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Teachers Engaging in Action Research to Increase Learner Agency

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Teachers Engaging in Action Research to Increase Learner Agency

A dissertation in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Abstract

This study is designed to explore the perceptions of teachers in a Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school context as they engage in design-based action research to increase learner agency. It is based on the Carnegie Project on Education Doctorate (CPED) framework that includes identifying a problem of practice and engaging in research to address the problem. A problem of practice was identified in this school setting by an incoming school principal following a principal that had been in the school for many years. The new principal, also the researcher in this study, recognized that there was a low level of learner agency among both students and teachers. Students were not tracking their own learning or setting goals. Teachers had a low level of teacher efficacy and were frustrated with the low level of student achievement and the low level of student motivation. To address this problem of practice, a design-based action research study was developed by the new principal and the new leadership team. At the time that research data was collected for this qualitative study, the teachers had been engaging in action research for eight months. This study will include interview data collected from all fifteen teachers that were willing to participate including all first through six grade teachers, a self-contained special education teacher, and two interventionists that had engaged in the design-based action research to increase learner agency. This study helped determine the next steps that should be taken in the cycle of inquiry in this school and serves as a resource for educational leaders that wish to address similar problems of practice.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, John Childress, who continually supports me in my pursuit of education. He is the author of the fun in my life and has made this journey a joyful experience. Thank you, Johnny, for nudging me at just the right times and for supporting me from the beginning of our marriage to reach beyond myself to create a better world for those around me. You have been a great inspiration, listener, husband, and friend. For that, I am so grateful. I also dedicate this work to my children John “Syngent” Childress IV, Kainyn Childress, and Tylinn Childress, as they are always my inspiration for reaching my goals to set a good example for them. They are a great testament to my life’s work, and they make me proud every day!

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CHAPTER ONE- INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how design-based action research influenced learner agency in our school as determined by teacher perceptions of action research that they engaged in to increase learner agency. Learner agency for the purpose of this study includes teacher agency and student agency. My goals were to understand teacher perceptions as they worked to increase student agency and to determine if the agency of students, agency of teachers, and collective efficacy of the teachers in a Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school increased through teacher engagement in a process of design-based action research to investigate learner agency. Teachers must take ownership of their work in order for it to be successful and sustainable. Herr and Anderson (2015) state, “We have seen time and again how coercion is successfully resisted by practitioners, and how most lasting change takes place through internal conviction, or to use a more popular term, ownership” (p. 75). Capturing teacher voice is then crucial in combating any feelings of coercion. Teacher action research gives teachers ownership in their work as they work to solve problems. This study was a qualitative study that explored how teacher engagement in this process impacted teacher perceptions of student learning, perceptions of their personal learning, the culture of our school learning community, the collective efficacy of our teachers, and how or if it has changed teaching practice.

The focus of teachers in their design-based action research study was to examine learner agency in students. As the school leader, I believed that teacher engagement in the action research would also increase teacher learner agency. By empowering teachers with their learning, reminding them of their purpose in teaching, encouraging them to work toward setting authentic goals, giving them a voice and choices in how they engage in the action research through their

Professional Learning Community (PLC) collaborative team meetings and giving them the resources to improve their practice, I believed that teachers would begin to see that what they do impacts student learning which would result in increased teacher efficacy. My hope was to change the conversation about what kids are capable of achieving in this school.

This was my first year to serve as principal in an urban elementary school in Northwest Arkansas. Mintrop (2016) states, “When educational leaders become designers, they first need to know what people need to learn or unlearn” (p. 120). All educational leaders have a responsibility to assess the design of the educational program they are leading. Sometimes adjustments to the education program need to be made, and sometimes a new system needs to be created. I knew as a new principal in this school that I would need to quickly assess our current educational program, and as a doctoral student, I knew it was important for me to identify any problems of practice quickly.

In order to assess the needs of our school and begin the process of building relationships, I met individually with everyone on my faculty and staff over the summer prior to the start of the school year. I heard from everyone that I met with that I was joining a great family of educators that work well with and respect each other. Many of them expressed the desire to build our Professional Learning Community. They began working in collaborative teams three years ago, but they stopped when human resources were cut back, and they were no longer able to meet during the school day. Also, several teachers expressed that students seem to be unmotivated and that they do not take responsibility for their actions or learning. Staff members reported that many of the parents are difficult to get along with. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Board is made up mostly of teachers. These teachers explained that the parents in our community really

do not want to be involved. Teachers mentioned that this school had high achievement scores in the past but that the demographics changed and student achievement decreased.

These factors led me to the conclusion that there are some sociopolitical factors at play in my school that are contributing to lower student achievement. I was concerned that these teachers held the belief that the struggles students face in their home lives were more powerful than the teachers' abilities to help students achieve academically. After receiving our most recent school report card grade of a C, which is down from the previous year's B, I sent an email to teachers letting them know our letter grade. I had an email response from one of my interventionists that told me that our letter grade was not a good measure of our school and that the letter grades are only based on numbers. She said that it was a good reflection of how cutting interventionists can impact a great system. Since the cuts to interventionists happened at the end of the school year after the tests were already taken and were not put into place until this school year, this is just another example of making excuses instead of improvements. Increasing teacher ownership and self-efficacy was a dire need in this school.

One of the first things I noticed when school began was that students were very teacher directed. Procedures were practiced for two full weeks before content was addressed. We changed the order of lunch and recess per a request made by a majority of the teachers. This meant that kindergarteners would have to get their own silverware, milk, and food tray. Teachers had always helped with this process in the past. Teachers and cafeteria staff were terrified to allow the students to do this by themselves. They went so far as to say that the students would not be able to do this. Within a week, students were going through the process with no problem. Teachers could not believe that the students were able to accomplish this task. This was just a

small example of how teachers had a difficult time giving students control. It was also an example of the low expectations that were present in this school.

Another indication that there was little student agency present was brought to light when I began asking students what they were learning, why they were learning what they were learning, and how what they were learning would help them. I asked these questions when I began doing classroom walk-throughs in the third week of school. I only had one student that was able to answer the why and how questions out of all of the students I asked. I asked two to three students in each class I visited, and there are 16 classrooms. I started asking students what their reading levels were, and no one was able to answer me. I asked teachers if students kept any type of data notebooks or portfolios of their projects or work, and they all responded that they did not. I asked teachers what types of choices students were able to make in their classrooms. The only choice students had in my school at the beginning of the year was where they wanted to sit because all of my third through sixth grade teachers had adopted flexible seating.

Problem Statement

The problem of practice addressed in this study was the lack of agency among students and teachers in my school context. I engaged teachers to shift focus from test scores, which had been the focus in the past, to learner agency in order to increase learner purpose, self-efficacy, motivation, choice, voice, ownership, and engagement. One problem we had at our 400-student elementary school in a large urban school district in Northwest Arkansas was that teachers worked very hard, but our achievement scores were not reflective of this effort. Our teachers had been focusing on quantitative test data for years, but no matter how much they focused on the data, achievement scores were declining. Teachers felt defeated by the latest test scores. Herr and Anderson (2015) state, “unless solutions to the problems under study tap into the complex

theories of action that underlie and maintain the status quo, problems will only be solved in a superficial and temporary manner” (p. 16). As the new principal in this school, I felt morally and professionally obligated to move past the status quo. I was determined to look past the test scores to diagnose and address the underlying issues and theories of action impacting our achievement results, which I believed stemmed from a lack of agency in both teachers and students.

