectiveness.

Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency entails choosing to use one's influence to address problematic situations. From the perspective of literatures on group development and work teams, efforts to develop collective agency are indicated in the extent to which a group strives to respond to its developmental challenges: to accomplish tasks, to address problems, affirm itself as a body, and contribute to members' satisfaction. Work groups can develop in ways that contribute to the organization's collective agency if helping the organization become a more integrated and affirmed body and attenuating core organizational problems.

The literatures on group development and work teams suggest that collective agency is not an all-or-nothing capability. It can emerge and recede depending on the context in which the group operates, the particular developmental challenge the group faces, and how the group handles it. The development of collective agency is thus not guaranteed but a quite contingent emergence that depends on the interplay of various factors that congeal at particular inflection points. Once emerged, collective agency may sustain, or it may later fall apart.

In schools serving socioeconomically and educationally disadvantaged students, collective agency may be particularly contingent. Amid negative judgment of the organization, resource scarcity, micro-political rifts, high turnover, disorganization, and student behaviors in the classroom that regularly shake teachers' sense of competence, educators face adverse circumstances under which to try to pull together into cohesive groups that accomplish tasks and address their problems. The context for group development is further complicated by institutional and organizational conditions in schools: a weak technical culture inviting high ambiguity and uncertainty, a press towards legitimacy rather than effectiveness, professional norms of autonomy, privacy, and individualism, and structures of loose coupling.

The literature on the social psychological, organizational, and group responses to adversity suggests that, in the face of such institutional and organizational pressures, collective agency may become constrained as groups try to cope with overwhelming problems that challenge their core competencies. Groups may feel a loss of control over their situation that brings out learned helplessness, resigning themselves to problems even when experiencing frustrations. They may turn to defensive tactics to ease the sting of their problems and reduce feelings of being overwhelmed by rejecting, doubting or deflecting responsibility for their charge, avoiding their task, or hiding or silencing their problems. Unproductive conflict may pull the group apart as members blame each other, point to the incompatibilities or insufficiencies of the group.

Thus, from the literatures consulted, I theorize that in a context of adversity, collective agency may emerge as a struggle. A struggle means there may be times when efforts to develop surge and collective agency becomes more enabled, and there may be other times during which group interactions shift and collective agency becomes constrained or collapses. A surge in collective agency is evident in interactions through which groups make efforts to develop and thereby respond to problematic situations: to try to accomplish tasks, address problems, cultivate a cohesive and affirmed group, and to contribute to members' well-being and satisfaction. Constraints in collective agency are evident in interactions through which the group avoids or takes no action to respond to problematic situations and becomes weakened, such as: avoiding or abandoning tasks, hiding and denying problems, undermining or attacking group members, and fomenting dissatisfaction and ill-being.

To theorize the potential key tensions of this struggle, I draw on the literatures on work teams and group development for insights. The work team literature suggests that one element of this struggle may stem from the organizational context that creates the structural set-up of the group. Efforts to develop collective agency may be enabled or constrained depending on how the team was formed—whether there is a clear charge with members who bring appropriate expertise—and members' access to feedback and rewards that motivate effective performance.

Within a particular structural set-up, collective agency may emerge in relation to internal group processes that enable or constrain development. Looking across the literatures I consulted, I understand these processes to fall into a few key domains. Table 1 summarizes these domains

and associated processes that may enable or constrain collective agency, as described in the discussion below.

Leadership appears to be a particularly important element of group interactions that enable or constrain the development of collective agency. Under conditions of adversity, the salience of leadership is heightened, and yet leadership also becomes particularly fraught. In the face of a distinct threat, leaders may exert more control that provides needed stability, or may exert so much control as to produce rigidity that suppresses dissent. When adversity is a chronic experience in the environment, leaders may find their legitimacy questioned and decide to maintain peace by turning a blind eye to unproductivity and disorder. Developing collective agency appears to hinge on the extent to which a leader in a context inviting an ongoing malaise finds sufficient energy and motivation to help guide and push the group forward. Thus, for schools facing adversity, in what ways leadership may be offered and how it may be enabling or constraining is not clear. Will a strong, firm leadership emerge that takes initiative to set a clear and consistent direction and keeps the group focused? Or will a leader with a tenuous sense of legitimacy and authority avoid attempting to influence others and retreat in the face of challenge?

Beyond leadership, an understanding of how collective agency emerges in schools facing adversity also calls for attending to how work groups come to manage their tasks. The literature on work teams suggests that task accomplishment calls for exerting focused effort on tasks that are consequential for the organization. The literature on school improvement and professional community suggests that consequential tasks have relevance to the authentic problems and passions of the teachers. Most likely, consequential tasks are not completed in one meeting, but require some follow up action steps, follow through, and processes by which groups check on progress. All of the above suggests that the group has arrived at some norms and protocols that establish shared expectations, decide upon tasks, connect tasks to members' needs, and organize itself to allocate and follow up on of action steps. Collective agency may become constrained when groups struggle to establish clarity about a task, lack the expertise to handle it, and develop tendencies of avoidance. Given the institutional environment of schools, work teams in schools may be assigned tasks with little connection to their needs or adopt tasks for legitimacy—which may make focused effort hard to come by. Amid pulls towards legitimacy, technical uncertainties, norms of autonomy and individualism, and conditions of adversity, it is not clear how and if work teams in schools will come to establish sufficient clarity about their tasks and develop ways of self-organizing that enable them to arrive at accomplishment.

Considering the processes entailed in task management, an understanding of the emergence of collective agency also calls for attending to how groups manage interpersonal dynamics so as to create sufficient group affirmation, handle conflict, and establish trust and psychological safety. Being able to coordinate and cooperate as a group hinges upon group affirmation that arises through experiences through which members feel included and valued, recognize affinities in beliefs or values, have their work and expertise validated and appreciated, and perceive group efficacy. Groups become more affirmed in their competence and worth as they see they can overcome conflict and solve problems successfully.

While such processes may sound straightforward, cultivating group affirmation under conditions of adversity may be difficult. In the face of an external threat, group affirmation may arise as a defense mechanism to protect against the threat by asserting the group's positive qualities. Or, chronic adversity may invite unproductive, personalized conflict as members blame each other, denigrate each other, focus on limitations and incompatibilities, and convey hopelessness. If this means that the group finds it cannot weather conflict or solve its problems,

group affirmation may suffer. Groups pulled into task avoidance or distracting conflict may experience unproductivity that produces experiences of failure rather than a sense of validated expertise or efficacy.

Thus, managing the group dynamics also relates to how groups deal with various types of conflict and disclosure. Before they can pull together to accomplish anything, groups must determine what is their charge and translate that into particular tasks—a challenge that the group development literature suggests will likely entail disagreement. The group development literature suggests that trust and psychological safety increase after groups successfully deal with a conflict. But the work team literature also finds that if some level of psychological safety is not present, group members may struggle to enter conflict because they are not willing to disclose ideas or concerns—or in education, "deprivatize" their practices. Disclosure may be explicitly encouraged and rendered safe with expressions of support, or fears of negative judgment. Experiences of criticism and retribution may prompt silences. Given prevailing professional norms, complexity, and conditions of adversity, it is not clear how educators' work groups will come to minimize unproductive conflict sufficiently to build good will and offer affirmation, trust and safety, but also allow for and resolve conflict over what the team will work on and how.

All of the above suggests that the emergence or hindrance of collective agency will depend on how groups handle problems. Handling problems entails the extent to which groups firstly face up to and acknowledge their problems (or deny them, ignore them, or cover them up), and navigate complexity. Real-world problems in a context of adversity are vexing and immensely complex. In schools serving socioeconomically and educationally disadvantaged students, challenges to reach students can strike at the heart of teachers' core motivations. On top of that, schools negatively judged as "failing" and beset by resource shortages may face thorny problems to get along as a faculty. Under these circumstances, facing up to and taking responsibility for problems can be both a social psychological and cognitive challenge. The emergence of collective agency will likely depend on how groups attempt to face the complexity of their problems. Might teams acknowledge their problems, or ignore and hide them? Might they try to understand the complexity, or avoid it? Might they become overwhelmed and deflect or externalize the problem? Or might they downshift the complexity with simple solutions?

Table 1

Possible Domains and Processes for Enabling and Constraining Collective Agency

Dimension	Definition	(-) Constraining ←→	(+) Enabling
Exerting leadership	Set direction, ensure progress	Avoid influencing others Retreat in face of challenge	Take initiative, guide group Hold firm
Managing tasks	Aim for task focus and effectiveness	No clear task or avoid task Focus on compliance No action steps	Focus effort on task Focus on consequential tasks Identify action steps, follow up
Managing interpersonal dynamics	Cultivate affirmation, handle conflict, foster trust and psychological safety	Emphasize limitations Focus on incompatibilities Avoid, personalize conflict Silence, hide concerns	Affirm good work Seek affinities Productive task conflict Disclose struggles
Handling problems	Face up to and take responsibility for problems, navigate complexity	Ignore, deny problems Deflect, externalize Avoid complexity Oversimplify	Acknowledge problems Accept responsibility Seek understanding Frame manageable tasks

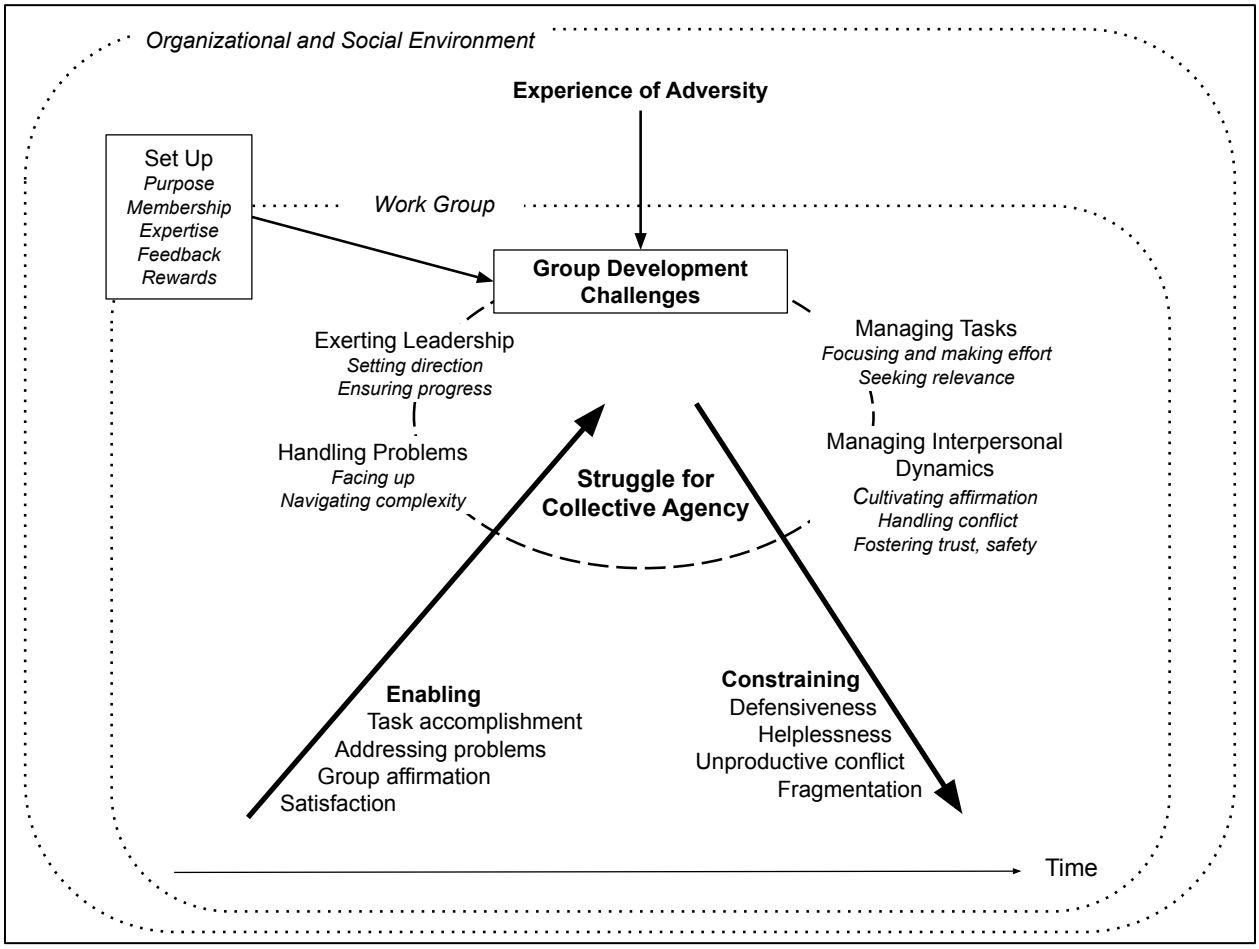
As implied in the discussion above, while each domain in Table 1 plays a role, the emergence, or diminishing, of collective agency likely depends on how these processes interplay. The extent to which leadership is available and how it is extended can influence the ways tasks are managed and how the interpersonal dynamics are navigated. The kinds of tasks the group takes up, and how much progress they experience on them, may hinge on how the group navigates the complexities of the problems posed by adversity and handles the conflict entailed in facing up to and responding to such problems. The extent to which groups are able to act on their problems relates to whether they have a sufficient sense of group affirmation to be able to acknowledge their problems, as well as the problem solving capacity to understand and respond to complexity. Thus, understanding how collective agency surges or recedes calls for attending to a confluence of factors that may cascade or coalesce such that groups handle problems with more or less success, generate stronger or weaker affirmation, and experience higher or lower accomplishment.

The group development literature and studies of work teams posit a temporal aspect to the emergence of collective agency. According to some group development models, the capability for collective agency may emerge linearly—with groups that start out in a stage of dependence on a leader with politeness and little dissent, leading into a stage of "storming" and conflict, that then resolves into a stages of "norming" and "performing." However, other models of group development and work teams suggest that collective agency may expand and contract less linearly in relation to task demands and external pressures. In this case, groups may have periods of equilibrium in which there is some "performing," punctuated by times of less productivity, conflict, or instability as the group reorganizes in response to time pressures or feedback.

Figure 1 illustrates the key ideas discussed above to represent how collective agency may become enabled and constrained over time as groups embedded in a particular organizational and social environment navigate a set of group developmental challenges while contending with experiences of adversity.

Figure 1

Theorizing the Struggle for Collective Agency in School Work Teams Facing Adversity



School Development at the Next Level of Work

In relaxing the focus beyond factors through which schools may arrive (or fail to arrive) at the grandest of our aspirational horizons, this study aims to remain sensitive to groups' efforts to try to develop even basic group capacities of collective agency—even if these efforts do not sustain or add up to effectiveness. In doing so, this study seeks insight: Is there developmental struggle in a so-called "failing" school using its existing resources? If so, what can be learned from the nature of that struggle? If the study finds evidence that work teams make strivings to develop, these strivings may contain important insights about how to develop the school further.

In looking for insights about how to enable school development in this way, the study makes certain assumptions about the scope of the development that is of interest. Presuming that collective agency entails struggle in a context of adversity, the study aims to understand what the struggle means for school development at "the next level of work" (City et al., 2009). I define the "next level of work" as a proximate step towards desired capabilities within the zone of struggle. It is indicated through the desires of the people within the group or organization—what they see as possible and strive to make happen—and the limitations posed by their strivings.

School improvement scholarship needs such insights into how development can occur at the next level of work. The literatures about social psychological, organizational, and group responses to adversity and unsuccessful reform efforts over many years warn against school reform ideas that rely too much on the prospect of dramatic change, abundant external support, resource-heavy and complex interventions, or an army of newly recruited talented educators. Presuming that the trends of concentrated disadvantage, disinvestment in social policy, and high demands on educators continue, many schools will have to find a way to develop amid conditions of adversity, and to do so with weak or intermittent external support using their existing resources. Development in the next level of work offers an alternative view of school improvement from that of popular strategies of turnaround. It is a stretch of group capabilities that capitalizes on group desires to develop and seems within reach, given the available human, material, and social resources as well as the continued presence of adverse conditions.

In tracing the fine-grained processes of work team development in a school facing adversity, the study presumes there are important insights to gain from understanding the dynamics through which educators in their real-world contexts attempt to develop—or struggle. The difficulties that groups run into, or the developmental shifts they are able to realize, may yield useful clues about the steps that could be taken, or the kinds of supports and scaffolds that could be put in place and that are reasonable for the more typical scenario facing schools and districts that serve disadvantaged communities.

Possible Contributions of Different Work Teams to the School's Collective Agency

Existing studies of processes in schools tend to either be case studies that look at general organizational processes or look at interactions within a single type of work team—such as teacher departmental groups. For the purposes of this study, I want to understand the processes that enable and constrain collective agency in work groups that can potentially play an important function for school improvement so as to understand the next level of work for the school as a whole. It may turn out that, given that group development processes arise within a particular shared organizational context and culture, patterns of the emergence of collective agency are quite similar across groups. Or, it may be that groups of different functions reveal different patterns of development. As such, it is helpful to recognize how various work groups across the organization may contribute uniquely to a school's collective agency.

Faculty Meetings. One type of work group that might contribute to school improvement is the faculty as it convenes in regular faculty meetings. From a limited literature focusing specifically on qualities of effective faculty meetings (Brandenburg, 2008; Klein, 2005; Michel, 2011), and references to faculty meetings in the school improvement literature (Barth, 1990; Blase, 1987; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Halverson et al., 2007; Spillane & Diamond, 2007), faculty meetings can serve as venues to cultivate a collegial culture, build shared vision, engage in collective goal-setting and decision-making, and monitor school improvement efforts. Considering these functions, I imagine that faculty meetings could enable the school's collective agency when enabling staff to: (a) deliberate over urgencies; (b) communicate about a school action plan; (c) make collective decisions; (d) model desirable behaviors; and (e) bring attention to positive qualities of the school.

Staff Professional Development. Another work group that could have a strong bearing on school improvement is staff professional development (Bryk et al., 2010; D. K. Cohen et al., 2013; Correnti & Rowan, 2007; Lieberman, 1988; Potter et al., 2002). When most effective, professional development is afforded substantial time with activities that move beyond one-shot

"workshops" or "drive bys" and instead provide ongoing, coherent, and applied learning around a particular challenge of student learning connected to mastery of subject matter (Desimone, 2011; Garet et al., 2001). In low capacity schools, professional development may be impactful if providing training in simpler or more prescriptive instructional program (D. K. Cohen et al., 2013; Correnti & Rowan, 2007). Considering these functions, staff PD could enable the school's collective agency by: (a) addressing authentic urgencies and passions of teachers; (b) developing new competencies; (c) modeling good practices; and (d) motivating teachers to experiment with new practices.

The Instructional Leadership Team. Instructional leadership teams (ILTs) typically include school administrators and representatives from different grade levels or subject matter departments. A limited literature on such bodies (Hallinger, 1989; Halverson et al., 2007; Klar, 2013; Knapp et al., 2014; Supovitz & Riggan, 2012; Weiner, 2014) describes effective ILTs as teams that discuss and utilize data about student learning to identify areas of instructional need, set goals for instructional improvement, plan and implement strategies for reaching these goals, track results, work to influence or oversee instruction, and organize professional development. Considering these criteria, an ILT could contribute to the school's collective agency if the group: (a) enables communication about teaching and learning between the principal and the faculty; (b) identifies teachers' urgencies and deliberates to understand them; (c) sets goals for school improvement and decides on solutions; (d) serves as role models; and (e) plans and executes PD or other initiatives.

Teacher Departmental Collaboration. Teacher collaboration teams may contribute to school development if bringing together teachers of similar subjects or grade levels to help each other address ongoing classroom challenges and procure resources for teaching and learning. The literature on professional learning communities describe such teams as most effective for school improvement when moving past simple "sharing" and "story-telling" to undertake joint work including curriculum development and collective inquiry around authentic problems of practice (Little, 1990; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Stoll et al., 2006). Considering these functions, a departmental collaboration group might contribute to the school's collective agency when teachers: (a) discuss the details of instruction; (b) share or develop curriculum; (c) raise and seek help for problems of practice; (d) exchange ideas and "stories" about what "works" with their students; and (e) stretch towards joint inquiry.

Informal and Volunteer Groups. Informal or volunteer work groups—such as "clubs" (Grossman et al., 2001; Sherin & van Es, 2009; Wilson & Berne, 1999)—may also contribute to school improvement by bringing together teachers for collegial exchange and reflection around a common area or need or interest, advancing teachers' pedagogical or subject matter knowledge, or working together on joint problem solving or inquiry. Given these functions, such a body could contribute to the school's collective agency when: (a) opening up an exchange between highly motivated teachers about teaching and learning; (b) expressing and affirming professionalism; (c) providing space and routines for continuous improvement around urgent problems; and (d) modeling best practices of collegiality for the school.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

In order for school reformers to develop supports that have a chance to work in challenged schools, we need a better understanding of the factors that enable collective agency to emerge in schools facing adversity. In this study, I expect that the development of collective agency is a struggle that unfolds in the day-to-day interactions of educators' work groups. Facing resource scarcities and overwhelming problems challenging core competencies, work groups may develop interaction patterns that defensively avoid or deflect problems, orient towards helpless inaction and resignation towards problems, or pull the group apart with finger-pointing and conflict. But it is also likely that groups may feel pressed towards efforts to exert collective agency—to pull together to seek accomplishment, feel affirmed, attenuate their problems, and experience satisfaction.

With the conceptual framework in mind, this study examines the interaction patterns in several work groups in one school to investigate:

- How does collective agency become enabled and constrained through the interaction processes of various educators' work groups in a school facing adversity?
- Which factors and processes are salient at points when the development of collective agency is most constrained and most enabled in each group?
- Are there similarities and differences in the factors and processes that enable and constrain collective agency depending on the function of different work groups in the faculty as a whole?

Methodology: Participant Observation

To answer these research questions, I used participant observation to study five work groups in one California middle school for one school year. Participant observation entails immersion amongst research subjects in their everyday context to develop deep understanding of their routines and culture (Brannan & Oultram, 2012; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013; Spradley, 1980). As its name aptly describes, the methodology involves both participating in the same activities as the research participants, as well as keen observation—and documentation and analysis—of those activities.

There are several reasons why participant observation is particularly suited to studying how collective agency emerges within work groups operating in contexts of adversity. As Wheelan (2005) explains, participant observation allows for flexibility that is appropriate for studying aspects of group behavior that are not well-established—as is the case for group development under conditions of adversity. Recognizing the processes through which a group affirms (or denigrates and fragments) itself, makes progress on a task (or avoids it), or addresses (or silences or deflects) problems calls for close-up and prolonged study of fine-grained dynamics of interaction.

Most group development research has been conducted using structured observations, interviews, or surveys, rather than participant observation. Many group development studies have employed experimental designs conducted with groups in protected or controlled settings, such as university classrooms and ad hoc treatment and control groups—including much of the research on groups facing threat (Sherman et al., 2007; Staw et al., 1981; Turner et al., 1992; Turner & Horvitz, 2001). These approaches allow for stronger causal inferences and internal validity but limit the research to data and insights that can be provided by self-report about

groups in settings in which it possible for researchers to merely document their behavior. Such studies have weaknesses in external validity and thus are limited when it comes to understanding the real-world behavior of professionals in organizations facing adversity.

Participating alongside group members in their everyday interactions has the advantage of affording the researcher some insight into both explicit and tacit knowledge shaping members' behavior (Brannan & Oultram, 2012; Spradley, 1980). For this reason, participant observation has been a common methodology for studying group interaction patterns as embedded in and elements of an organizational culture (Martin, 2002; Van Maanen & Barley, 1982). Sharing in the same experiences and activities as organizational members allows for understanding collective behaviors that may have become habituated in an organizational culture as "the way we do things around here" (Schein, 2010)—such that people may not be fully aware of these patterns or the reasons for them. This methodology can be of particular use in under conditions of adversity. Groups that have developed amid a context of chronic adversity may have developed weak capabilities or defensive interactions, and members may have particular difficulty acknowledging or recognizing behavior that limits their agency.

Moreover, gaining close enough access to study the processes of real-world work groups facing adversity is difficult. Members do not necessarily welcome having an outsider merely document their struggles. Difficulties with access and trust is a major reason for the paltry amount of research that has been conducted in challenged or struggling organizations (Cameron et al., 1988). Through participant observation, the researcher may have more of an opportunity to research groups in such settings, as the methodology involves investment in building relationships, regularly sharing in members' experiences, and understanding their perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013; Spradley, 1980).

For these reasons, I use participant observation to study educators' work groups in their real-world contexts as they confront everyday problematic situations and infer patterns of interaction and factors that limit and enable collective agency.

To effectively undertake participant observation, the researcher needs to balance two key tensions. One is to adopt and navigate a dual role of insider-outsider (Spradley, 1980). This means the researcher becomes a quasi-insider by participating alongside research subjects in their everyday world and activities. Adopting an insider role requires researchers to spend extensive time in the research context and develop trust and rapport with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)—which may become particularly important for research in challenged organizations (Cameron et al., 1988). However, to enable dispassionate analysis and to see patterns and draw inferences that may not be readily available to full insiders, the researcher also must maintain sufficient distance and "naiveté" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011) of an "outsider." In discussions of the study context and methods below, I describe how I established and navigated an insider-outsider role.

Another tension in participant observation is that "the researcher *becomes* the research instrument" (Brannan & Oultram, 2012; Spradley, 1980), capturing data through the five senses and bodily experiences while participating alongside research subjects in their everyday context. When serving as the research instrument, the researcher's own positionality and subjectivities (Peshkin, 1988; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013), background knowledge (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002), and social skill contribute to the extent and quality of the data as well as the inferences drawn from it. When the researcher is the instrument, the researcher's unique subjectivities may introduce bias (Peshkin, 1988; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013), and limitations in the researcher's knowledge base (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002) or limited access to participants' implicit or

contextual knowledge (Spradley, 1980) may lead to flawed interpretations of group behavior.

A more accurate and valid understanding of group behavior calls for complementing researchers' observations with other sources of data. For this purpose, the study also included one-to-one reflective conversations conducted regularly with individual members from each work group. Incorporating elements of what has been described as an informal interview (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013), ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979), and a reflective conversation in collaborative action research (Feldman, 1999), reflective conversations in this study asked members to share their perspectives, explanations, and interpretations of events, as well as wishes or plans for the future, for a particular group and the school in general.

Reflective conversations also allowed insight into factors that may have influenced group interactions but could not be readily observed during group meetings. Work group interactions are situated within an organizational context, such that processes of interaction may be influenced by events outside of their meetings, including planning efforts, decisions or actions of other groups, or communication that occurs beforehand or afterwards (Hackman et al., 2000). Moreover, sometimes what is *not* said amongst a group—and the reasons why—can be just as important as what is (Argyris, 1985). Reflective conversations with individual group members also provided insight into how different members perceived and interpreted the group's situation. This enabled an understanding of perspectives that were shared and that differed and that may not have been expressed explicitly amongst members but could contribute to underlying dynamics and tensions. (More details about the set-up and questions asked in reflective conversations are described later in a section about methods and data.)

Study Context

As explained above, participant observation entails close-up and long-term embeddedness that calls for trust, rapport, and the negotiation of an insider-outsider role. In line with these methodological considerations, this study took place in one school in Whitman District (a pseudonym), a Northern California district in which I have been involved in a research-practice partnership (RPP). RPPs involve long-term collaboration between educators and researchers in the pursuit of mutualistic goals (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017; Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017; Tseng, 2012). In our RPP, in its fifth year at the time of the study, researchers collaborate with district administrators, principals, coaches, and teacher leaders to co-design artifacts and routines for professional learning to foster instruction that increases students' academic engagement. To inform next iterations, the RPP also conducts research in five partner schools to understand the extent to which co-designed artifacts connect to school needs, how school teams take up, adapt, or decide not to use them, and why.

This study took place in one partner school, Jackson Middle School (a pseudonym), a school with which I have been closely involved since the fall of 2017 through the RPP. I first became involved with Jackson when attending a full-day district professional development event at which I asked permission to join Jackson's instructional leadership team (ILT) for the day as a thought partner. The team enthusiastically accepted, eager for attention in a district in which they had felt overlooked. After this day together, the principal and the ILT invited me to be a regular participant in their team meetings and staff events. From there, I was invited to facilitate occasional professional development workshops, to serve as the principal's "critical friend," and to consult with instructional leaders about their change ideas.

This long-term relationship allowed me to develop trust and rapport with many staff and to gain dual status as an "outsider" with presumed "impartiality" and an "insider" who shares in and understands "what we are up against." Following this time getting to know each other, the school's site-based decision making council held a vote to join the RPP. As part of the RPP, from the start of the 2018-2019 school year, I was invited to be a regular participant and to conduct research about the ILT, the English Language Arts department, and staff professional development and faculty meetings.

Case Selection

To understand how collective agency might become enabled or constrained in a school facing adversity, research would need to take place in a school that faced a multitude of adverse conditions similar to what Payne (2008) described for a "bottom-tier" school. At minimum, this would mean a school that serves a student body primarily consisting of students of color that live in a "truly disadvantaged" community, has a negative reputation, and has been deemed chronically "low-performing" on the basis of academic outcomes. From these criteria, Jackson seemed a useful context in which to conduct this study.

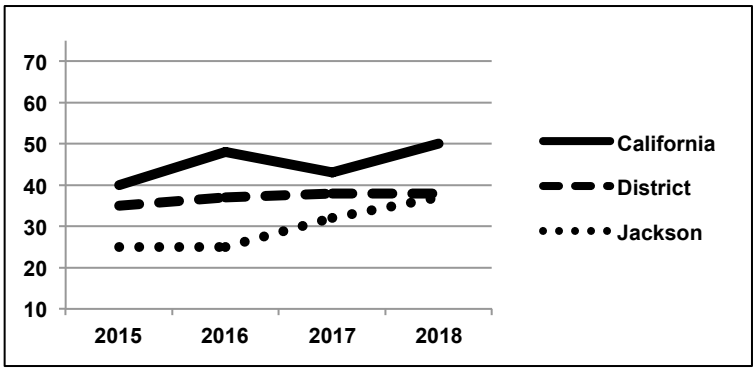
Jackson serves primarily students of color in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. In a K-12 district of 20,000 students in the Bay Area of Northern California, Jackson serves about 500 students, of whom 75% are Latino, 9% are African American, 79% are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 19% are English Learners (California Department of Education, 2018). According to 2012-2016 census surveys, over 40% of the residents in neighborhoods served by Jackson fall below 200% of the federal poverty line, with 25% below 125% of the poverty line.

The school had also developed a negative reputation. From the first interaction I had with the ILT, the principal and the teachers openly shared that the school was seen and treated as a "dumping ground" for students and teachers not wanted elsewhere.

The school also had posted long-term low performance in terms of academic outcomes. Prior to 2013, under the federal accountability policy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the school was in "program improvement" status for five years due to low performance. In 2015, NCLB was replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that afforded more flexibility for states to establish an accountability policy. Since 2016, California has developed a new accountability policy that tracks schools' incremental changes in performance on multiple indicators using a color-coded "dashboard," offering support to chronically low performing schools rather than requiring reconstitution (California Department of Education, 2017). Under this new policy, Jackson appeared to be faring slightly better: In fall of 2017, the staff briefly celebrated receiving no "red" marks (representing very low *and* declining performance) on any indicators. However, as Figures 2 and 3 below represent, average state test performance in the school persistently fell well below state averages.

Figure 2

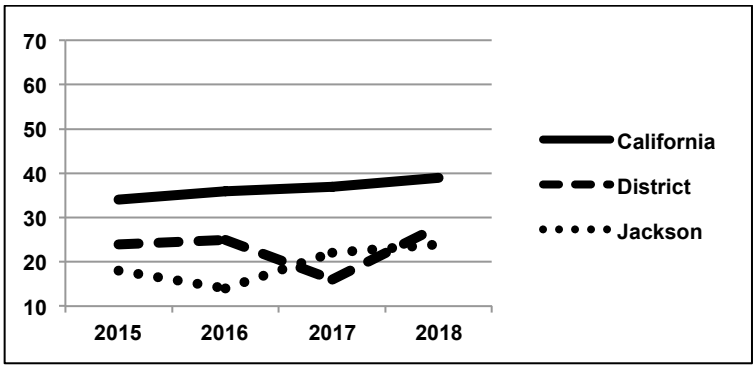
Percent of 7th & 8th Grade Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in ELA, 2015-2018



Note. Data from California Department of Education (caaspp.cde.ca.gov).

Figure 3

Percent of 7th & 8th Grade Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in Mathematics, 2015-2018



Note: Data from California Department of Education (caaspp.cde.ca.gov).

For the purposes of contributing to theory about how schools facing adversity come to develop collective agency, the research would be most useful if conducted in a school that operated under a more typical scenario in terms of the level of external support available. This would rule out schools with substantial external support—such as one in which the district, state, or other organization was involved in a targeted or large-scale intervention into the school, or was providing a massive amount of external resources to help the school. It would also rule out schools with little to no support at all. The level of external support can be gauged in relation to district-provided professional development (PD) and supervision, direct support provided by an outside organization, or coaching support.

Jackson appeared to have access to a fairly typical level of external support. The school had some district support that was the same as what was provided to all schools in the district, but there were no concentrated efforts or substantial help from the outside targeted at the school. As far as district-provided PD for the school year, all school ILTs had the option to attend two full days plus three two-hour after school sessions, and all teaching staff were required to attend three full days. (The school was expected to organize another two full PD days and five after school sessions on their own.) The district required all principals to attend two monthly half-day meetings, parts of which were allocated for practice in observing and analyzing lessons. Once

per year, district supervisors and principals conducted a "learning walk" at each school that entailed 10-minute visits of 4-5 classrooms of teachers who volunteered to be visited. There was no support organization working with Jackson. The district had provided the school with a part-time coach in years past, but that resource had been cut due to budget shortfalls.

Hence, it appeared that Jackson had some external support, particularly in the provision of district PD, but it was limited. While the school was not entirely on its own, there was no targeted intervention or concentrated effort from the outside to try to bring about improvement. Thus, for the most part, groups in the school would have to rely their internal resources and capacity to develop collective agency.

This internal capacity included a stable and committed principal who was in her sixth year of the role, after having served as a teacher and assistant principal at the school for nearly 20 years. During my time as the principal's "critical friend," the principal talked about her background as a Latina woman who was a first-generation college graduate, and she regularly spoke of her deep emotional connection to and desire to serve socioeconomically disadvantaged students of color. The school appeared to have some skill when it came to organizing student and community events. For example, during the year prior to the study, I attended a family night: Several student volunteers cheerfully greeted visitors as they walked up on a red carpet, the school's multi-purpose room was decorated with colorful streamers, and every table was full with families as the principal, parents, and several teachers served and ate dinner together and participated in various games for prizes. The school also had a few active ILT members that attempted to launch initiatives to try to improve teaching and learning. For example, one member attempted to convince the ILT to organize classroom visits amongst themselves—providing suggested tools and offering to guide the process—and visited with one department team to suggest that they visit each other. However, neither of these efforts was successful. The staff appeared at least nominally interested to seek improvement, as suggested by their collective decision to participate in the RPP.

Thus, Jackson fit the profile of a "bottom-tier" school facing adversity, seemed to face a fairly typical scenario in terms of available external support, and appeared to have some internal capacity to draw upon.

Methods and Data

"Participant as Observer" in Multiple Work Groups

Data were primarily collected through over 100 hours of participant observation with multiple work groups of educators in the school—the instructional leadership team (ILT), the staff PDs and faculty meetings, and the English Language Arts (ELA) department—during their regular meetings for the 2018-2019 school year. For the ILT, this included 10 monthly 60-90-minute meetings, two full-day and three two-hour professional development sessions for ILTs organized by the district, and two 3-hour PD planning meetings held shortly after the end of the school year. For staff PDs, this included two full-day meetings as well as two meetings of about two hours (three other planned PDs did not take place). For faculty meetings, this included 10 monthly meetings of 75 minutes each. For the ELA department, this included 21 meetings usually held weekly for 90-120 minutes.

These groups made for useful loci for this study because their formal work definitions suggested that they could play an important role in school improvement, and hence, the development or limitation of collective agency in these groups was consequential for the school.

The ILT was formally charged with planning the school's professional development, and the ILT consisted of the administrators that held formal supervision authority over the school and department chairs responsible for organizing weekly teacher collaboration meetings in their subject areas. As such, the ILT offered a potential site for directing and organizing school-wide instructional improvement efforts. The staff PDs offered potential site for collective learning amongst the staff, and faculty meetings could be an important site for collective voice and decision-making about goals, challenges, or communicating about progress. The ELA department offered a site in which teachers of a core academic subject might collaborate to improve upon their curriculum and instruction to better meet students' needs.

In participant observation, the extent to which the researcher participates or observer can vary depending on the research design choices and the phenomenon under study (Brannan & Oultram, 2012; Creswell, 2013). For the four work groups above, I adopted a "participant as observer" role (Brannan & Oultram, 2012; Creswell, 2013), entailing active participation in the group's activities during meeting events. In this role, when the groups in the study convened, I participated in their discussions and tasks while recording data in field notes. When prompted to do so during meetings, I offered my reactions, expertise, and opinions. On occasion, I facilitated PD activities with the staff when asked to do so about topics I had particular knowledge. In particular, I was asked to facilitate district-provided workshops about deeper learning because I was involved in the development of these workshops through the RPP.

Adding Action Research with the Launch of a New Group

I stepped into a more extensive participatory role by launching a new group, the Hub, that met for seven sessions of 60-90 minutes between March-May of 2019. The Hub was open to any interested teachers and was forged with the explicit purpose of pursuing improvement projects together. As such, it became another site through which to understand the development and limitation of collective agency possible in the school. In taking the lead in the Hub, I became more of an insider and incorporated action research methods (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2014). Using action research methods, I approached participant observation as cycles of plan-act-observe-reflect (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Coghlan & Brannick, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2014) so as to produce knowledge "in action," seeking new insights about the potential for a group in the school to develop collective agency by planning, trying out and reflecting upon the results of interventions. In taking action, I proceeded according to the assumption that "you cannot understand a system until you try to change it" (Schein, 1996, p. 34), and acted as a change agent who experienced the "social gravity"—or structural constraints—of the practitioners' situation (Erickson, 1994, p. 14). Through my own attempts to bring about change, I gained experiential knowledge about the combination of dynamics that enabled and constrained the pursuit of improvement. My willingness to try to "help," and to face the potential failure and limitations that insiders also faced in their efforts at change, deepened my relationships with research participants who were also members of other groups.

Observational Data: Field Notes, Audio Records, and Research Diaries

The conceptual framework guiding this study presumed that collective agency is an emergent and temporal capacity that develops through group dynamics that are situated in a broader organizational context. Group interaction was captured field notes about events and interactions in group meetings as well as other events and interactions that occurred before or after meetings during school visits, including informal interactions, enabling a deeper

understanding of the context.

Field notes consisted of a low-inference narrative and scripting of interactions in meetings as well as informal interactions during site visits. Where possible, I typed field notes on my laptop during meetings; however, in cases in which this would have been too distracting (Schenshul & LeCompte, 2013), I kept hand-written field notes instead. As much as possible, I captured verbatim statements, noting these in quotation marks. In the margins, I noted higher-inference judgments and interpretations about particular interactions. For each meeting event, I noted basic information about the event, including meeting type and location, beginning and ending time, seating arrangement, documents used, and the participants who were present, arrived late, or were absent. In the narratives and scripts, I noted participants' verbal and non-verbal interactions, emotional tone, silences, and other contextual details that seemed salient to the group's interaction, such as side conversations amongst group members and weather. I added to the field notes the text content of any email communications between group members before and after events—for example, for announcing meeting scheduling or agendas, or following up with notes and reminders—as well as details from documents collected during meetings—including agendas and key points of information on handouts. As soon as possible after each site visit, usually on the same day, I typed up handwritten notes (if necessary), and added additional details about events from memory. Also, after each meeting, I wrote an analytical memo that captured my immediate interpretation of the events according to the conceptual framework and noted new insights that contradicted or added to it.