Focus on Instructional and/or Systemic Issues

Teachers at this elementary school had been data conscious but had struggled to be data driven in their instructional practices due to perceived systemic constraints. The Professional Learning Community (PLC) collaborative team meetings that they held previously were not sustainable with the structure that was in place when the school lost some human resources. Professional development had been provided in isolation from practice since the abandonment of the PLC model. There was a mindset among teachers that there was not a way to have PLC collaborative meetings, unless the district gave us back the human resources that were lost. I knew that changing the mindset of the teachers and providing a new structure and support for the rebuild of our PLC must take place for teachers to engage in work to increase learner agency.

Is Directly Observable

The lack of learner agency was observable in students and in teachers. Students had not been setting goals or tracking their own data. The assistant principal had been in this school for eight years, and he reported that students were rarely able to state the purpose behind their learning. I witnessed this at the beginning of the school year through my walk-through observation data. The two interventionists shared their observation that students did the right things when they thought someone was watching or when a teacher was next to them, but they acted out when they were left on their own. The first two weeks of school were spent on

procedures throughout the building. Teachers had students practiced everything including how to play at recess and how to get their trays and navigate the cafeteria. Students were taught what was expected, but student agency was not directly taught. There was a Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) system in place to provide extrinsic motivation. When I asked students why they were doing what they were doing in class, they often reported that they were working so they could earn points, which they could later spend in the school store. This system had dramatically decreased the amount of discipline referrals according to the assistant principal, previous principal, and school counselor. While this was a positive for our school climate, it was time to move toward the promotion of intrinsic motivation as well to impact the culture.

There were also indications that teachers had low teacher efficacy. These indications included statements by teachers about students not wanting to learn, not being able to learn because of difficult home situations, and multiple reports to me about how “we used to be a good school before our demographics changed.” There was a lack of teacher collective efficacy as well because even though teachers mentioned they saw the power in collaborating in PLC collaborative teams, they did not take the initiative to meet without being pulled out of class time to do it. They had also decided that it is just easier to be the PTA than to work with parents to build a strong connection with parents. This had given teachers the license to say, “We have tried that, and it doesn’t work,” which was another example of the lack of collective efficacy among teachers.

Is Actionable

This problem of practice was actionable because it aligned with the current objectives of the school district. The Director of Elementary Education in the district announced at our principals’ meeting before school started that we would be engaging in a new initiative for

principals in the district to engage our teachers in a process of action research. This initiative involved identifying a problem of practice to address through a cycle of inquiry and the creation of a theory of action. This new initiative aligned perfectly with this dissertation that is based on the Carnegie Project on Education Doctorate (CPED) framework that includes identifying a problem of practice and engaging in research to address the problem.

As a building level administrator, I knew that I must look at problems of practice that I had the power and responsibility to impact. School leaders still have a great deal of this power even with the constraints of national, state, and district policy. School level administrators working with teachers have the most direct impact on student learning. Finding ways to stay within the external constructs of policy while at the same time creating more effective systems for serving students' educational needs and building teacher capacity for moving away from an industrial model of education was a personal passion for me. Perhaps the most important policy that the district had that made this problem of practice actionable was the strong belief in site-based leadership. There was a great deal of autonomy given to principals in the district.

At the state level, the Arkansas State Department of Education (ADE) made a shift under the new ESSA law to take more of a consultative role toward Local Education Agencies rather than the more punitive role that they took in the past (Johnny Key, Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators Summer Conference, 8/2/2017). The Arkansas ESSA plan includes wording that supported my problem of practice goals to promote the components of learner agency. The ADE (2017) states:

The academic content and skills that students must acquire and demonstrate for success must dive more deeply into complex thinking and learning, creative problem solving, synthesis, and design. Students need to develop internal motivation and the tenacity to persist in a future where change and innovation will be the norm. (p.10)

This new approach by the ADE allowed for more risk taking at the district level. Focusing on fostering learner agency was innovative, included developing students' internal motivation and tenacity, and increased student capacity for complex thinking and learning.

Connects to Broader Strategy of Improvement

The school improvement goals that were already in place as I entered this school context as principal included increasing student achievement in reading and math for special education students and general education students and increasing student behavior accountability for teachers and students. Since quantitative data were only capable of measuring symptoms and progress in addressing these goals, addressing the problem of practice to increase learner agency provided the opportunity to treat the underlying causes of poor student achievement and behavior issues. It also directly addressed the accountability factor by shifting ownership to the learner.

The school district had recently gone through a strategic planning process prior to the action research examined in this study. A recurring theme in the planning process was to empower students with their learning and to prepare students to become life-long learners and productive members of society. Student focused learning versus traditional teacher-led learning was a part of the new instructional action plan. Increasing student engagement, motivation, and choices were all items addressed in the plan. Increasing teacher efficacy was also a theme of the plan. These are all elements of learner agency.

Is High Leverage

Engaging teachers in action research to increase learner agency addressed John Hattie's two top factors for school improvement including Collective Teacher Efficacy with an effect size of 1.57 and Student Expectations with an effect size of 1.44. These two factors are much more influential on student achievement than socioeconomic status with an effect size of 0.52

(Donohoo, 2017, p. 5-6). Increasing learner agency is high leverage because it directly impacts student learning according to this research. In education, the main goal is to provide every student with an education that empowers him or her to become a productive citizen. Engaging teachers in action research to find ways to increase learner agency was designed to help teachers equip students with the power to propel their own learning and hold them accountable for the quality of their work. It also was designed to impact teachers' learner agency which would hopefully inspire them to engage in future action research. Exploring their perceptions of the process will help educational leaders understand how to provide the needed support to increase the success of teacher action research.

In this school context, the current student population of around 400 students and all future students will benefit from shifting focus solely from test scores to taking steps to increase learner agency. Twenty-four kindergarten through sixth grade teachers, interventionists, and special education teachers engaged in the action research project throughout the year, and fifteen teachers including all first through sixth grade classroom teachers, one special education teacher, and two interventionists served as participants in this qualitative study. These teachers had the opportunity to learn and grow through the process. Our District Math Coordinator, District Science Coordinator, District English Language Arts Coordinator, Assistant Principal, Technology Specialist, Title I Elementary Specialist, school counselor, special education resource teachers, specialty teachers, paraprofessionals, and interventionists also had a supportive role in the pursuit of addressing this problem of practice. Since our District Math Coordinator, District Science Coordinator, District English Language Arts Coordinator, Assistant Principal and Technology Specialist are shared with other elementary schools in the district, there is a likelihood that the learning acquired through this action research will extend beyond our school

setting into other schools in the district. The true power of engaging in action research to increase learner agency was in the value that has been added to every individual student and teacher through the work. The power of exploring teacher perceptions about their engagement in the action research has the potential of that research guiding educational leaders in future school improvement efforts.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were open ended in nature to allowed for the exploration of the complexity of action research that the teachers engaged in to increase learner agency. Herr and Anderson (2015) explain, “Action research is inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them” (p. 3). Since the action research study was conducted with the teachers, it was not predetermined what specific evidence would emerge. Allowing teacher voice to be heard through an interview and focus group process to collect data about their perceptions and observations was the catalyst for the design of the first research question. Herr and Anderson (2015) go on to state that action research, “is a reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken, and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions” (p. 3-4). The second and third research questions allowed for the collection of evidence in the form of interview data, focus group data, and process data that emerged throughout the action research process.

Research Questions

1. What perceptions and observations will teachers at this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school share about the process of engaging in action research to increase learner agency?

2. What is the evidence that learner agency has been developed as a result of the action research process?
3. How has the action research project influenced collective teacher efficacy?