Following a technique recommended for reflexivity in action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007), an additional memo was added to field notes in the form of a "research diary." The research diary was for recording my emotional reactions and, particularly for the Hub, reflections about the results of meeting events that informed my plans for next steps and the reasoning for those plans. These diary memos—in which emergent research decisions and the my impressions and feelings were recorded—enabled disciplined reflection throughout the study about how my emotions and assumptions may have contributed to the participants' interactions and the patterns in the findings (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2014).

By November, I recognized that I had gained enough trust to ask permission for audio records. I sought for permission to audio record in the smaller groups in which I was embedded—the ILT and ELA department; all consented. In the larger-group venues—including district-wide events attended with the ILT and faculty-wide meetings at the school—I did not seek permission to audio record due to practical and ethical concerns about informed consent, given the wide variety of shifting participants. For these large-group meetings, I kept field notes only. When I launched the Hub in February 2019, I asked for consent to keep field notes and audio records from the start; all members consented, and all meetings apart from but an initial informational one were audio recorded.

Table 2 summarizes the observational data set for each group.

Table 2
Summary of Data from Participant Observation about Group Meetings

	Meeting events	Hours of obs.	Pages of field notes	Meeting events with audio	Total audio hours
ILT	17	35	86	7	10
Staff PDs	4	20	38	--	--
Faculty Mtgs.	10	13	43	--	--
ELA Dept.	21	29	121	14	16
Hub	7	10	39	6	9
Totals	***59***	***107***	***327***	***27***	***35***

Reflective Conversations

In addition to observational data from group meetings, I also conducted a total of 59 reflective conversations with 14 staff members during the school year. The conversations ranged from 30-90 minutes each, totaling about 45 hours. I aimed for reflective conversations with as many members of each group as possible. A few staff members made themselves available as regular informants.

The format was a "conversation" because I aimed to capture participants' authentic perspectives through a reciprocal interaction. A conversation allowed flexibility for participants to take the lead when so inclined and discuss what they felt was important about the groups or the school, providing insight into the interactions that were salient to them. A conversation also allowed participants to ask me questions. However, I steered conversations with prepared prompts. Prompts asked for participants' perspectives about the general school context and their work groups. In this way, parts of the conversations were similar to a semi-structured interview (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011) or ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979).

The conversation was "reflective" because the prompts included asking participants to think back upon particular meeting events, explain what seemed important and why, and share their intentions or hopes for future steps with the group. As part of the reflective prompts, I provided a low-inference description of an interaction that I had noticed to ask what he or she thought of it. Overall, reflective conversations enabled insight into members' perspectives of how the school context contributed to interactions occurring within the groups, how members perceived the purpose and intentions of their groups, what was planned for group meetings and why (and what was avoided and why), what the group was willing and able to work on (or not) and why, and whether the group's work was satisfying or not. They also enabled me to compare my interpretation of group events with insiders' perspectives, offering a type of "member check" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013). Appendix A provides a sample of prompts used during reflective conversations.

Reflective conversations were held before, after, and in between meeting events over the course of the year. During reflective conversations, I kept field notes and audio records. Table 3 summarizes the data set from reflective conversations.

Table 3
Summary of Participants and Data from Reflective Conversations

	Role	Group membership			Sessions	Pages of field notes	Total hours audio
		ILT	ELA	Hub			
Vanessa	Principal	X			12	42	9
Ana	Science Teacher			X	8	28	8
William	History Chair	X		X	7	21	7
Greg	ELA Teacher		X		5	10	5
Megan	ELA Teacher	X	X	X	7	16	4
Gabriela	ELA Chair	X	X		6	15	4
Henry	History Teacher				3	6	2
Emily	PE Chair	X			2	3	1
Ryan	Math Chair	X		X	3	3	1
Mark	Math Teacher				2	3	1
Vincent	History Teacher				1	3	1
Connie	Counselor				1	4	1
Nicole	Science Chair	X		X	1	2	0.5
Faye	SPED chair	X			1	2	0.5
Totals	***14***	***8***	***3***	***5***	***59***	***158***	***45***

Note: All of the above participants are also members of Staff PD and Faculty Meetings.

Documents

Supplemental data was collected from 130 documents used during group meetings. These included printed agendas and meeting-specific handouts and artifacts, including formal school information or policy documents that were provided to participants during meetings. I also consulted the publicly available teacher union contract for information about formal rules pertaining to the groups under study.

On limited occasions, anonymous written feedback forms enabled further insight into participants' perspectives about the groups. Ten anonymous written feedback forms about staff PD—designed and collected by a staff member—were shared with me for use in the research. These feedback forms asked staff to write responses to the prompts: "I learned . . ."; "Most helpful . . ."; "Least helpful . . ."; "I would like to know more about . . ."; "During our professional development, I would like to continue working on Deeper Learning Practices by . . ."; and "During our professional development, I would find it helpful if we would . . ."

I designed and collected six anonymous feedback forms about the Hub at the end of the year. These asked participants to write responses to the questions: "What are the most important ideas or principles that you learned from participating in the Hub this year? What did you enjoy most about the Hub so far? What did you find the least useful about the Hub so far? How would you like to see the Hub improve if we continue in the future? Would you consider participating in the Hub next year?"

Data Analysis

Data analysis began concurrently with data collection (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007; Miles et al., 2014) to generate preliminary lines of analysis and findings, captured in analytic memos. I

personally transcribed the audio records from group meetings, enabling me to develop a rich familiarity with the events for each group. For audio records from reflective conversations, I used a transcription service and reviewed and edited transcripts for accuracy.

Chunking Meeting Episodes

Using methods from studies of group development and dynamics (Gersick, 1988; M. A. Marks et al., 2001; Weingart, 1997) and teacher community research (Horn, 2005; Kuusisaari, 2013; Little, 2002), I began systematic analysis of group interactions by chunking the observational data into thematic meeting episodes. The purpose of this step was to create smaller units of analysis from the meeting events that would allow recurrent patterns and variations from patterns in group interactions to become visible.

Some studies of group development define episodes in relation to the type of group process involved, distinguishing between goal-directed action episodes and transition activity (M. A. Marks et al., 2001). In studies of teacher communities, episodes have been defined in relation to exchanges of reasoning about a particular issue (Horn, 2005) or of talk about a particular artifact (Little, 2002) or topic (Kuusisaari, 2013). In any case, an episode is a set of group interactions that constitute some type of bounded event with a detectable beginning and end. As group interaction depends on a wide array of factors, there is no formula or standard for the length of an episode (M. A. Marks et al., 2001; Weingart, 1997).

In this study, I was interested in understanding interaction patterns over time that limited and enabled collective agency—as defined by the extent to which groups sought to accomplish tasks, address problems, and feel more cohesive and affirmed. During participant observation, I had recognized that group meetings often involved multiple tasks and times when "the task" itself was unclear, including periods of unstructured conversation. To account for how these various kinds of interactions may have enabled or constrained collective agency, I defined a "meeting episode" as a set of interactions that focused on a particular topic of conversation or a particular task within a given "meeting event." A new meeting episode started when a new topic or task started and concluded when that topic or task finished. Tasks and topics that carried on for longer periods of time and consisted of clear sub-tasks or sub-topics were divided into different episodes to create a small enough unit of analysis to be useful. If in the midst of any topic or task, the group digressed to another topic or task and sustained their focus on this, a new episode was created out of that interaction. As a rule of thumb, I considered it sustained if involving five or more changes in speaker. Data about interactions occurring immediately before or after meetings were chunked into separate episodes.

When audio records were available, transcripts served as the primary source of data. In this case, transcripts were chunked into meeting episodes first, and then data from field notes was chunked to align with the content of the meeting episodes from the audio and analyzed secondarily to account for data from before or after meetings or contextual details not included in the transcript. When only field notes were available, these were the primary source of data.

Coding and Analysis of Patterns

After chunking the observational data, systematic analysis proceeded by coding meeting episodes. To help with coding and analysis, I used the software program, Dedoose (Dedoose, 2018). I first tagged meeting episodes with descriptive codes to identify the group and date. Then I began coding using deductive codes developed from the conceptual framework (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2014) based on processes of group interaction that could enable and constrain

collective agency. I added new codes inductively (Miles et al., 2014) to capture emergent group processes and patterns that were not adequately represented in the original conceptual framework. Appendix B summarizes the main coding set.

Analysis proceeded first by coding all of the episodes for the ILT. I created an initial list of descriptive and process codes (Miles et al., 2014) organized into first-order bins about categories of group processes accompanied by second-order codes to specify particular group interaction processes. For example, "task management" was a first-order code that included second-order code of "task processing" accompanied by 'child' codes to note particular ways that tasks were processed, such as "make progress, accomplish," "avoid to focus," and "abandon task." During analysis, I elaborated with additional inductive codes. For example, during coding, I noted that there were times when a group acknowledged a problem, but in a way that did not orient towards taking action on it. To capture this, I added to the first-order code of "handling problems" a second-order code for "action orientation" and added "seek solution" and "lament, no solution" as specific processes related to this. I also noted times when the group curtailed the discussion of a problem by accepting the first idea and moving on, as distinct from other times when the group discussed a problem or possible solution at more length. To capture this, I added child codes for "deliberate" and "accept first idea" to the code of "navigating complexity." To facilitate a closer examination of how groups managed tasks, navigated complexity, and connected to their urgencies or desires, I created descriptive codes about task demands, the types of urgencies and passions that participants expressed, and the "wishes and desires" that were explicitly expressed by participants or implicitly conveyed in group interactions.

After coding all of the data for the ILT, I examined the episodes coded for various group interaction processes and sought to identify patterns and variations from patterns over time. To facilitate data reduction, I constructed matrices and meta-matrices to help key patterns and variations become more evident. From these meta-matrices, I wrote analytic memos to describe and explain the patterns (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2014), consulting earlier analytic notes, research diaries, and research team meetings to consider alternate explanations.

Then, I followed a similar process for analyzing other groups: chunking and coding meeting episodes to identify patterns and variations, adding new codes inductively where needed, and constructing meta-matrices and analytic memos. After all groups were analyzed, I created cross-group meta-matrices to capture key patterns in domains of group interaction.

Next, I coded the data from reflective conversations and triangulated patterns from this data against those identified from the observational data. To analyze the reflective conversation data, I first coded transcripts with descriptors to identify the participant and date and chunked the reflective conversations into excerpts by group. Then, I coded all of the excerpts using same coding sets as for the observational data, adding additional codes inductively where needed. After coding, I pulled the excerpts for particular codes and compared across codes to identify themes within and across participants' descriptions and explanations about groups. I represented these patterns in matrices and meta-matrices. To seek confirmatory and alternative explanations about group meeting events and interaction patterns, I pulled excerpts from particular dates from reflective conversations and compared these to the patterns identified from observational data to account for participants' insights. Returning to the earlier meta-matrices created with the observational data, I made adjustments, added key pieces of supporting data from the reflective conversations, and wrote new analytic memos. I consulted my original analytic notes, research diaries, and audio and notes from research team meetings to check for confirmatory and alternate explanations.

From these meta-matrices and memos, ebbs and flows in each group's efforts towards developing collective agency were evident, informing the next round of analysis. In analytic memos, I attempted various ways of representing these patterns of ebbs and flows, and determined that making sense of the main patterns called for representing the interplays and confluence amongst them within the context of time. For this, I used the meta-matrices, analytic memos, and raw data from particular meeting episodes to develop an outline of key interactions during meeting events across the year for each group, interspersed with key excerpts from reflective conversations. I used this outline to a write a low-inference narrative of all meeting events from across the year for each group.

To more closely analyze ebbs and flows and the factors that contributed to them, I then identified "critical episodes" of group interaction that showed the greatest relative contrast between times when the group's efforts indicated more enabled and expanding or more constrained and contracting collective agency during the course of the year. In this round, I defined episodes not by topic or task, but in relation to a series of exchanges that, holistically, added up to patterns indicating more expanding or more contracting collective agency. To delineate points of group interaction indicating expanding or contracting collective agency, I took into consideration how the group's interactions reflected dimensions of collective agency theorized in the conceptual framework—task accomplishment, addressing problems, feeling affirmed as a group, and members' expressions of satisfaction—and the level of energy intensity of the efforts in these dimensions. In other words, critical episodes indicating contracting collective agency were evidenced during times of when there were the lowest efforts towards task accomplishment or addressing problems and when members expressed the most negative views of the group—indicating contracting collective agency. Based on the conceptual framework guiding the study, contracting collective agency was evidenced in interactions through which the group avoided or took no action to respond to problematic situations and became weakened, such as: avoiding or abandoning tasks, hiding and denying problems, undermining or attacking group members, and fomenting dissatisfaction and ill-being. Critical episodes indicating efforts to expand collective agency were evidenced during times when there was surge in energy towards developing collective agency, indicated when group interactions showed strongest efforts to: accomplish tasks, address problems, cultivate a cohesive and affirmed group, and contribute to members' well-being and satisfaction.

After identifying critical episodes, I pulled up the relevant meeting episodes involved and compared the codes applied to these events to determine processes that seemed salient and distinguishing factors between points indicating more expanding or contracting collective agency. I referred back to the earlier meta-matrices and narratives to identify events that appeared to serve as "turning points" between critical episodes of more enabled and more constrained collective agency. I considered how and why particular sets of group processes emerged and hung together during particular junctures, checked my analysis against raw data, earlier analytic notes and research diaries for the possibility that these were not the salient processes or there were others that were important, and wrote analytic memos to describe these patterns. I also considered the extent to which the group's interaction patterns over time and critical episodes suggested group developments that I had theorized could enable that group to contribute to the school's collective agency.

After all groups were analyzed, I created cross-group meta-matrices to examine similarities and differences in the salient factors that enabled and constrained collective agency across groups, and to examine the extent to which certain factors co-occurred during times of

more enabled or constrained agency. From this cross-group comparison, I considered whether the groups appeared to differ in their patterns in relation to their function, and I examined organization-wide patterns in how and why efforts to develop collective agency emerged or faded.

Epistemology and Validity

This study proceeds from a critical realist epistemology (Maxwell, 2013), assuming an objective "real world" exists but is knowable only through our subjective construction of it. In a critical realist approach, biases and subjectivities are not avoided but made explicit and subjected to critique. In participant observation, the quality and accuracy of the data collected and the inferences drawn from it can be vulnerable to researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013). Using action research methods introduces additional sources of bias, as the researcher intentionally seeks to influence the behavior and contexts under study, and the researcher's interpretations may be distorted by the desirability biases of a change agent who wants to make a positive impact (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007).

This study design incorporated strategies commonly used in qualitative and action research as checks against validity threats (Maxwell, 2013) and to establish the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The inquiry was guided by a conceptual framework that specified important incoming assumptions (Miles et al., 2014; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). Prolonged engagement with participants, audio recording and transcription of events, field notes separating low-inference descriptions from higher inference judgments and feelings, reflective conversations soliciting members' perspectives, and triangulation between multiple data sources offers trustworthiness and credibility to the data sources and inferences drawn from them (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

In addition, I kept research diaries in which I recorded my plans for and reasoning about next steps for the Hub. Following traditions in qualitative (Maxwell, 2013) and action research methodology (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007), I met regularly with members of the RPP research team to reflect on data and discuss preliminary lines of analysis about all groups. I also consulted with the team to generate ideas for the initial organization of and adjustments to the Hub. Written anonymous feedback forms at the last meeting of the Hub served as another check against my interpretations of participants' perspectives about the Hub.

Navigating My Researcher Role

Gaining access to an insider positionality is an essential pre-requisite for undertaking participant observation to closely study group interactions in a school facing challenging conditions. My background as a former urban public school teacher in California was a key factor in my acceptance as a quasi-insider. During the study, I frequently drew upon my experience as a teacher career to build rapport and meaningfully participate in team discussions. During group meeting events and informal interactions, it was not uncommon for a Jackson staff member to ask me, "Did you experience this, too, when you were a teacher?" and to make comments like, "I'm sure you have experienced this when you were in the classroom."

Acceptance as a quasi-insider was also possible due to the time that I spent building relationships and actively participating in school activities in the year before the study. This involvement allowed me to not only be a friendly and consistent presence at various formal meetings, but to eat and commune together with staff at luncheons, to participate in after school

events, and to forge emotional connections with the principal and teachers through anecdotes and photographs from their personal lives.

My insider status solidified when the study began, and I consistently participated alongside members during their regular meetings. I became subjected to the same forces and shared in the same (exciting or frustrating) experiences. Proximity to their reality, trusting relationships, and shared experiences meant that participants were more willing to disclose their authentic struggles, deeper hopes and desires, and honest opinions to me. I became cognizant of my acceptance as a quasi-insider when I was given a school T-shirt and asked to join in the annual staff photo, when team members explicitly commented at times, "Liz is a part of our team," and when staff members reached out to me of their own volition to ask to have a conversation about meeting events.

However, simply being present was not sufficient. Overloaded educators did not want just an empathetic listener showing interest in their work. They wanted help. To provide this help, I bridged my insider role with my outsider positionality as a researcher and district partner to broker research knowledge at times when I was asked for it, to facilitate workshops about topics with which I had familiarity through the RPP, and to launch the Hub.

Becoming closely involved in the relationships and work of the school created some tensions for enacting this insider-outsider role. Playing a "helpful" outsider-insider role called for in-the-moment judgments to enact role boundaries and necessitated careful and consistent reflexivity. This entailed efforts to self-regulate my participation and time-consuming steps to enable sufficient psychological distance—including substantial time spent in lengthy reflective conversations, transcribing meetings, writing diary entries, and memoing to provide myself multiple ways to check for accuracy in my data and bias in my interpretations. These steps proved important for adding depth and shoring up confidence in my eventual findings.

Limitations of the Study Design

Given that the study focuses on a few groups in one school, this study does not aim to generalize to a population, but rather aims to generalize to theory. While the school was selected because it was a suitable case for the phenomenon in the study, as described earlier, I did not identify it from a broad sample of schools using a theory-guided process of selection, but rather identified it through the happenstance of a district RPP. The RPP made it possible for me to spend substantial time needed to develop sufficient trust and rapport for undertaking a study that might otherwise have been impossible, and prolonged engagement helped participants to share openly with me. However, it is possible that my association with the district had some influence over how the groups behaved and what participants told me during reflective conversations.

The findings might be strengthened if I had collected additional types of data. The loose structure of the reflective conversations sometimes limited comparability of the data across participants. These conversations could have been supplemented with a series of more structured interviews (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). In addition, the study might have benefited from additional sources of self-report data or more systematic measurement of known factors associated with school improvement or group development, and thereby increased the strength of the evidence about patterns and further reduced potential bias and reactivity.

Ideally, I would have held repeated reflective conversations with all members of all groups and collected audio recordings of all meeting events. However, practical and ethical concerns interfered. As my research was embedded inside of a real work place, I was cautious

not to over-reach, over-ask, interfere with staff members' required duties, or put faculty into a position in which they may have felt coerced into participation. Amongst staff facing overload, reflective conversations were sometimes difficult to schedule. There were repeated instances in which staff did not show up to scheduled talks or cancelled at the last minute.

Strengths of the Study Design

Despite the limitations above, the study benefited from multiple sources of rich data generated through long-term close-up involvement and audio recordings with real-world work groups operating under conditions of adversity. Few such close-up studies of the dynamics of educator work groups exist in schools facing challenging conditions. Thus, the study affords insight into the real-world challenges and dynamics of improvement in schools serving disadvantaged populations, in which improvement is typically most needed. While existing close-up studies in schools have typically focused on one type of work group—such as subject matter departments—in this study, participant observation was conducted with a range of work group types that could contribute to school improvement. This offered a diverse perspective that allowed for deeper inferences about the possibility and challenges of school development. This diverse perspective was enhanced with rich self-report data from a range of individuals representing various positions, departments, and perspectives across the school, offering a fairly representative view of the school and the groups.

My positionality as a district RPP member and former urban schoolteacher equipped me to be able to undertake robust and empathetic participant observation that acknowledges both the limitations as well as the strengths of educators operating under difficult conditions. Given the extent to which I observed breakdowns in group functioning and participants openly acknowledged "unprofessional" behaviors and preferences, I feel confident that, in most situations, participants revealed fairly authentic perspectives and challenges to me.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

As explained in Chapter 2, this study aimed to capture the subtleties and small steps that work groups in a school facing adversity might take to develop collective agency—even if these efforts did not sustain or add up to the criteria of effectiveness posed by the literature on school improvement. Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), I conceptualized agency as the capability to choose to respond to "problematic situations." Drawing on literatures about organizational culture, work teams, and group development, I conceptualized collective agency as a group capability that develops over time as groups embedded within a particular organizational and social context make efforts to learn how to: accomplish tasks, address problems, become more affirmed as a group, and contribute to members' satisfaction (Hackman, 2002a; Schein, 2010; Wheelan, 2005). However, within a context of adversity posing problems that challenge core competencies, I assumed that groups could develop tendencies towards defensiveness, helplessness, and conflict that could constrain the development of collective agency. Thus, under conditions of adversity, I imagined collective agency to emerge as a struggle—if groups exerted efforts to lessen constraining tendencies so as to sufficiently to pull together as an affirmed body that seeks to accomplish tasks, attenuate the organization's challenges, and fuel members' satisfaction.

To understand how school development unfolds in a context of adversity, this study examined the close-up interactions of multiple work groups in a school that serves educationally and socioeconomically disadvantaged students and sees itself as a "dumping ground." From the literatures on work teams and group development, I theorized various domains of group processes that could have enabled and constrained the development of collective agency in the extent to which: leadership was exerted to set direction and ensure progress, tasks were managed to enable focus and action, interpersonal dynamics were managed to contend with conflict while fostering psychological safety and group affirmation, and groups faced up to and navigated the complexity of problems. When analyzing observational data about the group's interactions over time, I noted a surge in energy towards developing collective agency when group interactions showed efforts to: accomplish tasks, address problems, cultivate a cohesive and affirmed group, and contribute to members' well-being and satisfaction. I inferred constraints in collective agency from interactions through which the group avoided or took no action to respond to problematic situations and became weakened, such as: avoiding or abandoning tasks, hiding and denying problems, undermining or attacking group members, and fomenting dissatisfaction and ill-being.

The study sought to identify group developmental factors that enabled and constrained collective agency, and what these factors suggest for the next level of work for development in the school. The findings below present descriptions and analyses of the interaction dynamics of five collective bodies in Jackson Middle School over the course of one school year: The instructional leadership team (ILT), the staff professional development meetings (PDs), faculty meetings, the English Language Arts (ELA) department, and the Hub. As theorized in the conceptual framework, each group has a different function that can make a unique contribution to the school's collective agency.

In the findings below, I will show how the pull of adversity brought forth group interactions that constrained collective agency, and also how group members pressed forth into efforts to expand collective agency. For each group, the findings first include a narrative of key meeting events over the course of the school year, along with insights from reflective

conversations with group members. The narrative is followed by an analysis in which I highlight critical episodes, and turning points between them, that encapsulate interaction patterns when the group's collective agency was most constrained and when they made the strongest efforts to enable collective agency. As a visual aid to the reader, for each group, I represent these ebbs and flows on a curve over time. Through the analysis, I show how each group arrived at certain kinds of accomplishments and satisfactions, revealing developmental strivings but also limitations. Comparing critical episodes and turning points in between, I identify factors from the conceptual framework that were salient when efforts towards collective agency most expanded or contracted. In a synopsis of all five groups at the end, I show how particular factors were salient across all groups, forming an interplay that represents a struggle—and potential—for school development at the next level of work.

The Instructional Leadership Team (ILT)

At year's start, the ILT included principal Vanessa[1], vice principal Darryl, and six elected department chairs (Megan for English, William for History, Ryan for Math, Nicole for Science, Faye for Special Education, and Emily for Physical Education). Per district expectations, the ILT was charged with planning two full-day professional development (PD) meetings (in August and November) and five minimum day PDs after school. Per union contract, the PD minimum day schedule was set by a separate site-based decision making (SBDM) committee that had assigned the minimum day PDs to Fridays before holidays (in November, December, February, March, and April). Focal PD topics identified by the ILT were subject to SBDM approval. Department chairs were also expected to convene weekly collaboration meetings with their departments. Per contract, collaboration meetings were entirely "teacher directed," but chairs were encouraged to address school or district goals and share department decisions with administration.

August 15-16

The ILT reconvened before the school year at a two-day district PD. All members attended. On the first morning, the team attended workshops about the new district vision of "deeper learning." In the afternoon, the ILT was tasked to plan the school's PD. Vanessa suggested that they plan the first PD day next week. To work on this, the team held an extended discussion about "ice-breakers." Then, Vanessa suggested that the rest of the PD replicate the district's "deeper learning" workshop. The ILT quickly agreed: The workshop was useful and staff should receive the same information. Considering their task complete, the ILT talked about their summers and ideas for covering two unfilled teaching positions.

The next morning, the ILT attended workshops about "culturally responsive teaching" (CRT) and "team-building." In the afternoon, the ILT was first tasked to select either a CRT or "team building" workshop to continue during three future district PDs for ILTs over the year. Vanessa requested to hear each member's preference. Several members preferred CRT because it is "for the students." Megan disagreed: "Yes, we care about kids, but if we don't have a strong team, we can't get there. I want to fight back against the undermining and talking behind backs that happens amongst adults." Darryl concurred. Ryan added, "Teachers don't trust each other." Nicole admitted there was a "toxic" level of "gossip," but advocated for bringing in a consultant to work with the staff on climate while ILT focused on CRT. Emily suggested that the ILT could

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

incorporate regular ice-breakers into the PDs to help the staff get to know each other more. Others agreed.

Ryan brought up another issue: what to do about "embarrassingly low" attendance at faculty meetings and PDs. Darryl suggested that "we need to make it stricter" but Vanessa said that absent staff had told her they would take "a cut in their pay rather than come to the meetings" because "we are boring." Ryan agreed, "We need to create curiosity in our staff." Megan suggested a different idea: "I found it really useful when Vanessa used to give out prizes for being on time. Can we bring that back?" Others concurred.

Vanessa agreed to host a raffle at each meeting and wrapped up the discussion: "I think we've decided. We are going with CRT for our ILT PDs, but want to do team building work with our staff."

Next, the team was tasked to continue PD planning. Vanessa reminded the group that they were to plan two PD days and five minimum day PDs. Megan asked, "Can some of those be wink days?" meaning that teachers could be excused to go home early. Vanessa said that some minimum days could be wink days, but some must be reserved for PD. Resuming the discussion from the previous day, the team struggled to recall what they had decided, and after several minutes, came to agreement again about the ice-breakers. Vanessa and Ryan agreed to facilitate these. Recalling their idea to present the district's deeper learning workshop, the team looked through the materials and was not sure how to facilitate this. William asked if I could do it, as I had helped plan the district workshop. The ILT liked this idea. I agreed, but asked that they assist. Nicole offered to lead one activity for ILT members to describe examples of deeper learning from their teaching; Megan and Emily agreed to share. For the last part of the PD day, Vanessa proposed "a radical idea": a "fishbowl" re-enacting the ILT's discussion, to demonstrate their "authentic" planning and "cohesive team." The team agreed.

Time was up, and the ILT joined a district-wide closing activity to share reflections. Megan volunteered to share over the microphone: "I am really proud of our team. Trust has been an issue at our site, but we had an open discussion and came together."

In reflective conversations after the event, ILT members expressed satisfaction and optimism about the year. Ryan expressed, "I felt different than I have before. I liked the feeling we had as a group. I left thinking it's going to be fun this year." Megan shared, "I feel optimistic and hopeful, more so than I've felt in the past three years, like maybe change is possible."

At the school's PD day, the ILT members facilitated their parts as planned. After lunch, Vanessa held a raffle as promised. Megan and her colleague, Gabriela, were late and missed it. When Vanessa good-naturedly pointed this out, Megan commented, "That's ok, we don't mind. We were getting ready for the year. I don't need those [prizes]." William did not return from lunch at all and missed the ILT's fishbowl intended to demonstrate their cohesiveness. Afterwards, Vanessa privately expressed frustration about some ILT members' behavior:

> It really bothered me that William did not come back after lunch. But it can't always be me . . . I'd really like it if Nicole—who said something to me on her way out that she was frustrated that he was not here for the fishbowl—if she would confront him herself.

Vanessa was also frustrated by Megan's response to the raffle: "It had been her big thing, and then she's said, 'Who cares?' It's a dumb thing anyway.' That just pissed me off." As a result, Vanessa decided to discontinue the raffle.

September 4

A few days before the ILT's first monthly meeting, Vanessa planned an agenda by deciding announcements to share and soliciting member requests. As they would at every meeting, the ILT picked up a printed agenda upon arrival: "counseling updates" facilitated by Vanessa; "cross-departmental planning" facilitated by William; and "cycle of inquiry" facilitated by "all."

All members attended on time. Vanessa began by reading out the norms, mission, and vision printed on the agenda. Then, Vanessa presented "counseling updates." School had been in session for a week, and Vanessa acknowledged that classes were "very full" due to higher-than-expected enrollment. Noting that this was a sign of improvement, Vanessa explained that she and the counselors were reorganizing the schedule to rebalance classes. For "cross-departmental planning," William shared that the English and History departments had had a "positive initial meeting" in hopes to foster "literacy coordination between departments" and wondered how to get other departments involved. Nicole said she would be open to coordinating on her yearly Science essay, and Megan and William suggested ways they might help.

Then, an ILT member brought up a concern about high numbers of Special Education (SPED) students in classrooms. Vanessa had asked counselors to cluster SPED students in particular class periods so that SPED staff could provide in-class support. However, the ILT members said that sometimes the SPED staff did not show up. One member proclaimed, "I felt abandoned. I can't be expected alone to promote the level of support needed. It is the SPED teacher's responsibility to help me differentiate." Vanessa said that she would talk with SPED staff and requested that teachers have "courageous conversations" with colleagues. William asked why the school was enrolling so many lower-skilled students. Vanessa said that Jackson was "still battling negative reputation from years ago" and competed for students with higher-resourced schools. "However," Vanessa added, "we had transfer requests from all over the district, so we must be doing something right." With that, meeting time was up. Vanessa thanked and dismissed the group. "Cycle of inquiry" was not mentioned.

In a reflective conversation, Faye said that she did not agree with Vanessa's suggestion to hold "courageous conversations," describing what happened when she tried this with a SPED colleague: "She told me I was being rude. Now she's filing a complaint with the union about her workload. I would prefer that teachers take it to the principal. I'm afraid of the conflict."

October 2

Vanessa planned the agenda similar to the last time, compiling requests from the members and announcements to share. The printed agenda included time for Vanessa to facilitate "SPED push-in" and "enrichment classes," and "all" to share "department updates."

At the meeting, Darryl was absent, and new members, Gabriela and Lauren, had joined. Gabriela had replaced Megan on the ILT after calling for and winning a vote for ELA department chair. Upset, Megan had requested to be reinstalled as an "enrichment" representative, but Vanessa had instead invited Lauren, the Music teacher, to join. As the meeting started, no mention was made of the tardies, absence, or new members.

Vanessa read aloud the norms, mission, and vision, and then reviewed the "SPED push-in" schedule allocating SPED staff to class periods. William and Gabriela asked why none were assigned to some of their impacted classes. Vanessa clarified that some gaps were due to the loss of a SPED teacher out on a long-term leave. Vanessa said that SPED teachers had "requested of general education teachers to come more prepared" to meetings about SPED students. SPED

chair Faye passed out a handout of "General Education Teacher Responsibilities" and asked how the ILT wanted it handled if SPED staff was unable to make it to class. Nicole said, "I go with assuming good intentions." Vanessa asked if others agreed; there was no comment.

Next, Vanessa announced that some electives classes were on hold due to unfilled teaching positions and described how she and Math teacher, Mark, were providing coverage. For department updates, Ryan announced Math's "cycle of inquiry" to incorporate technology in the classroom, Gabriela stated that History and English were continuing to collaborate, and Nicole said Science had been working on team building. With that, Vanessa concluded the meeting.

In reflective conversations, some ILT members shared that, contrary to the positive reports, they were having serious difficulties with departmental collaboration. Ryan reported that Math's "cycle of inquiry" quickly "fell apart" after a "headstrong" member "took it over." Although Gabriela said that the English-History collaboration had continued, after Megan's ouster, Megan and two History teachers refused to attend. William said that his own department rarely met due to irreconcilable differences over pedagogy. Rather than admit these challenges, William said, "It seems like the ILT is going back to fluff stuff, with everyone just saying how well things are going."

October 15

The ILT convened for the next district PD. Vanessa and Lauren were absent. After attending follow-up workshops about deeper learning and CRT, the ILT was prompted to discuss how the training might be relevant for their sites. Faye admitted, "These are the kinds of issues we should be talking about during ILT." William agreed, "Our ILT meetings have become too much about procedural items, I don't see where the 'instruction' piece comes in. We have lost our way." Nicole balked, "But SPED push-ins are also an important topic that affects our instruction." William asked, "But when are we doing any discussion about PD?" Gabriela replied, "I thought PD was an SBDM issue," and William clarified, "No, we're supposed to be the instruction people. But we just make proposals to SBDM, so we don't have any real authority." At this point, the time was up, and they were dismissed.

In reflective conversations, ILT members shared renewed doubts about the potential for improvement, noting a negative adult climate that was a more pressing need than PD. Emily saw "adult issues" as the "main problem," concluding: "There's nothing anybody can do to improve this school. There is too much backstabbing. Change has to come from the top." As Gabriela expressed it:

> We can teach them how to teach, that's not the issue . . . Most of the problems at this school are adult issues . . . How can we get any group working together, given the personal rifts that tear us apart?

November 6

By now, the school's November PD day had come and gone, and the ILT had not planned it. Outside of the meetings, some ILT members individually agreed to facilitate activities for it. Ryan facilitated another ice-breaker. Vanessa presented a slideshow celebrating the school's clubs and events. Darryl presented the latest district CRT workshop. Nicole had teachers take sample questions on the new state science test. William facilitated a discussion about "how our classes can support deeper learning." In a reflective conversation, Gabriela said that she did not want to lead PD, explaining, "I don't have a lot of social capital around here."

For the November ILT agenda, Vanessa planned for a debrief of the PD day, along with "announcements," and "department check-ins." All members were present and on time. Vanessa reviewed the agenda, and the group started with the debrief. William said that he liked the continued focus on deeper learning. Emily said she also liked the deeper learning focus, but would prefer PD that involved visiting other schools to get new ideas, commenting, "I don't understand why the district is not organizing this." Emily went on to explain that she was frustrated that she had to pay out of pocket to attend conferences over the last several years. Gabriela added that she was frustrated that for several years the district had not paid for her to attend the conferences offered for the study skills program she taught, AVID.

Following on these frustrations, the group discussed a series of concerns. Ryan said, "Maybe we should visit elementary schools and see how they are teaching," explaining that many of his students failed his tests because they had not been taught their basic Math facts in elementary school. Vanessa said that that was because elementary school teachers did not understand the academic expectations of middle school, and she had complained for years to the district that 6th grade should be moved into middle school to be taught by "subject matter specialists," as they did "in higher-performing districts." William was concerned that his students were not completing homework. Vanessa and Darryl countered that the value of homework was not necessarily supported by research. Gabriela said that her concern was that her students did not have confidence that they could learn and improve, and needed to be taught a growth mindset. "The research has proven that there is no such thing as smart or dumb, it's really your effort that counts," she said. William looked puzzled: "There is a lot of evidence that the brains of smart people and not-so-smart people are very different." Vanessa replied that the important point was to avoid students "internalizing the belief that they are dumb."

By now, the meeting had run long. There was no time for other items. Vanessa thanked the ILT for an "important discussion."

In reflective conversations, ILT members expressed frustrations with the group's productivity. As Gabriela said, "I'm not sure what we're producing in ILT. What is the vision? There's no instructional part." William said, "ILT is just not doing anything. Some people are looking for excuses not to attend." Emily admitted, "I only joined the ILT because I thought it was required for department chairs, and recently found out it's not. So I am thinking about not being part of ILT anymore. I have not found the meetings relevant."

When asked what could be done to improve the ILT, the members admitted ambivalence about serving as leaders of adults. As Ryan expressed it, "My focus is student engagement. As a department chair, I'm just a figurehead, I only do that job because no one else wanted it." For William, "If I can't show a level of improvement for the kids, I don't care if all the teachers stand, sit around and sing Kumbaya together. We have failed." However, William doubted that the ILT members had sufficient expertise to bring about improvement: "Some of the department chairs are not clued into curriculum." For Gabriela, the ILT's challenges stemmed to some extent from fundamental differences in educational values: "We're not on the same page . . . There's like different philosophies here."

Teachers on the ILT attributed some of the group's struggles to insufficient direction from Vanessa. As Gabriela expressed it, "How can we be an instructional leader without the instructional leader?" Meanwhile, Vanessa believed that, "in this union district" it was up to the teacher leaders to bring about change: "It has to be a teacher leader, it can't come from me . . . With this union, I can't." While Vanessa believed in the need for teacher leadership, she did not think that the ILT members were necessarily the ones who could offer it: "Some people are on

the ILT because it's like 'Tag, you're it' . . . You know, like these people are not going to move the world." Vanessa perceived her most important leadership influence in the school to be spreading positivity: "Any little negative thing that gets out just destroys all the other positive stuff . . . So I'm trying to build capacity at the site, but I'm really just the school's biggest cheerleader." However, Vanessa was also skeptical that her efforts, or anyone's efforts, could truly motivate teachers to change: "I want to get everybody on board . . . And it's like [sighs], there's no way I can . . . They come in programmed."

December 4

Heading into December's meeting, Vanessa decided to share with the ILT that her priority this year was "to lift people up" by emphasizing "bright spots." For the agenda, Vanessa made time for "PD planning," positive "announcements," and "department check-ins."

At the meeting, Ryan and Nicole were absent. Starting the PD planning discussion, Vanessa announced that she wanted to stay away from "deficit thinking," or "focusing on things that we need to work on," and instead focus on "bright spots." She added, "We are doing a lot of great things here at Jackson, and I want to make sure that we capitalize on *everything*." For example, recently a Jackson student was honored "alongside Washington," the district's highest-performing middle school, when receiving a city award. Vanessa shared more examples: Jackson recently "got a roaring round of applause" at a district event for being the only middle school to increase Math state test results in "double digits"; and data showed Jackson was "#1" in parent involvement and PE. "These are the kind of things that propel us forward."

When the discussion turned towards planning the upcoming December minimum day PD, Emily suggested, "Something light and fun would be good." The PD was on the day before winter break, and she had heard that teachers at other schools were being released to go home. Emily said she thought Jackson's staff would balk if they were asked to have a PD. Vanessa replied, "I was actually thinking potluck. It would be good for community building." Others agreed, and the group discussed ideas for the party, including bowling and ordering food.

For announcements, Vanessa said that another teacher was out on leave. She and Mark were again organizing coverage. "Because that's what we do here at Jackson, we're a family." Vanessa gave a "shout out" to Darryl for organizing a Black Student Union assembly, and reminded everyone that a talent show and school play were coming up.

By this point, the meeting was past its scheduled time. There was no time for department check-ins. Vanessa thanked everyone, and the meeting was adjourned. A few days later, Vanessa emailed an invitation to the staff for a holiday party on the December minimum day.

January 8

Ahead of January's meeting, Vanessa reflected that the ILT had struggled to plan PDs because "they need things more 'spoon fed' to them." Accordingly, she would propose an idea for the remaining PDs: for the ILT to organize demonstrations of their teaching, with each department taking a turn. For the rest of the agenda, Vanessa decided to share a state accountability report that she had recently reviewed—the California School Dashboard. On the dashboard, the school was assigned colors for various indicators—including ELA and Math scores and suspension rates—indicating relative performance and growth: red for low and declining, orange for low but slight improvement, yellow for average and steady, and blue and green for higher performance. Vanessa saw some "bright spots" on the report that "would make for a good conversation."