Overview of Methodology

Teachers engaged with me in a design-based action research process to focus on increasing learner agency in our school. At the beginning of the school year, I introduced learner agency to teachers including the elements of learner agency. Each month beginning in September, I shared articles, YouTube videos, and diagrams about one element of learner agency ensuring that the materials that I shared aligned with peer reviewed research on each topic. During PLC collaborative meetings, teachers focused on each element of learner agency and designed a plan for increasing learner agency in their classrooms. This action research was pragmatic in nature because teachers decided what data to collect for each element. After every component was researched, teachers reflected on their learning. During walk-throughs, discussions with teachers, and classroom observations, I collected evidence of learner agency. At the end of the cycle of action research, I interviewed teachers to collect qualitative data on their perceptions of the action research process. I invited seven of the teachers to participate in a focus group to clarify my understanding of some of the interview data and to triangulate the data. I transcribed, coded, and analyzed the interview data, focus group data, and the process data to explore teacher perceptions of the action research study. I also collected field data in a research journal as a part of the research process to note observations and evidence of learner agency and collective teacher efficacy.

Positionality

Being a new principal, placed me in an interesting position as both an insider and an outsider in this action research. I am an insider in the sense that I have complete access to the school context, but I was still an outsider to the context to some degree because I was at the beginning stages of developing relationships with the teachers and students that are stakeholders in this study. This research study was important to both my position as a doctoral student and to my position as a new principal in my school district. Success in this study and the underlying action research had the potential of propelling my education and my career. That made this research both professionally and personally important to me. Carefully navigating the politics of implementing this research was a delicate matter, since I was in the infancy of my principal position. On the other hand, my teachers seemed eager to please me and to engage in new learning. I took this responsibility seriously and was cognizant of not crossing any boundaries in the gift of trust they demonstrated towards me.

Researcher's Role

Because relationships with stakeholders had not been solidly established, and because I was the direct supervisor of the participants in the study, I explained my role as a researcher to my teachers and was mindful of the biases I had as their supervisor and the apprehensions they may have had as I conducted interviews with teachers about their perceptions. Since this research is based on an action research study, I also had the dual role of being researcher and an instructional leader in the context of the action research process to develop our PLC through engaging in action research to increase learner agency.

My past experiences as an instructional leader implementing new initiatives helped me in the action research process. Those experiences also gave me some bias toward learner agency

because I had seen the impact of teachers providing students with the tools they needed to become independent learners, to make choices in their learning, and in providing students with a voice through the implementation of a reading system's change initiative. I also gained bias for learner centered practices through learning at the Mickelson Exxon Mobile Teacher's Academy, the Model Schools Conference, and through the process of pursuing my National Board of Professional Teachers Certification.

Assumptions

One assumption that I had going into this research study was that engaging teachers in action research would have a positive impact on teachers' personal learner agency. I also assumed that engaging teachers in action research to increase learner agency would result in increased learner agency in students and have positive impacts on student achievement. As far as teachers engaging in action research, I assumed that they would buy-in to the process based on my previous experiences and my initial analysis of the school culture. Another assumption that I had was that teachers would be willing to participate in this research study, in which I conducted interviews and a focus group to explore their perceptions of the process.

Definition of Key Terms

Learner Agency- the learner's (student's and/or teacher's) purpose, ownership, motivation, engagement, choice, voice, and self-efficacy in the process of building knowledge and skills

Purpose- understanding and embracing the reason learners are learning what they are learning and ultimately being able to connect their learning to their role in society or how they will make a difference in the world

Ownership- understanding that learners have a responsibility in their learning including their goal setting, their work, their consequences, and their achievements

Motivation- learners moving from extrinsic to intrinsic rewards by developing a desire to meet learning goals and ultimately a love of learning

Engagement- learners are actively working on authentic work and take responsibility for their learning

Choice- learners have input on the way that they learn and in the way that they demonstrate their knowledge

Voice- learners are listened to and can have input on the learning process, not only to provide feedback but also in the design of their learning

Self-efficacy- “people's beliefs in their ability to influence events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 2010).

Collective Teacher Efficacy- teachers’ belief that what they do together as a PLC to improve student achievement will make a positive impact

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One of this dissertation has provided an introduction to the study that was conducted in the context of my school setting. It has established my problem of practice and given a brief overview of the intent behind the study.

In Chapter Two, the literature review contains research gathered for action research, PLCs, collective teacher efficacy, learner agency, and for each component of learner agency. It defines the conceptual framework that is the lens through which the study was situated by the researcher. The literature review served as a summary of the existing research on the topic and components of learner agency but was not designed to be exhaustive. This literature review

serves as background knowledge for readers of this research and served to inform the design and analysis of the study.

Chapter Three is the Inquiry Methods chapter. Chapter Three provides descriptive data about the school context. It outlines the methods that were used to conduct the study and also describes the decisions and methodology that went into the design of the study.

Chapter Four is the Presentation of the Data and Discussion. In this chapter, I share the data that was gathered through the research process including process data, interview data, and data collected from the focus group. The data are organized based on the research questions that are addressed in the data.

Chapter Five is the Analysis and Recommendations section of the dissertation. In this chapter, I explain the analysis of the data in relationship to the research questions. I also draw conclusions based on the data and make recommendations based on the analysis.

CHAPTER TWO- LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how design-based action research influenced learner agency in our school as determined by teacher perceptions. A lack of learner agency was identified as a problem of practice in both teachers and students at our school. In an attempt to address this problem of practice, our faculty engaged in developing our Professional Learning Community (PLC) through an action research process that focused on learner agency. As part of a cycle of inquiry, I examined teacher perceptions about the process and about learner agency in order to inform further development of our PLC.

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) from Solution Tree state, “Those who ‘do’ develop deeper knowledge, greater self-efficacy, and a stronger sense of ownership in results than those who only talk about what should be done” (p. 33). We must begin the work instead of just talking about the work. For two years, teachers in this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school knew that they should be working together to meet individual student needs, but they let barriers stand in the way. As their new principal, I was committed to providing the support they needed to find success in meeting the individual needs of students through a process of engaging teachers in design-based action research to increase teacher agency as they examined student agency. Then for the purposes of this study, I explored teachers’ perceptions about how engaging in this action research influenced learner agency and our collective efficacy.

In this literature review, I explored the research on developing PLCs, action research, collective efficacy, learner agency, and the elements of learner agency including learner purpose, ownership, motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, voice, and choice. I also provided a conceptual

framework for this study that includes theories and my personal experiences that form the lens through which the study was framed.

I utilized the resources of the University of Arkansas Online Library through the library guide for the EDLE (Education Leadership) cohorts to search databases including ERIC, Google Scholar, Professional Development Collection, and ProQuest Central for topics including professional learning communities, action research, collaborative cycles of inquiry, learner agency, student agency, teacher agency, collective efficacy, student purpose, relevance, motivation, extrinsic, intrinsic, self-efficacy, student voice, student choice, student ownership, student engagement, self-regulated learning, Social Cognitive Theory, Human Agentic Theory, Adult Learner Theory, Motivation Theory, and building teacher capacity.

I searched Amazon, bought, and read the only book I could find with Learner Agency in the title which was titled *Adventures in Self-Directed Learning: A Guide for Nurturing Learner Agency and Ownership* by Bernard D. Bull. I also bought and read *Collective Efficacy: How Educator's Beliefs Impact Student Learning* by Jenni Donohoo, and *Personalized Learning in a PLC at Work: Student Agency Through the Four Critical Questions* by Timothy Stuart, Sascha Heckmann, Mike Mattos, and Austin Buffum. I found that each of these books provided relevant learning for this literature review. I revisited *The Action Research Dissertation* by Kathryn Herr and Gary L. Anderson, *Design-Based School Improvement: A Practical Guide for Education Leaders* by Rick Mintrop, and *Learning By Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many.

Altogether, I read 114 Peer Reviewed articles and ten books. Prior to beginning this literature review, I also searched the Internet for information about learner agency to help me understand the information on learner agency available to practitioners that are not privy to the

databases available to university students. It was in this search activity that I found a framework for the elements that make up learner agency, which gave me a starting point for database search topics. This exercise also proved fruitful in uncovering a graphic on the PowerSchool website that helped me anchor my study and further define learner agency. Table 1 outlines the types of research materials that were relevant and the number included in this research study.

Table 1

Types of Literature and Number Reviewed that are Included in this Study

Types of Source	Number
Peer Reviewed Articles	59
Scholarly Books	10
Websites	3

Review of the Literature

This literature review is not exhaustive, but it does provide the relevant research needed to understand what it means for teachers to engage in action research through PLC collaborative teams. It also addresses the multiple facets of learner agency as it pertains to both student agency and teacher agency. The research on collective efficacy explains the connection between learner agency and collective efficacy and the importance of the presence of both in schools. The Conceptual Framework provides the theories, context, and personal educational experiences that form the lens through which I framed this study.

Professional Learning Communities

In order to actively engage teachers in action research in this elementary school, I chose to develop the Professional Learning Community that they were already familiar with as a vehicle

for engagement. “Dewey (1916) argued that teachers’ reflection upon their practices would bring about benefits to the entire school system. In Dewey’s view, reflection is not an isolated activity, but the product of practices embedded in community settings” (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012, p. 206). Although the term Professional Learning Community had not been coined at the time, I believe that is exactly what Dewey was speaking about. “For example, Dewey (1929) was committed to the view that: ...educational practices provide the data, the subject matter, which forms the problems of inquiry” (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006, p. 223). Dewey’s ideas have influenced education over the ages, and this idea of teachers engaging in self-reflection about their teaching practice to address problems of inquiry sounds very familiar in this time of addressing problems of practice through cycles of inquiry.

In this age of accountability, it is easy to lose sight of the practice in an attempt to manipulate the data versus manipulating the practice to improve the data or more importantly, the education students are receiving. “PLCs are a means to an end: ‘The goal is not to ‘be a professional learning community’. A key purpose of PLCs is to enhance teacher effectiveness as professionals, for students’ ultimate benefit” (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006, p. 228-229). Gilbert, Voelkel, and Johnson (2018) point out:

It is typically stressful for schools to sustain professional learning communities due to disconnecting or conflicting interests that can exist between what professional learning communities represent (caring for all students, critical reflection, and collaboration) and bureaucratic requirements of accountability and control. (p. 155)

Over the past year, two schools in our district have worked directly with Solution Tree to develop their Professional Learning Communities through a grant they received from the Arkansas Department of Education. As a result of their learning, we have received some exposure to this process from district coordinators and instructional facilitators that were shared

between buildings. Some of our teachers also went to a three-day Solution Tree conference on developing PLCs three years ago.

There was not much clarity in our collective understanding of the concept of PLCs though. Some teachers saw the term PLC as a synonym for interventions. Some teachers thought interventions were done only by interventionists. Some thought the sole purpose of having PLC collaborative team meetings was to place students in intervention groups. Somehow the learning had been taken out of our Professional Learning Community or perhaps it was never a part of the culture.

Since the limited understanding we collectively had about PLCs had some roots in teaching by Solution Tree, I decided to go to their literature first in understanding what it meant to develop our Professional Learning Community. They describe professional learning communities as groups of educators that work collectively in cycles of inquiry to increase levels of student success. These groups of educators are continuously learning and working together to improve their practice. “Most educators acknowledge that our deepest insights and understandings come from action, followed by reflection and the search for improvement” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010, p. 9). This theme of action resonates throughout the literature. When my teachers asked to continue in the process of building our Professional Learning Community, they were asking to engage in action research and a cycle of inquiry even if they did not understand what that would entail. They were eager to intervene on behalf of students or to have interventionists intervene on their behalf, but they did not understand their roles in the process yet. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) state, “A corollary assumption is that if the organization is to become more effective in helping all students learn, the adults in the organization must also be continually learning” (p. 11).

As the building principal, it was my responsibility to create a sustainable system for continual learning. Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) determined:

Resources that matter are those that create the conditions for effective collaboration, such as time for network actors to collaborate. Networks must have access to some flexible funds – small amounts can make a big difference. Equally if not more important is securing resources to ensure sustainability. As Hargreaves et al. (2014) point out, successful organizations prepare for sustainability from the beginning of their improvement journeys, rather than at the end. They tackle key questions from early on, such as how to build solid foundations for the continuation of success over time, even after the founding network leaders are gone; whether to keep on improving in what the group already excels at or strike out a new direction; or how to keep short-term gains connected to long-term goals. (p. 17)

Listening to teachers about their perceptions of the process is critical to building a firm foundation of sustainable learning in my school. Teachers must take ownership of the learning in order for the process to continue after I am gone. Teachers must learn to be flexible in their thinking for times when resources or funding are cut to continue the learning. This has already been proven in this school context because when human resources were lost in the past, PLC collaboration ceased.

DuFour and Mattos (2013) state, “Research has also established that simply providing time for educators to meet will have no effect on student learning unless their meetings focus on the right work” (p. 37). With all of this in mind, I knew that I must provide teachers with a structure of focus that was sustainable in order to create an environment conducive to increasing student achievement. This focus must involve teachers taking ownership and changing their practice or putting into action the learning that they are involved in. In high performing districts, “leaders didn’t change existing assumptions, beliefs, and expectations in order to get people to act in new ways; they got people to act in new ways in order to change assumptions, beliefs, and expectations” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010, p. 213). This means that the actual work had to begin before teachers’ beliefs and assumptions began to change because they were only

working from the frame of reference they had before the work began. To try to change beliefs before teachers have evidence to the contrary is very difficult if not impossible to accomplish. For me to build the capacity of my teachers to influence learner agency through action research, I had to change the way we did things at our school. The hope was that this action would change teacher perceptions, build collective efficacy, and empower students with their learning.

Professional learning communities have been researched extensively. The findings have been similar and have concluded that PLCs are very context specific, but certain elements are universal among effective PLCs. “Instructional strategies that center on collaborative and critical pedagogy are among the most effective for improving teacher and leader efficacy while increasing student learning outcomes” (Gilbert, Voelkel, & Johnson, 2018, p. 155). Efficacy is a critical element of learner agency. “We believe that professional learning communities have the potential of making a difference in the landscape of school reform if priority is given to teachers’ agency and teachers’ learning” (Riveros, A., Newton, P., & Burgess, 2012, p. 204). Providing enough structure or scaffolding while giving teachers autonomy or agency was a crucial balance in this process. Antinluoma, Ilomäki, Lahti-Nuuttila, and Toom (2018) found, “Teaching culture is improved when the learning communities increase teachers’ collaboration and empowerment, break down walls of isolation, create collective responsibility, and secure continuous professional learning” (p. 77). When this study began, I think we had some level of collaboration, but there was not a culture of collective responsibility or professional learning.

Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, and Wallace (2005) conducted a study on the effectiveness of professional learning communities. They came to the conclusions that PLCs are worth developing as a means for school improvement. They identified shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils’ learning; collaboration focused on learning; individual and

collective professional learning; reflective professional inquiry; openness, networks and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support as components that must be present in PLCs in order for them to be effective. Student learning was the focus of people engaging in PLCs, and the more developed that the PLC is, the higher the student achievement they attain (p. 145-146).