At the ILT meeting, Ryan and Emily were absent. Vanessa introduced the dashboard data and walked the team through Jackson's results. "So, we did get one red—on suspension rates," Vanessa explained. However, she added, many staff had told her that "the kids are just better this year." Others agreed, "You can really see it, the kids are better." Vanessa explained that ELA had received yellow for a second year in a row and Math had moved from yellow to orange. For ELA, she said, the yellow was "actually impressive" because the feeder elementary schools "sent us students in the red and orange," meaning that "we got kids who were under-skilled, and we moved them." However, in Math, scores declined because the feeder schools "brought us kids who were in the orange when we got them." Wrapping up, Vanessa pointed out how Jackson's performance compared to another district school that, like them, served a high percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students: "They're sadly in the red for everything. And that was us once. So we're making huge, huge strides and we just have to keep up the good work."

Darryl said the "eye-opening" data showed Jackson "in a transition period," advocating for sharing the data with the whole staff. The ILT agreed.

At this point, the data discussion had run long, and Vanessa quickly pitched her idea for the ILT to organize demonstration lessons for upcoming PDs. She asked if anyone wanted to "kick off February." There was a long silence. Nicole offered to "volunteer Ana" from her department, as Ana was a demonstration teacher for the district. Vanessa agreed that was a "great idea." With that, she thanked everyone, and dismissed the group.

In a reflective conversation, Gabriela said that she did not think Vanessa's positive focus was productive. "I feel like the only thing that's cared about here is what can be bragged about at the district. All of that rah rah stuff. We should be looking at the academics." William questioned Vanessa's avoidance of problems: "How do you discuss instructional leadership if you only talk about bright spots? . . . I mean, improvement starts with recognizing issues."

February 5

For the agenda, Vanessa planned a "PD debrief" for the ILT to fill her in about a recent district PD that she had missed, in addition to time for "announcements," and "department check-ins." Two members were absent. To start, Vanessa asked the group what had occurred at the district PD. William said they had watched deeper learning videos but these had been poorly chosen and were not enlightening. Emily said that she did not like the CRT workshops, and William concurred that the ideas were "retreads." Emily added, "That is my issue. The district spends so much money getting these 'experts' that have never taught, to show us a 'new idea' that is really like the same thing as the old idea. Just let the teachers teach, we know what we're doing." Ryan described a closing "circle" activity, and said he had "walked out of the meeting laughing" at the suggestion to hold "circles": "I can barely finish my lesson in an hour."

Vanessa was surprised to hear about the "circles." "Doesn't that seem a little bit contradictory, given the pressures on 'test scores, test scores'?" she asked. "Because our elementary kids are coming in pretty much under-schooled. And in high-performing districts, they are not having circles, they are not holding hands. They're challenging them." Ryan repeated his concern that elementary schools were not teaching basic math facts, adding, "But I don't want to blame anybody." William countered, "Well, I am," and Vanessa agreed, "Me, too." Ryan shared, "I have students that do absolutely 100% nothing." Gabriela said she experienced this as well. "My kids come in believing that you're either smart or dumb. I work very hard at breaking that down." Ryan countered, "I think it's because, in elementary school, it's like, 'Oh, I can't do Math, so they put me in a corner.'" William said he had heard this as well.

Ryan went on, "But I also think that we need to reaffirm that our students can learn, they are capable. We—and I've done it, too—we have lowered our standards. A lot. Like, 'Oh, ok, you did your name on the paper, good job!'" Gabriela countered, "But sometimes you've got to start like that, to give them hope." Ryan replied, "Yes, but we used to have systems that our kids would learn every period. Like, an agenda, on the board, four squares. Remember this? And the kids would have to write it down, and we had a school-wide agenda check. We don't do it anymore." The team discussed how this agenda board routine had faded away over time as fewer teachers kept it up. Gabriela said, "I like the agendas, and I do binder checks, that really works for me." Ryan replied, "Me, too," and Nicole added, "We need to have the agendas."

Vanessa said, "I agree with you, organization is important. But the question is, if we're going to do this, who is going to hold each other accountable? I cannot put it in a teacher review. The union president would meet me in the parking lot to beat me up." The group laughed. Gabriela offered, "As department chairs, we can support our colleagues who we see falling off the wagon." Others nodded in agreement. Vanessa proclaimed, "We are a powerful group. We could do that. I think we've hit on something important, and we're narrowing in on it."

By now, the meeting had run long. Vanessa restated her request for ILT-organized lesson demonstrations. Ana was to present at tomorrow's faculty meeting, and "I want to get Math on board for March." Ryan said he would ask his department. Vanessa dismissed everyone.

The next day, at the faculty meeting, Vanessa announced that the Math department would present next time. Ryan stood up and announced, "Actually, I spoke to my department. We can't do it." In a reflective conversation, Vanessa shared that Ryan's announcement had "dropped a bomb on the meeting." After this experience and seeing that Ana's presentation had been well-received, Vanessa decided to ask Ana to handle the remaining PDs for the year.

March 5

Vanessa decided that, in lieu of planning this year's PD, she would "empower" the ILT to make decisions for the school for the coming year. Picking up on a "positive" mood from the last meeting, Vanessa would propose that ILT agree on a school-wide initiative to launch next year. "One commitment that we are going to make, and we will all hold each other accountable, and it's not Vanessa doing it all." Additionally, Vanessa decided that next year's electives program was "going to be an ILT decision," and planned a set of options for them to decide on.

At the meeting, Ryan and Lauren were absent. Vanessa introduced two tasks for the ILT to work on: deciding on a school-wide initiative to be launched at the start of next year, "that we can really stick with and implement with fidelity," and voting on the electives program for next year. Vanessa added, "I think we're cohesive enough as a team, I'm feeling very inspired." Starting the discussion of a school initiative, Vanessa reminded them of their previous discussion about the agenda routine. "I'm not saying it has to be the agenda, it could be anything." Gabriela jumped in: "I have some things I would like to see uniform in the school, and the agenda board is definitely one." Darryl agreed. Vanessa said she hoped the ILT would also consider an initiative around school-wide use of Cornell Notes, referring to a note-taking strategy in AVID. "I know many are already using them, and many teachers have come to me and said, 'I'd like to be trained.'" William agreed, "I think we should be an AVID school." Others liked this idea as well.

Noting the time, Vanessa said she would pause the conversation to reserve time for the electives decision. She added, "Wouldn't it be great if over the summer, we would meet as a team and plan for next year? Instead of right now, using what little precious time we have?"

Vanessa introduced options for electives classes for next year, explaining that she wanted the ILT to select one. One option added a "business math" class, another added a "STEM-type" class, and a third added a "Science enrichment/Test Prep" class and expanded the AVID program. Vanessa added, "We know AVID works and is a program you can be trained on." Nicole also advocated for the third option because "the state Science test is here and it's going to count" and that the school's current Science teachers were willing to prepare the curriculum. Each member shared preferences, and quickly a consensus emerged: All chose the third option.

By now, the meeting had run long. Vanessa thanked and dismissed the ILT.

Reflective conversations revealed that ILT members found this meeting to contain positive developments. William commented, "We're getting there! Sometimes change can be glacial." Gabriela was surprised that the ILT had come to consensus about the electives: "Shocking. I can't remember that ever happening." Gabriela thought the discussion about the agenda routine was "so important" and a useful and feasible focus for the ILT:

> Things would run a lot more smoothly if we had more of these basic things in place . . . The agendas, that really needs to be a push . . . That would be for department chairs to do. 'How can I support you?'. . . If we are supporting each other, we could get to 100%.

April 2

Having heard complaints about PD attendance, Vanessa added a "get real conversation about PD" to the ILT agenda. In addition, she would continue the "site initiative" discussion.

At the meeting, Ryan was absent. To start, Vanessa brought up the concern about PD: "It seems to be the number one day when teachers call in sick. Are you guys seeing it, too?" William admitted that it seemed like only a handful of staff had shown up at their most recent PD. Nicole contended that it was poorly timed before a holiday break, and many teachers were pressed for time to finish their grading after the district had changed the grading window. Others pointed out that these were SBDM and district decisions, not up to them. William countered that the "staff malaise" was also evident for other events, too, and he thought the issue was a result of the "drive by" nature of the PDs and a lack of accountability. "Why bother show up? You're not going to be expected to know about it or to implement it." Vanessa said she hoped that a longer-term plan would help avoid this situation next year, "So there's not like this wandering in the dark kind of stuff." She hoped that the ILT would put together such a plan over the summer.

With that, Vanessa turned the group back to their discussion of a possible site initiative. Vanessa said she continued to wonder what could be done to address the skill gaps that students brought with them from elementary school. "Because we're supposed to be building, and we're not, we're starting from scratch." William agreed, "It's a hole we're standing in." Faye suggested that the school should bring back a prescriptive writing program from years prior. Gabriela countered, "First, I'd like to see them hang on to handouts." Others agreed: Their students struggled to keep track of assignments and had difficulty managing time to meet deadlines. Vanessa concurred, "That's what I'm saying, organization is so huge. And I think study skills is something teachers should explicitly teach, and that we should take responsibility for teaching." Others agreed. Darryl added, "Study skills is an important area for our students."

At this point, Vanessa said time was up. She reiterated her hope that the ILT would create a "year at a glance" PD plan over the summer, and thanked and dismissed the group.

In a reflective conversation, William said a school-wide focus on organizational skills was important. He explained that for his most recent major assignment, "I had to replace almost a third of my 7th graders' papers" when the students had lost them. Meanwhile, Gabriela

reiterated that the agenda initiative would be "an excellent starting point for us . . . Before we try to bite off something big, we should start with something really simple."

May 7

For the next meeting, Vanessa invited a guest speaker to present on "alternative learning programs." For the rest of the agenda, Vanessa planned to continue discussing a site initiative. Two members were absent. First, the guest speaker shared a program of project-based classes from which teachers could select to offer. Vanessa explained that the program was something to consider for next year, to "keep the students busy" at the end of the year, "when we are all tired."

When Vanessa turned the conversation to planning a site initiative, there was a long silence. Vanessa said, "I think we're all pretty tired. We've got testing coming up, we have all of these assemblies, and the student behaviors that come up at this time of year." Gabriela added, "And it's Open House tomorrow." Vanessa concluded, "We're kind of day to day," and suggested that they postpone the decision until after the end of the school year. Everyone agreed.

For the rest of the time, the team exchanged information about upcoming school events.

In a reflective conversation, Vanessa shared that the ILT site initiative conversations had felt at times "like pulling teeth" and had renewed doubts that the ILT could carry out an initiative. "To start something from scratch is problematic with this team . . . It's because not everyone is invested in the work." Vanessa concluded that instructional leadership in the coming year hinged upon finding a teacher leader outside of the ILT. She hoped that would be Ana:

> It takes somebody who's committed to the school and committed to the cause and committed to the extra time and being the voice. Not everyone is willing to do that. Not everyone has the skill set to do it. Not everyone has the drive to do it. She does.

June 4

Vanessa decided the last meeting of the year would have only one item: inviting the ILT to participate in a two-day planning group the week after school was out. Vanessa recruited Ana to host the PD planning event and to join the ILT meeting to make the pitch.

At the meeting, four members were absent, including Vanessa. Ana explained Vanessa's request for a PD planning convening. Ana said, "We need to look at small goals. And get more buy-in." Gabriela suggested, "We need a theme for the year." Ana replied, "We've done so much to create community, I want next year to focus on persistence." Emily and Gabriela agreed that would be a good theme, as many students showed "no work ethic." But Gabriela reminded them, "We did talk about picking a couple of things we could all agree on and support. My big thing was the agenda board." Darryl agreed, and suggested that the PD planning group discuss this.

The ILT members requested that Ana send around an email with dates.

June 25-26

Over two half-days, five ILT members joined teachers Ana, Henry, and Megan to plan the coming year's PD. Ana facilitated and kept notes on a planning template she created. Vanessa and Ana reminded the group of proposals for site initiatives the ILT had discussed: Cornell Notes, the agenda routine, and organized binders. Ana mentioned the idea of having "persistence" as a "theme." Vanessa balked, "If I am a teacher, that sounds like extra work. Just give me something that makes sense, is user-friendly, that you don't have to have some huge training to understand." Henry concurred, "If I have to choose between 'persistence' and Cornell Notes, I choose Cornell Notes." William added, "It's too early for us to do 'persistence,' we're

not ready for it. We just need to get more staff involved in PD first." Vanessa replied, "And to create a structure so that we are not doing everything month to month."

The group came to agreement: The PD plan would include trainings on the agenda routine, Cornell Notes, and organized binders. Megan wondered, "Would it be better to broaden it and say our theme is 'becoming an AVID school'?" Others agreed: AVID had widespread interest and its own curriculum with ready-made materials for other trainings down the line.

By the end of the two days, the group had a plan for the year based on the theme of "becoming an AVID school" that included trainings in the agenda routine, Cornell Notes, and organized binder. As the group departed for summer, Megan commented, "I'm really impressed with this. You can tell that it's a plan that people actually spent time thinking through."

Analysis of the ILT

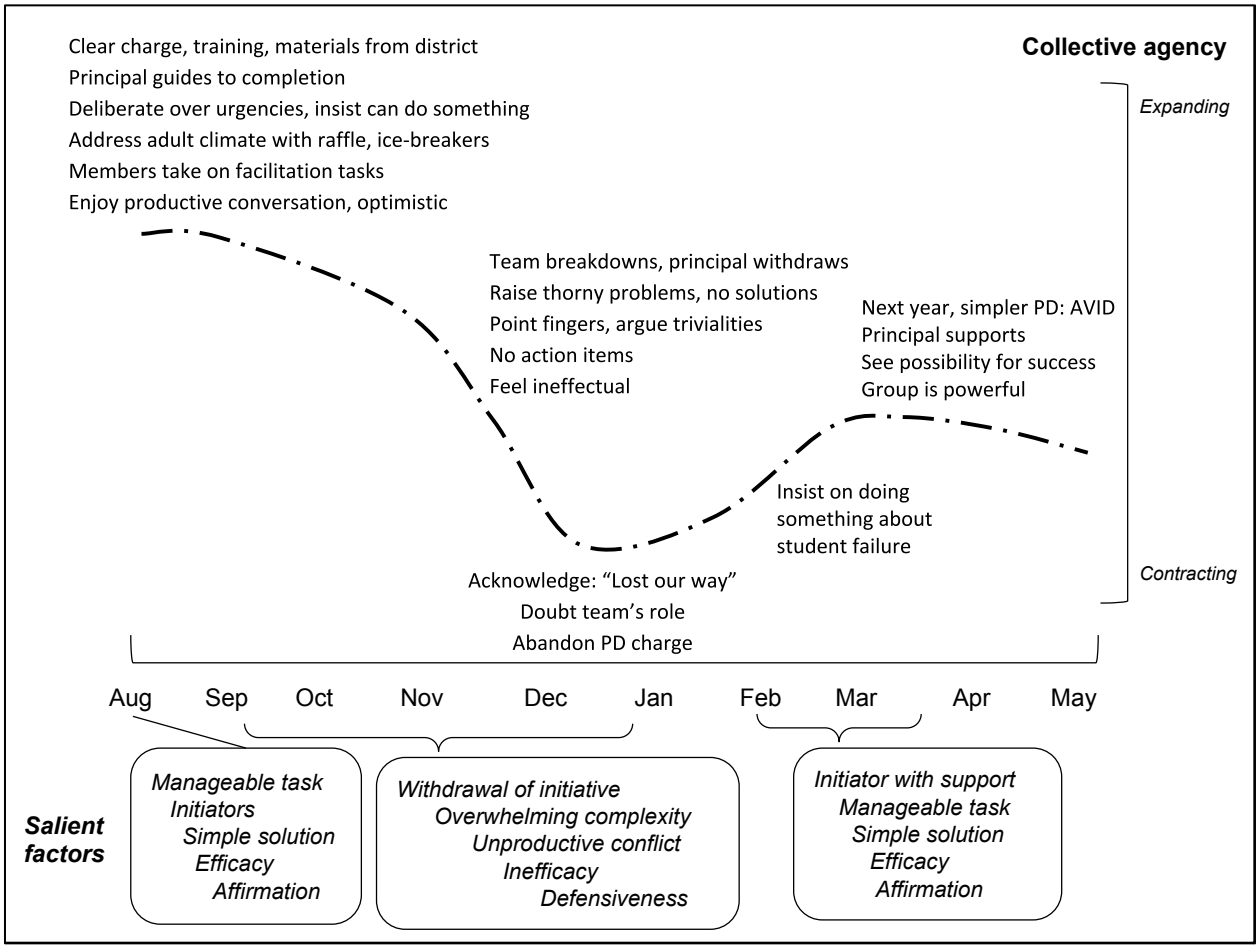
From the literature on school improvement and a limited literature on bodies of teachers whose charge it is to further instructional leadership, one could conclude that this was an ineffective team. Generally, the team did not operate from or establish clear and consistent goals for instructional improvement, its members took few steps to influence or oversee instruction in the school, and rather than promoting professional development, the team sometimes actively contributed to minimizing it. The literature on effective work teams would suggest that the team lacked the structural prerequisites for effective performance. With group membership based on bureaucratic roles—of school administrators and department chairs established by departmental votes—it could be said that the team was not composed intentionally to ensure members that could bring the right expertise to their task. The ILT shared authority with an SBDM whose decisions constrained and sometimes superseded its own.

However, this study set out with a more open perspective, examining processes by which teams made efforts towards developing collective agency, regardless of whether a team attained overall effectiveness. From this perspective, group interactions suggested emerging collective agency when the group made efforts towards accomplishing tasks, addressing problems, becoming more cohesive and affirmed as a group, and producing satisfaction in its members. From this angle, it becomes possible to see that, at some key moments, despite the challenges posed by the structural set-up, the ILT made efforts to develop collective agency over the course of the school year. At other times, group interactions suggested that collective agency had contracted, evident in how the group avoided or abandoned its tasks, hid and denied problems, undermined or attacked group members, or fomented dissatisfaction.

To understand how collective agency becomes more enabled or constrained, I aimed to be sensitive to the subtle ups and downs of group development. Below, I present an analysis of critical episodes in the ups and downs—times at which the team's interactions suggested that the development of collective agency was most enabled or most constrained. Comparing these critical episodes and considering relevant turning points, I identified salient factors that contributed, drawing on the conceptual framework guiding the study. To determine which episodes seemed most critical, I considered the intensity of the group's energy in relation to key dimensions of collective agency: task accomplishment, affirmation as a group, addressing problems, and members' satisfaction. As a visual shortcut for the reader, Figure 4 represents the ups and downs posed by these critical episodes and relevant turning points on a curve over time. The text on the curve describes an event, and the salient factors at play are noted on the x-axis. The discussion below provides explanation.

Figure 4

Curve of Expanding and Contracting Collective Agency and Salient Factors for the ILT



The year started out with a surge towards collective agency when the group successfully planned the first PD day in August. In the relative slack before the start of the school year, the group attended a district training that communicated a clear charge—to plan the PD—and pointed them to a manageable task, providing them with options for a PD focus and materials to use. In this context, the principal guided the group towards focusing on and completing their task, and called upon them to deliberate about their choice of a PD focus. Members took up this opportunity to air long-term challenges with a negative adult climate, and insist that the ILT do something about it. Briefly, the team considered suggestions of bringing in team-building consultant "creating curiosity," but these ideas were left aside when they discovered simpler solutions: to offer regular ice-breakers and a staff raffle. From these interactions, they agreed on a plan for the first PD day: reproduce the district's "deeper learning" materials and address the problems of climate with ice-breakers and a staff raffle. Given the school's troubled history, the positivity and productivity of this collegial communication made the ILT proud—so much so that the principal proposed that they include in the PD a fishbowl of their discussion to model their professionalism for others. Feeling affirmed in their acceptance and competence as a group, everyone agreed to take on specific PD facilitation tasks, and they left optimistic.

However, it did not take long before this newfound group resolve began to crumble. The downturn started in the wake of team breakdowns in carrying out their August PD—a team member repudiating the principal's good will (a raffle for tardiness) because she herself was tardy and another important team member's unexplained absence in a staff demonstration intended to show off the ILT's cohesiveness. With the principal's show of initiative publicly rejected and seeing that other ILT members had not called each other out, she felt alone and resentful that she was "the only one," and she retreated from leading the group. In September and October, the group was adrift. With ad hoc agendas, members brought up urgent and highly complex issues (e.g., SPED) without hope of finding solutions. As overwhelm, set in, they pointed fingers at each other, planned no PD, and identified no action items.

After a key group member acknowledged that the ILT had "lost its way," efforts towards collective agency collapsed. The response was a defensive mechanism: Rather than face up to their task and problem, the authority and identity of the group was questioned, and responsibility for the core charge for the group (PD) was shifted onto another presumably responsible team. The team continued meeting, but when the topic of their core charge was raised, petty disagreements over homework and brain development consumed time and covered up the ILT's neglect of the core charge, PD. Privately, members expressed little control over the school's challenges and deep frustrations with the ILT's unproductivity and lack of direction, for which they blamed each other. There was talk amongst some of leaving the group. However, silence prevailed: In their meetings, they made no mention of these frustrations or the group's struggles. In December, the principal's call for attention to "bright spots" left ILT members frustrated with a focus on "rah rah stuff" that felt like denial and avoidance. Yet, when the principal revisited the team's core charge by raising the topic of the next PD, members quickly agreed to repurpose PD into a winter party. From here on, the ILT abandoned PD planning. The principal in turn searched for and found a substitute, a teacher who was not a member of the ILT but was passionate about PD.

Renewed efforts to develop collective agency emerged in the spring after a team member insisted that the group do something as instructional leaders about persistent problems with student failure. At first, the group looked for how to avoid the complex charge by deflecting the problem of student failure onto the district and the elementary schools, but then the team member who had raised the problem offered a simple solution: The ILT could reinstate an agenda routine that the school had had success with in years past. Acknowledging this as a shared urgency and seeing a possibility to act with a solution that affirmed existing practices and was much simpler than their earlier focus on "deeper learning," the team accepted the charge. Building on this idea, others suggested that agendas be combined with a focus on study skills by expanding the existing program, AVID. Energy surged. The team felt a renewed sense of progress. The principal affirmed that the ILT was "powerful" and supported the show of initiative with a charge for the group to turn it into a plan for the coming year.

However, this swell of effort towards collective agency proved tenuous. The group was able to keep their idea alive for PD focused on agendas and AVID over several meetings, but could not find the energy or skill to complete the task of turning it into a plan during the course of the regular school year. Instead, they conceded to exhaustion and postponed the task. By year's end, the principal determined that the plan could not get done by that group and would require the help of other teachers.

Thus, in examining these critical episodes over the course of the year, it becomes possible to see a struggle for collective agency, and sites of tension that undergird it. When someone in

the group was willing to take initiative, when the team's task was made clear and manageable, and when the complexity of a shared urgency was downshifted towards a simple solution, the group was able to experience a sense of accomplishment and affirmed its capability. These efforts were sufficient to keep the group together and to feel at times that they were accomplishing something and addressing problems of consequence. However, such efforts enabled only a fragile surge towards collective agency that did not contend with the full complexity of their problems and could not withstand experiences of inefficacy. Internal breakdowns quickly led to a withdrawal of initiative that left an aimless group exposed to vexing problems, they became overwhelmed, and collective agency collapsed as the team silenced and deflected their problems with conflict, doubts of their capability, and defensive avoidance of their charge.

Yet, the struggle to develop collective agency continued because, at some point, members could not withstand being adrift amidst the suffering of their problems. They pressed forth again in new efforts towards task accomplishment, affirming themselves as a group that had something to contribute and seeking satisfaction. Their striving shows developmental potential in the desires that drive it—desires for a sense of accomplishment, to connect as a group, and to make headway on core problems to reach students. Points during which there were the strongest surges towards developing collective agency over the year show what helps the group to act on these desires: someone willing to boldly take initiative regardless of negative consequences or frustrations, simplicity and clarity about their charge and associated tasks, and finding how to make complex problems actionable. However, the fragility of their collective agency shows their limitations and why the struggle falters: shows of initiative tend to be unsupported, and thus isolated and prone to retreat; an ambiguous and complex charge overwhelms, and they struggle to navigate the conflict necessary to translate it into manageable tasks; they are not sure how to contend with huge and complex problems; and their efforts to manage this complexity with simple solutions exposes them to experiences of failure that invite defensiveness. What if supports were designed that take into consideration the needs and desires suggested by their enabling efforts and limitations? Might their collective agency be able to sustain and expand?

Staff Professional Development (PD) Meetings

The main staff consisted of principal Vanessa, vice principal Darryl, and 23 teachers. The staff convened in two types of meetings: professional development (PD) meetings and monthly faculty meetings. The findings below first describe the staff PDs, presenting a narrative of meeting events and insights from reflective conversations, followed by an analysis. After this, the next section of findings follows a similar structure to report events and analysis of monthly faculty meetings.

Two full day PDs were set by the district-wide calendar, and five two-hour "minimum day" PDs were scheduled (in November, December, February, March, and April) by the school's SBDM. Per SBDM vote during the previous year at Jackson, all of the minimum day PDs were scheduled on Fridays before holiday breaks.

August 22 PD Day

The day before the August PD Day, the first official workday of the year, Math teacher, Mark, sent an email to the staff with a calendar of meetings for the coming weeks. This was a role and routine from Mark that Vanessa welcomed to assist with keeping staff informed. Mark's

calendar listed the August PD Day twice with two different start times. As a result, while all staff attended, some arrived late, and the start of the PD was delayed by 15 minutes. The meeting took place in Mark's classroom, arranged in rows of desks facing inward towards a path that included a projector. Activities for the day had been planned one week prior by the ILT. As staff arrived, they followed the same routine as they would at all PDs: They stopped by a table near the door to sign in and collect a printed agenda and handouts, and then found a seat of their choosing.

Vanessa started the meeting by introducing herself as the "proud principal excited for the start of the year, especially to see our progress." Vanessa explained that the school "only had to bring in three or four teachers this year" compared to years past in which they might have had 10-12. "This shows we're doing something right, because people want to stay here." After this, Vanessa led an icebreaker: "Say how many years you have been an educator." This icebreaker revealed a mostly veteran staff: two-thirds of those present had been educators for 10 years or more. Following this, ILT member Ryan led staff through a game to try to correctly identify the meanings of educational acronyms widely used in the district.

For the next part of the PD day, I facilitated a workshop about deeper learning provided at a district PD for ILTs the week before. The workshop included watching video clips of Whitman District teachers sharing stories and artifacts of their deeper learning practices and reading vignettes about classroom lessons. After this, Nicole facilitated an activity for staff to share examples of deeper learning in their classrooms. Megan told how she sparked students' curiosity about "theme" through a read-aloud of a children's book. Emily shared how she interested students in "team cooperation" through a game simulating escape from a sinking 'Titanic' using exercise mats in the gym. Nicole described a culminating student debate as part of a Science unit. Concluding the activity, Nicole said, "The point of this is to show that deeper learning is happening at Jackson. I appreciate the district recognizing this. So it is not like, 'Now I've got to teach in some whole new way,' but it's something I already do."

After lunch, Vanessa introduced the ILT fishbowl activity, explaining how the team had participated in a district training the week prior. "We had very informative discussions and want you all to get to hear a re-enactment of that discussion." Megan added, "I want to say how proud I was of the team during these discussions. We were so professional. All voices were included." Emily added, "It really gave me the feeling of being part of a team."

During the fishbowl, the ILT pulled a circle of chairs together while the staff gathered around. The ILT expressed that the school has had "trust issues" and that "we cannot accomplish what we want in the classroom unless the adults are all on the same page." At the end, the ILT revealed their ultimate decision: "We will do PD on teambuilding that we bring to the whole staff, while the ILT works on CRT." At the conclusion, staff shared comments of appreciation.

Vanessa concluded the PD with a brief introduction to CRT. With that, she thanked and dismissed staff. Following this meeting, there were no action items for staff.

While staff made comments of appreciation for the PD, reflective conversations suggested that deeper learning and CRT were not perceived as salient needs. When asked about urgent needs, few teachers mentioned PD at all. Most reported concerns with a negative adult climate, referring to "adult issues," "trust" and "fragmentation." As Vincent expressed it:

> We're too isolated . . . People tend to have their own agendas. You can't know if people are really telling you the truth. They can make your life miserable. That's why I'm more comfortable just staying in my room.

According to William, colleagues tended to misinterpret others' intentions: "You say things to a lot of people, you never know what they heard. It's like, 'You don't like me and the way I think'

. . . People hold a grudge." Gabriela similarly reported: "There's childhood issues and baggage playing out . . . We're triggering stuff in them totally unknowingly, and then there's fallout."

Reflective conversations also revealed doubts about a deeper learning focus, or PD in general, as a means for change in the school. Many perceived that academics were not a priority. As one staff member expressed it, "The real emphasis around here is on other things like sports and music . . . Academics is second place here, no matter what is advertised." According to Ana, "We are overly concerned with culture and not enough concerned with academics, and our test scores show it." Moreover, staff expressed doubts about colleagues' motivation to develop as professionals. As William put it, "There aren't that many people that are really interested in curriculum here." Most reported that the faculty did not hold shared beliefs about the school's needs. According to Mark, "There is no common urgency or passion about any one issue, it's different for every person." Gabriela similarly reported, "We are not unified at all." Some staff were skeptical about the potential for change. As Ryan put it, "There's no accountability here . . . Teachers could go into a classroom and sit down and play on their computer all day long, and not teach a damn thing. It's happened here." Another staff member said, "Very seldom does an intervention we try here lead to major change. Usually there's a lack of follow through."

According to Ana, the staff had potential that could be cultivated through professional development: "There has been a definite shift. There are more teachers who actually give a shit now. We need to ride this and invest in them through professional development . . . We have some teachers who mean well but do not have the skills." When asked what kind of PD Ana imagined, she said, "I think we should focus on becoming an AVID school," referring to the school's study-skills program. "We have to learn to work with what we have."

November 2 PD Day

Ahead of the November PD day, Vanessa said that she wanted to prioritize PD activities that "lift people up" with a focus on "bright spots." Towards this end, a few days before the PD, Vanessa prepared a slideshow celebrating the school's work on building community through its clubs and community events. The rest of the PD would consist of activities that individual ILT members offered to facilitate.

As with the August PD day, staff received no advance agenda. Mark's calendar email listed "PD Day" with no further information. Uncertainty about the start time contributed to a 30-minute late start. Two staff were absent. Upon arrival, staff picked up the agenda and handouts.

Vanessa began the meeting by asking volunteers to read aloud the norms, mission, and vision printed on the agenda. Then, Ryan facilitated an ice-breaker: If you could wear any costume for the rest of your life, what would it be? The staff participated eagerly, and each faculty member took a turn to explain their costume choice.

After this, Vanessa presented her slideshow. Vanessa showed a video and many pictures of students, parents, and staff at various cultural events (including at dances, a talent show, and a school-organized Latina conference) and over a dozen after-school clubs that teachers had launched. There were several bouts of applause and cheering, with staff eagerly asking each other questions about the clubs, some of which they were hearing about for the first time. An audible gasp erupted across the room when Vanessa shared that 175 students attended the Halloween dance, compared to last year's turnout of 60. Vanessa garnered more applause when explaining that a major community event that the school had organized for the next day had gained local media attention and interest by the city government. Mark explained that he had helped send flyers to over 6,000 community members about this event; over 500 people planned

to contribute and set up stalls. Recognizing Mark's role in this event, one staff member stood up, "I want to give a special recognition to Mark, he really goes above and beyond."

Continuing the slideshow, Vanessa introduced a new narrative about the school: We are a "family" who take care of each other when things get hard. This family slide received the loudest round of applause and cheering of all, and several staff asked to have a printed copy. Concluding her presentation, Vanessa reminded the staff that the school had "beat" two other middle schools in the district in test scores. As a reward, she had hosted a Halloween assembly, the first time in years that students were given permission to dress up for the holiday during school.

Amid the exuberance, the slideshow ran 30 minutes over the allotted time. Afterwards, Mark and Vanessa stepped out for the rest of the morning, finalizing plans for the next day's event.

Next, Darryl facilitated a district CRT workshop that explained the difference between individualistic and collectivist cultures. At the conclusion, Darryl provoked another round of applause when he proclaimed: "Through our focus on CRT, our communication as a faculty is really improving. Behavior issues at the school have been reduced and more teachers have stayed. We're at a turning point and on the way to becoming the #1 middle school in Whitman."

For the rest of the morning, I facilitated a district workshop about deeper learning that involved introducing a set of deeper learning competencies and watching a video of one Whitman teacher using a deeper learning practice in the classroom.

After lunch, many staff returned late, and five did not return at all. Vanessa attended for part of the afternoon. No one commented on the tardies or absences. Introducing the next activity, William reminded the staff about the deeper learning competencies and prompted a discussion: How can our classroom support these areas of deeper learning? After time to discuss in small groups, William asked volunteers to share. Science teacher Miguel shared, "I have recently been thinking about how kids are going to multiple rooms every day and have to learn six different sets of procedures. If we had more similar procedures, like Cornell Notes, this might help our students get to the deeper learning." Several staff commented how they also were interested in incorporating more Cornell Notes. Miguel continued, "I recently had a conversation with a student who told me that no one ever talked to him about college or told him why it was important. I decided I'm going to set aside some time to talk more with him." Henry jumped in, "At [my last school], we had a college awareness day in which all of the staff told their college stories. We should consider something like this here." Several staff expressed agreement, and conversations broke out around the room about what the assembly could entail.

Next, Nicole introduced the last activity of the day—sample questions from a newly mandated computer-based state Science test. As the staff struggled to log on, manipulate the interactive question formats, and answer the Science questions, many expressed shock at the expectations of the test. One teacher proclaimed in frustration, "Our students need to have more practice!" Darryl agreed, "We have often said we don't want to teach to the test, but I think that to some extent we probably should." Nicole lamented, "But we don't have one-to-one technology, like they do at Washington." Various staff agreed, sharing experiences with limited access to Chromebooks and discussing how this made it difficult to organize more test practice.

This concluded the day. Vanessa thanked and dismissed everyone.

Reflective conversations revealed some appreciation for the PD. Vanessa reported of the slideshow, "People seemed to be a little more engaged . . . They felt more connected." English teacher Greg found the staff's interest in college awareness palpable: "We got super excited about this college experience thing . . . There was this energy that went through the room."

However, some staff still found the PD disconnected from their needs. Math teacher Mark missed most of the PD day to instead prepare the next day's community event, which he thought made more difference to help his "low" students engage in school:

> In my 21st year of teaching, there is nothing that anyone can teach me . . . I know that's not a good attitude, but it is honest . . . I feel confident that I am able to reach all or most of my students . . . I don't expect to see that much academic growth over the course of a year because these are low kids and there's not that much that can be done . . . That is why I believe it is important to offer them other ways to feel excited to be in school. . . [School events] give them opportunities to develop interests and skills that are not just academic . . . It gives me joy, seeing the kids have opportunities to shine.

To ILT member Gabriela, the PD revealed a lack of planning and vision on the part of Vanessa: "No one is thinking it through, and doing any backwards mapping for the staff . . . I am tired of these piecemeal meetings. I want there to be a vision."

When prompted about their perceptions of PDs, nearly all teachers said PDs should focus on training staff in "best practices" to be implemented school-wide. Like Miguel, many specifically called for PD focused on Cornell Notes—an AVID note-taking strategy.

But many also yearned for richer learning opportunities. Most expressed desires for PD that involved observations of teaching, being observed, and discussing their teaching with colleagues—all of which they reported having few opportunities to do. Most had come to believe that their colleagues did not really have an interest in instruction. As Megan put it, "We're not valued. Nobody comes in." Ana, a demonstration teacher tasked to open her classroom for peer observation, found her invitations generally ignored: "I invite all the time . . . 'I'm doing this thing, it's really cool, wanna come by and take a look at it?' No. No one wants to come."

At the same time, classroom observations were difficult to realize due to a lack of safety. Megan admitted, "I don't want my colleagues in my room because they've talked behind my back . . .There's some manipulative people around here." In the previous year, William had attempted to organize classroom visits, but teachers did not want to participate out of fears of being judged: "The teachers thought just doing a walk-around to look at other teachers was judging teachers."

Others shared that their desires for deepening PD were unfeasible due to teacher fatigue and union "pushback." History teacher Henry, also a district demonstration teacher, said PDs should have time for "application": "Like, in your team, create a lesson like this . . . If we don't get to the application stage, it's just somebody else talking." However, Henry found teachers to have little stamina: "When we attempt to [provide application time], teachers just goof off because it's like, 'I'm tired.'" William wished that PDs could involve inquiries in which teachers presented a "fact pattern"—but did not think that teachers would willingly engage in such instructional analysis from fear of having their insufficiencies exposed: "They'll find it threatening . . . It's really the emperor's got no clothes." Both also perceived that the teachers' union played a role in preventing PDs from connecting more closely to instruction. As William explained it: "You get pushback from the union [for anything] that might be used as judgmental on teachers." Henry claimed the union opposed the demonstration teacher program for identifying a "favorite teacher" and treating teachers like "semi-administrators."

Meanwhile, reflective conversations revealed significant classroom struggles that went unacknowledged during PDs. Gabriela reported, "The kids are more fragile than I've seen before. Not even trying because they're already defeated." William expressed resignation about meeting his students' needs: "We have kids in seventh and eighth grade that have third and below skills . . . They just shut down. I've tried all the different methods with them. I've used up my tool box."

November 16 Minimum Day PD

As the November minimum day PD neared, there was no plan. Mark's calendar noted a "minimum day" but made no reference to a PD event. A few days before the event, Vanessa said that she was considering a "Thanksgiving" potluck as some staff members had requested. Ultimately, the night before, Vanessa was required to close the school due to poor air quality from the California wildfires, and the event did not take place.

December 21 Minimum Day PD

In the weeks leading up to December's minimum day PD, there was no plan. In reflective conversations, staff said that the day before winter break should not be used for PD. Gabriela said it should be a "wink day"—"We need those wink days after everything we do around here"—and felt bad for whomever would have to lead PD that day: "People will shoot you." Gabriela added that staff felt "resentful" about scheduling: "It's like, she's making us stay here. It has that feeling." Megan had a similar reaction: "I am frankly surprised that it is not a 'wink day' because I was assuming so, and most staff will probably be annoyed when they hear." The ILT decided to "keep it light" and repurpose the PD into a celebration. Vanessa emailed staff an invitation to a "holiday celebration" with instructions for ordering food.

February 15 Minimum Day PD

As reported in the ILT findings, Vanessa perceived that "in this union district," PD "can't come from me" but called for teacher leadership. To continue the focus on the district vision and bright spots, Vanessa had in mind for teachers to provide deeper learning lesson demonstrations. When her original idea to tap the ILT for this did not work out, Vanessa asked Ana. Ana said she felt confident to organize and facilitate this: "It's fine . . . I am not worried about it."

First, Vanessa asked Ana to present a lesson demonstration at the February faculty meeting. To start the presentation, Ana introduced herself as one of the school's demonstration teachers, explaining that the demonstration program is "about creating a more open culture so that we can all learn together." For her demonstration, Ana showed a "hook" activity she used to interest students in the concept of evolution. The hook involved students working in groups assigned to act out hypothetical genetic adaptations (e.g., blindfolded, taped together hands or fingers) and moving across the room to compete for "food" (candy) to "survive." As she presented, Ana answered the staff's eager questions about the activity and showed a video of her students participating in it. Ana explained that she had planned for the staff to enact this hook today, but they were out of time. "Too bad! It sounded fun!" Megan said. Ana provided a reflection handout, asked teachers to write for a few minutes about hooks they used in the classroom, and then prompted them to share their ideas with each other. At the end of the presentation, Ana said, " If you would like to talk more with me about it, please do, because I'm your demonstration teacher and I'd love to hear your ideas." Afterwards, several staff rushed up to tell Ana that her presentation was "great," talking more about their hook ideas.