By developing our Professional Learning Community to engage in the action research to investigate learner agency, according to the research learner outcomes should be increased. According to Schaap and Bruijn (2018), “effective PLCs draw upon at least five elements, namely, shared values and norms, clear and consistent focus on student learning, deprivatization of practices, focus on collaboration and reflective dialogues” (p. 110). We created these shared values and norms through our action research, had a clear focus on increasing learner agency, shared what we were doing through Google Classroom to deprivatize our practices, focused on collaboration through our PLC collaborative team meetings, and built our reflective dialogues through Google Classroom discussion posts, one on one conversations, and through our PLC collaborative team meetings.

Based on this research, I know that the development of our PLC will continue to be a long process. It has been an effective means to use in engaging teachers in action research to investigate learner agency in their students and as a vehicle for increasing teacher agency as well. “The change that professional learning communities propose is not necessarily a transformation of the organizational structures, but a change of the way teachers understand their professional practice—a change of the teachers’ attitudes towards organizational goals” (Riveros, A., Newton, P., & Burgess, 2012, p. 207). By examining teacher perceptions of the action research they engaged in through our PLC, I was able to determine whether teacher attitudes were shifting.

Moving from a compliance mentality to a true learning community has empowered teachers to empower students. According to Dufour and Mattos (2013), the process of developing a PLC increases shared leadership, gives teachers a voice, and allows principals to hold teams accountable for results. In this process, it is important for the principal to act as an encourager in acknowledging progress (p. 38). My role as a principal in this PLC development process was to provide structure, provide resources, give encouragement, and monitor to make sure that we as a collective moved forward in the same direction to increase learner agency. Lee, Zhang, and Yin (2011) found:

A PLC plays an important role in building teachers' personal and collective capacities as well as in improving students' achievements in school. A review of eleven studies focusing on the impact of PLC suggested that well-developed PLCs could positively improve teachers' teaching practices and students' learning activities (p. 821)

“A trusting atmosphere among teachers in a community or school can be closely related to the development of a PLC. Trust has been found to be a significant predictor to people's overall job satisfaction and risk-taking behaviors in an organization” (Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011, p. 821). This trust among the teachers in this school exists, but it has not been channeled toward the development of the PLC until this school year.

My role as a researcher, was to determine if the intended outcomes of the PLC development actually impacted teacher perceptions, collective efficacy, and learner agency in the context of this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school.

Action Research

In order to engage teachers in action research, I had to first understand what action research was. The following definitions have informed my understanding of action research. Herr and Anderson (2015) examined action research and developed this definition:

Action research is inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them. It is a reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken, and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions. What constitutes evidence or, in more traditional terms, data is still being debated. Action research is oriented to some action or cycle of actions that organizational or community members have taken, are taking, or wish to take to address a particular problematic situation. The idea is that changes occur within the setting or within the participants and researchers themselves. (p. 3-4)

Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen (2011) explain that professionals working in their line of work conducting research to improve their practice are engaging in action research. They posture that engaging in action research is a way to change organizational culture through collaboratively working to refine their practice (p. 13). As indicated in the definitions of action research, engaging teachers in action research to influence learner agency had the potential to change the culture of our school, help teachers to become more reflective in their practice, give teachers ownership over their teaching practice, and address the problem of a lack of learner agency in our school.

“Formalizing the puzzles of practice into research is a way of working better rather than doing more of the same only harder” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 92). My teachers worked hard, but through engaging in action research to influence learner agency, I hoped to find a positive impact on our collective efficacy. For this impact to be made, teachers must have changed their practice. “Micro-institutional change thus depends, in part, on teachers' ending their habitual use of long held instructional practices, teachers' questioning the meaning and value of existing practices, and teachers' using new practices rather than shielding existing practices from external intervention” (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015, p. 141). Teachers must learn from each other and implement new learning by experimenting with it in their classrooms. “Peer learning involves innovation opportunities in the sense that teachers work together to develop new forms of

instruction or adapt existing practices” (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015, p. 150). This takes an environment where teachers feel safe to try new approaches. “While in high-stakes contexts the natural response of data comparing results creates defensiveness, environments of high trust turn transparency of data into a sense of moral urgency to get better and learn from others” (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016, p. 14). Helping teachers see that they are researchers and that they do have the power to change the trajectory students are on by empowering students with their learning should empower teachers with the data instead of producing the negative culture that can come from high-stakes testing. As a new principal, it was a goal to find ways to let teachers know that it is safe to take risks and try new things to cultivate that culture of trust.

Our school district was engaging principals in a cycle of inquiry framework to encourage principals to engage in action research with teachers. “Tapping into the fundamentally human inclination to learn by doing, effective collaboration almost invariably engages participants in ongoing cycles of collaborative inquiry” (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016, p. 14). The only way these cycles of collaborative inquiry can take place is in that environment of safety and trust. There must be a clear understanding of what cycles of collaborative inquiry are as well. Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) explain:

Cycles of collaborative inquiry essentially consist of: (1) Using credible evidence (student achievement data, student work, classroom observations, etc.) to identify a problem of practice at the right grain size – challenging enough to require a stretch of existing knowledge and capacity within the group and manageable enough to be tackled with the existing capacity of the group. (2) Designing, trying out, and testing changes in practice aimed to solve the identified problem. (3) Rapidly accumulating evidence of impact; embedding those changes that improved teacher effectiveness and student performance into the daily work of participants, and refining or discarding change ideas based on evidence of their effectiveness or lack thereof. (4) Identifying a next problem of practice. (p. 14)

As a result of engaging in this type of action research, Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) found that engaging in this process can improve the culture of an organization by deepening

relationships and increasing positive partnerships between stakeholders including parents and families. This work has created “radical transformation” in the roles of stakeholders (p. 16). While this study focused on teacher perceptions of the action research to increase learner agency, I believe that this work will eventually impact all stakeholders including our families, mentors, and community partners as teacher perceptions about students change. “The most highly effective networks combine school-focused strategies with efforts to engage the wider community” (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016, p. 17). Working to increase learner agency allows teachers to release some control and make learning more personalized which will eventually impact parent relationships.

As a principal, it was important for me to understand my role in the action research as well. According to Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016), leaders must act as lead learners to create a learning focused system. Principals should model the importance of being learners (p. 18). As Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan discuss, I was also a learner in the action research study that was being explored through this study.

Collective Efficacy

Teachers must believe that they can make a difference before they actually do. Teacher perceptions are crucial in moving schools forward. Lee, Zhang, and Yin (2011) define collective teacher efficacy:

Collective teacher efficacy refers to the expectations of the effectiveness of the school as a whole for the teachers and their collective perceptions and beliefs of organizing and executing teaching practices to make positive educational differences to the students over that of their homes and communities. (p. 821)

Collective teacher efficacy has more than double the effect size of prior achievement and triple the effect size of students’ home environments and parent involvement in their educations. This makes collective teacher efficacy the most influential factor of student achievement. Collective

teacher efficacy is the belief of teachers in a school that they can work together to positively impact student achievement. If we believe that we can make a difference with hard work and sound instructional strategies, we will make a difference. Both Hattie's and Marzano's work have found that collective teacher efficacy is strong enough to overcome student backgrounds (Donohoo, 2017, 1-7). Other researchers agree. Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2004) postulate that increasing teacher autonomy is a way to build the collective efficacy of a school. They found that when teachers share decision making that it increases their confidence and ability to effectively educate students (p. 10). You may be wondering how collective teacher efficacy ties in with learner agency. Self-efficacy is an element of learner agency and increased self-efficacy can lead to higher levels of collective efficacy. Lee, Zhang, & Yin (2011) explain collective efficacy is separate from individual self-efficacy because it involves the entire organization. That being said, the self-efficacy of the individuals in the organization does contribute to the collective efficacy. Increasing teachers' self-efficacy has a positive moderate correlation to the teacher collective efficacy of schools (p. 821). Schools can increase collective efficacy by providing opportunities for teachers to learn and work collaboratively. "Teachers in well-developed professional communities tended to have a stronger commitment to schools than those who felt little sense of collegiality and had little opportunity to learn in their schools" (Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011, p. 827).