After Ana's presentation, Megan shared in a reflective conversation: "I knew she was a good teacher, but now I could see that she's really doing it . . . I was so excited." Henry explained, "Ana was brilliant. The staff, they love Ana." William expressed more skepticism: "I didn't get a whole lot out of it . . . There's no pre or post testing. It's [her] gut feel that [she] accomplished something." Ana was happy with the presentation, but thought it had threatened

William: “For a few days after that, he really was just not in the mood to even look at me . . . I think he felt threatened.”

Following Ana’s positive reception, Vanessa asked Ana to organize another lesson demonstration for the February minimum day PD. This event, scheduled on the Friday before a holiday weekend, was listed on Mark’s calendar only as a “minimum day.” On the day, several staff were absent and others told Vanessa they were leaving early for “appointments.” Concerned about high absenteeism, Vanessa cancelled the PD hours before its start. In a reflective conversation, Ana expressed her frustration at this last-minute cancellation: “An hour before we're going to do it, ‘Would you mind if I cancel?’ . . . It's not taken seriously at all.”

March 29 Minimum Day PD

About two weeks before the March PD, Vanessa again asked Ana to prepare a teaching demonstration. In a reflective conversation, Ana explained that she had agreed, but cautioned Vanessa, “We’re not going to cancel again, right? Because I’m not doing all of this work if it’s just going to be cancelled.” Vanessa agreed not to cancel the meeting this time.

Ana’s first idea for the PD was to use what she had planned for the February PD—a follow up to her hook demonstration, giving teachers time to plan their own. However, as it had been nearly two months, Ana decided to instead give a new demonstration. This time, her demonstration would focus on organizing student conversations around making evidence-based claims. She prepared a template for teachers to plan for how to incorporate something similar into one of their lessons. Ana explained that her main intention with the PD was to make it “safe” for teachers to discuss instruction by sharing lesson ideas in a “casual,” appreciative way:

> We need to go in baby steps . . . For right now, we need to work on creating a safe environment so that our staff is willing to invest themselves . . . People have been persecuted here . . . That’s why one of the things when I did my PD was, ‘Hey, I don't know anything more than you guys do. But I'm really striving here for more. And if you want to strive for more, let's hook up.’ In a totally non-confrontational, casual way. Because of the history.

Ana also prepared a simple feedback form to find out whether teachers found the PD useful.

Mark’s calendar listed “minimum day” without mention of the PD, but Vanessa sent emails to staff with the times and reminders that “teacher extraordinaire” Ana would be presenting. In reflective conversations, staff grumbled about overload from too many meetings, being frequently asked to cover for absent teachers, and a looming deadline to turn in grades. Megan shared a complaint echoed by others:

> Three-day weekend, so yeah let's back it up with a PD. You expect people to give their full attention to learning something when personally all I can think about is, good God, do you know how much stuff I have to do to get ready to get my grades in? I would kind of like a break.

Hours before the PD, Ana reported that teachers were lobbying her to cancel: “A minimum of five teachers will not be attending . . . Two other teachers have seen me today and mentioned that I should call it early . . . It is going to be a tough crowd.”

Despite these grumblings, Ana went ahead with the PD. It was the lowest attendance of any staff convening of the year. Ten staff members were absent, including Vanessa. Two were 15 minutes late. Upon arrival, the staff picked up a printed agenda as usual. Darryl chaired, starting: “Some of us had to leave, some of us are working on the play, but we will carry on.”

Ana started her presentation. “Welcome to your Friday before a three-day weekend PD when grades are due.” The staff laughed. Henry commented, “So you know where we’re coming from.” Ana explained that she had decided to focus this PD on a different lesson, since her last demo had been a while ago. “A lot of work is going into trying to make our PD better, so today I’m trying something in the hopes that it will be more useful for you.”

Ana called attention to several student posters that she had hung on the wall. On the posters, students used a “claim-evidence-reasoning” format to analyze data. Ana walked the staff through the lesson that had culminated in the student posters. First, she showed a video of live guppies swimming. Various teachers commented: “Wow! Are these all different species?” and “Do they mate with each other?” Ana answered their questions and pointed out, “See how you got interested because I showed you the pictures? It’s the same for kids.” Next, Ana demonstrated how she had helped the students unpack a table of data about the guppies and had students work in groups to debate and arrive at consensus about a claim based on the data. Then, Ana passed out a handout prompting teachers to try a “claim-evidence-reasoning” discussion in their lessons. “Take 10-15 minutes and come up with your ideas. You can work together if you want, or on your own.” The teachers eagerly moved into partners to discuss, and Ana circulated. After 20 minutes, Ana decided to let discussions run longer than planned: “They’re so into it!”

Ana brought the group together and asked who wanted to share. Emily shared her idea to have students debate scenarios of conflicts over rules in PE. Ana replied, “I had been wondering how PE was going to connect to this, but you came up with a great idea.” William commented, “This is a very academic PE department.” Ana replied, “I see that. Will you actually try it and let us know how it went?” “Yes!” Emily said, “It’s something we wanted to do already, but this is just another way to approach it.” Nicole shared her idea to use “claim-evidence-reasoning” as part of a forensic science project in which students solved a murder mystery. Upon hearing about this project, teachers responded, “I want to see!” and “sounds really cool!” Ana added, “So you are going to implement the claim-evidence-reasoning template for something you do already, that’s very cool.” Megan shared about her students’ group project to create Cinderella myths and publish them as iPad projects. Ana: “Definitely creates a lot of curiosity! When we meet again, can you talk about how it’s going?” Megan replied cheerfully, “Sure!”

Ana said they were out of time and asked whether the PD was useful. Nicole said, “I like that you gave us time to think about something we can use.” Megan said, “It’s really great that we’re sharing things we’re already doing. Starts to give me hope for having a common language in our school. Really great that it was so good, given that it’s a Friday when I have to get home to my weekend and start all of this grading!” Ana said she would send feedback forms over email. William called out, “That’s important! Because we have to give you a good eval!”

On feedback forms, participants reported as most useful: “the examples that Ana provided”; “a real world lesson that worked”; and “conversations were positive and progressive.”

In reflective conversations, Ana described the PD as a success: “They got it, it clicked . . . They took it to places I didn't even think of taking it.” Megan reported that it was a successful PD that deepened her motivation and inspiration from the previous presentation:

> It went really well . . . Watching her present stuff kind of inspired me . . . like the same way I might have a passion for English . . . I could kind of feel that from her for Science . . . That saved me this year . . . My little head was barely staying above water . . . She made me feel like, oh, I could swim forever . . . We feed off of each other like that.

As with Ana's previous presentation, William was skeptical: "I still didn't like it . . . It still has the feel of a drive by . . . There wasn't any suggestion that, 'Try this, at this next meeting you're going to report back how it worked . . . and how to improve it.'"

April 12 Minimum Day PD

Ahead of April's PD, scheduled on Friday before spring break, Vanessa first considered releasing the staff. "I guess I have to ask myself, is it important to do PD when the staff doesn't want to be there?" Then, Vanessa decided to check if Ana would organize another PD, and Ana agreed. Soon after, Ana reported that Vanessa was referring to her as "in charge of all the PD," which Ana said was "okay." However, Ana predicted more staff grumbling: "Our last PD of the year is the day before spring break? They are all going to hate that yet again."

Ana's initial idea for April's PD was to "have everyone check in about how their activity from last time went." However, since many teachers had missed it, she decided to instead create an opportunity for all staff to share. Ana decided "to invite everyone to bring an example of deeper learning with artifacts and present for 3-5 minutes." Ana imagined that "after each presentation, we can have a discussion of how that specific activity can be modified in a general way to be used by others." An invitation to the event, with instructions for the presentations, was emailed to staff on Monday before the PD. Hoping to add some continuity between PDs, Ana reached out to a few teachers who had attended the last PD to suggest that they share follow ups. She again prepared a feedback form to find out if staff found her PD useful.

Mark's calendar listed the PD with times and location, and Vanessa organized pizza. Once again, hours before the PD, Ana was approached by staff who said they were leaving early. "I have a feeling that the turnout is going to be low," she predicted. However, staff attendance was not as low as last time. Six staff members were absent, including Vanessa due to a personal emergency.

Ana started: "We thought this would be way to follow up from great ideas already shared at last meeting, so I'll start by calling on those who were there. Megan, did you bring what we discussed last time?" Megan replied, "Yes," and passed around a book of Cinderella tales from around the world. Megan described her iPad projects, and Ana asked how she had selected student groups. Megan said that earlier in the year she assigned groups, but this time she let them pick and was pleasantly surprised. Various staff commented, "Wow! How interesting!" and shared their approaches to student grouping.

Next, Henry passed around a flyer for the school play and described how the play enabled students from different areas of the school to connect and feel successful. Ana commented, "All the research says that sense of community is so important. That is something we do really well here." Other staff shared their experiences with creating community, exclaiming, "So amazing!"

Ana continued calling on volunteers. Emily described a jigsaw game to help create curiosity about a new PE game. A SPED teacher showed samples of "experiential learning" opportunities, passing around student work and photos of students participating in activities. Various staff exclaimed appreciatively, "Beautiful!" and "I love it!" Ana presented student posters about ecosystems and described a Gallery Walk to learn from each other's posters.

PE teacher Missy described teaching meditation in the classroom. Missy explained that "scientific data has demonstrated its benefits" and that "some kids come to me and ask me how to practice on their own, they're really interested in it." Several staff were surprised and excited to hear that she used meditation in the classroom, sharing that they do as well because "the kids ask for it." Ana said to Missy, "I'd love to ask you to run our next PD about this."

Next, novice teacher Kathy presented curriculum from a unit about stereotyping, passing around a map listing common stereotypes and samples of her students' writing about stereotyping. A wave of excitement emerged. Several staff commented that they were impressed by the students' "powerful" and "deep" insights about this weighty issue.

Finally, Ryan showed student posters in which groups developed inquiry question,s and collected and analyzed quantitative data to answer them using statistical methods. Another wave of excitement emerged: "That is hard stuff!" and "Look at what they came up with!"

Ana announced that the time was up, and asked, "What did you think about today?" One teacher called out, "Super interesting!" and another, "Really great!" Ana asked everyone to complete feedback forms, and thanked them for coming. The staff applauded, and several teachers rushed over eagerly to talk more with each other about their presentations.

As the staff filed out, Kathy commented, "This was my favorite PD so far this year. I loved the energy in the room. We were just being ourselves." Ana asked William for his thoughts. He told her, "It was not deep enough, it was still just show and tell." Ana replied, "I know, because that is where we are at. We have to build people up to it. Over time, we will go deeper, but first we have to make it safe." William replied, "I know, I understand. I consider it a step forward that we're even talking about instruction. Plenty of good ideas were shared."

Feedback forms communicated positive sentiments, such as: "sharing best practices contributes to our academic learning environment" and "I felt loving energy in the room without the usual reluctance of these ill-timed PDs." In reflective conversations, staff reiterated that the PD was a positive development. Gabriela was surprised to discover shared practices and an "authentic" mood: "Everyone seemed really, really genuinely interested. And it seemed authentic. A lot of our staff meetings, there's just too much for forced emotion . . . It just felt very comfortable. It felt useful." Asked why the meeting was more "authentic," Gabriela smiled, "Because Ana was talking . . . Ana hasn't betrayed anyone . . . It's really important to be a person of integrity." Megan also reported that she enjoyed the PD more than other meetings of the year:

> I sat through a lot of meetings this year not sharing, where I was just thinking, get me out of this freaking meeting . . . I wanted to do [my presentation] . . . I wanted to show that English isn't always boring . . . Plus I wanted to live up to Ana. She set a high standard.

However, Megan also pointed out that the negative sentiments about the PD scheduling and absences, particularly of the principal, had not evaporated:

> Someone said to me, 'why do we have those stupid meetings right before we're going on Spring break' . . . And guess who wasn't there? . . . It got a lot of negative press. Not the actual [content]—most people were like, 'hey it went pretty well, but did you notice?' Oh, hard not to.

To Vanessa, meanwhile, ensuring that students felt connected to school was the highest priority. "For middle school kids, that is the key, I swear, to everything." This called for non-stop effort to organize motivating events for students that contributed to a sense of community:

> We literally left here at 10:00 on Friday . . . And then this morning seven o'clock schedule goes out. We are getting ready for play practice every day this week and every Saturday in between . . . So we're always doing something around here . . . It takes work . . .We don't have helicopter moms here . . . So we have to put things in place.

In Vanessa's vision of a relationship-based school, "being kind to kids is the number one priority," and teacher kindness was not something that PD could address: "How do you make someone compassionate? You can't . . . not through professional development."

Vanessa recognized challenges with PD attendance and perceived that to some extent this was due to the schedule—"And that is intentional, that was set by SBDM," she said. She predicted that the schedule would be difficult to change because some staff preferred holding onto "wink days" or wanted to use the time "for planning things for the kids." By the end of the year, Vanessa told of a "contentious" SBDM meeting when the idea of changing the coming year's PD schedule was broached. One disgruntled member was on the "attack" for missteps in meeting procedures and had invited district monitors to attend. The monitoring and the staff member's aggressive "body language" had created an "extremely uncomfortable" climate that had prompted other committee members to "shut down." Vanessa explained that, amid this tension, SBDM voted to keep the same minimum day PD schedule for the next year.

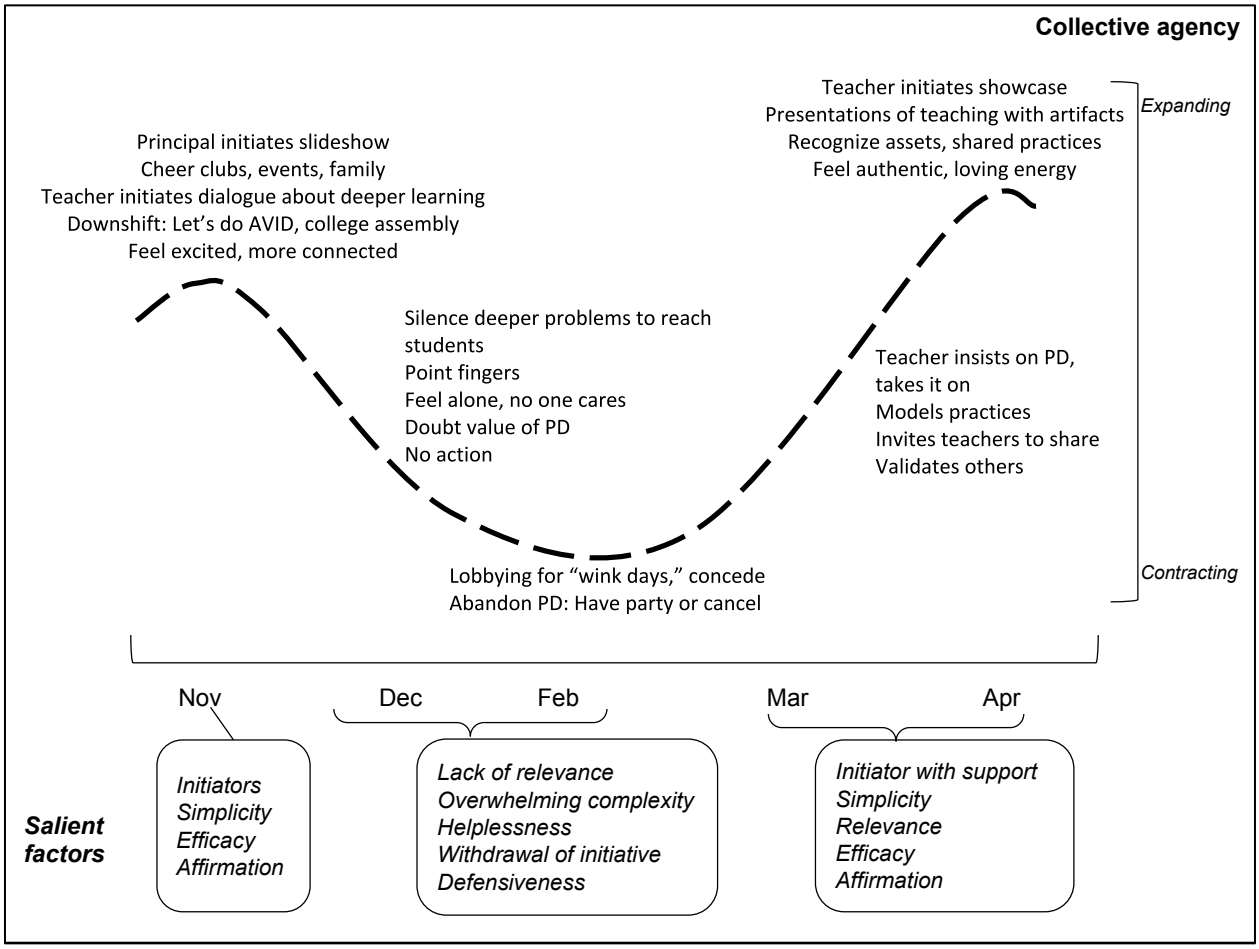
Analysis of the Staff PD Meetings

According to the literature on effective PD for teachers, the PD organized at Jackson could be said to be weak. In part, the weakness was tied to the structural set up: With only two full days and five two-hour after school sessions, allocated time for PD was limited. The PD was also weak in content. Many activities offered only ice breakers and informational announcements that entailed neither professional learning nor pedagogical dialogue. As one staff member lamented, the PDs felt "drive by." Despite an espoused focus on "deeper learning," the content offered across the meetings tended to be discrete and disconnected chunks. At some PD events, activities prompted teachers to apply the learning to their practice, but these were isolated efforts that did not focus on a particular problem of practice. The PDs also did not offer training in a prescriptive program, as can be effective in lower capacity schools.

However, if considering the processes that enabled any collective agency to develop, even if these processes did not lead to such criteria of effectiveness, it becomes possible to see clear efforts at times to use staff PDs to help the faculty become a more affirmed body, accomplish tasks, address problems, and increase staff members' satisfaction. When comparing critical episodes at which the group interactions suggested the strongest energy towards expanding or contracting collective agency across the year, a set of key contributing factors becomes evident. As a visual aid, Figure 5 represents these critical episodes and relevant turning points as a curve over time. Salient contributing factors suggested by the conceptual framework are noted on the x-axis, as explained in the discussion below.

Figure 5

Curve of Expanding and Contracting Collective Agency and Salient Factors for the Staff PDs



A surge towards collective agency was evident at the November PD Day when the principal decided to try something to boost staff morale and pride. She presented a slideshow celebrating the schools' array of student and community events and framing the school as a "family." The slideshow demonstrated the successful efforts of various staff members to put together highly attended student events and large-scale community events garnering local media attention—revealing hard work and accomplishments that the staff did not know about before. This afforded a newfound sense of efficacy and affirmed the staff's passions to build community and serve the whole child, and the staff rejoiced. The vice principal pumped up the affirmation when proclaiming the school "on the way to becoming #1." Amid the glow, another staff member stepped up to host a dialogue about how to make deeper learning a reality. One teacher used this opportunity to raise concerns about students' struggles to manage teachers' varied expectations, suggesting that the faculty do something about it by spreading a simple note-taking procedure from the school's study skills program, AVID. When this idea was met with approval, another concern was raised about whether students knew enough about college, and someone suggested the faculty host a college assembly. Having downshifted the complexity of "deeper learning" to the prospect of spreading AVID practices and an assembly, eager discussion

emerged about the possibilities. The principal and others noted a sense of increased connectedness and excited "energy."

However, this surge proved short-lived. In the classroom, formidable challenges to reach "low," "defeated," and "fragile" students mounted. While the PD had offered an opportunity to voice concerns about how they might bring about deeper learning amid such challenges, the staff kept silent about these deeper problems that suggested more fundamental struggles with their teaching competence. Behind the scenes, members criticized the PDs for not doing enough to train staff in "best practices," but when asked what could be done about it, they pointed fingers at each other. Some felt that the principal did not do enough to set "vision" while others said their colleagues were too fearful or not interested enough to discuss instruction. Experiencing "piecemeal" PD meetings that seemed irrelevant to their most vexing urgencies, the staff felt alone with overwhelming challenges, and helplessness set in. Despite the excited "energy" about spreading AVID and a college assembly, no one acted on these ideas, nor any other ideas, that might have improved the relevance and quality of PD.

After the required PD days were completed and a series of minimum days scheduled around holiday breaks was set to begin, collective agency appeared to nose-dive. Perceiving that "no one" cared about what happened in their classrooms, a defense mechanism took hold: The usefulness of the meetings was called into doubt, and the staff abandoned the charge. Feeling justified in asking for "breaks" from "stupid meetings" that were poorly scheduled and overloading on top of "everything we do around here," the staff lobbied for "wink days." The principal responded in kind with more defensiveness: Doubting the value of PD as well as her authority, feeling abandoned by the ILT, she withdrew her leadership and conceded. December's PD became a winter party. At the lowest point of the year for PD, widespread staff absences on the day prompted cancellation of the February minimum day PD at the last minute.

This trend of avoiding and cancelling PD might have continued were it not for one teacher who decided to take the reins to do something about PD in the spring. Passionate about PD and seeing its potential to help the school, Ana pushed back against the "wink days" and silences about instruction. Instead, she boldly introduced herself as a demonstration teacher and opened up a discussion about the classroom—modeling her teaching ideas, calling upon colleagues to share their own practices, and validating them. When lobbying for wink days and pressure to cancel PDs continued, she insisted to the principal that PD events be held, and the principal supported her.

An upward push towards collective agency swelled in the final PD, when Ana hosted a faculty showcase in April. Having held firm against constant lobbying to cancel PDs, Ana asked teachers to undertake a simple task: come prepared to present about their teaching and share artifacts of student work. Right up until the start of the event, Ana was uncertain if her colleagues would show or participate. Given teachers' active fears of exposing their practice and the faculty's discord, it was a risk to ask teachers to present about their instruction in a public forum. As it turned out, many staff attended and presented, with several including artifacts of student work. But these were not presentations in which teachers faced up to and shared how they solved problems. Ana set the tone to keep the presentations affirming—complimenting colleagues and pointing out features she appreciated in their teaching. In turn, colleagues expressed excitement over newly discovered shared passions for project-based learning and classroom meditation. From the presentations and the artifacts, the staff recognized colleagues' expertise and student strengths, boosting a sense of efficacy. Staff beamed over the

"authenticity" of a PD that revealed "loving energy" and offered "best practices" that others might try, fueled by Ana's "integrity" and "high standard."

But this surge towards collective agency remained fragile. Although producing a feeling of accomplishment and affirmation, this "authentic" PD still left the staff adrift and exposed to the formidable problems of the school. "Drive by" PDs that were "show and tell" were not enough to attenuate a sense of being overwhelmed, and the conspicuous absence of the principal reinforced a sense that they were still alone. Thus, even though April's showcase seemed to offer a valued experience, defensiveness returned: When SBDM had an opportunity to vote on a more conducive schedule for PD, a preference for wink days prevailed.

Looking across these ups and downs, a struggle for collective agency—and the interplay of factors that underlay its core tensions—becomes apparent. A push towards collective agency emerged when someone—the principal or other staff members—was willing to grab the reins to do something about a challenge in the school, despite the risks entailed, and offered simple PD tasks that emphasized affirmation of the faculty's competence and worth. This was sufficient to provide short bursts of connection and efficacy that seemed to pull the faculty together and gave the feeling of doing something to address problems, prompting some signs of excitement and appreciation that signaled satisfaction. However, these surges receded quickly when it turned out that isolated shows of initiative around simple and affirming PD activities had little connection to, and little chance of attenuating, the complex problems amongst the faculty and in the classroom. While the PDs sometimes offered opportunities for staff dialogue or moved closer to the classroom, rather than disclose the full nature of their problems and use the PDs to try to understand the complexity, staff kept them silent and avoided the complexity by focusing on the promise of simple solutions and "show and tell." When the series of minimum days began, the staff felt adrift and alone with problems that challenged their core competence and turned to defensive avoidance and abandonment of PD.

However, even when events suggested that collective agency had collapsed, new efforts arose to strive towards it again. These efforts show core desires to have their work recognized and appreciated, to feel connected to each other so as not to bear their challenges alone, and to feel effectual as a faculty and as teachers who can reach their students. The limitations of the ways they acted upon these desires suggest clues about what might help them develop further: They want to show initiative but need this initiative to have support from others; they want to address consequential problems, but they cannot handle complexity; and they need validation of their good intentions and small successes to shore up their core sense of worth and competence. In this way, forays into and limitations of efforts to develop collective agency point the way towards supports that might be put into place to develop into their next level of work.

Faculty Meetings

For monthly faculty meetings, the union contract affords control to school site administrators, but specifies that staff meetings should be 75 minutes on the first full week of the month, and advises that meeting content prioritize "school site decision-making, staff input, and dissemination of essential information."

August 24

The first faculty meeting of the year was the week before school. Shortly beforehand, Vanessa prepared an agenda including a review of meeting norms and the staff handbook.

Similar to staff PDs, faculty meetings took place in Mark's classroom, and staff followed an arriving routine to sign in and collect the agenda and handouts. One member was absent.

Vanessa initiated the meeting with an icebreaker and then started the norms discussion. Vanessa noted that she had added the item to today's meeting "after noticing some staff violating our norms at our PD" two days earlier. Vanessa explained, "I want everyone to own the norms because I don't want to be the only one being the norms police." She asked whether staff wanted to keep the norm: "Professionalism: Accountability, Be Punctual, Present & Focused, No Electronics/Work." One teacher disagreed with "no electronics," explaining that there were personal emergencies that justified using one's phone, such as checking text messages about a sick pet. Vanessa conceded that the norm was created in years past "to convey the expectation not to be grading papers during our meetings," adding that "maybe now that there is more trust, we can adapt that." Someone suggested revising the norm to "use technology appropriately," and others agreed. Other staff members requested changing "accountability" to "hold yourself and others to shared understandings," and changing "professionalism" to "integrity," explaining, "The point is really about trusting everyone here to be adults." Vanessa agreed to these requests, but reiterated that she wanted staff to speak up if norms were violated. Vanessa asked what the staff thought about being "punctual, present and focused." The faculty agreed those should remain in place.

A volunteer read aloud the revised norm: "Integrity: Hold yourselves and others to shared understandings; be punctual, present & focused; use electronics appropriately." Various staff indicated approval.

Vanessa moved on to review the staff handbook, informing staff of school policies and answering clarifying questions. Vanessa pointed out that the monthly faculty meetings would start 15 minutes later this year to reduce lateness. One staff member protested that this would cause meetings to run too late and requested for a "five minute passing period like the students get." Others agreed, and Vanessa asked the staff to mark the change in their handbooks.

After reviewing the rest of the handbook, Vanessa thanked and dismissed the faculty.

September 12

A few days prior, Vanessa planned an agenda with announcements, a district-requested survey, and a required staff training. Staff arrived on time. One staff member was absent.

Vanessa began the meeting with a review of the agenda and asked volunteers to read aloud the school's mission, vision, and (now revised) norms printed on the agenda. The vision statement read: "Jackson Middle School has a shared mission where we set high expectations for academic, social and emotional learning. We provide students with the 21st Century Skills necessary for high school, college and career, and civic readiness." The mission statement read: "Jackson Middle School is committed to encouraging and supporting student achievement and excellence in a safe learning environment by developing positive relationships within the school, families, and community."

Next, Vanessa shared announcements. Referring to a handout of state test scores for Whitman's middle schools, Vanessa pointed out that Jackson had "exceeded" two others. "So Jackson is making some moves." Nicole added, "And our enrollment numbers show it." Vanessa agreed, "Our classes are overflowing, and we are one of the few schools with this 'problem.' It shows that we're on the move." The staff cheered.

Next, Vanessa asked staff to complete the district survey, and Darryl facilitated a Mandated Reporter training. After this, the staff was dismissed. There were no action items.

In reflective conversations, several staff expressed that, despite Vanessa's proclamations of a school with "more trust" that was "on the move," there were widespread problems with "relational trust," claiming that "doors are so very closed" and "we are divided." Some staff tied the climate to the school's negative reputation. As Vincent expressed it: "The school has kind of a negative stigma about it, being lowest scoring." Vanessa similarly said that the faculty's sense of being "beaten up all the time" was why she focused on spreading positivity:

> Jackson has always been the school that's like the lowest. Everybody knows that . . . It's so hard to get out of the hole, when you're getting beaten up all the time . . . until you say, 'No, no, it's different,' and you keep sending that message out, then things aren't going to change.

October 3

A few days before, Vanessa planned an agenda: positive announcements and reviewing mandatory health and safety policies. The meeting started on time. Two staff were absent.

Vanessa started the meeting as usual with a review of the agenda, norms, mission and vision. For announcements, Vanessa shared that the school had secured grants to pay for a Saturday Math Academy and English tutors. A student support professional announced funding to offer basic medical services for students on site. Staff applauded each announcement.

Then, Vanessa stated, "We have come to the training portion of our meeting." For the remainder of the meeting, small groups read and discussed handouts of health and safety policies (e.g., technology use, blood borne pathogens, field trips) and then gave short presentations to summarize the information. After this, Vanessa thanked and dismissed the staff.

In reflective conversations, some staff expressed dissatisfaction with the faculty meetings. To some, the meetings were not well-planned. As Greg saw it, "Admin has a lot going on, and things get left by the wayside." Some expressed said the meetings did not encourage sufficient faculty voice. As one said, "We should help people have a conversation as a staff, to find out what we need—instead, we are always running agendas designed by someone else." According to William, "We never really 'meet,' we're just talked to."

Some questioned why faculty meetings were used for mandated trainings. As Ana put it "I mean, the meetings are kind of bad. Why are we having the meeting if we're just going to do the sex ed training?" William explained this as a response to union protections of teachers' time:

> The only time the principal has control of time is during that hour and 15 minutes . . . If they say you must do this on your own, the union responds back, 'And when will the check be coming?'

To Vanessa perceived, the systems that she had put in place for the faculty were a substantial improvement over years prior:

> When I first came here, there was nothing. No systems in place. No staff handbook, nothing. And my friends were like, isn't that something that the district provides? No. It's all down to me . . . I still have a lot of—what do they call it? PTSD. [laughs] This place was no joke . . . It was just riddled with gangs and teachers who didn't care about kids . . . And any time the teachers would get together, they were always upset about something . . . because Jackson was a dumping ground for so long.

Gabriela shared a similar view—a history of "bigger stuff" made faculty meetings seem trivial. She described a litany of transgressions: A teacher who had sexually exposed himself, another who had "verbally abused" children, and a third arrested on site for defrauding her colleagues out of thousands of dollars. Gabriela also described "ethical problems" with past

principals, like "having sex with a teacher after hours" and drinking at school. "So, you know, it makes the stuff around here easy to accept. Because bigger stuff has gone on, right?"

November 7

A few days before, Vanessa planned an agenda with positive announcements and a required police department training. Staff arrived on time. Two were absent.

Vanessa began with the usual reading aloud of the norms, mission, and vision. Then, a police officer trained the staff in using a new phone application for communicating with first responders during a crisis. This training lasted for nearly the entire meeting. The officer reviewed procedures for marking one's status in the system during a crisis. The staff attended carefully, asking clarifying questions, practicing using the application and following the procedures.

Near the end, the district superintendent stopped by to announce the passing of a local bond measure for facilities upgrades. Jackson was first in line to benefit. The staff broke out into loud cheers and applause. The superintendent asked for questions, and one staff member called out, "How about administrator of the year for Vanessa!" The staff applauded and cheered more.

In a reflective conversation, Vanessa said that she was "deeply surprised" by the call for the administrator award and had heard that some teachers had lobbied the district "to make the nomination happen." To Vanessa, this was not really about her leadership, but about "wanting the school to be recognized." Vanessa explained, "The staff feel like no matter what we do, we get overlooked again and again. It gets to feel like, 'What more do we have to do?'" Later, Vanessa found out that she would not be nominated. "All hell is going to break loose. It will be another crowning moment [of defeat]. We're moving, and no one is recognizing it."

December 5

A week before, Vanessa planned an agenda with positive announcements. In a reflective conversation, she described good news she planned to highlight:

> After the disappointment of being passed over for admin of year, something else fell in our lap—Jackson has a [student who won a city award]. One of ten in the district. For middle schools, it's Jackson and Washington—the Crown Jewel of the district. So amazing. This is even better than getting admin of the year . . . So important to keep informing staff of our progress and what a great school we are.

Meanwhile, Megan had been seeking opportunities to further the adoption of school-wide "common practices," now that she was no longer a member of the ILT. After hearing from various staff who were interested in incorporating Cornell Notes into their classrooms, Megan offered to organize a presentation for staff at the December faculty meeting about this. Vanessa had agreed.

The meeting started on time. Four staff were absent. Vanessa was called away, so Darryl opened the meeting in the usual way. Megan had arranged for six of her students to lead the training. Megan started, "We are trying to encourage common strategies in the school, and today we are going to talk about Cornell Notes. Our student experts are here because they are the best ones to teach us." The students shared why Cornell Notes were important: "It opens a deeper level of thinking"; "it keeps all of my thoughts organized"; "it's very beneficial when I am studying." The faculty smiled and listened intently.

The students passed around an article and a template for Cornell Notes. One student used the document camera to demonstrate how to fill out the Cornell Notes, and prompted the faculty

to take notes about the article. As the staff worked with focus, the students fanned out around the room as teachers checked in with them, "What do you think of this? Am I doing it correctly?"

Calling the teachers back to attention, each student took a turn reviewing their Cornell Notes about the article on the document camera, explaining how they had decided what to write. After this, the presentation was over, and the staff applauded, calling out appreciations: "Our kids are great speakers!" and "I learned a lot from them." Just then, Vanessa arrived and commented how sorry she was to have missed the student presentation.

Finally, Vanessa shared the announcement about the Jackson student who won a city award and that this accomplishment was being celebrated with a colorful banner at the front of the school. Staff applauded and cheered. After this, Vanessa thanked and dismissed the staff.

In a reflective conversation, Vanessa reiterated her regret to have missed the student presentation, as she had picked up on the enthusiasm. "That set a good precedent—it should be the students leading us because . . . the teachers are more interested." Megan similarly reported about the faculty, "They loved it," and concluded, "We might want to consider using students to teach the staff more in the future, as it gives more power to promoting common goals."

Despite these reflections, for the remainder of the meetings of the year, the topic of Cornell Notes was not revisited, and there were no further student presentations. In a reflective conversation, Vanessa said that she found it hard to stay on top of planning amid the constant effort needed to cover classrooms for six open positions and chronically absent teachers: "That's a lot. It's hard to keep up and maintain continuity when you don't have all the team players." Other staff also reported that the effort to cover classrooms was consuming significant time and attention. According to Gabriela, "Some pockets of campus have total chaos due to the teachers who are out and the long-term subs . . . We deal with that pretty much every day."

January 9

A few days before, Vanessa planned an icebreaker, a required district survey, and a discussion of the California School Dashboard data. At the meeting, four staff were absent.

First, Vanessa reviewed the agenda, facilitated an icebreaker, and had the teachers complete the district survey. Then, Vanessa presented the dashboard results, similar to how she had presented this to the ILT. First, Vanessa discussed the red rating for suspensions. "When I first saw this data, it reminded me of how so often this year, people have told me how the school feels different, and we are having so many fewer behavior problems." Mark commented, "It makes sense that we had an increase in suspensions. There was a lot going on last year." Others agreed. Reviewing the ELA and Math results for Jackson, Vanessa explained, "ELA was in the yellow, and look, where is Washington? They are in the orange! That's right, we outperformed even Washington in ELA this year." In Math, Vanessa pointed out "a slight dip" in Math, "as we went from orange to red." However, she showed that three of the four feeder elementary schools "were in the orange" for Math. "So it makes sense—if we had kids coming in the orange, we can do our best, but in the end we can only work with what we get, right?" Vanessa reminded staff that 83% of Jackson's students were "socioeconomically disadvantaged," and pointed out that Adams, "the school most like us" had "unfortunately found themselves in the red in pretty much everything." Vanessa concluded, "I know it's not always nice to compare ourselves like that, but you know, if it helps us see the positive, then I think sometimes we have to."

At this point, time was up, and Vanessa thanked and dismissed the staff.

In reflective conversations, staff reported dissatisfaction with the dashboard conversation. According to Mark, "That's the kind of data that some policymaker who has never set foot in a

classroom or never taught one day in their lives thought would be helpful. It's not." Others felt that Vanessa's framing of the data minimized the school's problems. Ana complained, "Why don't we talk about, like, the problems we're having? It's like the testing numbers don't matter." Connie similarly expressed, "If we were frank about what we need to do, there's so much we could do. Instead all we hear is 'we're so good' and 'everyone wants to come here.' We're in a constant state of denial." Gabriela did not appreciate the comparison to other schools: "'Oh, we're better than [the other school].' And that's the takeaway. Like, oh, ok, everything's ok."

Vanessa reported frustration with the uneven attendance at required meetings, but was not sure what could be done about it. Improving upon that was limited by the faculty's sense of responsibility: "They always look at me and think I have to step in there and stop them. But I am only one person, and it cannot all be down to me." Vanessa did not perceive authority to tighten the reins; when she confronted teachers, "They're like, 'Well, write me up.'" Vanessa explained that, due to these dynamics, when it came to trying to influence staff behavior, she relied on supporting the initiative of a few passionate teachers, and appealing to others to join in:

> At Jackson, it's feast or famine. You've got the [ones who work their] ass off . . . who just put in their heart and soul . . . And that's where I would like all my staff members to be . . . You know that that kind of passion, it's that kind of desire to support . . . And then you have like some who are just here just checking in . . . I have to work with what I have, right? . . . So what I do is, I try to get people included, I guess I try to say, "Hey, we're doing all these great things, become part of it, you'll see."

February 6

A few weeks before the meeting, Vanessa had planned an agenda: a mandatory training in administering an epinephrine injection in the case of severe allergic reactions; positive announcements; and Ana's first lesson demonstration. At the meeting, five staff were absent. The allergy training ran 20 minutes long. Then, Vanessa shared her announcements, revealing the school's new marketing brochures and website that highlighted the "full music program, ballet folklorico, annual community events, and cheerleading." The preview of the brochure and website prompted much interest, "oohs" and "ahhs," and applause.

Then, Vanessa introduced Ana: "The moment we've all been waiting for!" The staff applauded again. As described in the previous section, Ana then modeled her "hook" activity, prompting much excitement. After this, Vanessa thanked the staff and dismissed them.

In reflective conversations, several staff reported appreciation for the presentations that Megan and Ana had organized during faculty meetings, which had been "inspiring," "very cool," and "super interesting." However, many grumbled about how "PD" was creeping into faculty meetings, which they found overloading on top of other PD meetings and made it seem that they no longer had an opportunity to convene as a faculty. As Nicole put it, "Is this overkill? Enough is enough . . . What happened to our staff meetings?" According to Ryan, "Our staff meetings have become PDs now. There are no more staff meetings."

The perception of PD "overkill" occurred alongside overload from increasing calls to cover other teachers' classes during lesson preparation periods. Gabriela reported, "I have been called in to sub during every single prep period in the last few weeks. It's hard." Megan reported that she had planned to use a preparation period to observe Ana teach, but her efforts were thwarted multiple times when she was asked to cover for an absent teacher instead.

March 6

The week before, Vanessa planned an agenda mostly devoted to another lesson demonstration, this time by Henry. For the rest of the agenda, Vanessa planned more positive announcements. However, on the day, she made a last minute adjustment for a district request to gather staff input for the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). The LCAP was part of the state accountability policy that required districts and schools to develop local improvement goals with input from various stakeholders. The superintendent had asked principals to host a dialogue and survey using a prepared set of materials.