How is collective efficacy built? Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2004) describe three experiences or constructs that can lead to increased collective efficacy. Mastery experience, vicarious experience, and social persuasion are the three ways that they have found in their research to increase collective efficacy. When people find success, they believe they can achieve further success. Thus, mastery experiences increase collective efficacy. Vicarious experiences create a pathway for increased collective efficacy even when success has not been experienced

first-hand. The third construct is social persuasion. This is where a principal or someone else is able to use encouragement and/or feedback to help shift the mindset of the organization to increase collective teacher efficacy (p. 5-6). Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2004) go on to explain that both anxiety and excitement are basically contagious in an organization and that environments with a great deal of anxiety can create an overall climate of stress (p. 6). The flip side of that is also true when there is an overall feeling of trust in an environment. “Hence, a trusting atmosphere in school should positively affect teachers’ working attitudes, motivation, and consequently their commitment to working” (Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011, p. 822).

Self-Regulated Learning

Since the term self-regulated learning arises often when reading of agency, I decided to research the term to better understand learner agency. *Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy* shares the following definition of self-regulated learning:

Self-regulated learning refers to one’s ability to understand and control one’s learning environment. Self-regulation abilities include goal setting, self-monitoring, self-instruction, and self-reinforcement. Self-regulation should not be confused with a mental ability or an academic performance skill. Instead, self-regulation is a self-directive process and set of behaviors whereby learners transform their mental abilities into skills and habits through a developmental process that emerges from guided practice and feedback. (p. 1)

Most of the research on self-regulated learning pertains to adult learners, college students, and some concentrate on high school students. *Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy* (2010) explains what self-regulated learners are able to do which makes it understandable that elementary students have not been the main focus of the research. Self-regulated learners analyze task requirements, set goals that are productive, adapt based on the feedback they receive, invent new strategies for success, regulate their emotions, and regulate their motivations. They are also capable of managing time and discerning the types of notes they need to take in order to be successful (p. 1). Elementary students should be learning how to use these strategies and how to

regulate their emotions in order to become self-regulated learners. Yamada, Oi, and Konomi (2017) explain that self-regulated learning is an interactive concept, “SRL is related to motivation, cognition, and self-control, as it is directed toward the accomplishment of learning purposes. SRL relates to many learning concepts such as metacognition, information processing, procrastination, and so on” (p. 3). Self-regulated learning includes understanding what to do, having the desire to do the work, and having the follow-through to complete the work. Isaacson and Fujita (2006) explain the cycle of monitoring and adjusting based on a set of skills that is required for self-regulated learning:

Self-regulated learners are skillful at monitoring their learning and comprehension which has a direct effect on each step in the self-regulation process. Pintrich et al. (2000) compares monitoring to the thermostat of a furnace. When the temperature falls below a specified level the thermostat tells the furnace to turn on the heat; when a learner is confused or does not comprehend what they are studying the monitor tells the learner to regulate their behavior, cognitive strategies, or motivation and affect to increase learning. To be effective learners, students must adjust their efforts based on their awareness of their own understanding and the level of difficulty of the upcoming task. (p. 39)

Learners monitoring their learning and adjusting to meet their personal learning needs is what self-regulated learning embodies.

Learner Agency

In order to understand what learner agency encompasses, we must look to research on agency. “Agency concerns the ways that people exercise some level of control over their own lives. People are more likely to purposefully pursue goals that seem challenging, rewarding, and attainable” (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004, p. 4). By proxy, learner agency is how learners exercise control over their lives and more specifically their learning. Gorzelsky (2009) connects agency to voice as he defines “agency- their ownership of their developing ideas and texts” (p. 64). It is impossible to give learner agency to people because it involves their feelings about their

learning, but it is possible to create environments that are more conducive to increasing learner agency. Mercer (2012) states:

Agency is therefore not only concerned with what is observable, but it also involves non-visible behaviors, beliefs, thoughts and feelings; all of which must be understood in relation to the various contexts and affordances from which they cannot be abstracted. (p. 42)

For example, according to Brown, David, and Smallman (2017), “Agency is directly linked to learner ability to self-direct, self-instruct, and self-access learning in ways that best allow individuals to learn” (p. 80). Furthermore, Robinson (2012) posits, “Agency seems to be about internalizing choices, about analyzing and reflecting, based on past experiences and future trajectories” (p. 233). Giving students opportunities to make choices, set goals, and reflect on their work foster learner agency.

The nature of agency presents challenges in terms of observability and measurement. According to Knight, Barbera, and Appel (2017) it is difficult to research agency because there is a lack of clarity on what agency is and it is “under-theorized” in their words (p.278). It is for this reason that I chose to examine teacher perceptions of their engagement in action research to increase learner agency.

Knight, Barbera, and Appel (2017) share a definition of learner agency, “Learner agency, the capability of individual human beings to make choices and act on these choices in a way that makes a difference in their lives” (p. 276). Others have defined learner agency in slightly different ways. Mercer (2012) explains, “Learner agency appears to emerge from the interaction of several factors such as self-concept, beliefs, motivation, affect and self-regulation” (p. 44). Still others have explained the importance or power of increasing learner agency. Williams (2017) found:

A sense of agency allows room for, as Carol Dweck wrote in 2006, the sense of “not-yetness,” the sense that expertise and mastery are attributes that are built over

time through persistence in the face of failure, and through drawing on the expertise and knowledge of those around us to compile the knowledge, understandings, and skills needed to achieve the successes we strive for as individuals. When initial attempts at a task do not produce the predicted or desired results, empowered learners are drawn back to the challenge, able to refine their approach, build new skills, and act to make change. (p. 10)

In order to create a culture that values learner agency, we must first see stakeholders in the school as learners. That includes principals, teachers, and students. According to Lehtonen (2015), before students can be afforded agency in their learning, teachers must be confident in relinquishing some level of control (p. 1886). Before teachers are comfortable in relinquishing control, they must have confidence in their abilities to make a difference and facilitate student learning experiences. “It is only possible to support students’ social learning, enhance students’ active agency and ownership by giving up control and distributing power in practice” (Lehtonen, 2015, p. 1887).

At the time of this study, there had been district initiatives in the preceding few years, but there had not been any major initiatives in this school for several years. Even the district initiatives had not been fully embraced or implemented. Cheng and Huang (2018) implore, “Promotion of teacher agency does not just rely on the beliefs that individual teachers bring to their practices, but also requires collective development and consideration” (p. 286). Furthermore, for any meaningful change initiative to be successful and school reform efforts to be realized, “Teachers’ buy-in and implementation of new practices need to be considered before reform. Also, teachers need to develop their agency and make decisions about appropriate practice to keep pace with change” (Cheng & Huang, 2018, p. 287). Without providing opportunities for teachers to learn, they are not likely to develop that agency.

Telling teachers that they need to increase learner agency would have no impact. Structures and practices must be created to develop an understanding of agency as “Teachers

exert endeavor in learning, teaching and research in the new curriculum when they have sense of being able to practice agency” (Cheng & Huang, 2018, p. 286). I used the PLC framework that teachers were familiar with in hopes that it would lead to them exerting themselves as learners through action research.

Increasing teacher agency while also increasing student agency can be complicated.

According to Ferrari and Taddei (2017):

A problematic dialectic relationship can be seen in the relationship between teacher agency and student agency. In this sense, the selected international literature highlights the importance of considering the “student voice” element in the construction of agency. In this perspective, it is important to understand how to support and foster agency in teachers, considering their professional conduct also in relation to the role of empowerment played by teachers towards students. (p. 4)

This was a factor in our school context because there was some fear among teachers of not having control when it comes to their management of students. At the outset of the action research, they were not sure how to give ownership to students while maintaining order in the classroom.

“When applied to teachers' professional practice, agency denotes the ability of teachers to step out of the contextual rules and regulations, and to act upon their own goals” (Oolbekkink-Marchand, Hadar, Smith, Ulvik, & Helleve, 2017, p. 38). As the building principal, it was also difficult to step back and give teachers the level of agency that it takes for them to take ownership when they were highly accustomed to being told what to do. When engaging in a process of identifying essential standards, one teacher even said, “Tell me what to teach, and I will do it. What if I am wrong?” The value of stepping back is that teachers must step up and be the professionals needed for school success. Pyhältö, Pietarinen, and Soini (2015) elucidate:

Teacher learning of professional agency in the school community consists of several elements - including “skills, awareness of efficacy and motivational factors leading to the transformation of their own teaching practices, experimentation of collective efficacy, construction of positive interdependence, appreciation of finding mutual agreements, and the use of active help seeking strategies. (p. 811)

According to Oolbekkink-Marchand, Hadar, Smith, Ulvik, and Helleve (2017), “one major contextual characteristic through which agency is negotiated, is a teacher's perception of his/her professional space” (p. 38). Through the collection of data on teacher perceptions, it was purposed by design that the contextual characteristics would become apparent. “If teachers in PLCs experience ownership, they take more responsibility that increases the effectiveness of innovations” (Schaap & Bruijn, 2018, p. 112). Examination of the teachers’ levels of ownership was important data to capture. Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini (2014) offer, “teachers’ professional agency affects the way and extent to which they perceive and adopt instructional and educational changes in their work” (p. 307-308). In order for teachers to exhibit professional agency, they must be able to make decisions about their practice. “Active teacher learning has been considered necessary, especially when teachers are confronted with change in pedagogical practices at the school, district or national level” (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2014, p. 304).

“If education is, at least in part, intended to help students effectively act upon their strongest interests and deepest desires, then we need a clearer understanding of how to cultivate that sense of agency” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 2). “In this sense, we must design and implement methods of collective and transformative agency which structurally involve the promotion of agency among the students themselves” (Ferrari & Taddei, 2017, p. 4). I was curious to see if there was evidence of students promoting agency among their peers when I read this research. Bray and McClaskey (2013) focus on a personalized system of learning to foster agency. This involves creating a shared vision by all stakeholders that focuses on individual student success. This shift in paradigm changes the roles of the stakeholders (p. 15). This level of personalized learning did not occur within the scope of this study, but this study will provide a foundation for furthering

personalized learning in this context. “Certainly, student agency is developed when the learners are involved in the whole learning process - including decisions on the curriculum – and when they are involved in everyday choices concerning how and why they are learning what they are learning” (Ferrari & Taddei, 2017, p. 4). Williams (2017)

questions:

How wide and deep should enabling agency go? After all, students need some structure, boundaries, and guidance—if for no other reason than to ensure their safety. It is important to emphasize that enabling student agency is not a recommendation for free-range education, an unfettered release of students into the wilderness for them to explore the world unattended. Rather, it is a pedagogical stance that defines the purpose of the structures, systems, and guides we put in place. A focus on student agency presses us to ask ourselves to what extent are we tuning in to our students (Murdoch 2015). How much are we listening to student voice, being responsive to student voice, and, most importantly, enabling student voice that leads to action? (p. 11)

This isn't to say that the teacher is of less importance. To the contrary, Brown, David, and Smallman (2017) outline the importance of teacher support for student agency, “Four activities associated with strengthening learners’ ability to learn autonomously: planning, monitoring, problem solving, and evaluating” (p. 80). They shared that the construction of autonomy must be scaffolded in a way that students shift from total dependency on the teacher for direction to a place where they are able to make decisions about their learning and act autonomously (Brown, David, and Smallman, 2017, p. 80). The perceptions of the teachers in this study about their personal agency and their students’ agency and how they coexist was an aspect of the study I was interested in from the outset.

There had to be a mindset change in order for learner agency to increase in this setting. Learning needed to shift from something that was trapped within a school day. “With personalized learning, anyone can be a learner. The term student implies someone in a class being taught by a teacher. Learners, in contrast, drive their learning from anywhere at anytime” (Bray &

McClaskey, 2013, p. 14). This idea is important if we want our students to grow outside of the confines of the school building. We must also begin to ask what teachers can learn from students instead of only what students should learn from teachers. “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Weltsek & Koontz, 2018, p. 61). The focus must shift from teaching to learning. Bray and McClaskey (2013) expound that learning environments must be flexible allowing students to learn in a way that best meets their individual needs. Moving from traditional teaching is difficult because they experienced traditional teaching as they were taught, and many teachers have been teaching in a traditional manner for many years. Without a strong shared vision, this shift would not be possible (p. 14). Time and a shared mission and vision are important to increasing learner agency. Klemenčič (2017) presents an argument for student agency which is at the heart of Student-Centered Learning:

There are several researchers that strongly argue in favor of ‘direct, strong instructional guidance rather constructivist-based minimal guidance during the instruction of novice to intermediate learners’. The more recent interpretations of SCL (Student-Centered Learning) and its related approaches now make sure to emphasize that they do not advocate for a withdrawal of teachers or indeed for a diminished role of teachers; in fact, to the contrary. To put it simply, SCL in pedagogy means that the fully guided direct instruction is complemented — as appropriate — by specific techniques of active learning, such as assigning open-ended problems, involving students in simulations and role plays, and enabling self-paced, self-directed and/or cooperative and or peer-to-peer learning. (p. 74)

Traditional teaching does not lead to increased levels of agency. “When school products and processes are predetermined and drill-and-kill worksheets are the work of learning, it is not surprising that students choose other outlets for their creativity and agency” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 28). Klemenčič (2017) iterates, “understanding students’ interests, preferences, capabilities and choices is seen essential to cater for more student-centered education provision; which is often also made synonymous with more personalized and more individualized

education” (p. 79). Brown, David, and Smallman (2017) discuss the need to teach students in a way that increases their ability to be critical thinkers in order for them to find success in this new world that presents new challenges. Self-agency and critical thinking are skills that our students will need (p.88). This is a new and innovative way to address education. So much focus has been placed on standards, objectives, and accountability that somewhere along the way, we forgot about the importance of students owning their learning. “In the perspective of schools designed as an overall community, we must recognize that all these elements must also involve the students” (Ferrari & Taddei, 2017, p. 5). If we do not include student voice in the process of reinventing schools, we are likely to be unsuccessful in the endeavor.