At the meeting, the faculty arrived on time; two were absent. After the usual review of the agenda, Vanessa asked the staff to write about a set of prompts using materials she had been provided by the district: *What words come to mind when you think about Whitman schools? What is one thing you love about our schools? One thing you wish we could improve? What do you want our district to be known for in three years?* "Take five minutes—no, let's say eight," Vanessa said, "I'd like us to have a serious discussion." The staff wrote quietly, and then Vanessa asked them to get into groups of three to discuss their answers.

Then, Vanessa asked the staff to share. About words that describe Whitman, staff shared: "diverse"; "disparities between schools"; and "undeserved negative reputation." Ryan added: "There is this negative view of the district from the outside that seems to be mostly based on test scores. I hate that because our students are more intelligent than that shows." About what they loved, staff shared: "passionate teachers"; "our students are real" and "super loveable"; and "we have good support systems for kids." One teacher added, "I love our aloha spirit—our sense of community, how everyone helps each other." Miguel agreed, "Our students feel that school is 'for them.'" About what Whitman should be known for, Ana said: "A better reputation overall so we can attract people who want to stay. But all of that is no comment on us here at Jackson. I'm really proud of our staff and the buy-in of our teachers here to do what is best for kids."

At this point, the discussion had taken much of the meeting time. Vanessa said, "Sorry I hijacked the meeting. I saw how engaged you were and realized it's very important for us to reflect on how we feel as a site." Vanessa asked the staff to complete an online survey.

With 15 minutes left, Henry gave an abbreviated version of his demonstration, modeling a lesson in which he guided students through an inquiry about the life of a famous historical figure. As Henry concluded his presentation, the staff applauded, and the meeting was adjourned.

In a reflective conversation, Vanessa said she was "pleasantly surprised" by the positive tone of the LCAP discussion, given that she had not been "in control" of it:

> It was not one of those "bash the district, bash the school"—and that's been a long time in coming here because forums like that, I've tried to avoid . . . You know me. All conversations are going to be positive if I can control it. And this really was out of my control . . . It was good to get the feedback from the teachers and hear that we're on the right track . . . It was a pleasant surprise . . . It's a new day here at Jackson, for sure.

Other staff also reported that the positive sentiments shared at the faculty meeting reflected a genuinely improved climate and shared values. Ana said she had noticed "a nearly 180-degree turn over course of the last 18 months in staff climate, feeling more proud and more connected." Ana added that, in other venues, the staff had agreed to shared commitments as a community-based, student-centered school: "We discussed it. That's our thing as a school . . . It's about their emotional needs. It's about their stability. It's about their grit. It's about everything." Henry, a veteran district teacher but new to Jackson this year, found the staff's positive expressions

resonant with "great" morale and a student-centered approach he had appreciated all year: "As a new teacher, I've been very welcomed here . . . I like the 'kid mentality' here."

However, not everyone was convinced that climate and morale had improved. According to Gabriela, "The negative energy is very strong here."

April 10

Two weeks beforehand, Vanessa planned an agenda with positive announcements and a review of state testing procedures. Vanessa started the meeting on time, in the usual way. Three staff members were absent. For announcements, Vanessa thanked the staff that had helped organize a school play and had launched a new Filipino Club. Reminding the staff again of the Jackson student who had won the city award, Vanessa shared that the school had been recognized recently at a district meeting for the most reduction in chronic absenteeism. These developments had inspired her to offer a pizza party "as a little incentive" to students who were "close" to perfect attendance. Vanessa added, "Even though we know for our kids it's not really about the pizza. Our kids want to be here, and that's why we've seen the improvement because of everything we're doing that make them feel the community and connection."

Then, Mark reviewed procedures for upcoming standardized testing, and answered teachers' questions. In closing, Vanessa announced that the office staff were planning to help organize a "pep rally" at lunch to give students test tips and provide positive messaging, like "we believe in you." After this, Vanessa dismissed the staff.

May 8

Ahead of May's faculty meeting, staff lobbied for an early release from the meeting to set up for Open House afterwards, at which parents would visit exhibitions of students' learning from the year. Meanwhile, Ana had requested that Missy provide a workshop about meditation in the classroom, which staff had shown interest in at the last PD. Vanessa honored these requests.

Vanessa started the meeting: "We are going to move through our agenda pretty quickly today because I know you all want to get to Open House. We have something of a skeleton crew here because there is so much going on." Seven staff members were absent. Missy presented research about the benefits of meditation and led staff through a guided visualization. Staff expressed appreciation for the demonstration, describing personal experiences with the benefits of meditation for themselves as well as for their "hyper" students. Several reiterated that they had been incorporating meditation in the classroom because "the kids were asking for it."

With that, Vanessa released the staff for Open House. Nicole announced procedures for the faculty to vote for their favorite Science Fair projects, to be entered into a district-wide contest. A few weeks later, Nicole sent a congratulatory email announcing that three Jackson students had won top prizes in the district Science Fair.

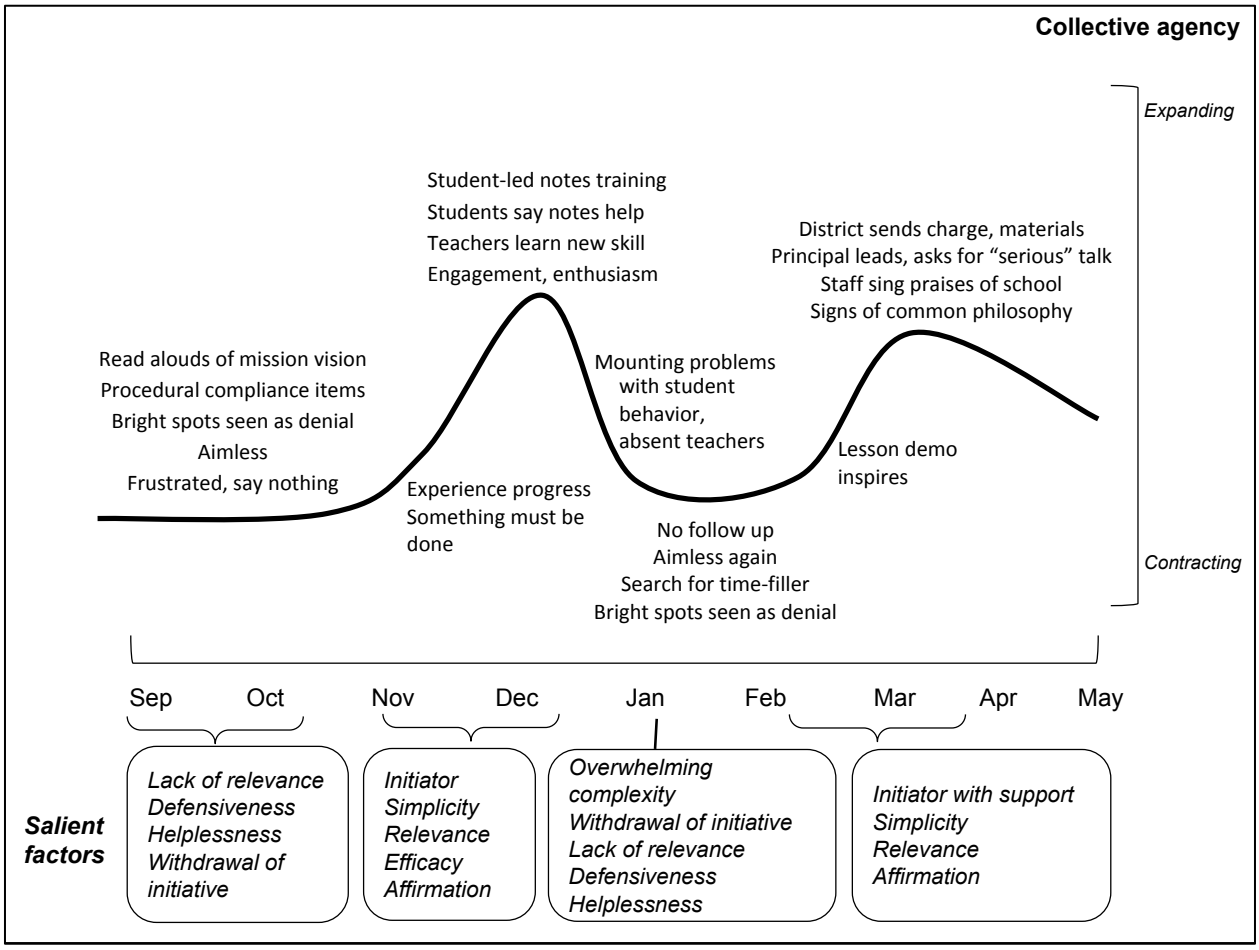
Analysis of the Faculty Meetings

From the perspective of the school improvement literature, Jackson's faculty meetings could be deemed generally weak. Structurally, a required monthly meeting of 75 minutes may have served well as a venue for cultivating a desired culture, developing a vision of teaching and learning, or advancing school improvement efforts. In practice, however, the meetings were ad hoc, did not communicate any goals, and, in response to external regulations and union pressures, much of the content of the meetings was devoted to compliance items.

However, a closer study of the fine-grained processes of group interaction shows efforts at times to develop collective agency during the faculty meetings—and times when such efforts receded. An examination of critical episodes during which events signaled most keenly that efforts to develop collective agency were expanding or contracting, and the turning points in between, revealed a confluence of contributing factors. Figure 6 shows these key events on a curve over time and notes the salient factors that contributed. The discussion below explains.

Figure 6

Curve of Expanding and Contracting Collective Agency and Salient Factors for Faculty Meetings



When the year started out, collective agency appeared constrained. In September and October, most of the meeting time was ceded for items that had little clear purpose or relevance beyond maintaining legitimacy. The faculty was prompted to read a mission and vision statement subscribing to "high expectations" and "developing positive relationships," and norms of "integrity," "equity" and "collaboration." However, most of the time at these two meetings was used for compliance items with no relationship to the mission, vision, or norms—a training on reporting sexual abuse and time for reading district health and safety policies. The principal's attempts to boost morale with announcements about bumps in enrollment and test scores came across to the faculty as face-saving and denial in the face of overwhelming problems of a divided

staff stuck in low performance. However, pointing to union constraints and a history of "bigger stuff," neither the principal nor other faculty took initiative to think through the meetings. Frustrations simmered about aimless and "bad meetings" at which they were merely "talked to." The staff kept silent about the school's problems and their criticisms of the meetings as helplessness set in and everyone resigned to the situation as acceptable enough.

A push to develop collective agency started in November, when a surprise visit from the superintendent told of new resources coming to the school. Feeling a rush of progress and affirmation, the faculty eagerly called out for the principal to win an award. When the award was not forthcoming, the principal seized upon another bright spot to stoke the faculty's affirmation with announcements and a banner about a student award. The staff rejoiced.

After this, this push surged higher when one staff member determined that something had to be done about the school's performance problems and fragmentation. She turned to a simple solution: bring her students in to make the case for the usefulness of an easy note-taking strategy from AVID and to teach their teachers how to use it. This simple approach turned out to be powerful. The students spoke proudly about how the strategy helped them to become stronger learners, instructed teachers to try them out, monitored their learning, and shared their own notes as models. Feeling a rush of efficacy—in learning an easy technique that might actually be relevant for problems they faced in their daily work in the classroom—the faculty engaged eagerly, showering their student "teachers" with questions and appreciation and diligently trying out the new practice. The skillful and caring instruction provided by their students impressed everyone and affirmed the school's potential. The principal took note of the palpable enthusiasm, seeing promise in more student-led presentations in the future.

However, this swell of energy soon deflated when there was no move to follow up. Despite the excitement about the note-taking strategy and student-led presentations, neither idea resurfaced at future meetings. Instead, in January, amid experiences of being overwhelmed by mounting and complex problems with staff absences and student behavior, the principal searched for something simple to fill the faculty meeting time. She decided to present accountability data—with no clear intention. As she pointed out bright spots and deflected negative marks as unfair judgment or due to factors beyond their control, she hoped to boost morale, but the staff interpreted this as another example of denial. Facing a number of unfilled positions, teachers calling in sick, and a shortage of substitute teachers, teachers' and the principal's time and attention became consumed by covering classes. Collective agency appeared to drain as staff absences at meetings increased, and helplessness arose. The principal felt she had insufficient authority to compel attendance, and with so many open staff positions, she felt alone in her efforts to plan. Meanwhile, teachers noted "pockets of chaos" in the school.

A new surge of efforts to develop collective agency began to emerge in February. In a determination to try to do something about the "bad" meetings to make them more relevant and conducive to staff development, the principal had the idea to start up lesson demonstrations. A colleague took up the charge and put together a strong presentation. Offered an activity more relevant to their daily work and seeing the impressive expertise of a colleague on display, the faculty expressed a rush of affirmation and became "inspired."

By the next meeting, the surge towards collective agency swelled higher when the principal used the opportunity of a district-required survey to provide staff an extended time to dialogue about their views of the school and district. Although she usually preferred to "control" faculty discussions to ensure positivity, when the task was communicated as an expectation from the superintendent and made manageable with district-provided materials, the principal took the

risk and even deepened the task, asking for extended time for written reflection and a "serious discussion." To her "pleasant surprise," when the staff was not merely "talked to" but given voice, they responded with a strong expression of school pride. Against external threats—unfair district and state practices that led to inequitable resource distribution and unfair reliance on test scores—they threw up a positive image of themselves as a school with "passionate teachers," "loveable" students, and "aloha spirit." The principal described the experience as "very important." Privately, some staff saw the meeting as evidence of an improving adult climate and the emergence of a shared philosophy as a student-focused school serving the whole child.

However, this swell towards collective agency proved tenuous. After March, some doubted the show of team spirit at the LCAP meeting and perceived the school's "negative energy" to be "strong." Meanwhile, "pockets of chaos" and persistent overwhelming problems in the school went unacknowledged in meetings that offered bright spots announcements, training in state testing, and a demonstration of meditation. At the same time, the faculty made sure that their meetings could not get too close to these problems, lobbying against faculty meetings that felt like "PD."

In sum, for the faculty meetings, a struggle for collective agency emerged in the tension between a focus on compliance and legitimacy and efforts to use the meetings as a venue to try to address the challenges facing them as a faculty. When meetings were ceded to ad hoc trainings in regulatory procedures and positive announcements came across as denial, collective agency appeared constrained. Rather than disclose and address frustrations with aimless and irrelevant meetings, these problems were silenced when, in the face of overwhelming problems in the school, helplessness arose and no one took initiative. A striving to develop collective agency picked up when signs of progress in the school combined with a show of initiative that entailed simple tasks that were more relevant to teachers' needs and that affirmed the school. However, shows of isolated initiative and relevance around simple and affirming tasks were a long way off from enabling the faculty to face up to and address the complex problems of the school. As a result, efforts towards developing collective agency in the faculty meetings were fairly weak and fleeting, usually receding soon after when they were once again overwhelmed by ongoing problems and became pulled back into defensiveness and helplessness.

But the efforts show developmental potential. Simplicity may have reigned but the faculty revealed creative ideas—for example, to bring in the students as teachers—to try to help teachers reach more students. The principal usually avoided staff discussions, but when the district sent an expectation for it and provided clear and manageable tasks, she took up the opportunity with gusto. The faculty frequently complained about fragmentation and tensions, and this shows how they were irked by it. Amid this suffering, they jumped at the chance to become more connected. Might the faculty be able to develop a sustained and expanding collective agency if these desires could be tapped into?

English Language Arts (ELA) Department

Per union contract, ninety minutes of teacher "collaboration time" was provided every Wednesday when students were sent home early, and the use of this time is "teacher directed." It was customary for secondary teachers to use their collaboration time to meet in disciplinary departments. The union contract also stipulated that one department member be elected chair each school year; in practice, this position is not coveted and is usually passed down without a vote.

In Jackson's English Language Arts (ELA) department, the chair typically organized weekly collaboration meetings. Veteran teacher Megan was the incoming ELA chair. The remaining ELA teachers included veteran teacher Gabriela and newly hired novice teachers, Claudia and Greg. Megan invited the History department to join in an attempt to foster inter-departmental collaboration. The History department included chair William and two veteran teachers, Vincent and Henry. By Vanessa's suggestion, Megan also invited Music teacher, Lauren, to join, as she had no other departmental colleagues with whom to collaborate.

August 29

At the first ELA meeting of the year, all ELA teachers, History teachers, and Lauren attended. Megan emailed an agenda three days before that included time to discuss Chromebook and grading policies, and four research-based articles about literacy instruction.

Megan convened the meeting in the faculty lunchroom, pulling tables into a circle. Megan welcomed the group and announced that she was keeping minutes. She reminded the ELA teachers to administer a diagnostic assessment next week, passing around a copy. Using sample questions from the state test, the diagnostic consisted of two texts with multiple choice and short-answer responses, and a prompt to write an essay integrating evidence from both texts.

After reviewing Chromebook cart and grading policies, Megan turned to the assigned research articles. Gabriela admitted, "I didn't read them. I saw 50 pages, and I thought, no way!" Megan suggested, "Just find what is useful." Then, Megan announced that the school librarian quit, and a long conversation ensued about concerns over how students would access books and about large class sizes of up to 47 students. Returning to the research articles, Megan said, "I knew that we'd need more than today for the articles, so keep reading them, see what is useful. Of course, the most pressing thing right now is how we are going to get access to the library."

Meeting time was up. Megan said that she would communicate members' concerns about the library to the administration. That evening, Megan emailed a thank you with her notes.

In a reflective conversation, Megan doubted her plans for next steps would pan out. In the days before the meeting, Megan had asked the ELA teachers to administer the diagnostic so as to provide a baseline for what she and William hoped would become a cross-departmental inquiry focused on student writing. "But I am picking up on a lot of resistance. There was skepticism by teachers who felt it was too hard for the kids." Megan doubted the teachers would administer the diagnostic and share their results, given failed attempts to launch an inquiry in previous years. Thus, Megan thought about alternative starting points and planned to propose a routine of bringing students' writing samples. "I am trying to think about what seems feasible, that people might buy into, that might actually lead us in the direction of instructional improvement."

September 5

The day before, Megan emailed an agenda that included time to discuss diagnostic testing and "a routine of sharing/examining writing samples." Lauren and Claudia were absent.

Megan started on the agenda. "So, how is the diagnostic going in your classrooms?" Each ELA teacher each shared that they had completed one section. William pointed out that the school schedule was changing to rebalance class sizes, and suggested passing on the diagnostics to the next teacher. This prompted a long exchange about how to handle large classes. Megan concluded, "It sounds like we have concerns about class sizes, but we're just kind of rolling with it. Which is ok. Not much we can do about it."

Next, Megan introduced the "writing sample" routine, explaining, "It would be good if we could bring something every week." Gabriela balked, "I don't think we can do it every time we collaborate. Our time gets taken up with so many other things. Once a month would be more realistic." Megan countered, "I don't think that's enough. We have one and a half hours, we can just do 30 minutes." Gabriela claimed, "We didn't have a lot of collaboration meetings last year. People wanted to do other stuff, like grades." Greg asked why meetings did not always happen. William explained, "By contract, we can't tell you what to do. We can tell you that you have to be working with another teacher, and you can decide what that means."

Megan suggested that next week the ELA teachers meet alone to discuss results of the diagnostic, which included a writing sample. No one disagreed. Later, Megan emailed the notes.

September 12

Before the next meeting, Gabriela requested that the department hold a vote for chair. In a reflective conversation, Megan shared that she was quite upset about this move: "People are trying to void our work. One thing that I believe caused this situation is the discussion of the writing routine . . . Gabriela thinks I am pushing my own agenda." Megan emailed an agenda with time to "begin reviewing diagnostic assessments" and "decide/recommend ELA chair."

At the meeting, all ELA teachers attended and brought their diagnostic results. Claudia jump-started the discussion: "I feel like I got better information about my students' writing needs from in-class assignments than I did with this diagnostic." Gabriela agreed: "They were overwhelmed. I could see it just by looking at them." Gabriela and Claudia held up samples on which the writing section was blank or filled with drawings. Gabriela pointed out that many students "are not using both texts in their writing." Others agreed.

Claudia suggested that they hold the vote for chair and asked for clarification about the chair's responsibilities. Gabriela said, "To put together the agenda for these meetings." Megan added, "It should be more collaborative. We have a lot of academic freedom so no one can tell us what we have to do." Claudia requested each person to write down a vote on a slip of paper. Megan jumped in, "First, I wanted you all to see this." She passed around a handout of state test results. "We are in 3rd place [out of 5 middle schools] for ELA. We used to be bottom of the barrel."

The vote results were read: three for Gabriela, one for Megan. Without saying anything, Megan packed up. Claudia turned to Gabriela, "As chair, what do you want for us this year?" Gabriela replied, "I want to work with really simple texts to start with. This diagnostic has no color." Greg added, "And the stories are boring." Claudia agreed, "It needs to be more exciting." Megan said good-bye and left, and the other members agreed to adjourn.

In a reflective conversation, Gabriela explained her decision to call for a vote:

> I know I hurt Megan's feelings, but I felt like it was the right thing to do. I want to support the new teachers with a positive and collaborative department . . . I am tired of the excuses given in the last years about why we can't collaborate and why we can't share things . . . Megan has never given us anything, any materials, anything . . . And that is really my number one focus this year, having new teachers . . . There is a sentiment that's being expressed that we should focus on being very rigorous . . . but for the sake of the new teachers, I want to be open . . . I haven't had one peaceful, cohesive, professional English department here since I've been here. This is my 11th year here . . . That's why my goal is like, I just want to be supportive . . . but I am worried it may mean that I just shot the department in the foot. Now there's bad blood.

In a separate reflective conversation, Megan said the experience of being voted out had been "heartbreaking," had "crossed a boundary," and had revealed fundamental incompatibilities:

> The other ELA teachers do not know their content well enough . . . I don't think some of my team members have any passion for what they do for English . . . I like setting paces, but if you don't have a crew to back you up, the boat's not going to go anywhere . . . I refuse to mend fences or play nice. I refuse to go to those [ELA] meetings . . . It's not collaboration . . . It's some sort of forced meeting that people think they have to go to.

Over time, Megan decided that the conflict had been a "blessing": "It freed me to reach out for collaborations with other like-minded people . . . I'm doing it without it being forced."

September 19

Taking up her new role as chair, Gabriela emailed out agendas in advance, continuing to include members of William's department for several weeks. Gabriela also invited Lauren and SPED chair, Faye, who sometimes attended. Megan and William, however, never joined another meeting. Gabriela's first agenda included time to "review the pacing guide for quarter 1" and "reviewing diagnostics." Like all agendas going forward, the agenda also included, "Any needs, concerns, questions" and ended with the refrain, "Please bring an open mind and an open heart."

Gabriela convened the meeting in her classroom at student desks arranged into a circle. Greg arrived on time. Claudia had gone home sick. Gabriela and Greg discussed how they discovered that his classes have been deliberately "overloaded" with students "who are 2.0 and below" (in grade point averages). Gabriela explained that Megan had arranged this with the counselor so that she could have a secret "advanced" class. (In reflective conversations, Megan admitted she had done so.) "Who would do this to a brand new teacher?" Gabriela exclaimed, explaining that she had advocated to Vanessa that the schedules be adjusted, but a district administrator advised against more schedule changes. Greg replied, "I see it as a good opportunity for me to learn and practice classroom management skills."

Next, Gabriela reviewed the district pacing guide, which organized the curriculum into units focused on a different writing type each quarter. The first quarter was focused on "narrative writing." But Gabriela cautioned, "Keep in mind, I have not started any of this yet. I am starting with building our class culture and teach them about 'growth mindset." Gabriela described how she taught writing: "We never sit down and do full blown start to finish in my class. We chunk it into paragraphs. Essays are overwhelming for them. A lot them come in with learned passivity because they've been failing for years. You want to undo that and give them hope." Looking over the pacing guide, Greg asked, "So when do you teach novels?" Gabriela replied, "I have not taught novels in years. Our kids need so much that I cannot devote all of that time."

Greg brought up a concern. "I would appreciate some advice about how to support 8th graders who have missing background knowledge." Gabriela suggested trying out grouping students so they could teach each other, but admitted, "This is something that never gets easier . . . I never know if I am really meeting their needs."

The meeting concluded with no notes and no action items.

September 26

Two days before, Gabriela emailed an agenda with plans "to discuss narrative writing" and requests to bring "trusted resources, student samples, realia, templates, sentence frames, classroom strategies, rubrics, and any other thing that did, or did not, work in the classroom."

At the meeting, Greg and Claudia joined Gabriela, who passed around resources she found useful for teaching narrative writing. Claudia shared a rubric and an identity essay she was working on with her students. She commented that students' writing had revealed that many suffered from depression. Gabriela replied, "That's why I have come to learn, 'don't get angry, get curious.' If a kid is not listening, it does not mean they don't care—they may really have something else going on in their lives." Claudia agreed, "They have adult problems." They exchanged experiences of having students who had witnessed parents' murders and discussed how some teachers were not sympathetic and attuned to their students' needs. Gabriela added, "That's one reason why I wanted to be chair of the department. We have a lot of potential here, but we need to spread more kindness and curiosity in order to bring it out. I want us to not always be focused on what's going wrong here, but what is possible and positive." Claudia replied, "I'm so glad you did that, I appreciate it. We voted for a reason."

Gabriela asked if Greg wanted to share anything. Greg admitted, "I am just getting to point where I start to think about what I want to do over four weeks. I am feeling more overwhelmed." A second-year teacher, Claudia reassured him, "It's normal for first-year teachers to cry at the end of every day. And remember that most of what you learn in your [teacher preparation program] will not be useful."

The meeting concluded with no notes and no action items.

October 3, 17, 24, 31

The next several meetings continued with the main agenda item, "Narrative writing needs," and encouraged teachers to bring resources to share. Gabriela sent the agenda one or two days in advance. Gabriela and Greg attended all meetings; Claudia missed one.

During each meeting, Gabriela asked if they had anything to share about their narrative writing units. Gabriela said that her students were writing about "a mistake I've made in my life" and described her approach: First, she wrote a mentor text and helped students analyze it; then, the class read a few texts in the genre, annotating the texts and using a graphic organizer to analyze the elements; then, they used another graphic organizer to plan their essays, followed by a rough draft, feedback and final draft. Greg described his unit: First, students read a series of stories and generated a list of themes; then, they chose one theme to write about, illustrated by a moment in their lives; finally, they planned that narrative on a graphic organizer, wrote a rough draft, received feedback, and wrote a final draft. Claudia described her personal identity unit that introduced students to the concept of oppression and shared excerpts from students' essays depicting stories of self-harm and adults in the household using drugs. Gabriela commented, "It's amazing what they contain in their little selves."

On October 24, Gabriela shared a preview of the first quarter benchmark assessment required by the district. Looking it over, Gabriela commented soberly, "This is so much reading." Greg added, "It seems very advanced." Claudia concurred, "Someone who has never taught must have made this. It looks boring." Gabriela lamented, "It's like they pick these stories that just plopped out of the universe that have no cultural relevance for our kids whatsoever." Greg added, "What bothers me is that it seems like three texts that are all testing the same standards. Why can't we just do one?" Claudia agreed, "Some kids will take one look at this and say, 'I'm not doing this.'" Gabriela said she would convey this feedback to the district.

Across the meetings, the group discussed various concerns that were brought up spontaneously. On October 3rd, they discussed high rates of student tardies and course failure, and how the administration should do "tardy sweeps." On October 24th, Greg claimed that about

10 kids in each class refused to do work. Gabriela advised him not to expect that he could "reach" all of his kids. "Most of these kids are so low-skilled," Gabriela said, "They come in and tell you the most traumatic things. It's just so much that is going on in their lives, and we have to concentrate on the ones we can actually help." On October 31st, Greg shared that many students were failing because they had not completed their final drafts. The group offered advice: ask students why, use a checklist for peer editing, use more modeling, and try stations.

Across these meetings, there were no notes, and no action items.

November 28

Due to conflicting meetings and a holiday break, a few weeks passed. The day before, Gabriela emailed an agenda including "sharing resources for informational text," and "any questions, concerns, needs." Gabriela, Greg, and Lauren attended; Claudia was absent.

Gabriela started by excitedly announcing that she had been given new "culturally responsive" curricular materials at a district meeting. Gabriela passed around samples of short books and poetry written by local African American community members. "This feels like some real resources for us." Greg and Lauren agreed. Greg wondered how to fit them into the pacing guide. Gabriela replied, "We have the pacing guide as our guiding star . . . but we're always adjusting, trying to figure out what will work for our students." Greg agreed. Gabriela said she planned to think more about how to incorporate the materials over the coming weeks.

Gabriela said she wished the ELA department could develop common assessments. Greg agreed but, "I'm not sure how comfortable Megan or Claudia would be," as they seemed to value following their "passions." Gabriela relented, "It's a huge task, getting the English department aligned. I think it's a bigger job than I can do."

At this point, Gabriela announced, "I want to share a technique I tried with my classes who have been pretty resistant learners." Gabriela described how she offered points for completing daily work. "They have completely transformed." Greg said that he did not think that would work with his most challenging class: "With them, it's apathy. I don't think they would care about points." Gabriela lamented, "I just wish I could help you, like come up with the magic bullet. But I think there's too many issues in there." Greg replied, "Actually it improved recently." He described an assignment in which the students could choose famous people to research. "When I walk by their desks, I see that they're actually doing it . . . So it's not all gloom and doom." Gabriela said, "That's a success story, at this point."

By now, the meeting time was up, and they adjourned.

In a reflective conversation, when asked how the department group was going, Greg perceived that Megan's refusal to attend had compromised the potential of the department: "It makes me sad . . . The department is not really organized . . . There's no English department dynamic." In a separately conversation, Gabriela similarly shared, "This is not going well because we have 25 percent of our department who refuses to participate or have anything to do with me." When asked about next steps for the group, Gabriela reiterated a general interest in creating common assessments, but did not think she could organize this:

> I would love for us to create common assessments . . . But I think we would need a training so that we can make them on [the assessment software] . . . And again, it's a time situation. And again, our department is limping along.

While Gabriela had in mind a general intention to support the new teachers, she did not see herself as personally "in charge" of the group's agendas: "The agenda depends, you know, where

we're at in the school year, pretty much, and getting feedback from other people . . . So I don't really determine it, I just respond to either the calendar, or demands of us, or the pacing guide."

December 12

Two weeks passed, with meetings cancelled due to conflicting commitments. On December 12, Gabriela and Greg attended. Gabriela had not sent an agenda. She explained that this was because she had been busy covering for Claudia, who as of today was out for the remainder of the year. Claudia had experienced high stress and had accumulated many absences; when the principal called her in to discuss this, Claudia felt unsupported and decided to leave.

For today's meeting, Gabriela brought the results from the first quarter assessment, which she had found her mailbox. The report included a series of graphs showing the percentages of students in four performance bands (standard exceeded, met, nearly met, and not met), for each teacher, grade level, and middle school, and for the district. For Jackson's three 7th grade teachers, 46-48% of the students scored "not met"; in 8th grade, Greg scored 73% "not met" compared to Claudia's 48% and Megan's 45%. Compared to middle schools across the district, Jackson's scores were near "the bottom" with 53% "not met" in both grades.

Greg commented, "I expect my scores will be lower as the year goes on since I'm a new teacher. In 8th grade, I see that Megan's scores are higher, but we know she is doing the tracking, so that's probably why." Gabriela replied, "All I know is that when I saw this data, my mood just plummeted. I've got 20 years of experience, but I did not get better results than a brand new teacher? That's really frustrating. And it also makes me frustrated because our department has always been so fragmented, and our principal does nothing to help. Now we've lost another teacher due to the anxiety and stress of this place. I'm just in a tired place right now."

Looking through the results, Greg and Gabriela tried to figure out what their students needed more help to learn, but struggled to infer this from the data. To Greg, it was not clear if students struggled with the concept, texts, or wording of the questions. Gabriela realized she had not taught on one of the tested standards because it was not emphasized in the pacing guide. "I also think it's test fatigue," Gabriela said, remembering that students had also completed a Math test in the same time. Greg replied, "I think there is some value to make them get used to it," adding that had a "New Year's resolution to try to get in one practice test per month."

Changing the subject, Greg said he was looking for advice about how to deal with students who have "total lack of impulse control," admitting "that's one thing my program did not teach me." Gabriela suggested trying out different seats and desks that allow students to "get their energy out" without distracting the class. Then, she shared that she had heard stories recently about bad treatment of African American students at one of the elementary schools. "They are beaten down over there, told that they are never going to amount to anything."

Wrapping up the meeting, Gabriela reminded Greg about a parent event happening in the evening. Greg said there had been an announcement during last period of day saying it was cancelled. Gabriela was shocked to hear this, and left to go to the office to find out about it.

January 23

Following this, the chair cancelled a series of meetings, and the teachers had a two-week winter break. Near the end of January, Gabriela called for a meeting and emailed an agenda to "discuss argument writing; please bring any resources you have found helpful." Greg was called away to a parent meeting. Newly hired novice teacher, Kathy, arrived to collaboration for the first time.

Kathy asked what the meetings were about. Gabriela explained, "Collaboration time is like sacred time that no one is allowed to infringe upon." Kathy jumped in, "I have so many questions," admitting she was already having challenges with classroom management. "And I am a little bit worried that maybe my expectations are too high." Kathy explained that the first time she asked her students to write an essay, "I thought they were going to mutiny." Gabriela explained that this was why she had learned to chunk writing assignments by paragraph.

Kathy asked how Gabriela handled deadlines, noticing already that her students were frequently not turning in work on time. Gabriela shared, "It's very common that these kids do not come home to a snack, quiet time with everyone sitting around the kitchen table. The only thing I know to try to do what I can for that is just give you as much time as I possibly can." Kathy replied, "Yeah, I'll do the same. I'm a firm believer in second chances. I like your ideas and your style and your openness." Gabriela added, "My biggest thing here is that I want to give the kids hope. Because a lot of time they have been bashed by the system their whole lives. I want them to come in here and feel like they have a shot." Kathy agreed, "Ok, I'll keep it real, too."

On her way out, Kathy called out, "Thank you so much for this! Can we have collaboration every day?" She said she looked forward to joining again next time.

February 20

After a few scheduling conflicts with other committees, the group convened again in the third week of February. The day before, Gabriela emailed an agenda: "Analysis of Quarter 2 benchmark results; lesson planning; any concerns, questions, suggestions." Gabriela, Greg, and Kathy attended.

To start, Gabriela passed out copies of the second quarter benchmark reports, formatted similar to first quarter's results. In 7th grade, Jackson had the lowest results in the district, and Greg the lowest amongst all teachers. In "standard not met" were 98% of Jackson's students, including 96% in Gabriela's classes and 100% in Greg's. Kathy had not administered the test.

Everyone read the report quietly. Greg commented, "It's pretty rough." Gabriela cautioned, "But you're not looking at the 8th grade teacher comparison, right? Because it's not a reflection of you," referring to the "tracking" issue with Megan's classes. Looking through the results, Greg and Gabriela noticed that one standard was worth one-third of the points and only four percent of students had mastered it. Gabriela suggested, "Let's see if we could pull out those questions from the test." They read the questions aloud. Some called upon students to know specific vocabulary—such as "hormones." Gabriela reflected, "You would have had to have read readings with these particular words." Gabriela brought out the articles she had assigned and realized, "I did not actually get to these until after the test was taken." Greg reflected similarly, "I was still wrapping up quarter 1 by the time the quarter 2 benchmark came." Greg reflected that answering the questions correctly depended upon students knowing particular academic vocabulary, such as "inference." Gabriela shared that the ELA department used to teach a set of key academic words and had developed some good strategies for this years ago, with help from a coach. The group discussed the possibility of reviving such a list. "At the same time," Greg admitted, "I don't say this to be defensive, but it's just a real possibility, that it's an issue with the design of the questions." The group puzzled over how the test measured 8 standards across 14 questions worth 22 points. Greg reflected, "I don't know how much weight I should put on this test." Gabriela concurred, "Yeah, I feel comfortable just continuing to do what I do."

Kathy admitted, "I can hear a little bit of taking these scores personally." Gabriela replied, "Of course! Because we lost ground from quarter one!" Kathy said, "I do think there are

some things that are beyond our control. It looks like it's a performance issue, but it's not. How do you build an algorithm for 40% of your students going hungry?"

Gabriela asked the group if they wanted to talk about this data anymore. "I feel like since Vanessa sends it to me, I need to present it to you guys." Kathy said, "I think you should burn the data." Greg said he was not sure how to respond to the results. "There's so many students who are not even close." Gabriela replied that it was important to keep in mind the inequities facing their students. "For kids who are growing up poor and from these backgrounds, it's really deep. Sometimes, I'm just happy that you are looking like a student, you are sounding like a student. Now if I could make it to the end of the year and your reading has improved and you can structure your essay, mission accomplished! Because that's a lot."

The meeting time was up, and they adjourned.

In a reflective conversation, Gabriela shared that "that data thing" was "not helpful to anybody." She did not have specific goals in mind for the department and believed the best use of the time was to support the new teachers by sharing instructional resources:

> I don't really know that I have any set ideas in my head . . . I'm supposed to say to move the test scores . . . For me, it's sharing resources that work because they're brand new teachers . . . Like if I could give you some nuts and bolts things, then that frees them up to focus on things that are important to them.

When asked about future steps, Gabriela said she could imagine trying "a lab" for pursuing an inquiry together next year: "Like create assessments together and then we could have these conversations around, OK, how can we get the kids to master this?" At the same time, Gabriela doubted there was time for it: "But, I wonder, do we really have time for that? Given, you know, the pacing guide, the district assessments? There's just so many hats to wear all the time."

Greg expressed a similar perspective, wishing the group could undertake an inquiry, but perceiving that it was not feasible, at least not this year:

> I would honestly prefer . . . like a tentative little inquiry project . . . But I don't know if I have the bandwidth, or Kathy has the bandwidth, or even Gabriela . . . Maybe next year . . . where we stop freaking out about survival every day . . . If I bring a problem up [now], I feel like I want it to be a smaller problem . . . Like a specific issue that has solutions that people have either thought of, or they've tried themselves.

February 27, March 7, March 13

For the next three weeks, Gabriela emailed agendas focused on sharing resources for the next unit, requesting to "bring any resources you have found helpful." Greg and Gabriela attended all three; Kathy missed one due to a conference.

On February 27, Gabriela started, "I want today to be really hands-on, what we could do that you could use to really help you." Gabriela shared her instructional materials and books with graphic organizers for argumentative writing. Greg said, "Thank you, I think I might be able to use this." On March 6, Gabriela shared a graphic organizer for teaching "claim-evidence-reasoning," walking step by step through her teaching process. Kathy said eagerly, "Can I get a copy? I love this, thanks for sharing." On March 13, Gabriela handed out a color-coded template identifying the parts of an essay from the school's prescriptive writing program. "For me, this is too busy, but a lot of teachers here like it, so I wanted to present it to you. Feel free to tweak it." Kathy exclaimed, "Thank you so much for this!" Greg added, "It's good to have."

At each meeting, the group discussed urgencies, giving advice and reassurance. On February 27, Gabriela said was "not as bothered by" benchmark results any longer. Greg said he

felt the same, explaining that he had come to accept that he had not taught what was on the test "and we could not have taught it, with where we are in our pacing." Gabriela agreed. Greg asked how Gabriela taught reasoning, as "a lot of students are having difficulties writing that part." Gabriela agreed, "That's the hardest part," and described how she helped students practice reasoning using a "simple example," like convincing your mother to allow you to go to a party." On March 6, Kathy said many students "are pretty disorganized," and Gabriela reminded her that "it's been a tough two years" for those students, who lost their teacher mid-year after last year's teacher in the same program was arrested for theft. Gabriela added, "I subbed for your class last week and the kids were really good. When I subbed in there earlier this year, it was chaos, so you've really done well." On March 13, Kathy asked for advice about how to handle challenging behaviors like "posturing" and phone use. Gabriela and Greg both recommended being firm. At the end of the meeting, Kathy exclaimed, "Collaboration time is my favorite time of the week!"

In reflective conversations, Gabriela and Greg said Kathy had brought positive energy to the group. Gabriela said, "I feel uplifted around Kathy." Greg said that while he was feeling "pretty tired" from the constant battles he faced to engage students in the classroom, he perceived Kathy's positivity to be "permeating through" the group.

April 3

The next two meetings were cancelled. For April 3rd's meeting, Gabriela emailed an agenda focused on "Quarter 4 planning." Gabriela and Kathy attended; Greg was sick. At the start, Kathy excitedly shared her unit on stereotypes that included teaching the novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Gabriela exclaimed, "Thank you for sharing! I really think it's a powerful book, and I think I'm going to teach it!"

Kathy described a recent incident in which a student severed a firehose during class "It was a really, really bad week. I did everything wrong," Kathy grieved. Gabriela reassured her, "Don't be so hard on yourself. As long as you are just trying, that's what counts." Kathy replied, "You're very kind to me." Gabriela added, "I'm not being kind, I'm just being realistic. There's so many hats you have to wear, and I think this is a difficult site." Kathy said, "I appreciate that . . . I am doing a lot of things right, too." Gabriela agreed, "Exactly. And focus on that."

Gabriela turned the conversation to "Quarter 4 planning." Kathy explained that as part of the program that she was hired to teach, "I'm supposed to host a poetry slam. I am not really sure what a poetry slam entails and I have not really done anything to organize it yet." Gabriela suggested, "Maybe the ELA department could do something all together for Open House and that could be your poetry slam. That could alleviate some of the pressure on you." Kathy replied, "That would be great!" Gabriela proposed that the department focus on this at the next collaboration meeting, and Kathy said she would bring her materials for teaching poetry.

April 10

For the next week's meeting, Greg, Gabriela, and Kathy arrived prepared to share ideas for the poetry event. "Welcome to Jackson's English Learning Think Tank!" Kathy proclaimed. For a half hour, the group exchanged ideas as they looked through resource books.

Suddenly, Kathy said, "I've been in so much trouble in the last month." The group asked why. She went on to explain a conflict that arose with the principal and some staff members when Kathy had complained about students being frequently pulled from her classes for other services. Recounting the conflict, Kathy wept. Gabriela and Greg consoled her. "It's really good for you to see the dynamic here," Gabriela said, "I have been in the middle of that [kind of

conflict] several times." Greg shared that, after the vote for department chair, he had been "bullied" by William, who "blasted into me in the hallway." Gabriela concluded, "Now you know what you're dealing with around here." Kathy replied, "Thank you for letting me share. I'm sorry, this is the last time I will do that." Gabriela countered, "No, I think this is more important than this [gesturing towards poetry planning]. Actually. Because, you know, you have to feel good about coming to work." Kathy reflected, "It just feels like, wow, I didn't expect it to be this exhausting. But I feel so much better now, thank you for listening."

At this point, time was up. They agreed to continue poetry planning after spring break.

April 24

The day before, Gabriela emailed an agenda with time for "Open House in May," and "Quarter 4 curriculum challenges, successes, suggestions." Gabriela, Kathy, and Greg attended.

Starting the Open House poetry planning, Gabriela said, "I don't know how Vanessa wants to organize the event this year." Kathy commented, "It's kind of hard to plan it, then, right?" Kathy asked what kind of poetry each of them preferred to focus on. Greg said he was "still deciding." Kathy said, "I'm willing to do whatever you guys want" and suggested to focus on "found poems." Gabriela replied, "Yeah, that's cool."

From here, the conversation led into an exchange of incidents of student misbehavior and progress, and ideas about how each planned to teach the upcoming unit. In the midst of these exchanges, Gabriela periodically returned the conversation back to the poetry planning, and the group repeatedly wondered how and where to set up, repeating their frustration about the lack of information. With twenty minutes left, Gabriela asked, "Ok, so do we want to spend time looking up poems? Looking through resources?" Kathy replied, "Whatever you guys want to do, I'm just happy to be here, I just like being with you guys and talking to adults." For the rest of the meeting time, they looked through poetry books and textbooks, pointing out ideas they liked.

In a reflective conversation, Greg shared the department meetings over the year had seemed mostly like "a social space." However, he perceived this "social time" to be important:

> The things that happen in collaboration have had very little effect on my overall practice . . . But it has had a very large effect on my rapport and my relationships . . . I think that's very important . . . since we don't see each other at all during the week at any other time.

May 1

The day before the meeting, Gabriela emailed an agenda focused on "Open House planning." Gabriela, Greg, and Kathy attended.

Gabriela started the meeting with an update on her plans for Open House. "I am thinking I could do a 'found poem.'" Kathy asked, "Should we all do found poems?" Gabriela suggested, "Well, why don't we just be a little unified." Kathy and Greg agreed. Gabriela explained that she had asked Vanessa about the event and was told each department would organize "their own thing." For example, Science was hosting their Science Fair. Greg suggested that ELA set up in the library, and Gabriela agreed to ask the librarian for permission. Kathy asked, "So are we all doing found poems?" Greg replied, "Sure, why not?" Kathy added, "Because it's an easy activity." Greg replied, "Easy sounds good to me, I'll do it." Kathy exclaimed, "Oh my gosh, this is going to be fun! Let's put out some arts and crafts materials, too!"

Kathy brought up that she still has 46 essays to grade, and she felt guilty about inadequately preparing students for state tests. Gabriela asked, "Are you working as hard as you could?" Kathy replied, "Yes." Gabriela said, "Ok, then, that's it." Greg added, "I think what

makes the difference between a great teacher and not so great teacher is the relationships with students. And you have that, Kathy. We've all seen it." Kathy beamed. "Oh, thank you!" and gave Greg a hug.

Kathy said, "Sorry, back to poetry." Gabriela reminded the group, "We are going to do the found poem thing." Greg suggested that the group display "nice ones for inspiration." The group discussed that they were not sure how well the event had been advertised. Gabriela said, "I'm guessing they are doing those automatic calls home?" Kathy laughed, "On the day, probably!" Gabriela teased, "Don't laugh. We will get the flyers on that day, in the middle of 4th period, and we'll be like, what? I'm not kidding you!" Everyone laughed.

At this point, the meeting time was up, and the meeting adjourned.

May 8

For the next collaboration meeting, the group set up their Open House event in the library. Gabriela displayed students' "found poems" made by selecting phrases from the novel, *Absolutely True Diary*. Kathy displayed a selection of "found poems" made by blocking out words from famous poems and decorating them with art. Greg had no display; he left early due to a personal emergency. During the event, Kathy stood next to her table and chatted with parents and students that trickled by. Gabriela was asked by a parent to talk about their child's grades and sat with them a table near her display as the child cried. In keeping with her avoidance of the group, Megan set up her own presentation in her classroom.

Between Open House and the end of the school year, the group held no more meetings, as the team members were diverted into other end-of-the-year school events and meetings.

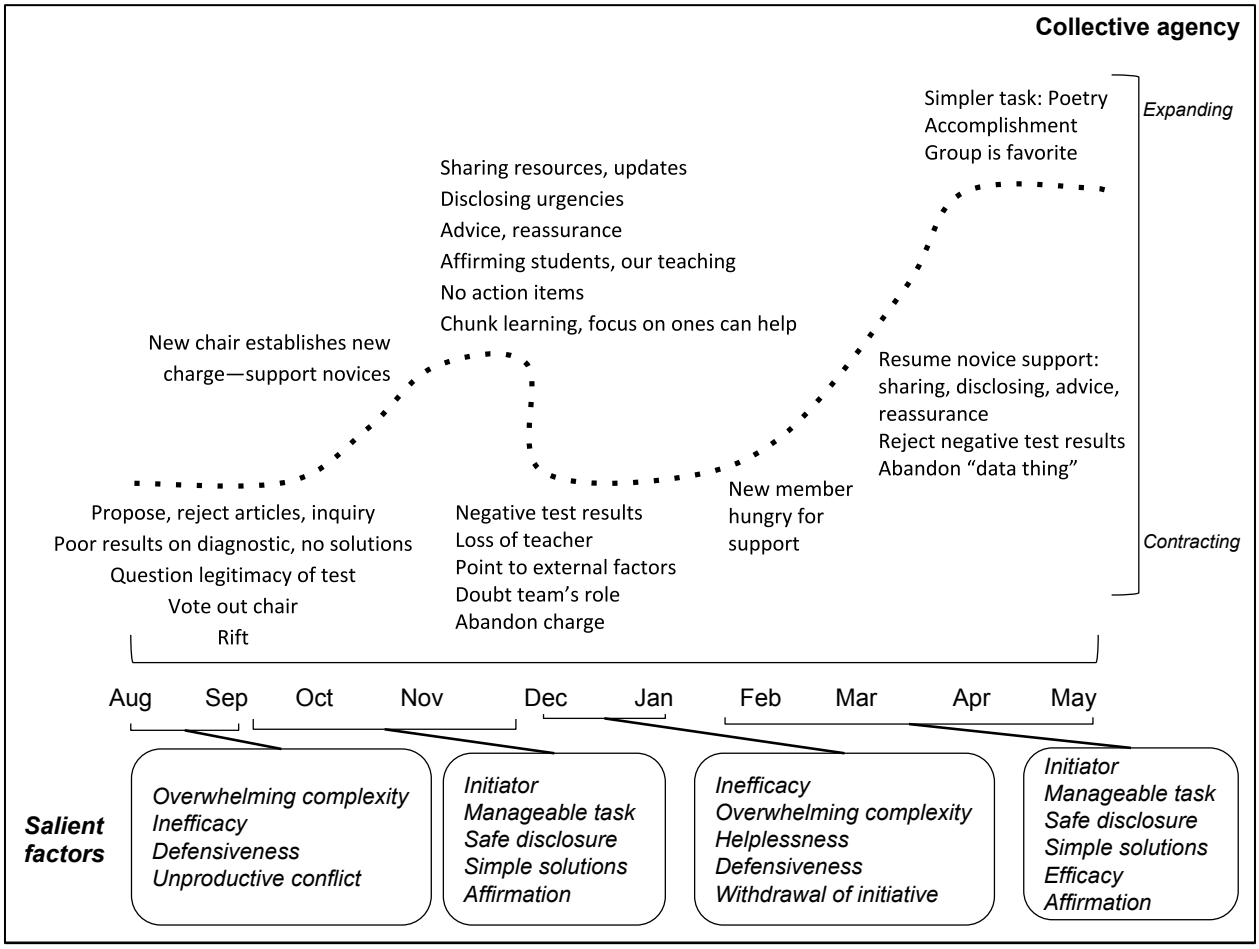
Analysis of ELA Department Meetings

From the literature on professional learning communities, Jackson's ELA department could be deemed fairly ineffective. There was ample time allocated for departmental collaboration—90 minutes weekly—but union rules protected this time as entirely "teacher directed," and in practice, much of this time was devoted to unstructured conversation, rather than focused joint work. Agendas were usually provided but were broad and not closely followed. An early attempt to launch an inquiry was rejected as unreasonable. One member refused to attend, meetings were sometimes cancelled last minute, and attendance was uneven. Negative assessment results were attributed to problems with test design and systemic factors beyond teachers' control, rather than teaching methods. Despite much sharing of teaching ideas and resources, there was not much by way of pedagogical deliberations or critique. The literature on work team development would suggest that the department lacked structural necessities for success: It was not constituted around any clear interdependent task, and its membership was based on roles, not expertise.

However, from the more open perspective of collective agency, it becomes possible to see clear developmental efforts at certain points during the course of the school year. Figure 7 provides a visual aid to represent ebbs and flows on a curve over time: critical junctures when the group's interactions suggested expanding or contracting collective agency, turning points in between, and salient contributing factors. The discussion below provides explanation.

Figure 7

Curve of Expanding and Contracting Collective Agency and Salient Factors for the ELA Department



When the year started, collective agency appeared constrained when a conflict over the group's charge led to a power struggle. The incoming chair's initial proposals to discuss research-based articles and try a weekly routine of analyzing students' writing were rejected as unreasonable, and the tasks were dropped. The chair advanced an initiative, asking members bring results from a standards-based diagnostic with intentions to establish a baseline for a group inquiry. Everyone complied—but concerns arose that the chair's expectations were too demanding for the novice teachers. Rather than enter into an open conflict to discuss these concerns, one member called for a vote for chair. When the results of the diagnostic confronted the group with inefficacy—in students' blank pages and weak writing—they turned to defensive tactics: rejecting the legitimacy of the test and ousting the chair. The team quickly resolved to a simpler charge—a focus on easier texts—while the ousted chair left, never to return.

The incoming chair fretted that the call for a vote may have "shot the department in the foot," but she saw it as a necessary step to act upon her ideas for how to forge a more "peaceful, cohesive, professional" department. Once the new chair established and started to act upon a new charge for the group—a supportive department for novice teachers—efforts towards an expanding collective agency swelled. To act on this charge, the new chair maintained simple

tasks that the group could accomplish easily at every meeting—reviewing the district pacing guide and sharing instructional resources—and imposed no new demands on members in the form of any action items. She encouraged teachers to bring up "any concerns" at any time. With guidance towards simple tasks and a supportive atmosphere for bringing up urgencies, the group started to meet regularly—sans the ousted chair. They came into a kind of equilibrium by October: updating each other about progress on the current unit, raising problems with student disengagement and failure, responding to these problems with support and advice, and affirming their students' "amazing little selves" and their own efforts to be responsive to their needs. The chair tried to keep the potential for being overwhelmed at bay by encouraging teachers to reduce complexity: chunk learning tasks and concentrate on students "we can actually help." The regularity of meetings and participation suggested some satisfaction.

However, in December, this emergent collective agency appeared to collapse when receiving low results from the first district assessment and losing one of the novice teachers. While the team's discussions during previous meetings had revealed ongoing travails to reach their students academically and social-emotionally, in one fell swoop the assessment results wiped away a sense of efficacy in the classroom and invalidated their efforts. Seeing that her scores were no better than a novice's, the chair's "mood just plummeted." Frustrated, the group felt helpless, pointing to external causes for student performance: Another teacher's higher results were attributable to an unauthorized tracking system, and their students were "beaten down" by racist and experiences in elementary school. A sense of inefficacy worsened when the chair saw that her efforts to forge a supportive department and respond to teacher's urgencies were not sufficient to help novice teachers manage formidable and complex problems in the classroom—as one teacher had just left the school in distress. Concluding that she was helpless to make a difference on problems beyond her control, the chair turned to defensiveness: She withdrew her initiative and cancelled a series of department meetings, calling into doubt the team's role and abandoning its charge.

New efforts to reboot the group emerged in the spring after a new novice teacher joined. When the new member showed up for what she heard was "collaboration time," she jumped enthusiastically when the chair described it as a "sacred" time in which teachers could share resources and get their questions answered. Feeding off of the new member's affirmation of her efforts, the chair resumed holding regular meetings and restarted her initiative on the charge she had laid out—to support novice teachers. When another round of negative results from the next benchmark threatened to once again pull them down, the group swept away the pain of inefficacy as unfair judgment and poor test design, and the chair decided not to incorporate "that data thing" that she had thought she was supposed to do but was "not helpful." Instead, she doubled down on the promise of simple tasks and affirmation: sharing resources, troubleshooting, reassuring, and encouraging a focus on what works with their students.

The chair's approach fueled an upswing in efforts towards expanding collective agency. By April, regular meetings were underway, and the group became more open and detailed in their sharing of instructional strategies, classroom breakthroughs, and struggles. They shared deeper problems and offered each other more elaborated advice, with an emphasis on simple strategies—selecting engaging texts, using graphic organizers, and offering points for effort. If their known solutions were not seen as likely to help, the group offered reassurances about understandable problems and affirmations of each other's good efforts.

The surge towards developing collective agency accelerated when the chair proposed a joint task: a poetry event for Open House to support the new teacher with an event she was

required to carry out. Unlike when the original chair had proposed an inquiry, the department carried out this—much simpler—task with enthusiasm, opting for "found poems" because "it's easy." Members hailed the group as the "favorite time of the week," appreciating a supportive atmosphere and rapport that eased their emotional burden and reduced isolation. Planning and carrying out a manageable task—the poetry event—and regularly addressing straightforward problems with known solutions that fit the "bandwidth" of teachers in "survival mode" produced a sense of efficacy. Members imagined the possibility of more complex work together next year—if the same teachers returned.

However, the emerging collective agency remained tenuous. The group's initial rift never healed, and after the poetry event, the department ceased to meet for the rest of the year.

These ups and downs over the course of the year throw a struggle for collective agency, and the key tensions that undergird it, into relief. When a chair's show of initiative tied the group's charge to heavy demands to fulfill complex tasks and solve complex problems of student learning, collective agency collapsed as experiences of failure in the face of overwhelming problems led to unproductive conflict over their tasks, silencing of their problems with defensiveness and helplessness, and a withdrawal of initiative. Efforts towards collective agency heightened when a new chair took initiative to set a new charge, one that was supported by others, that focused the group on simple tasks that offered a sense of accomplishment and affirmation of everyone's good efforts, and that enabled teachers to feel safe to disclose urgencies that were met with reassurance and rendered manageable with simple solutions. These efforts enabled a hobbled group—absent one core member—to hold itself together and provide members with some sense of accomplishment, affirmation, and attention to their urgent problems. But these efforts also limited the group only to simple tasks that affirmed them and known solutions to simple problems. When external feedback and the loss of another member challenged their competence and exposed the limitations of their efforts, the full weight of their problems and a sense of inefficacy punctured this emerging collective agency, leading to the temporary abandonment of the group. New energy surfaced when a new member rekindled affirmation of the chair's initiative, prompting her to resume convening a group focused on simple tasks, hearing out and offering simple solutions to teachers' urgencies, and reassuring them of their good work.

Hence, the group's development did not go so far as to offer capacity for critique, for challenge, and for complexity. But in the struggle to rebuild the group, members revealed core desires—to connect with and support one another, to better reach their students, to have their professional efforts and expertise affirmed—that show developmental potential. The contours of their struggle point the way towards steps that might help to develop a more sustained collective agency that enables more advanced group capabilities to emerge. There is a willingness to show initiative, but amid norms of autonomy and low pressure to perform as a group, when this show of initiative is not supported, it can easily retreat. They want a cohesive group, but amid ambiguity and competing values, they have difficulty navigating the conflict necessary to establish consensus about their charge. There is a yearning to feel competent—but this was challenged by feedback tied to ambitious tests and standards far from their everyday efforts. They want to address consequential problems but cannot handle them in their full complexity.

The Hub

In the latter half of the year, I ventured to explore the extent of development possible when organizing a new group of "the willing." Drawing upon insights from research about professional learning communities and continuous improvement in schools, I proceeded with the intention for a group focused on identifying and experimenting around problems of practice, using artifacts to help make problems more concrete and results more observable.

While the literature provided guidance, I proceeded according to what seemed to be within the "next level of work." Given how little is known about school development in contexts of adversity, I started with assumptions based on dynamics that had been observed in the school. For one, I assumed the group needed a leader who would take initiative and risk to organize the group, pose ideas, and direct the group's focus and conversation. To begin with, I assumed I would need to provide this but would encourage and defer to efforts by others to do so.

As far as what the group might work on, given struggles with disclosure and safety and the tendency towards low task complexity, I assumed that it was not feasible to lead with the expectations of a fully-fledged process of inquiry. To start with, we would need to establish safety and a routine that introduced an inquiry mindset with simple tasks, aiming to 'stretch' into more complexity over time. Given the difficulty with maintaining focus and the tendencies towards inaction that I had noted in other groups, I imagined that asking members to maintain focus on an improvement project, to work on projects in between meetings, to prepare artifacts, and to follow through were risks. These could not be 'demands' but requests and suggestions, and there might be difficulties. There might also be difficulties establishing the safety needed for sharing problems of practice and artifacts. Would they be willing to disclose challenges and expose their teaching practices? Would there be openness to critique? Given a tendency noted in other groups to hide or silence problems, reject responsibility for problems, and emphasize affirmation, I planned to encourage teachers to identify actionable steps and short-term goals that proceeded from their urgencies and passions. Moreover, I presumed a need to maintain flexibility to allow for relevance: What members found useful to discuss or work on might be different from what I planned.

In reflective conversations, I shared my ideas for the Hub with some Jackson staff members to gauge the level of interest. Vanessa said the idea "sounds amazing." William—frustrated with the ILT and passionate about the need for "improvement"—was eager. "We're at the point where you need to be here," he said, and laughed. "Because we've just got to do something now." However, he was skeptical about whether others would join. "I wonder who else would come. Not many people are really interested in the concept of instructional improvement." Ana was interested in the potential for richer professional learning: "That is my biggest problem with my job. I am not growing as a teacher." However, Ana, too, was skeptical that others would join. Megan was interested in "measurable goals" but her willingness "depends on how the group is comprised." Megan made a point to request that I play the role of facilitator, as she was wary of "unqualified people" that had facilitated other groups at the school.

I drafted a plan for the meetings and distributed a flyer to invite all teachers to an informational meeting in late February. The flyer explained the group as "dedicated time, space, and hands-on support for your improvement projects" and "cultivating a supportive and productive professional community," specified suggested activities such as "workshops to apply tools of continuous improvement to your own projects," "sharing and discussing artifacts," and

"collective reflection about our learning." The flyer requested commitments of regular attendance, initiating or furthering an improvement project, and preparing and sharing artifacts.

Given the time at which this proposal was put before teachers, such an invitation could have easily gone nowhere. Around the same time, the ILT had abandoned its task to plan the school's PD; a minimum day PD had been cancelled due to teacher absenteeism; staff were complaining of overload from "PD overkill"; and the ELA department, suffering an ongoing rift and having lost a teacher due to stress, despaired over poor results on another assessment.

Nonetheless, six teachers joined: William (History chair), Megan (English teacher and former chair), Nicole (Science chair), Ana (Science teacher and demonstration teacher), Ryan (Math chair), and Steven (Special Education teacher). At the informational meeting, we discussed the flyer, and the interested members agreed to these ideas as a useful start. After discussing their availability, the group decided to meet for an hour after school twice per month. Some members were at first interested in the possibility of identifying a shared problem of practice. However, after a brief conversation, the group quickly decided that, given the time of year, they would prefer to focus on individual improvement projects in their classrooms. I offered to be our group's facilitator: preparing agendas, leading discussions, and keeping us organized—with the understanding that all of the above was open for adaptation.

After this initial meeting, I privately reflected that it was a "positive start," as "more people showed up than I had thought was realistic." In reflective conversations, Ana said similarly, "I was happy with it and that more than four people were there," and Megan shared that "it was different people showed up than I expected, which I thought was good."

Over subsequent meetings, I provided printed agendas and handouts with prompts for written reflection based on a logic of problem solving for continuous improvement. These included concretely defining a problem of practice, setting a short-term goal, and reflecting on iterative attempts to improve upon the problem. Drawing on the literature about effective teacher learning, members were encouraged to bring artifacts—such as student work samples—to help "deprivatize" practice, concretely define or diagnose problem, and ascertain whether improvement occurred.

I arranged to hold the meetings in the parent engagement center, in which we could sit around tables arranged in a circle. The group convened for six meetings from March-May.

March 7

The day before, I sent a reminder email. Ryan and Steven arrived on time. Ana was out sick. I asked Ryan about his idea for an improvement project. He said, "I want to move some of my tests to an online version so that kids can get used to [state test]-style questions. I rarely do any [state test]-style questions, and I feel bad . . . The decoding just to read the question, oh my gosh, I can't see our kids being successful." Others arrived as Ryan talked. He explained that this improvement project originally had started out as a "cycle of inquiry" with his department, but "we got stuck because of personal issues, so now I am stuck with, should I do it on my own?" "About the vocabulary piece," Megan said, "I'd love to support you in that because I think that's school-wide. This is the first year that I've not been focused on teaching to the test, in my career—I'm gonna get into it now, good Lord—I'm really focusing on the language, and the critical thinking skills."

At this point, we were about 15 minutes into the meeting, and I interjected to redirect us to the agenda. "Well, we're off to a lively start," I said. William replied, "It's exciting." I prompted the group to review the agenda. It included time for written reflection, taking turns

sharing improvement projects, deciding which artifacts to bring, and feedback. The reflection handout included the prompts:

- What is the focal issue that we want to see an improvement on?
- What aspects of this issue do we have direct control over? Are there any aspects of it that we cannot control?
- What new practice or intervention do we want to try out to see if it makes a difference on this issue?
- What is currently happening (Point A) with this issue? What difference could we see within 8 weeks (Point B)? What is the ideal desired state?
- Can we reach Point B using resources that are currently available to us or that we could easily get?

Megan commented, "I think I might need clarification on a 'focal issue.'" I explained, "In education, we tend to jump pretty quickly to implementation. But for an improvement project, it can be helpful to kind of clarify for yourself, what's the thing that I want to make a difference on? We could call it 'a problem of practice' or we can call it 'an issue'—but it's like a current state of something that you want to move to a better state. Is that clear?" Everyone nodded. I continued, "Ok, so do you want to have some time to reflect individually on that?" The group was silent. Megan replied, "I don't need any time myself." I suggested we take five minutes "so that everybody has a chance to put your thoughts together" before having each member share.

The group indicated agreement. Then, for several minutes, they conversed about incidents in meetings and classes. Eventually, the room quieted as members started writing.

A few minutes later, I prompted us to start sharing, picking back up with Ryan. He said, "For a focal issue, I said, 'Raise [state test] Math scores.' For what I have control over, I said, 'exposure in content area with regards to Math academic language.' For what I do not, I said, 'My students,' and 'my colleagues.' For what I want to try, '[District assessment software] to help my students practice language.' For 'resources I have access to,' I would need to use Chromebooks to get students access to the same types of questions as on the state test, like 'click and drag.'" Ryan said that he had not tried this before because his department had not been provided with training on the software. I asked, "Do you have an idea of the Point A? Sounds like something is telling you that language could be an issue. How do you know?" Ryan replied, "When we go to the [question] item bank, it's above their level. We looked at the test, and went, 'No, no, no, they can't understand that.'" I asked, "But what were the student behaviors that you were seeing that suggested language is the issue? And then in 8 weeks, what would be different?" Nicole jumped in, "What if you tried a vocab test? And then in 8 weeks, do it again?" Ryan said that he had in mind to incorporate regular practice of sample test questions with academic vocabulary "embedded." Noting the time, I asked Ryan if this talk had given him ideas of what he might bring next time, and he said yes.

I asked Steven to share next. He stated that for his SPED classroom, his focal issue was "making connections." Steven explained, "We have to adapt the 8th grade textbooks, because our students have no clue of what's going on because they don't understand the vocabulary, and they don't understand the background." I asked, "Sounds like your issue is how well your students are understanding the content?" Steven agreed. I suggested for next time that he bring an artifact that showed his students' understanding for one lesson. He said he could do that.

For his turn, William said that his focal issue was "written communication." He explained, "That's a weakness for our kids. We have a lot of second language kids." William

said he could control “classroom interactions and classroom work products” but not “Language Arts instruction.” “So if I expect it from the kids, I have to teach it first.’” He had in mind to try “putting more structure into the steps of writing” and “maybe modeling more.” He summarized, “So Point A is I started with embedded vocabulary instruction, but I need in Point B a greater use of academic language.” I asked, “For your Point A, can you drill down a bit? Is there a particular aspect of their writing you want to see a difference on in 8 weeks? Perhaps bring a writing sample next time so we can see the issue?” William replied, “I would be glad to.”

Megan shared that her focal issue was “writing, particularly argument writing.” Megan added, “I can control my writing prompts—I write all of my own prompts and give choices. I’m trying more differentiation with argument writing, like different outlines. In 8 weeks from now, I’m thinking I am going to have all of these improved, great argumentative essays.” Megan explained that her passion was “critical thinking.” “I have a bumper sticker that says, ‘Critical thinking, the other national deficit.’” Everyone laughed.” I asked if she might also bring a writing sample next time. Megan replied, “Oh, sure.”

For her turn, Nicole explained, “Our department is working on our cycle of inquiry, 'making Science meaningful.' We just developed a survey to ask students so we'll have actual data.” The survey asked students to rate which Science activities they enjoyed most. “So one thing that I can control is the survey being distributed. What I cannot control is their answers.” The group laughed. Nicole continued, “I’m hoping that if they have a buy-in and enjoy the subject, then they'll actually learn by engaging in the lessons. If they write that they prefer the direct teaching or computer versus worksheets, then that will change what we do over the next 8 weeks." I suggested she bring the survey results next meeting, and she agreed.

Noting that our time was up, I asked for feedback. “What did you think about today?” William commented, "I enjoyed it." Megan shared, "What I like is that I feel like there are a few people that I can look at and actually believe on this campus that want to improve academics. And every subject is represented. That really is surprising." Steven added, “And nobody's trying to like talk over anybody or hog the spotlight.”

I thanked and dismissed the group. The next day, I emailed a summary of what each person had shared and planned to bring next time. Privately, I reflected that members appeared willing to disclose challenges and show support, to allow others to make suggestions, and to plan for next steps. However, I noted that they seemed to prefer discussion and were uncomfortable with written reflection, but felt I should help them stick to it—to make their thinking explicit so they might question it and to have a structure for organizing their thinking. I also noted that their ideas for an improvement project were “loose” and reasoned that they might develop a more clearly defined problem of practice if prompted to state Point A and Point B in terms of students’ observable behaviors. I added this to the reflection page.

In a reflective conversation later, Ryan shared that as a next step, he planned to meet with a Math teacher at another school who could show him how to use the assessment software. “But,” he admitted, “when I start imagining taking these steps, and that I am doing it alone without my department, I start to want to give up. I get demotivated.”

March 28

The day before the meeting, I emailed the agenda with a reminder to bring artifacts to share. Everyone arrived on time. After a few minutes of small talk, I suggested we get started. William said, “I’d like to add something to the agenda. I’d like to discuss the drive-by PD format that we’ve suddenly degenerated to [in our staff PD meetings]." Ana replied that she had been

asked to organize the PDs at the last minute. William replied, “I know, this is not a reflection on you at all, it’s not against you. But an hour and a half of my private time on the last day of the quarter, for a drive-by PD, that's as good as worthless and wasting my time." Megan agreed, “Exactly! I wanted to say this.” Ryan added, “I was going to say that there's four of us on SBDM, and it's one of SBDM's purviews to decide PDs. We should be able to put it on the agenda and talk about it.” Megan disagreed, arguing that the whole staff should have more voice in these decisions, and not just SBDM or ILT.

At this point, we were twenty minutes into the meeting time, and I interjected to ask if they wanted to start on the agenda. The group agreed. I reviewed the reflection page, which included similar questions as last time with an added question to name Point A and Point B in “low inference terms of what we can hear or see students say or do.” I explained the purpose of the questions was “to revisit your thinking, and keep trying to clarify for yourself what you think is the issue,” and that “low-inference” language can be helpful to define this issue more precisely.” I asked if there were any questions, and there were none. I prompted the group “to take a few minutes to jot down some answers” before sharing.

The room grew quiet as everyone began to write. After a minute, Ana said, “This is the first time I’ve stopped all day. I’m like, ahhh, I think I’m breathing.” Everyone laughed. Ana went on to describe a visitor in her classroom today. Others listened as they continued to write.

After a few minutes, I suggested that each person take a turn to share, like last time. Nicole went first. She passed out copies of her student survey results and set up displays of student work samples around the table. Nicole explained that she had created “a pie chart with colors” out of her students’ survey responses to the question, “What was your most meaningful experience in Science this year.” On the pie chart, the highest number of students reported “Group Work/Projects/Labs” (18%), “Einstein Essay” (14%), and “Chemistry” (13%) as most meaningful; the lowest number students reported “Grades & GPA” (1%) as most meaningful. Nicole continued, “We had a rocking turnout for Einstein's essay so I brought a copy of that,” and she passed this around. “I thought that was like, wow, this many people put that in here? Ten paragraph minimum.” Nicole continued on, describing the student work on display that represented the highest-rated assignments. Ana added about one project, “I walked by and I saw them doing it, it was great.” I asked Nicole if the survey results helped her identify any next steps. Nicole replied, “Yes, that's that little pink slice about their grades, I want it to be bigger! I would like to see 90% plus of my students actually pass the course, which is going to require them to do Science Fair. Last year was a very good turn out, but right now, we're not there.” I suggested that next time we could check whether that had improved. “No, you won’t be able to ask me that until after May 8,” she said, referring to the date of the Science Fair.

In the interest of time, I suggested moving on. For her turn, Ana described how she set up her units, starting with a “graphic organizer” that introduced the main concept and vocabulary, followed by a “hook,” “direct instruction,” and labs. Ana said that her focal issue was to improve her students’ note-taking during “direct instruction” by implementing Cornell Notes. “But I need help!” she said. “I need someone to explain to me how this really works.” Megan said, “You can tweak how you do it, you don’t have to follow it exactly. I do it all the time,” and explained how she did so. Ana explained that she encouraged her students to keep their notes in an interactive notebook that became a “tool to assist them in completing the labs.” I asked Ana how she would name her Point A in terms of her students. Ana said, "They're just writing it down, like sentence after sentence, in one long paragraph. So I would like to facilitate more organization that makes the information more easily accessible to them." William replied, "If you figure out how to do it,

that should be a good activity for this group. Because their verbatim copying drives me nuts." I asked, “So instead of the copying, you would like to see them do what?" Ana replied, "My Point A to Point B right now is to take my paragraph and get it in a Cornell Notes format."

Next, William passed around samples of several students’ writing. He explained that his students were preparing to write a research paper about a biography of a Renaissance figure, and these samples were student autobiographies completed as a “pre-assignment” to show him “where the writing deficiencies were.” Looking through the samples, Megan called out excitedly, “Look at this kid!” William clarified, “That's my EL [English Learner] student.” Megan replied, “Oh, you have got to be kidding.” Nicole commented, “She's amazing.” William continued, “So the first 4-5 [samples] obviously did not meet the standard of an essay.” “This one did! I love it!” Megan exclaimed. William went on, “Essay in my class, automatically the definition is five paragraphs of a minimum of five sentences each. The next one is my SPED student.” Megan commented, “Wow, nice job.” Ana added, “For that student, that's a really good job.” William continued, “And the last two are my shining stars. So that's the spread of my classes. What you're not seeing is a whole chunk below this first group that just produces nothing. But some of these find some sort of interesting way to start. Like this one, he only produced this much, but he actually had a very nice introduction.” Megan agreed, “It's a good intro sentence.” William said, “I was like, ‘Wow.’ There is a glimmer of hope with this child, just by producing this much, now I know, oh, there's some talent to work with.” I asked William what he aimed to improve within eight weeks. William replied, "My Point B is to meet the standard to be able to construct a cohesive multi-paragraph paper. Probably about 70% will. Some kids as soon as you say over one page, they will automatically just [gasp], they're done. They won't even start.” I suggested that next time he bring samples from the same students, showing their progress with the next step. William liked that idea.

At this point, we were close to the end of our time, and the group decided to stay later to continue hearing from everyone. Megan brought writing samples but could not stay late and said she would bring them back again next time.

Ryan did not bring artifacts but shared an update. He and another Math colleague visited a teacher at another middle school who showed them techniques and tools for using technology in the classroom. “We both left happy. Because there is so much stuff we don't know about technology because we weren't trained. She opened my eyes. It was an actual conversation.” The teacher inspired him to try introducing his students to an online graphing calculator used on the state test. However, Ryan said, while he presumed that adding technology to the classroom would engage more students, a puzzling thing had happened when he had tried this. “Half of my classes said, no, I'd rather use the handheld calculator. So I think the technology in my class, my students don't really want to use it, so I'm worried about that.”

I asked Ryan what next steps he had in mind. Ryan said that his visit with another teacher had inspired him. “So for 6-8 weeks, I was thinking—it may have to happen for next year—but a redesign of the way that the traditional math classroom here at Jackson has been. I want to include more group work, more project-based, and more with computers. But I am hesitant, I'm scared, because I don't know how to do it. For group work—in all of my years here, I have never had too much success with that.” I asked if there was a smaller piece of this ambition that he could try out in the next few weeks. Ryan said, “The truth is, with my curriculum guide, there's no way, impossible, there’s no time.” Ana suggested he could have students compete to solve one problem on the computer. “With what Chrome carts, though?” Ryan asked, “Don't forget we are headed into the month when the school is taking away Chrome carts [for testing].” I

countered, “But we have to somehow get ourselves around these obstacles so that we can keep working on something that we find rewarding. Like, if I can't do the Chromebook carts right now, what else could I do?” William suggested that students could work on Math problems on their phones. Ryan was not convinced. “Even when I offer the kids to use my laptop, they're like, ‘No I'm good.’ They just don't want to go up there and push a button.”

Taking note of the time, I suggested we move on. Steven also brought no artifacts, but shared an update. He had taught his students gestures to help remember vocabulary, “like ‘equator’ is the ‘belt of the earth’ and we go like this [a belt-buckling gesture] around our belts.” His goal was to ask students to “come up with more of the connections themselves.” I suggested he come up with a baseline: tally how many students offered how many connections on a given day. “And then we could set a goal from there.” Steven said he might try this.

By now the meeting had run thirty minutes late. I thanked the group for staying and asked for feedback. William said, “This is fun, guys.” Ana added, “I like hearing what everybody else is doing. I feel very safe and comfortable in this space. I think that’s important, too.” Ryan said, “Me, too.” Steven said, “I think it’s good to get different perspectives on what other teachers are going through.” Ryan agreed, “Yeah, that we’re not alone. I am stuck in my classroom all day. I don’t really leave.” Ana concurred, “Me either. I didn’t even have lunch today.”

I thanked and dismissed the group. The next day, I emailed a summary of what each person had shared and planned to bring next time.

In reflective conversations, Hub members shared their perspectives on the group’s work thus far. Megan said, “This has been one of the best experiences I’ve had. This is how our professional community should be. Everyone shows up, they share what they are doing, we get ideas. I was so impressed with what everyone is working on and the focus on academics.” William said that the work of the group was a significant development for the school:

> It's a huge improvement! Six years I've never seen people bring work . . . It's where I have been wanting to go for a couple of years now . . . I mean, considering five years ago we started talking about student performance, the teachers were leaving in tears . . . That we're even able to talk about student performance is a huge leap for the school.

However, William was disappointed by the depth of the discussion. “When I left the last meeting, it was like, well, that was just show and tell . . . I just felt like I walked down with a pile of student work and no real use for it.”

April 11

A few days ahead of the next meeting, I emailed the agenda and reminders. William replied to the group and shared his critique: “The sharing was more show and tell than analysis of student needs . . . I would like some critical analysis of what we are seeing.” When there was no reply, I wrote to the group that I agreed, suggesting that next time, “we take a second look at the artifacts that were already brought” to have deeper discussion. Again, there was no reply.

At the meeting, only Ana arrived for the first fifteen minutes. When Megan came, she looked harried and explained that she had had a stressful afternoon covering for William’s class. “Some students are so disrespectful. It was horrible. I had to call the office and tell them, ‘My mental health depends on walking out of here right now.’” Nicole and Steven arrived. William and Ryan were absent. I suggested starting with the agenda, and Megan and Nicole warned that they had to leave on time. Given the late start, mood, and what members had brought, I privately shelved the idea to push for more “critical analysis” that day.

At 20 minutes past the scheduled start time, I suggested that we start with the reflection page, which was similar to last time. I asked the group to "take a minute and jot down some notes for yourself" about the questions. The group wrote quietly for several minutes.

I suggested we hear from each person. Megan went first. She passed around a sample of her students' essays that included a packet of activities they had completed in preparation. Megan explained that she offered choices of writing prompts and three levels of outlines for "lower-skilled," "medium-range," and "over-achiever" students. Megan brought student examples from each type. However, Megan said, overall she was frustrated with the results. Although she had taught her students "many ways of using evidence" including daily practice of the format, "I cried grading the final copies of the argumentative essays. There's no cited evidence." Looking through Megan's materials, Nicole commented, "I really like this format. This really walks them through it, there's no reason they shouldn't all get A's." Ana agreed, "It's really nice, isn't it?" Megan replied, "Thank you, that's really good feedback, because I try all the time, always looking for how to make it better. I don't know what else I can do besides write the essay for them." Ana added, "You should know that [this student] is having trouble with evidence in her work in Science, too. Gold star, really. I can't believe you got this out of [another student]. I never got him to do anything." Megan replied, "I know! I'm so proud of myself. And of him. I like getting this feedback from other teachers who have the same students, because I'm like, am I just beating my head against the wall?"

Next, Steven described a lesson he had taught recently about a museum in Japan where visitors make their own Cup Noodles following a series of steps. Steven described how he revealed the steps to his students one by one, prompting them to come up with reasons for each step and to guess what might come next. "They all knew Cup Noodles, so they were pretty into it." Steven said that this lesson was an example of how he was working on Point B: for students "to make connections between what they already know and what they are learning."

For her turn, Nicole described a new strategy she had tried to improve students' group cooperation. Nicole was frustrated that, with group work, sometimes "one person does all the work," or the students work together but they do not appear to learn, as many still fail her quizzes. "So what I found that works and they actually learn at the same time, is a Jeopardy-style game with the white board. It's student-led. You could hear a pin drop all day today for the first time in a little while." Nicole explained that she used this game to introduce her students to topographic mapping. She added, "I told them that, if you all try and participate, you are all going to get the highest score, and the winning team is going to get a 'front of the line pass.' So there was a lot of arm-twisting going on and they held each other accountable." Ana replied, "That's the best, when they hold each other accountable." I asked what Nicole thought was different between how she usually tried group work and this experience. "The accountability," she said. "They liked the idea that they were going to get the top scores as long as they were trying hard."

Next, Ana showed a sample of her students' interactive notebooks to demonstrate how she was implementing Cornell Notes. "I gave it my best shot. I read about how to do the Cornell Notes, and I created the Cornell Notes for this unit. I had them set up the page on their notebook, and I lectured like I normally do. And then I had them copy what I wrote." Ana explained that the first notebook belonged to "an A student who works hard to get his A. And his notes look amazing." She held up the notebook to demonstrate. Nicole commented, "Very nice." Ana flipped back to previous notes to compare and said she had seen an improvement from "the block format that I told you I was getting." Ana went on to explain that another notebook was from "a

student who usually has Bs and Cs," and held this up, explaining, "Not as nice as my A student, but they weren't bad." She again flipped back through previous pages to demonstrate. Nicole commented, "Now they are legible." Ana said she was happy to see that two of her failing students showed about a "30-40% improvement" from their previous notes. For next steps, Ana planned to use a gradual release: next, providing a partial set of notes with blanks to fill in, and after that, having students write the notes on their own.

At this point, the meeting time was up. I asked for feedback. Ana said she liked seeing the student work: "It makes it tangible." Steven agreed and particularly appreciated how Ana showed "before-and-after, so you can see how the students developed." Ana added, "I like how everybody's changing their focus and refining it as we move forward. Maybe we needed to have the show and tell to get to the next step. I'm sorry William missed that." Ana continued to explain that she imagined the group could "go deeper next year," but this first year, "I see it as foundational. It's what we need to lay a foundation so we can build on it."

After the meeting, I emailed a summary. Privately, I reflected that the group seemed "more animated" when looking at student work. My starting assumption had been to cultivate a "continuous improvement mindset," but I was starting to think that "what's important right now is the connection, the joy, the willingness to share, and that they see possibility." Still, I aimed to deepen their thinking, in the hopes that the work of the group might contribute to visible improvement in their classrooms. For this, I added a prompt about how their Point A-B had changed over time.

In a reflective conversation, I asked Ana if she thought it would be useful to deepen the work of the Hub by asking participants to collect more systematic data around a clearer focus. Ana disagreed. "I think if we were to impose that now, it would fall apart. It would just destroy whatever is building. It's building a foundation of trust . . . That's what we're missing here. People don't feel safe here [at Jackson] . . . We are still building to being comfortable." For example, Ana explained, she had intentionally chosen her own improvement project for "political" reasons, rather than bringing her most pressing problem of practice:

> I feel like I threatened William and I felt like [Cornell Notes] was something that he was an expert in and I wasn't. And it would allow him a bit of power in the situation . . . I think that it helps Megan to feel like she's supporting me in something also . . . I think that it's important to put myself in that position to learn from their expertise and by doing it this way I felt that it availed me of that. So it was very political.

April 25

Two days before, I emailed the agenda and reminders. Nicole was ten minutes late; everyone else arrived on time. As I reviewed the agenda, I asked if anyone had brought artifacts; no one had. Ana said she had not lectured again since our last meeting. William had intended to bring samples of his students' research papers, but the students were late in turning these in.

Turning to the reflection page, I explained that I had added a question to think about how Point A or Point B had changed. Then I prompted the group to start writing, and the room grew quiet for a few minutes. Then, Ana called out, "Well, I don't think I am making dinner tonight." Megan replied, "Oh, you're not?" A conversation ensued about division of labor in everyone's households. William shared that "the kids are starting to feel more accountability now that they know we're talking to one another." Others agreed, and the group exchanged examples of this.

I suggested we move on and take turns sharing, prompting Megan to get us started. Megan shared, "I think my Point B is still the same—trying to figure out how to get students to

cite textual evidence—but I guess my Point A is what other resources can I use to show them how to get that evidence into their essay, that was totally lacking."

Ana explained that her Point A and B had not changed. "Next time, I am going to give them an outline of what is expected, but I am not actually going to write it for them. We'll see how that goes. Training wheels." Megan admitted that her students still required a lot of guidance from her, even at this late date in the year. "I thought the mother bird could let the baby birds feed themselves by now." Nicole agreed, "I am getting tired of carrying the worms home."

For her turn, Nicole described a group project she had started for students to create Power Point presentations. "At the beginning, group work was more social, there was little to no participation after I gave the instruction. Now I am just kind of on top of them, holding them more accountable, and I have 90% student engagement." Ana asked how Nicole was holding them more accountable. Nicole explained, "I am literally on top of them constantly—I'm exhausted." Ana replied, "Yeah, that's what it takes." Nicole added, "That's why I am saying, I'm tired of carrying the worms!" Megan described a strategy she had found to promote more student independence: charging students "points" for asking questions. She added, "Now they're really trying to figure stuff out better." Ana commented, "That's a huge skill. It's so important."

Steven shared next. "My Point A stayed pretty much the same: students building connections. My Point B changed. Before I would spoon feed them, hoping they would come to the connections. Now I am just letting them come up to the connections on their own."

Ryan admitted that he had not taken any further steps for his improvement project. He reminded the group of his visit with another teacher. "After that, life happened. We had benchmarks, I had duties, and everything kind of stalled." Ryan again stated that the computer carts were about to be taken away. "So I feel like I'm kind of on hold." Ryan said that he hoped to provide one session of "test practice that we do together" before state testing.

William shared that his Point A and Point B had remained the same, "but I had to change my methodology considerably." William said that he had come to realize "how much I had relied on [the former librarian] to work with the kids on the research side [in prior years]." With the loss of the school librarian this year, his students had struggled with his research assignment. "Now I'm meeting with each student individually starting next week. We'll sit down and say, 'What obstacles did you come up against to reach this point? How can I point you to new resources?' I need to find out from them what are they finding are their roadblocks to be able to independently research going forward." I suggested that William keep notes about those conversations as artifacts to bring. William said, "That's a good idea, I think I'll do that."

At this point, I asked if the group would like to use the time left to discuss a few projects in more depth. Nicole jumped in, "It sounds like we are all trying to not spoon-feed. How do we get past that?" Others agreed, "spoon feeding" was a constant battle. Megan said that, to her, the key to addressing this issue was to have school-wide implementation of practices, such as Cornell Notes, but she was not sure how this group could assist with that. "We are a small group, we need more buy-in from everyone."

From there, the group entered into an extended discussion about the difficulty bringing about school improvement at Jackson, and how the Hub could contribute. William said that he had heard a concern that "collaboration time was becoming semi-dysfunctional." So he wondered, "So how effective are we in taking a great group like this and getting those ideas down into the rest of the school? For History—I'll throw myself on that sword. No. It's not happening." Megan said, "I'll put myself out there as well," and explained that in her experience as department chair, "Trying to get them to collaborate, all I got was a brick wall."

William had an idea. “Would it be possible to do a questionnaire of the staff here about their impressions of collaboration and ideas for improvement?" Ana liked that idea and suggested they could present the survey results at a staff meeting.

At this point, Nicole balked. She recounted past experiences of department chairs being “thrown under the bus” after the district mandated that teachers sign up to attend “outside collaborations.” Nicole explained, “So it’s a slippery slope, and I’m not on board." Ryan agreed with Nicole, concerned that such survey results might be used against them in union contract negotiations: “It’s dangerous what you are saying. Because that’s what the district wants to take from us. Our collaboration time.”

William suggested another idea: give a demonstration of the Hub to the staff. “We could go through this process in front of them.” Nicole rejected this idea. “And then it will be that we have to do that every third Thursday,” explaining that the “outside collaborations” mandate had also started out as a “suggestion.” Megan added that she was also wary that others at the school might try to “sabotage” the Hub, as she had experienced with other initiatives.

At this point, Ryan said he had to leave. “It’s too dangerous for me to keep talking. There’s many truths that this room does not know, that I can’t say, and it hurts the idea of what we want to do.” Megan said, “Thank you for sharing, though.” Ryan left.

The group continued their discussion. Megan commented, “I feel sad now. It’s a bit painful, to see that people want change, yet we keep getting blocked. Nothing is going to change.” Ana offered, “But I think that's where our normal PD comes into play. Where we need to keep improving it. We need to create as much of a safe environment as we can so that those people who will choose to venture into giving it a shot will feel safe to do so." William was doubtful. “I have yet to see in this district where there is an upsurge from the staff that rebuilds the school’s social fiber,” he said. “What typically happens is, the staff gets disgruntled about something, and they start filing lots of grievances. Then the administrator is moved on, or fired, or demoted.” Megan suggested that their best chance for motivating interest in improvement across the school was for others to “see that kids in our classes are more engaged.” Ana agreed, “That’s all we really have. If they see the patterns, hopefully it will make them open and want to be part of the change.“ William agreed, “Kids are the answer, it’s not going to be staff.”

At this point, Ana pointed out we were “way over time” and suggested that we “call it a day.” Megan said, “But I think it was valuable. I appreciate everyone staying and listening and being honest.” William agreed, “Thank you all for your honesty.” I thanked everyone and dismissed the group. After everyone had left, Ana commented, “Damn! And I was feeling so optimistic! Now I am back to feeling bad again.”

Privately, I wrestled over whether the meetings were productive. As I saw it, “The habits of mind that I hope to instill with these reflection questions are not really coming through.” At the same time, the last exchange seemed important: The group disclosed struggles more openly than had been discussed in other groups. Then again, the exchange ended with fears that the conversation was “dangerous.” I wondered, was the work of the group worthwhile?

May 16

Two days before our next meeting, I emailed the agenda, a summary of what had been shared last time, and a reminder to bring artifacts. William and Ryan were absent.

I reviewed the reflection page, and the grouped settled into a brief moment of quiet writing. Then, Ana called out, “I love snack time!” Megan and Ana discussed allowing healthy snacks in their classrooms and exchanged experiences with scraping gum from desks. The room

became quiet again for another minute, until Ana shared that she was swamped by grading, prompting Megan to join her in a discussion about their approaches to grading. From there, the others in the group joined in, and the discussion turned to weather and global warming.

After a few minutes, I suggested that we start sharing. Megan shared first. She did not bring artifacts. “My Point A is, students struggle to complete work in class when given all necessary tools—and me being one of the major tools—because there’s too many Fs and low grades. So my Point B is, I want to get to a point where students show more capability to use class time and resources, and work completion percentages go up. I've been working on that one for years. What more can I do?" I said, “I wonder if it could be an issue of needing the assignments broken down more, so they can see their progress?” Megan replied, “I already break it down so much, I don’t see what else I could possibly do, without actually just doing the work for them.” Ana said that she was having a similar struggle with the Science Fair projects and suggested that Megan try giving out stickers. “That’s a good idea, I should try that,” Megan said.

Ana shared next, reviewing a sample of her students’ Science notebooks. Ana reminded the group that, “I am working on my Cornell Notes,” and that she first had students copy her model, then gave them a partial outline, and on the third try, the students “did it completely on their own.” About one student, Ana commented, “I think she did a pretty good job on her own.” Megan replied, “I think she did a great job.” About the next student, Ana commented, “I get very little out of him,” and showed how many of the student’s previous pages were blank or incomplete. “Now, these were the last ones. Check them out!” The page was full of notes. Megan was impressed. “How did you get that? What did you do? He talks non-stop in my class.” Ana replied, “I have no idea! But look”—pointing back to his notes—"he drew the waves! And he actually wrote down all of the parts of a wave!” Megan replied, “That's amazing. I've never seen that much work from him, really.” About the next student, Ana explained, “She's just hit or miss. I thought she was a good medium-type student. Before, her notes looked like this.” She showed blank pages. “But the last three times, I've gotten work from her.” Megan exclaimed, “Wow!”

For his turn, Steven shared an update about a lesson about Earth Day. His students read an article about 10 ways that Google tries to be more sustainable, and then came up with 10 ways to make Jackson more sustainable. “They came up with some really awesome ideas,” he said, and two students “made good connections and remembered what we learned” about whales.

Nicole brought samples of student groups’ Power Point projects. Nicole explained, “I wrote, Point A is ‘lousy time management’ and my Point B is, ‘to be able to pace themselves, complete their tasks, and be able to do it neatly and completely.’” Nicole explained that for the project, she randomly assigned students to research a type of natural disaster in groups of threes. Nicole admitted she was disappointed with the results because her students had included “dry content,” less explanation than she’d asked for, and used illegible font sizes. “That made me sad,” she said, and concluded that it meant that the next time she tried the project, she would provide even more detailed directions and a “firm rubric to follow.” Megan said, “Seems like we are having the same issue—kids do not use their class time that we give them, and then they don't finish by the deadline.” Nicole admitted, “I don’t know what to do about it.”

At this point, the meeting time was over. Megan shared, “I think the practice we have been doing with Point A and Point B would be helpful to do right from the start of the school year so that you could really follow the progress you have made on one particular issue over time. I think it gives us something that we desperately need sometimes, that we *are* doing something, because we get bogged down in all of the stuff that’s wrong, that doesn’t work, and there’s so much that *does* work. And I think I’m going to need a reminder of that.”

The group was dismissed. Later that day, I emailed a summary of what was shared.

May 30

Two days before, I emailed an agenda and reminders. Nicole arrived nearly 30 minutes late. William was absent; by now, we had found out he was out on a long-term medical leave.

Before starting the agenda, the group started a discussion about events at an SBDM meeting, frustrations with the poorly scheduled PD, and overload from meetings. Hearing this, I asked if the group still wanted to meet for another time in June, as originally planned. Immediately, Ana and Nicole said, "No." Nicole clarified, "Don't misunderstand us, we still love you!" Megan added, "It's just, when you look at the meetings coming up for the next two weeks, it's like insanity." I said that I understood, and we agreed that today would be our last meeting. Ana said, "I would like it if we continued meeting next year. I'd like to have a group that actually works on something together. I mean, I think we've really created a safe space." Megan agreed, "I think we've made a lot of progress in this group, and I would like to see it continue."

I suggested that we use our remaining time to check in on our improvement projects. Nicole shared, "My focus was on improving grades, and I'm still working on it. It did not go how I planned. Instead of less Ds and Fs since progress reports, there are a few more. But I have not given up. It will get better." Megan said, "I have experienced that, too, at this time of year."

Megan passed around a few colorful, glossy books that her students had created. Megan explained, "I brought examples of my Cinderella projects that I just had printed. I was really happy with the projects overall." Looking through one of the books, Nicole gasped, and commented, "This is beautiful! Look at this artwork!" Ryan pointed out pages of the students' writing that he appreciated. Megan said her students had been very proud of their work. "When they saw their book in print, they screamed." "Wow," Ana said, "this is great."

Steven described a class project in which students found their heart-rates. "They came up with their own connections," he said, "like wondering if their heart rate goes up when they are in PE because they are running."

Ryan shared his attempt to provide some test practice for his students. "I realize I came unprepared to understand what they need in order to get into the system," he explained, and described a series of technical glitches. However, Ryan was able to provide practice for about 15 minutes. "We all got bored after question 11," he said, "but I think it was helpful because I showed them how to push the buttons for fractions, and many of the kids were like, 'Ohhhh!' because they did not know how to do that."

By this point, we were nearly out of time, and I asked the group to complete anonymous feedback forms about the Hub. Ana reiterated her hope to reconvene next year, and others agreed. As they finished their forms, the members thanked each other, and departed.

On the feedback forms, members reported as their most important learning: "Other teachers have similar thoughts to how I feel"; "how many really dedicated teachers are present at Jackson"; "the Hub group shared many of the same goals"; and "kept me thinking of where my students are and where I want them to be." About what they enjoyed most, members responded: "sharing projects"; "camaraderie"; "having a safe place to work out skill development"; "like-minded individuals"; and "reflection." All reported interest in participating again.

Analysis of the Hub

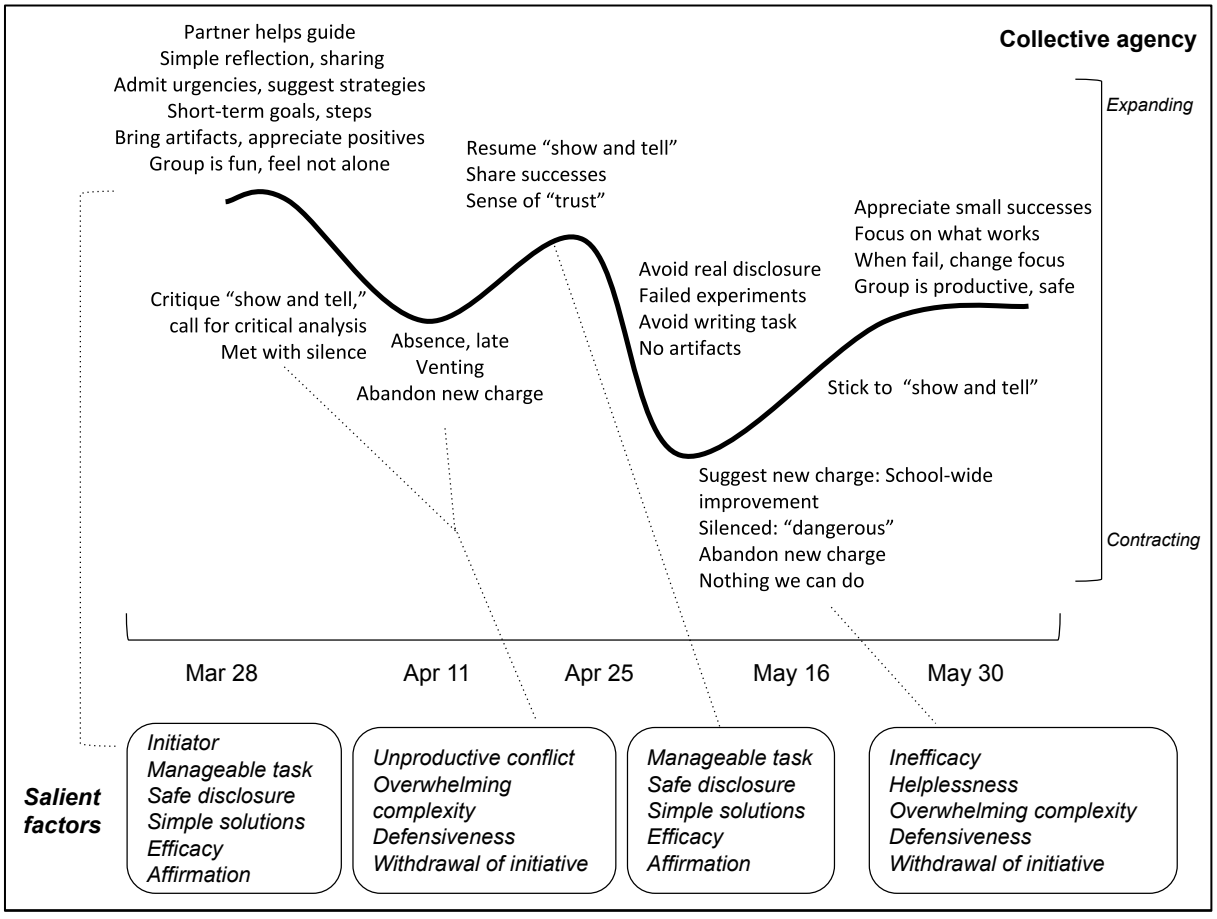
Viewed from the literature on school improvement and professional learning communities, the Hub seems a fairly weak body. Despite initial interest amongst members to "do

something" to advance instructional improvement, experience rich professional learning, and pursue measurable goals, in practice the group did not coalesce around any clear plan or strategy for improving instruction, experienced little learning, and rarely set or kept focus on clear goals. There was an attempt to establish routines of inquiry and analyze artifacts of practice, but group members struggled to keep focused, follow through with action steps and artifacts was spotty, and discussions remained mostly, as William complained, "show and tell." The literature on work team development might suggest the group had the wrong set up for effectiveness: its purpose was too broad, it did not focus on a clear interdependent task, and membership was based on voluntary willingness rather than expertise.

However, if examining the fine-grained processes of the group through the lens of collective agency, the events at the Hub reveal important positive strivings at times to develop—to push towards task accomplishment, address core challenges to reach students, become more cohesive and affirmed, and produce member satisfaction. Identifying and analyzing the differences between critical episodes when efforts towards collective agency appeared most expanded or contracted, and the turning points, reveals a set of salient and interacting factors that contributed to upswings and downswings. As an aid to the reader, Figure 8 illustrates these episodes of waxing and waning collective agency on a curve over several meetings and identifies salient contributing factors. The discussion below elaborates.

Figure 8

Curve of Expanding and Contracting Collective Agency and Salient Factors for the Hub



The Hub started with a surge towards collective agency in March. With guidance and focus provided by an initiator (in this case, the school's partner), members tried out a simple reflection task with inquiry-oriented prompts, and a simple routine to take turns sharing. The sharing invited members to disclose important struggles at the core of their work—including student engagement and motivation, academic writing, and incorporating technology. In response, members offered each other encouragement and advice that made it safe to admit complex challenges. This complexity was reduced as members tried out a new language of "Point A" and "Point B" to identify short-term goals that clarified actionable steps to take, and they offered each other suggestions for how their problems could be managed with simple strategies. Importantly, some members brought artifacts to share, impressing each other with a willingness to disclose practices and a show of follow through that was not typical in their other work groups. Reviewing student survey results and samples of student work produced an experience of efficacy and led to expressions of affirmation as members showed off signs of their students' engagement and appreciated students' strengths. Simple action items and group encouragement helped one member move past resentment about his department and seek out new learning that left him "happy" and inspired. Most members stayed well beyond the scheduled time to finish sharing, and the group reflected that the space was "safe," "fun," and made them feel "not alone" in their struggles. Members expressed excited optimism about the Hub as a model of professionalism that was a "huge leap for the school."

By the next meeting, this swell of collective agency was punctured. Ahead of the meeting, one member challenged the charge of the group, sending an email criticizing "show and tell" and calling for more critical analysis. Facing the prospect of a charge that would call for much more complexity in the team's interactions and work and more closely facing up to problems with student learning, defensiveness emerged. The partner serving as the chair of the group chimed in to support this show of initiative, but other members met this proposal with silence. The criticizing member was absent. Others showed up late and started the meeting with venting about the struggles of the day. No one mentioned the email. Sensing that the group wanted to stick with the easier original charge—simple tasks that were affirming, not critical—the group's leader retreated from the prospect of critical analysis.

Once the group resumed their original charge, strivings towards collective agency re-emerged. Again, members impressed each other by bringing artifacts of student work. When one member ventured into despair when admitting complex problems with student learning—struggles to cite evidence in writing—the group pulled her up by affirming her good teaching, reassuring her that everyone had this problem, and shifting the focus to signs of her efficacy by pointing out her success with one struggling student. Another member proudly shared artifacts demonstrating her progress, noting a "30-40% improvement" in her students' work and describing in detail the steps she planned to take next. Others affirmed her success and plans. At the end, the critical email was mentioned, and the idea of critical analysis was conclusively squashed by concluding that "show and tell" was working well: Sharing artifacts that showed "before-and-after" improvement built a "foundation of trust."

However, the emerging collective agency was tenuous. One member privately explained that "safety" and "trust" did not mean capability to share authentic problems of practice, but intentionally limiting the focus to problems that could offer others "power."

The group hit a low point on April 25 when it became clear that the simple tasks and the small action steps members had tried were falling well short of producing headway on complex problems in the classroom. Experiences of failure prompted expressions of defensive avoidance

and helplessness. The group sidestepped the writing task with unrelated conversation. No one brought artifacts. Some members admitted they had no new efforts to report—projects stalled because "life happened." Collective agency appeared to contract.

As the discussion shifted to more proposals for expanding the group's charge, collective agency seemed to sink farther when a conflict arose. At first, it seemed the group might be on a push towards advancing in its capabilities. One member suggested that, rather than continue to work on their individual projects, Hub members should try to do something collectively about a shared problem with students wanting to be "spoon fed." In response, other members suggested that working on this problem called for a school-wide effort to address teacher alignment and collaboration. Suggestions were posed for how the Hub might respond to this complexity by serving as a model of professionalism for the school or helping the school diagnose problems with collaboration through a survey. By this point, several complex ideas for expanding the group's charge had piled on, and the group faced the prospect of difficult tasks that entailed more coordination, the risk of trying to influence the faculty, and directly contending with some of the most difficult challenges in the school. As fears of failure and experiences of being overwhelmed mounted, defensiveness reared: Other members shut down the ideas with claims that the suggestions were "dangerous," and one member left in distress. This prompted others to feel "sad" and abandon the new charge, resigning themselves to the idea that nothing could be done: School improvement efforts usually ended in sabotage and "nothing is going to change." Collective agency appeared to sharply contract.

The meeting ended with members feeling "bad," but the group did not disband. The partner continued to host, and at the next meeting, members returned in search of the affirmation and satisfaction that the group's earlier interactions had offered. The original push towards collective agency returned when it was clear that the group would stick to routines of "show and tell." Keeping complexity even lower, the group continued to turn to side conversation so as to avoid focusing on the written reflection task. However, a sense of accomplishment was restored when members brought new artifacts. One member demonstrated substantial progress in her students' work, beaming with a sense of efficacy. Others affirmed her as they clamored to find out how she had accomplished it. In cases when the sharing and artifacts conveyed experiences of failure, the group offered simple strategies to try—stickers for student motivation or rubrics for student projects. The group's focus on Point A and Point B fueled affirmation by focusing on "what works" and not getting "bogged down all the stuff that's wrong."

By the last meeting, it seemed that the group's push to develop collective agency had plateaued. Most members showed, but one was 30 minutes late. The group avoided its task by first venting about frustrations over other committees and the PD schedule. Claiming exhaustion and overload, the group decided not to continue with the remaining scheduled meetings. In their final round of sharing, some members admitted that their problems had remained but set them to rest by asserting "it will get better"—without specifying any steps to take—or changing their focus to other artifacts that showed more success. However, a sustained sense of affirmation as a group and satisfaction was expressed. One member shared that he had finally accomplished a piece of his project, after it had stalled. The group glowed over creative books students had created. They talked of the Hub as a productive group that had made progress, appreciated the safety it had created, and expressed hopes to continue next year.

Across the ebbs and flows over time, the Hub's struggle for collective agency and the factors that undergird it become evident. With someone willing to take initiative and guide the group, the group was able to complete relatively simple tasks, made it safe to admit vexing

challenges, and reduced the complexity of those challenges with simple steps. This produced experiences of efficacy and affirmation of professionalism that felt like exciting progress and offered satisfaction. These efforts were sufficient to enough to keep the group together working on small tasks for several months. However, the efforts were limited when it came to addressing the true weight of the problems that members faced, and the group's emerging capabilities proved fragile amid the prospect of increased complexity or experiences of failure. Attempts to ramp up the complexity of the group's charge were shut down with defensiveness, and when the group's small steps in the classroom produced inefficacy towards their weighty problems, they gave up or changed their focus.

Yet, even when sinking to a low point when concluding that not much could be done to improve the school, members kept on coming back and making efforts to strive again towards collective agency. Why? They sought an experience that affirmed them as professionals, a sense of competence and accomplishment, and relief from their vexing classroom problems by connecting with each other so as not to bear their struggles "alone." But their limitations show how, as a group, they could not really handle the complexity of their problems or directly face up to problems that revealed the limits of their competence. If supports were designed that tapped into their desires and considered how to stretch past their limitations, might they be able to sustain and expand their collective agency into the next level of work?

Cross-Group Synopsis

Across the work groups in this study, collective agency appears a highly contingent capability. For all groups, a context of adversity posed vexing and complex problems: severe difficulties to reach their students and to get along as a faculty. These problems were compounded by limitations in the structural set-up of the groups, uncertainty about their tasks, weak external support, and shortages in personnel. Each group showed tendencies towards defensive avoidances and rejections of responsibility, helpless inaction, and unproductive conflict, suggesting that collective agency was constrained. Had the study examined the groups at only limited points in time, such findings would describe groups that, according to the literature on school improvement and professional learning communities, were weak and ineffective, deficient in the capacities and qualities associated with collective efforts that lead to development: lacking leadership, low in trust, holding low expectations, and refusing responsibility for student learning. From the literature on work team development, one might conclude that the groups had insufficient designs and were immature, having yet to sufficiently to establish trust and consensus and thus not yet capable of effective task accomplishment.

However, through the careful tracking of fine-grained group processes over time, this study adds nuance that points to developmental potential. In each group, there were clear efforts at times to exert collective agency: to pull together as an affirmed group and strive to accomplish tasks with an intention to address problems and experience more satisfaction.

Comparative analysis of critical incidents during which interactions suggested expanding or contracting collective agency revealed an interplay of contributing factors. While there were some subtle differences in the dynamics across the groups, the similarities are more striking. In each group, collective agency appeared most constrained when experiences of failure and being overwhelmed emerged in the face of uncertain or difficult tasks and complex problems. Amid complexity, fears of failure and experiences of being overwhelmed brought out defensive tactics (withdrawal of initiative, deflecting responsibility, doubting the group's charge, and avoiding or

abandoning its work), unproductive conflict (blaming each other, leaving the group, or distraction from the core task or problem), and helplessness (inaction and resignation that nothing can be done). On the flipside, efforts to expand collective agency surged when someone took initiative to "do something" to address a challenge or set a direction, and when what was initiative kept complexity low and offered an experience of affirmation.

Hence, three factors appeared particularly salient for enabling collective agency in all five groups:

- *Initiative*: Someone was willing to take (usually isolated) initiative to influence others.
- *Simplicity*: The group focused on simple tasks or reduced the complexity of a task to render it manageable.
- *Affirmation*: The group validated and appreciated members' values and expertise.

The salience of initiative, and what happened when it was withdrawn, reveals how leadership emerged. The groups' experiences of accomplishment came when someone showed initiative to focus the on a particular problem or task, and guided them towards action and completion. When this initiative was withdrawn, the very existence of the groups was threatened. The ILT's efforts and accomplishments for the first PD day depended firstly on the principal—supported by district expectations and materials—keeping the group focused until they completed the task. When breakdowns in the team prompted a retreat from the principal's leadership, the group "lost its way," and facing aimlessness, some members started to talk of disbanding. In the ELA department, with an ousted chair that refused to attend, when the new chair became distressed by experiences of failure and started cancelling meetings, there was no department to speak of for some weeks. On the flipside, only the initiative and guidance of the new chair ensured that the group completed and carried out its joint poetry event. When the staff lobbied to cancel the "piecemeal" and irrelevant PD and neither the principal nor any other staff member insisted on it going forward, there was no PD. The PD resumed when someone on the staff took the PD in hand, decided what it would be about, and facilitated it. The Hub was possible because of an external research partner's willingness to launch it, organize tools and materials for it, and facilitate the group. When the Hub reached its lowest point, with one member storming out and others concluding that there was nothing to be done to improve the school, it is not clear whether the group would have met again were it not for the continued leadership of their external partner.

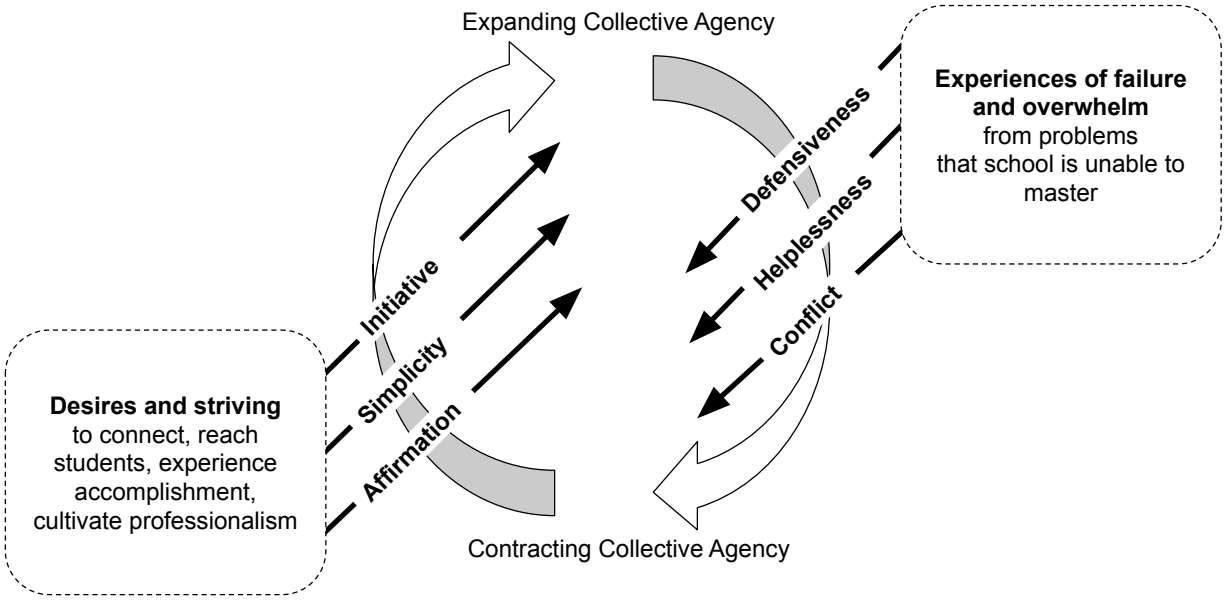
The salience of simplicity reveals how tasks were managed and how problems were handled. The groups struggled with how to define their task so that they could find something manageable. In the cases when complex tasks and thorny problems were up for consideration, groups sidestepped them—unless they could quickly downshift them into something simpler. For the ILT, when the district defined the task for them, task focus and accomplishment increased. On the other hand, when they were on their own to figure out how to translate the charge of "instructional leadership" and "planning PD" into tasks, they resorted to ad hoc agendas that resulted in surfacing enormous and shifting problems for which they saw no solutions. Facing an espoused focus on "deeper learning," they became overwhelmed and ultimately abandoned their charge. Efforts to develop collective agency recovered when they found their way to a much simpler task and downshifted a thorny problem with student failure with an easy solution: reinstating an agenda routine and AVID. A focus on compliance tasks in the faculty meetings was to some extent due to uncertainty about what else to do with the time—other than keep up appearances.

The salience of simplicity and affirmation also connects to how the groups approached the management of their interpersonal dynamics. Generally, the groups' approach to conflict served to inhibit risk and keep demands low, which had the effect of limiting the development of more stable trust and complex work. Rather than enter conflicts and find a way towards consensus, groups tended to avoid conflict, silence the problems that underlay conflicts, or use conflict as a way to avoid their tasks. In the staff PD and the Hub, collective agency surged when tasks stayed in the realm of affirming teachers' practices, and when risk of conflict entailed in undertaking more "critical analysis" was avoided. Challenges to the Hub's charge that invited more complexity were laid to rest through the use of conflict when members called them dangerous and stormed out. This way of approaching conflict kept the groups limited to "show and tell" tasks that did not allow them to really face up to and make headway on their core problems. Conflicts over the ELA department's charge led to a power struggle that opened a permanent rift. The new chair's efforts to limit the group to more simple tasks avoided the risk of further conflict, but proved insufficient to help novice teachers in the classroom, as evidenced when one teacher left the school in distress.

Thus, collective agency became enabled or constrained in how these factors interacted and hung together. Enabling processes formed an interplay: willingness to take (isolated) initiative generally combined with an emphasis on simple tasks that emphasized affirmation, rather than critique or analysis. Each process on its own did not necessarily boost efforts towards collective agency: Some shows of initiative were shot down in defensiveness (as with the incoming ELA chair), some simple tasks were experienced as irrelevant and dissatisfying (as with the compliance tasks in the faculty meetings), and some efforts at affirmation came across as empty cheerleading and denial (as with the principal's bright spots announcements). It was the interplay of the three that led to a sense of accomplishment that made the group feel more affirmed and satisfied. However, this interplay enabled only a fragile collective agency that did not sustain. The interplay did not enable the groups to establish a lasting sense of affirmation and accomplishment because these efforts did not allow groups to really face up to and master their problems in their full complexity. When groups' efforts to take initiative, tackle simple tasks, and offer affirmation proved insufficiently powerful to mitigate the core challenges that adversity posed to the school—being able reach their students and being able to reliably cooperate as colleagues—experiences of failure and being overwhelmed pulled groups back into defensiveness, helplessness, conflict, and fragmentation.

This cycle is demonstrated in Figure 9.

Figure 9
Cycle of Expanding and Contracting Collective Agency



This cycle illustrates two key points. On the one hand, group processes through which they strived towards collective agency entailed limitations that ultimately inhibited efforts towards agency from sustaining and expanding. On the other hand, new efforts at collective agency repeatedly re-emerged. In this way, exerting collective agency was a struggle. This struggle exists both due to limitations in the groups' efforts and capacities, *and* due to groups' striving to push past their limitations in pursuit of desired aims. The nature of their striving reveals these core desires: to reach their students, connect with and support each other as colleagues, experience progress and accomplishment, and cultivate professionalism.

Such desires reveal developmental potential and point the way for the next level of work for the school. When individuals' and groups' show isolated bouts of initiative, they reveal willingness to exert effort and take risk to influence their situation—but also uncertainty about what exactly is the right direction to head, how much change is possible, whether others will follow, and whether their efforts will be rewarded—or punished. When the groups stick with simplicity, they reveal a developmental striving for competence, but a difficulty in navigating the complexity of multi-faceted problems of organizational development and teaching and learning amid a work environment that provides scarce resources and little clarity about what to do or how. When the groups emphasize affirmation, they reveal a developmental striving for connection and professionalism, but also a need to shore up a core sense of esteem and worth the face of problems that challenge them in their core competence. When the main feedback they receive about their performance is tied to ambitious expectations that are very far from their current state, they yearn for other evidence that they do good work and that make their small successes visible and appreciable.

In the final chapter of the dissertation, I discuss these findings in light of the literatures consulted and the key dynamics they suggest would need to be attended to in order to bring about school improvement in the next level of work.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study set out to analyze the everyday interactions of educators' work teams to understand how school development unfolds in a "bottom tier" (Payne, 2008) school. This is a school that serves "truly disadvantaged" students (Bryk et al., 2010) who live in an area of concentrated poverty. The school has been deemed "low-performing" for many years on the basis of student achievement on standardized tests. It is a school that faces adversities that have been found typical in schools serving disadvantaged communities: resource scarcities, teacher turnover, a history of adult conflict, and formidable and persistent challenges to reach many of their students (Anyon, 1997; Bryk et al., 2010; E. García & Weiss, 2019; Hess, 1999; Kraft et al., 2015; Lipman, 1998; Mintrop, 2004; Mintrop & Charles, 2017; Payne, 2008).

Over several decades, the field of school improvement has had ambitious hopes for schools serving socioeconomically and educationally disadvantaged communities. Proceeding from the perspective of research on effective and improved schools (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2003; Knapp et al., 2014; Rosenholtz, 1985; Stoll & Fink, 1996; Stosich, 2017; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993), researchers have typically focused on finding out how these types of schools come to raise student achievement and build positive school climates. As such, the research tends to describe work groups that have, or are in the process of developing, advanced capabilities: with strong leadership that creates coherence and faculties that form into professional learning communities that draw on resources of trust and collective responsibility to pursue collective inquiry (Bryk et al., 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Little, 1982; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Stoll et al., 2006). Such findings offer an optimistic picture of schools that arrive at an ambitious horizon.

Over many years, school reformers and policymakers have tried various major efforts at improving schools that serve disadvantaged students—seeking how to move them closer to these ambitious horizons. High-stakes accountability, turnaround, and CSR have been prominent approaches. Their results have been disappointing. Even if we tried to learn from the limited cases of success, we simply do not have a pipeline of highly expert leaders and teachers to fill the ranks of all of the schools serving poor communities of color, nor a policy environment that is poised to provide every challenged school with stable and extensive external support.

With this in mind, I took a different approach to understanding school improvement. Recognizing a context of adversity facing schools, as discussed in Chapter 2, I was skeptical about the prospect that the groups in the school would come near to the capabilities that we would expect from the literature on effective leadership and professional community.

I considered literature about group development (Forsyth, 2014; Smith, 2001; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Wheelan, 2005) describing the prospect of group maturity. This maturity emerges over time as initial passivity and dependence on a leader shifts into conflicts over the group's task and norms that, if resolved, allow for more trust and productivity. I consulted a literature on work teams (Edmondson, 1999; Gersick, 1988; Hackman et al., 2000) that posed organizational conditions that work to press work groups past avoidances, passivity, or conflict so as to become more productive—such as a clearly defined interdependent purpose, members with appropriate expertise, perceived pressure to effectively accomplish group tasks, and feedback about progress (S. G. Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Hackman, 2002b; Hackman et al., 2000). These literatures offered a view into various contingencies upon which the development of more basic collective agency depends. However, as I discussed in Chapter 2, considering the adverse conditions, institutional context, and organizational structures of schools, I was skeptical that the

work groups in the school I chose to study would successfully navigate such contingencies to attain "maturity" and effectiveness.

So I developed a conceptualization of collective agency that might capture the small steps that groups make take, even if these steps did not sustain or lead to the success conditions enumerated by research on school and team effectiveness or maturity. In so doing, I aimed at understanding not "what works" so that schools reach an ambitious horizon, but for signs that there were surges forward on the long journey, and what enabled these amid the frustrations and suffering posed by adversity. This is school improvement in the next level of work.

What does this dissertation have to offer about the prospect for school improvement in a "bottom-tier" school? The findings support my original doubts. "Strong" leadership and thriving professional communities engaging in reflective inquiry were not evident. Nor did I find groups that arrived at a state of maturity and effectiveness after successfully weathering stormy times. Like other scholars who have studied schools serving disadvantaged students, I found destructive tendencies associated with "stuck" schools. All of the collegial groups I studied, including the one I led, showed tendencies towards deflections of responsibility, unproductivity, resignation, tenuous leadership, and low trust (Anyon, 1997; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Mintrop, 2004; Mintrop & Charles, 2017; Payne, 2008; Rosenholtz, 1989; Stringfield, 1998). Had I approached the school as a case study seeking evidence of developments associated with effective schools, I might have concluded: Jackson, the school I spent a year following, is riddled with dysfunction that keeps it stuck. Under these circumstances, the school may be hard-pressed to improve on its own.

But using participant observation and tracing the fine-grained processes of group development over time, I did not find groups showing simply "absence" of leadership, utter fragmentation, and failure. This study showed something more nuanced—groups that were struggling to get somewhere, even if they could not quite make it where they wanted to go.

The findings suggest that school development in the next level of work is constituted by several core dynamics: struggle, fragility, churn, basic capabilities, concrete limits, external nudging, connection, and searching for authentic affirmation. These key dynamics bear consideration for thinking about the kinds of reform approaches that could help a school like Jackson improve.

Struggle. Attending to the ebbs and flows of group interactions over time, it becomes possible to see struggle—and it is *constant*. In each collegial group at the school, there were times when the group decided to "do something," acknowledged and came up with some way to address a problem, put forth effort to bring about an accomplishment, and affirmed each other. The struggle proceeded when a series of interactions built onto each other and coalesced, fueling an upswing that buoyed the balloon. The shapes of the 'curves' in Chapter 4 attest to a prevailing quest of groups that are not "stuck" but struggling.

The struggle inheres in the enduring search for progress and well-being amid a sea of suffering created mostly by problems that educators did not create. Given a structural incompatibility between the organizational set-up of schools, the "extraordinary human needs" (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 24) of their students, and the resources available to deal with it all, a tidal wave of frustrations and overwhelm is at educators' backs at all times. But this study showed that educators did not sit idly by in such frustrations. They yearned to connect with each other, reach their students, get something done, make progress, and feel good.

Fragility. The shape of the curves in Chapter 4 also attests to the utter fragility of their efforts. A show of initiative, expressions of affirmation, and manageable solutions could push

towards a swell of collective agency, but this swell was usually easily punctured. One or two negative interactions in which a show of initiative felt unsupported, or a single experience of failure, could prompt initiators to withdraw their efforts, leaving groups aimless. Any proposal that was too demanding could open up a painful conflict or even a permanent rift. Why?

When a group raises up efforts against a sea of overwhelming problems to try to "do something," and finds their efforts unsupported or unsuccessful, they are at the mercy of the overwhelming problems. For survival, they quickly retreat or whip out a defensive smack-down. All the while, for groups used to breakdowns, an undercurrent of doubt erodes the foundation of their surges even as they emerge. The organizational context makes it so that when frustrations mount, it is acceptable to attenuate these frustrations by simply silencing problems or withdrawing from the group. Thus, in their struggle towards development, they build what can feel like sand castles.

Churn. When struggle and fragility combined, there was also churn: a striving to develop encountered an experience that punctured it and fell apart—but the striving returned, and the cycle repeated. "Isolated" initiative, expressions of affirmation, and simple solutions were no match against a relentless flood of thorny problems that collegial groups could not address in their full complexity. Renewed experiences of failure and being overwhelmed brought out destructive tendencies, sometimes washing out earlier developments. But sometimes, the earlier developments left traces—patterns of interactions that had "worked" to bring about a sense of accomplishment and affirmation—that enabled a steadier return to their push towards development.

Basic Capabilities. Surges towards development depended upon the emergence of leadership. But this was not "strong" leadership. It was of a more basic kind: the willingness of someone to take any initiative to try to influence others, despite the possible consequences. When collective agency seemed most enabled, such efforts at leadership combined with two other key enabling factors—self-affirmation and manageable steps—usually at a level of simplicity that was poor fit to the challenge at hand. This is an important nuance: a show of leadership alone was not enough to push groups towards collective agency. Indeed, the bolder the initiative, the more likely it was to provoke defensive reactions.

In this way, the struggle for development at the next level of work takes place in the arena of basic capabilities. Research on professional learning communities has described groups that move past simple tasks of "swapping stories" and "sharing" to undertake complex "joint work," involving tackling problems of practice together through reflective dialogue and inquiry that includes productive disagreements (Achinstein, 2002; Grossman et al., 2001; Little, 1982; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Stoll et al., 2006). In this study, however, educators facing formidable challenges to reach their students and to get along as adults were after more basic capabilities. In a school perceived as a "failing" and a "dumping ground," teachers feared and actively avoided to talk about instruction, experienced intense interpersonal conflict, and told of a history of gross misconduct. In the midst of overload, a reactive orientation arose: planning was shoddy, meetings were patched together, tasks sometimes dropped, and plans were not followed up. Under these circumstances, becoming able to "show and tell" about teaching in a civil and appreciative manner and arriving at some basic team accomplishment were not easy feats and were experienced as substantial steps forward.

Concrete Limits. The struggle for collective agency and its fragility also reveals the importance of attending to concrete limits as to what is possible to attain. Collective agency does not develop when groups face a charge they see no hope of attaining or a problem over which

they perceive no locus of control. Defensiveness, unproductive conflict, and helpless resignation rear if facing a charge that is too far of a stretch from their given expertise and resources, or a problem that appeared rooted in factors beyond their sphere of influence. Thus, developing collective agency in a context of adversity means accepting that real concrete limitations exist. Problems rooted in structural incompatibilities between demands and resources cannot be solved simply because of a heroic determination and grit. There is only so much time in the day, so much energy that people have, so much effort that can be extended, and so much influence that groups have. Development in the next level of work does not mean reaching for the highest ambitions or becoming burned out trying to address problems over which groups have too little control. Groups develop collective agency when they are sensitive to the "bandwidth" that exists and aim at tasks and problems that the group has the capacity to handle and influence.

External Nudging. The findings of the study suggest that some external nudging seems a necessary and powerful force to invite a press towards collective agency in schools facing adversity. In a school like Jackson, there may be long-term experiences of low results and weak incentives that make for fairly weak pressure from the outside. If the school also has little district oversight or no critical friend, then groups may not necessarily recognize clear tasks to accomplish or may exhibit a low concern for how well their tasks are completed. When the group's progress stalls or the task seems too difficult, the charge of the group, as we have seen in Jackson's case, can simply be abandoned, or the group or work team could erode as people simply stop coming, as we also have seen in Jackson.

In this study, groups strived towards collective agency to the extent that someone was willing to exert leadership, and in some instances, such initiative emerged in response to some external press. This occurred when the district provided training and materials that helped to define a task, prepared the team or principal to undertake it, and conveyed an expectation of accomplishment. Thus, some "good pressure" gave the groups a boost. This did not come from a heavy-handed mandate. Actually, "top down" compliance tasks, as we saw, enabled little push towards collective agency. When external support was enabling, it was a nudge. But some of the groups' surges in Chapter 4 showed how a nudge could sometimes be powerful enough to press the principal towards exerting more leadership and groups towards more accomplishment that they found satisfying, producing a burst of efficacy and affirmation.

Connection. Amid expectations of the Common Core State Standards and state policy to bring about students' critical thinking within a positive climate, educators in a school facing adversity may find their students "under-skilled," "defeated" or wanting to be "spoon fed." These are vexing problems that call for a collective response, but creating sufficient "team spirit" is a challenge in a school that sees itself as a "dumping ground." In a loosely coupled organization, educators spend most of their time alone in their classrooms with little oversight. As seen in Chapter 4, when educators find their collegial groups struggling to organize themselves and get along, feel that it is not safe to discuss instruction with colleagues who may be "triggered," or feel themselves like they are merely "surviving" amid the overload of their daily work, teachers might not find time or trust to visit and take an interest in what goes on in others' classrooms. Some may withdraw from their collegial groups partially or completely. An overloaded principal might spend too little time looking into classrooms. When these conditions combine, other than daily interactions with students that they may find hard to reach, the main "feedback" teachers may receive from the outside could be in the form of color-coded reports of performance numbers.

In such a context, individuals in the school feel left to bear terrifying problems alone. "No one" is interested. Amid these conditions, "performance" as work groups may not be a prime concern. When efforts towards collective agency swelled, the collegial groups I studied were not necessarily after something narrowly task-oriented. Sometimes, work groups pressed towards development when the suffering of adversity activated desires to attenuate suffering by feeling "not alone" in their struggles. The teachers sought a group in which they could express their frustrations and excitements openly, share their experiences, and see that someone amongst them cared. In these cases, the sense of "accomplishment" was finding that others shared in their struggles and made them feel that their work mattered.

Searching for Authentic Affirmation. Developing collective agency hinges upon forging group affirmation—a sense that the group is worthy and capable. But in the midst of adversity when a never-ending stream of problems challenge core competencies, how does this authentic affirmation—that is, affirmation that at once recognizes worthiness, but also the depth of the struggle—come about? In this study, the press to connect and "do something" enabled a striving towards collective agency—to the extent that simplicity could be found. Simplicity meant that the groups did not treat their problems with an elaborate process of problem solving. Rather, in the midst of overwhelming problems, it became possible to strive towards collective agency when recognizing an available and manageable solution fairly quickly. However, this set them up for fragility that led to the churn—as the solutions that they found manageable were generally inadequate to the complexity they faced.

Thus, the struggle for collective agency includes a search for authentic affirmation—and this is a challenge in a context of adversity. Chapter 4 showed that when groups tried to merely pump themselves up by pointing to "bright spots" while papering over the challenges, people did not feel affirmed. They felt belittled. We also saw how concrete evidence of small successes, like one student receiving an award or incremental growth in students' note-taking, could provide powerful experiences of efficacy that launched surges towards collective agency—but it did not last. When groups were reminded of the depth of the school's challenges and their difficulty to really attenuate them, a renewed sense of being overwhelmed could quash the rising affirmation.

Authentic affirmation, in this case, would rest on sustained collective efficacy—a sense that the faculty is able to reliably pull together and reach their students. However, conditions of chronic adversity do not allow for this. In the midst of overwhelming problems and recurrent experiences of failure, work groups, as we saw in Jackson, do not develop capabilities that allow them to face up to their problems in their full complexity. Even if they could stretch this capability, there are concrete limits as to what is possible to address. And even if they were to make headway on one thorny problem, the problems in schools are so interconnected that "success" of this effort might get washed out when a different urgency rears. Thus, in any event, it seems likely that many frustrations could mount.

Thus, some failure will almost certainly be a part of the process. In a context in which swells towards collective agency can be so fragile, what is to prevent a work group from simply squashing their efforts as soon as failure arrives? For this, there are no obvious solutions. In essence, what I call authentic affirmation—recognizing the group's worthiness within the depth of the struggle—is about building resilience. However, the literature about resilience sheds little light into the subtleties of how groups might pick themselves up in the face of failure when they are used to defensiveness and helplessness. Hence, development in the next level of work requires searching: What might help the groups endure past this failure and keep on trying?

School Development at the Next Level of Work

After a year of participating in the daily struggles of Jackson's educators, I ask myself: Is there a prospect for improvement at a school like this? Or is the struggle doomed to fall apart amid fragility that arises in context of adversity? Could something be done to fortify the struggle and diminish the fragility so that the churn might be less dramatic or frequent, and the work groups could become more stable? Considering the discussion above, I recognize that this entails attending to the struggle, fragility, and churn amid developmental efforts concentrated in basic capabilities, attendant to concrete limits, offering connection, nudging from the outside, and searching for authentic affirmation.

I am aware that a school like Jackson exists in a district with limited capacity. In such a district, there may be some district-organized PD opportunities, although these may be of uneven quality. There may be a limited number of coaches who could assist particular schools or subject areas, although they may not be well-supported or trained. There may be some district administrators who oversee schools—but their daily work may not be closely connected to the schools, and they may not be expert instructional leaders or well-versed in organizational development. Modest funding could be available for some support from an outside organization. There may be options for a research-practice partnership that could provide some developmental support.

With this arrangement in mind, I rule out the prospect of a sweeping solution coming from the outside. The school must draw on its hard-won strengths with boosts from limited external support. So what I call "the next level of work" is a proximate stretch towards developing new capabilities for collective agency that lay within reach of the struggle, given existing capabilities and resources. This is not aiming for improvement that rises to the standard of what is described in the literature on effective or improving schools. Rather, it is attending to the most urgent capabilities that would have to be developed in the school, how these capabilities could arise given the limitations and strivings available, and what kind of external support would be most needed.

Improvement at the next level of work does not presume a linear course to advanced capabilities. The cycle of expanding and collapsing collective agency illustrated in Chapter 4 cannot simply be "broken." Adversity will remain a prevailing force, and as work groups learn new ways of contending with their functioning and their problems, there will likely continue to be valleys in their striving towards collective agency. Churn may still arise as the groups feel the gnawing sense of being overwhelmed, and then feel pressed again towards new efforts, as indicated in the dips and swells of the curves shown in Chapter 4. To get to the next level of work means to attend to the positive struggles and look for how these might become strengthened to lessen the fragility so that the valleys are not as deep. The aim is to orient the surges towards building new capacities so that the groups do not build mere sand castles, but incrementally build up their capabilities over time. Their surges may still be punctuated by periods of frustration and slippage. However, if each surge builds some capacities that leave traces and show up again in subsequent efforts, the churn may slow and become less dramatic.

One place to begin in strengthening the struggle and lessening fragility is to aim at developing the foundational capabilities of teams. In the areas of leadership and task management, this starts with aiming at basic team functioning. This entails simple steps, such as: Designating a chair (or a rotating chair) who prepares in advance for the group, sets a direction when the group does not have one, and helps provide focus; adopting routines for setting agendas

together and identifying action items; establishing roles for monitoring time, keeping notes, and reflecting on group process; and revisiting commitments in subsequent meetings.

Alongside basic team functioning, the groups would need to develop capabilities in collegial discourse about their core work—which, for educators, means talking about what is going on in classrooms. This discourse may not stretch so far as "reflective dialogue" or "inquiry" as described in studies of professional learning communities. It is a move towards "deprivatizing" practice but with the purpose of allowing for a "safe" exchange.

A "safe exchange" refers to a simple routine that aims to provide a low-pressure opportunity to disclose events in the classroom and to practice supportive and respectful collegial dialogue about these events without the prospect of blame or negative personal judgment. This could look like something similar to the "show and tell" that was seen in some groups at Jackson. In a "safe exchange," the group could follow a protocol that starts by inviting any individual to briefly share or present about a teaching experience from their classroom, either negative or positive. Then, colleagues could be invited to offer their support, appreciation, or advice. At first, such a "safe exchange" may be mere "swapping stories," or oral anecdotes. This exchange can be deepened with concrete artifacts to illustrate the stories. At the level of basic capabilities, however, the "safe exchange" is not aiming at heavy analysis or critique. The protocol could be simple and flexible so as to allow room for spontaneous dialogue that arises. In this way, the exchange could also become a venue for connection through giving voice to authentic urgencies and passions.

A "safe exchange" gets started on the search for authentic affirmation by cultivating appreciation of group strengths. But authentic affirmation is contingent upon wrestling with more complexity. Mere "show and tell" will not cut it in the long run—this leaves the group without a real sense of accomplishment and too much at the mercy of problems that overwhelm them and can eviscerate their efforts.

The search for authentic affirmation thus appears to call for a few additional developments. One might be to balance shows of appreciation with some "get real talk." "Get real talk" would be leadership practice related to, but not the same as, what some term "straight talk." "Straight talk" refers to "undistorted delivery of negative information" (Sussman & Sproull, 1999, p. 154). For example, a leader might say, "We have way too many students that we are not reaching, and it shows up in our test scores and in our grades," and present the staff with the data that indicates this. In a school like Jackson, such a presentation on its own could be a recipe for destructive tendencies of defensiveness, helplessness, and finger pointing. However, given that concrete experiences of the school's problems surround teachers every day, avoiding discussing problems and merely pointing to "bright spots" also does little to satisfy yearnings for affirmation and competence.

To develop the next level of work, a "get real talk" aims to avoid inviting destructive tendencies while orienting the group towards facing up to consequential problems. For this purpose, the talk could include three key components: acknowledging evidence of difficult problems, softening this with a recognition of the school's limitations and assets, and appealing to the group to consider what is within their capacity to address. Identifying the limits means firstly naming concrete realities that bound the school's capacity. To avoid opening a litany of woes or finger pointing, the leader could name the limitations for the group by acknowledging resource shortages (e.g., unfilled positions, available time) and factors that the school does not have direct control over (e.g., state and district policy, other schools, students' home lives). Then, the leader could name some of the school's resources and strengths: What do we have to

draw on, broadly speaking? For example, the leader might point out: We have XX meetings during which we could work together, we have teachers on staff that can do XYZ, we have XX specialists that can help us with certain needs, and we have XX committees that could focus on particular areas. At this point, a dialogue could be invited: What other strengths can you think of? And, considering the challenges we face, what could we reasonably do to improve something here?

A "get real talk" provides framing that orients the group for taking action on a manageable target. But the "get real" talk is not enough for actually getting to the action and experiencing success. Given that the groups cannot face up to or address the complexity of their problems in full, the "get real talk" would likely need to be coupled with processes that develop new ways of thinking to boost problem solving capacity. This could be done by borrowing some processes from models of continuous improvement (Bryk et al., 2010; Mintrop, 2016) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008). However, to avoid overtaxing the groups and puncturing their collective agency, these processes would be scaled-down. For example, the groups might benefit from learning how to articulate more firmly the school's strengths and capabilities by trying out just the first step of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011) in which the faculty interviews each other to identify peak experiences and core values that identify the "positive core" of the organization. Additionally, the groups might benefit from learning a few basic elements of improvement science and design-based school improvement, such as how to: determine a shared urgency, define the shared urgency in concrete terms to make it actionable, roughly estimate a baseline, set a short-term goal, decide on an action strategy, collect practical evidence about progress, and periodically check and make adjustments in relation to that evidence.

To avoid the destructive potential of experiences of being overwhelmed, teams probably would need to learn all of the above step by step, with each step supported with guiding materials and manageable tasks. It would probably be of help if some of the steps resulted in artifacts—such as group posters—that could enable focus and consistency and provide concrete reminders of the team's work over time, offering resources for boosting a sense of accomplishment and affirmation.

However, a social psychological ecology needs tending to for the above to be productive. Development at the next level of work is a highly contingent affair. There are many dynamics that could get in the way of any of the above working out. Any one of the steps could break down. During "safe exchange," someone might show disregard or express a criticism, sparking a destructive conflict and a move to shut down the whole process. The processes may turn out to be too complex for the groups, and defensive avoidance or helpless passivity may arise. Even if they made it through all of the above, the action strategy a group identifies might not pan out.

Given the dynamics of fragility—how easily efforts towards collective agency can deflate when running up against a frustration or failure—development at the next level of work means helping groups to face up to breakdowns and tolerate failures along the way. This means acknowledging what happened, reconsidering the strategy tried, making adjustments, and trying again—rather than silencing the problem or dropping the work as soon as the going gets tough. This suggests the development of two capacities. First, it seems a leader would need to set an explicit expectation that group efforts to improve might not work out on the first try, so that failure might become normalized. Second, the leader would need to make an explicit commitment to see the initiative through and to learn from setbacks. Without these supports from

leadership, when running up against little failures in a context of adversity, "immature" groups may simply drop the task or focus altogether and shift to something else.

Moreover, the group would probably need to develop a repertoire of "fall back" strategies that can swoop in to pull members' affirmation up when an experience of frustration or failure arises. One "fall back" strategy could be to establish, as part of basic team functioning, a role of "caretaker." When reporting on updates about action steps and checking into progress, if it appears that the initiative is not succeeding and someone starts blaming, expresses the view that "nothing can be done," or efforts are pointless, it is the job of the "caretaker" to interject into the conversation. If the group creates a "positive core" poster, a second "fall back" strategy could be to refer back to the poster periodically, remind themselves of core values and peak experiences, and check in if anything should be added to it.

Thus, in order for the groups to develop the capacities needed to get to the next level of work, they would need to develop more sustained leadership. The findings in Chapter 4 revealed that, even in a "dumping ground" school, a leadership impetus and willingness to take initiative exist, and individuals' efforts at times to "do something" can be consequential for whether collective agency swells or collapses. However, if willing leadership is not consistently supported and amplified, experiences of feeling "alone" or inefficacy could easy prompt a withdrawal of leadership.

Development of more sustained leadership could arise through two sources. One has to do with external support, as described more below. Another could be an internal school effort to mobilize "the willing." It may be that leadership impetus happens to exist amongst the standing work groups in a given school, but given how school teams tend to be formed in relation to bureaucratic roles rather than disposition or expertise, that may not be the case. For development in the next level of work, it would be important to attend to finding out who are "the willing" people in the school that have a yearning "to do something" but need a nudge, mobilizing, and a venue. All of the above capabilities described—basic team functioning, "safe exchange," "get real talk," scaled-down elements of continuous improvement, and the "fall back" strategies—might be first developed amongst this group of the "willing" who could then demonstrate and model their work for the staff and other groups.

From the discussion above, Figure 10 summarizes a sample of processes that could help develop the most urgent capabilities needed for work groups in schools facing adversity to enable a more fortified struggle and stable emergence of collective agency.

Figure 10

Sample of Possible Processes for Developing School Capacities in the Next Level of Work

Adopt routines for team functioning: Designated chair; agenda-setting; action items; roles (time-keeper, note-taker, process observer, caretaker)

Shore up a positive core:

- Practice "safe exchange" about teaching with artifacts, using a protocol that for appreciating assets.
- Conduct "positive core" interviews. Share the ideas anonymously. Discuss: What is shared?
- From what is shared, create a poster that hangs on the wall: Our Positive Core.

"Get real" talk:

- Acknowledge serious problems with data that shows our difficulties.
- Name limitations and factors not in our control.
- Dialogue: What other assets do we have? What could we reasonably do something about?

Decide upon a focal initiative:

- *Determine a shared urgency*: Write down urgencies that we could do something about. Collect anonymously. Sort, identify key area.
- *Concretely define a shared urgency*: What do we see or hear that suggests this issue is going on?
- *Roughly estimate a baseline for one key area*: How often do we hear or see that on a given day/week right now?
- *Set a short-term goal*: What would we see or hear differently if it improved? How far could it shift over six weeks?
- Write the goal on a poster and hang it on the wall.

Plan action steps:

- Brainstorm: What could we try to reach that goal? Narrow to one idea with most promise. Add it to the poster with the goal.
- The leader asks: Who is willing to work on it with me?

Normalize failure and practice "fall back" strategies:

- Leader frames: It may not work, and we will learn, and try again. I am committed to sticking with it until we get some progress.
- Fall back strategies: Reminders from the caretaker; revisiting the "positive core" poster

Action committee:

- Determine manageable action steps and assign. Meet to follow up on steps taken, and identify next steps.

Share updates on initiative:

- Leader frames: We may not have complete success right away. We will check in our progress and see if adjustments are needed.
- Re-do baseline. How often is this issue going on now? Add to the poster with goal.
- Discuss: How have we done?
- Activate "fall back" strategies as needed.
- Revisit the positive core poster. Discuss: Is there anything we should add to it?

Together, these processes could capitalize on the strivings for connection, affirmation, and well-being and enable groups to experience more stable accomplishment and more authentic affirmation as they work towards making a dent on a vexing problem in the organization.

External Support Needed

All of the above is unlikely to happen without some external support. But given that external support may be limited, what external support would be most urgently needed? The findings suggest that the next level of work is unlikely to develop if teams are confronted with complicated tasks with heavy expectations or evaluative feedback. What is needed is nudging—but more consistently than what was observed at Jackson—coupled with developmental support.

One external support that seems indicated is having a district advisor assigned to the school. This advisor would be responsible for being aware of the developmental needs of the school and providing helpful advice or support to the principal (and, if applicable, the ILT). If possible, such a supportive role would be probably be more successfully enacted by an advisor who does not serve a formal evaluative role for the principal. This advisor could hold regular conversations with the principal about instruction and about the state of the work of the staff,

encourage the principal to include instructional matters as a focus at staff meetings or PDs, and occasionally visit during team meetings. This could boost all groups' sense of "good" pressure (Fullan, 2007) to improve the quality of their work teams, increase the relevance of the meetings, and stick with what they start through to accomplishment. This could also offer more connection—by conveying to the faculty that they are "not alone" in their struggles and someone cares.

The advisor's discussions with the principal could also shore up the principal's consistency of leadership, expertise, and commitment in trying out leading an initiative. The advisor and principal could use some of their visit time together to practice some of the processes described above, share updates about challenges and successes in the work, provide some advice as to adjustments to get back on track, and communicate encouragement to stick with it.

To enable teams to learn basic team functioning and the protocols described above, the district would need to make these the focus of district PDs. During these PDs, teams could be provided with guiding materials, time to practice new protocols, and time to discuss and adapt these suggestions to plan for their own meetings. The district advisor for that school might spend some time with the school's teams during PDs to help groups get started with these protocols and tasks, and answer questions. The protocols could include some simple self-reflection tools that teams could practice to recognize their team's accomplishments and weak spots.

Such supports could reasonably fit the wherewithal of a district with limited capacity. Having a district advisor that is attending to the school and regularly talking with the principal and teams could provide helpful orientation towards what to work on, convey its importance, and help sustain efforts towards accomplishment and affirmation. This would entail some commitment and protected time on the part of the district. To avoid overwhelming schools, the district would need to limit other initiatives and be willing to protect the bulk of the PD time available for processes to support team development in the next level of work.

Thus, some guidance or support from an external organization or research-practice partnership also seems indicated. The district supervisors do not need to be highly trained experts in instructional leadership or organizational development—but probably would need some support to prepare for holding productive visits with principals and school teams. The external partner might also serve as a "critical friend" that looks out for signs that the district has taken on too many initiatives and is overloading schools. The external partner could also help with developing the protocols and tools for teams to try out during PDs.

A last support that would be indicated would be a part-time coach for the school. Even with some district PD and support from a district advisor, many work teams need some direct coaching to become more effective (Hackman et al., 2000). Rather than focusing on individual classrooms, this coach would meet with teams to help from time to time with developments such as: getting started with basic team functioning and trying out some of the tools and protocols described above. Presuming limited availability and expertise of coaches in a typical district, this would likely be an occasional support—and would probably require help from the external partner for training in the use of the tools and protocols.

Summary: The Prospects for School Development at the Next Level of Work

School development at the next level of work aims to build up foundational capabilities that can strengthen the struggle that exists, reduce fragility, and tolerate some churn so that collective agency may sustain and expand over time. However, the overwhelming problems of

adversity and their destructive potential remains, and thus the development remains a highly contingent struggle. Setbacks will occur. To move to the next level of work, groups would strive towards capacities of: more consistent task focus and accomplishment, routine safe discourse about their work that offers connection, handling more complexity, and facing up to problems for authentic affirmation. These capacities show up in processes of: basic team functioning; regular safe and appreciative exchange about their work; more consistent leadership that orients the group towards taking action on a reasonable challenge, normalizes failure, and expresses commitment to learning from it; scaled-down steps and tools of continuous improvement; and designated strategies for bouncing back from frustrations or failure.

The above steps suggest that enabling a "bottom-tier" school to sustain and expand collective agency likely calls for *some* external support. This includes: protected district PDs dedicated to training in useful protocols and tasks and time for groups to discuss, adapt, and plan for their own work; more consistent time and attention from one district advisor for regular conversations with the principal and occasional team visits; occasional school-site help from a coach that helps with basic team functioning and trying out new protocols; district-office support from an external partner for the design of tasks and protocols, preparing supervisors for school visits, and training coaches.

For all of the above, what kind of improvement can we expect to get? This is no fast-track ticket to an ambitious horizon. This is not a process of discovering firmly and with certainty "what works." Rather, this is a longer journey of development, one that aims to look in the face of the hard reality posed by adversity and accept the level of improvement such a reality allows—given the typical scenario facing many schools today. We have tried solutions that imagine something grander, more complex, faster, and much more resource-heavy, in search of impressive and predictable improvement. This dissertation looks at the disappointing results of many years of those efforts and offers another way to think about the challenge of school improvement. Improvement in the next level of work recognizes the positive struggle and developmental potential that is there in "bottom-tier" schools and imagines how these struggles might become strengthened to gradually develop firmer capacities for collective agency. For this, we could expect school teams that become more self-sufficient over time and capable of gradually handling more and more complexity so that they can get closer to addressing the core vexing problems in their organization.

There are clear trade-offs to this approach. Taking this long view of developmental growth may leave untouched substantial problems that teachers have to reach their students. For poor students of color, the daily and long-term implications of this can be devastating. In the event that more external help would be available or more highly motivated and talented leaders and teachers could be found, it makes sense to take advantage of that. However, the evidence from this study and prevalent major reforms suggests that scholars and reformers should be cautious about the horizon of expectations we set for improvement, even if these additional supports and resources were available. So long as adversity remains, so will struggle, the potential for fragility and churn, and limitations in developing sustained collective agency. Given the structural roots of adversity, and the dim prospects for a massive social movement that addresses the roots of social inequality and shortcomings of our education system at every level, I believe that development in the next level of work is the more realistic scenario for school development for many schools for some time to come.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

The study design offers a contribution to theory by revealing more nuanced processes of school development in contexts of adversity and offering suggestions for practical design knowledge that may be transferable to other schools facing similar contextual conditions. However, with a reliance on qualitative and interventionist methods in a single school, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to all schools. It is possible that using reflective conversations, rather than structured or semi-structured interviews, might have influenced participants' responses and created a "Hawthorne effect" in work group behavior. Thus, it is possible that my role and research in the school may have brought out more striving for collective agency than would have been the case otherwise.

Some scholars may object to taking a more open perspective towards school development that looks for potential for "the next level of work," given the moral urgency of addressing educational inequities in our society. I would argue that the approach takes up the moral urgency from a different angle: What can research offer that could help to improve the educational experiences of students *right now*? Given the society as it is, and the conditions as they are? Presuming that work teams learn and develop in relation to affordances and constraints in their context, I imagined that educators, like all humans, can and do use their agency to develop for pro-social reasons and can find their agency disabled in the face of oppressive conditions. I presume that if we see behaviors in educators we do not like, we can do little about them if we do not understand why they are there and what alternatives are available in that environment. I think that educators' behaviors in the midst of adversity have something to teach us, if we are willing to look and listen with patience and empathy at both their strivings and their limitations. I think the findings bear this out.

To truly enable a sustained and expanded agency in schools calls for nurturing, consistency, and coherence at multiple levels of the system that create the context in which teachers and students interact. This calls for the change of behaviors of many more people than teachers. District actors need to attend to the inner workings of schools and become more willing and able to play a developmental role. Scholars are also part of that system. Researchers contribute to the adverse circumstances that educators and students face when we reserve our intellectual resources and effort for publications that afford us status and produce findings that point to, but provide little help in attenuating, the suffering of teachers or students.

Future research might better contribute to school reform efforts that develop educators' collective agency if there was more concentrated effort to conduct research in proximity with the real world of educators facing challenging circumstances. By necessity, this means wading into a swamp of frustrations and suffering posed by adversity and struggling to find ways to conduct rigorous and useful research in the midst of incoherence and defensiveness. Such research is most likely to be possible if it proceeds from a developmental lens using participant observation, action research, or design research that allows for collaboration between researchers and practitioners in struggling schools. This study examined group development processes at the school level, but the findings show how these processes were embedded in a wider district context. It might be fruitful to conduct similar research into group developmental processes but attend to multiple levels of such processes across a district.

One possibility is to organize research-practice partnerships focused on districts and schools in distress. Such partnerships could focus on co-designing team tools or protocols that are sensitive to the needs and perspectives of educators facing adversity and studying the

processes of development that emerge across multiple levels of the system. Such research could systematically trace the processes of group development and impacts of designed supports with not only qualitative research like audio records and interviews, but also practical metrics and validated quantitative instruments. Validated instruments may add some firmer measures of fluctuations of collective agency to that noted in the qualitative data about processes. Results from this research could inform more robust theory about school and district improvement, as well as adaptations to designs that could travel to other districts and schools.

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Appendix A: Sample of Reflective Conversation Prompts

School context

What's it like to be a teacher at this school?

What has been tried in the past to improve things? How did that turn out? Why?

What would you like to see happen at this school?

- Do you think it could ever happen? Why or why not?

What are the most urgent problems around here?

- How could the school improve on these problems?
- Who could do it? What strengths could you draw on?

What really gets you going in your work? What gets you out of bed every morning to come here?

- To what extent do others share that passion around here?

General perceptions of work group

What's it like to be a member of X group at this school?

What do you see as main purpose of this group? What is the group aiming to accomplish?

- How do you think this group is going? Why do you say so? What explains this?

What would make this group's work more useful? What, if anything, needs to change?

- Is this something you would bring up with this group? Why or why not?
- How likely is it that that change will happen? Why?
- What, if anything, could you personally do about it?

You mentioned a concern about X in the school. Is this something you would bring up with this group? Why or why not?

Reflections on meeting events:

What did you notice about the last meeting? Anything stand out for you? Any surprises?

During the last meeting, I noticed X (or heard you/someone say "X.") Can you tell me more about this? How do you explain this?

Last meeting, the group worked on X. What did you think of this? Was this productive? The right focus for the group? If not, what would be better?

Reflections on next steps for group:

What do you think are next steps of growth for this group? What is possible to accomplish together next? Why?

Are there any steps that you plan to make sure happen yourself? If so, which ones, and why? Could you imagine working on X? Why or why not?

Appendix B: Coding Framework

Leadership

Communicate goals
Perceive no influence
Doubt authority
Avoid directing others
Take initiative
Hold firm
Retreat, concede
Facilitate
Avoid to facilitate
Direct, guide group
Exert tight control
Allow digression
Model practices
Refuse to model

Basic team organizing

Ad hoc plan
Longer-term plan
Have agenda
On time start
Late start
Attendance
Manage time
Set norms
Assign roles
Use protocol
Follow through
No follow through
Plan action steps
No action steps
Advance communication
Last-minute communication
Keep notes
No notes
Feedback
Cancel meeting

Task Management

Defining task	Clear task or aim
	Unclear, shifting task or aim
	Assigned external task
	Develop relevant task
	Arbitrary task
Processing task	Outsource tasks
	Make progress, accomplish
	Focus on compliance
	Focus on effectiveness
	Avoid to focus
	Maintain focus
	Reduce task
	Abandon task
	Focus on simple task
	Simplify complex task
	Refuse complex task
Task demand	Receiving information
	Learning procedures
	Unstructured conversation
	Making collective decisions
	Advice-giving
	Viewing instructional models
	Applying learning
	Developing curriculum or PD
	Conducting inquiry
	Goal-setting
	Ice-breaker
	Written reflection
	Examining assessment data
	Examining classroom artifacts

Appendix B: Coding Framework (Continued)

Handling Problems

Facing up to problems	Acknowledge problems
	Ignore, deny problems
Action orientation	Seek solution
	Lament, no solution
	Resign
	Share what works
Responsibility for problems	Accept responsibility
	Deflect responsibility
	Perceive shared responsibility
	Perceive individual responsibility
Locus of control	Emphasize external causes
	Recognize internal cause
Navigating complexity	Seek understanding
	Define and frame problem
	Deliberate
	Accept first idea
	Seek new expertise
	Complex problem—complex solution
	Complex problem—simple solution
	Simple problem—simple solution
	Seek ambitious change

Wishes and Desires

Authentic connection
Mutual support
Team accomplishment
Reaching students
Teacher alignment
Being appreciated and recognized
Improved school performance
Focus on positive
Become AVID school
Direction, vision
Classroom observations
PD with inquiry
PD with application
Visit other schools
Professional collaboration

Urgencies and Frustrations

Lack of accountability
Low attendance at meetings
Lack of teacher motivation or buy-in
Lack of teacher voice
Negative adult climate
Teacher turnover
Fragmented faculty
Collaboration breakdowns
School disorganization
Overload
Low school performance
Resource insufficiencies
Resource inequities
Negative school reputation
Irrelevant meetings
District policies and support
Principal support
Elementary school practices
Constraints of union
Colleagues not interested in instruction
Lack of academic focus
Lack of direction
PD schedule
PD low quality
Special Education student needs
Student failure
Student misbehavior
Student disorganization
Student dependent learners
Student apathy
Student skill gaps
Negative teacher-student relationships

Passions

Service to the whole child
Parent engagement
College preparation
State test performance
Relationships with students
Building community
Student well-being
Student academic engagement
Curriculum development
Being student-focused
Rigor
Professional development