As a school leader, I see myself as a problem solver. I want to help my teachers come up with solutions to their problems. Figuring out the perfect balance of support and creating an environment in which teachers are empowered is difficult. “School principals often wonder how to stimulate PLCs and experience tensions between structuring, managing and facilitating PLCs and struggle with often unpredictable processes and outcomes of PLCs” (Burke et al. 2007). “They tend to control the progress and results of PLCs, while members prefer professional autonomy” (Schaap & Bruijn, 2018, p. 112). The difficulty is that when given complete autonomy, some teachers find success and others do not progress. “Professional agency appears to be constructed through the collective actions of the teachers” (Robinson, 2012, p. 244). Teachers cannot be left on their own, but rather, strong teacher teams can accomplish great things. “Research showed that a top-down approach often negatively affects outcomes at different levels, ranging from teacher satisfaction and ownership to student learning outcomes. More specifically, it can negatively affect, for instance, teacher autonomy and self-efficacy for learning” (Schaap & Bruijn, 2018, p. 112). Solution Tree suggests that leadership should be both loose and tight

meaning that you provide autonomy to teachers while also having a mission, vision, collective commitments, and goals for which everyone is responsible (Tim Brown, Professional Learning Communities Coaching Academy, January 10, 2019). Riveros, Newton, and Burgess (2012) situate the importance of teacher agency:

An alternative conception of cognition that portrays learning and agency as situated in the environment is significant for professional learning communities because it gives a new meaning to the claim that groups of individuals co-create knowledge in the context of schools; namely, that professional knowledge is enacted in the teachers' practices and actions. (p. 209)

Schools are unable to make a transformational change without teachers, and teachers will not make changes on the classroom level without an increased level of agency. According to their research Riveros, Newton, and Burgess (2012) state, "Indeed, if professional learning communities are to promote the collaborative co-creation of knowledge then the conception of agency must be coherent with the fact that teachers participate in shared contexts of practice" (p. 209). A sense of agency is tied to the success of both students and teachers in the school context. Teachers and students must have ownership over their work in order to increase achievement.

Learner Purpose. Learner purpose as it pertains to learner agency is the idea of whether the learning is relevant to the learner or not. If there is not a strong understanding of why the learning is important, the learner will most likely not invest the effort required for learning.

Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) describe this idea through Expectancy-Value Theory:

Expectancy-value theory suggests that when asked to complete an academic task, students frequently conduct a sort of cost-benefit analysis by surveying what other demands and desires might be competing with the current one, and then directing attention and energy toward those that offer the greatest return. Issues of impulse control and delayed gratification are important here, as are the student's personal goals and the relevance of the activity to both current and future desires and aspirations. (p. 11)

In other words, motivation is tied to learner purpose. If learners understand why what they are doing is relevant, they are more likely to expend the effort needed to be successful.

Authenticity of work adds to learner purpose. “Authentic tasks are assignments that mimic activities completed outside of school settings. Authentic tasks have real purpose and, therefore, encourage student engagement” (Parsons, Malloy, Parsons, & Burrowbridge, 2015, p. 224). Authenticity impacts more than motivation and purpose, it also has a strong connection to student engagement. “Activities are authentic, collaborative, challenging, student-directed, and sustained. These components have been identified in the literature as essential to enhancing engagement” (Parsons, Malloy, Parsons, & Burrowbridge, 2015, p. 225). Without engagement, no learning is accomplished.

Learner purpose is closely tied to learner ownership. “In order for students to have ownership of their learning, they must have an understanding of the intended learning. Developing clear learning targets is essential to student ownership because learning targets provide direction about expectations for performance” (Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, & Konrad, 2014, p. 107). According to the research, learner purpose is interwoven with the other elements of learner agency.

Learner Ownership. In order for students to have ownership in their learning, they must have clearly defined learning targets. They must also be involved in goal setting and goal monitoring. “Central to student ownership of learning are high aspirations and goals clearly aligned to achieve them” (Conley & French, 2014, p. 1030). Teachers must directly teach students how to set goals and how to identify learning targets. Conley and French (2014) present:

The ownership element includes five major components: motivation and engagement, goal orientation and self-direction, self-efficacy and self-confidence,

metacognition and self-monitoring, and persistence. These five components are not strictly sequential, although a strong case can be made for a reinforcing relationship among them. (p. 1020)

All components of learner agency are closely tied. “When learners feel ‘ownership’ of an idea, they are suggesting they have a personal stake in the creation and use of that special thought” (Druin, 2014, p. 123). This gives their work purpose. Teachers also need to have clearly defined learning targets, and they need to exercise their agency in meeting their goals. Ketelaar, Beijaard, Perry, and Henny (2013) suggest that in order to create large-scale innovations, administrators must ensure that teachers have set aside time to collaborate with each other and they must be given agency (p. 1004). Teachers also must realize the need their students have for this same type of ownership in their learning. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) express, “What teachers need to recognize is that students are human and have to decide to learn first, then muster the necessary techniques to keep at it until progress has been made” (p. 19). Learning is difficult for teachers and students, and they must be given the support, time, and resources they need to find success. Increasing student achievement is directly tied to increasing learner ownership. “The more students are determined to pursue self-selected goals, the more likely it is that those goals will be accompanied by expectations of success in areas that matter most to them” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 10). The purpose of public education is to prepare students to be productive citizens. Students that are taught to take ownership of their learning are prepared to realize the purpose of the education system. Druin (2014) describes the importance of this relationship of ownership between teachers and students, “All community stakeholders deserve the right to make decisions. This will undoubtedly lead to a developed sense of responsibility for all stakeholders so that they may invest time and energy in the advancement of learning” (p. 125). Embedding reflective practices in lessons is one way teachers can empower students. “Empowered students make meaning and act from reflection, instead of memorizing facts and values handed to them”

(Weasmer & Woods, 2000, p. 16). Teachers have great opportunities for increasing student ownership when they understand how students are empowered. Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, and Konrad (2014) the following are practices that promote ownership of learning:

Evidence-based practices that promote self-determination and student ownership of learning enable students in the following ways. 1. Being informed about their learning goals, in terms they can understand, from the very beginning of the teaching and learning process; 2. Using accurate assessment information to become confident in themselves as learners; 3. Receiving frequent feedback that provides them with specific insights as to how to improve; 4. Engaging in regular self-assessment, with standards held constant, so that they can watch themselves grow over time; and 5. Actively communicating with their teacher and their families about their achievement status and improvement. (p. 106)

Teachers must directly teach students self-regulation skills in order for all students to accomplish high levels of achievement. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) connect self-regulation to ownership, “Cognitively, self-regulated learners plan, set goals, organize, self-monitor, and self-evaluate at various points during the process [of building new knowledge or skills]. These processes enable [students] to be self-aware, knowledgeable, and decisive in their approach to learning” (p. 18).

Teachers find it difficult at the elementary school level to share ownership with students. Even in early childhood, students can build ownership for their learning. “Clear learning targets are an effective tool for building student ownership of learning with students of all ages, even early elementary students” (Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, & Konrad, 2014, p. 107). The recurring theme of the literature is that students need to understand what is expected of them and be involved in setting goals to meet those expectations. Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, and Konrad (2014) offer further suggestions for cultivating ownership. They suggest that students track their progress, collect evidence of their own learning, compare their performance to their learning targets, reflect on their learning, and seek help when they need help moving forward (p. 108). As the research clearly outlines, there is not much difference between teachers’ ownership

and students' ownership when it comes to learning. Both must be provided with autonomy, goals must be set, progress towards goals must be monitored, and reflection must take place.

Learner Motivation. Motivation is an internal construct that is difficult to measure. “We are motivated by desire; we engage out of a desire to do so; and, if fortunate enough, we voice our desired wishes and intentions. Desire is a powerful human instinct” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 2). Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) attempt to describe motivation further:

Motivation is better understood as an alterable state than a permanent trait; it is highly susceptible to modification as conditions vary. Students build motivational beliefs in relationship to a domain (e.g., math class, biology, P.E., language arts), then use these beliefs to orient themselves in new learning. Such beliefs are malleable even though the skills learned in a particular domain may not be transferrable to other domains. (p. 5).

The idea that motivation is malleable gives hope to educators because it means that we can move students forward. It also makes it our responsibility to find ways to motivate students to find success in subjects that are less desirable to them. “Here, classroom instruction is thought to influence students' motivations in school, students' motivations are thought to predict engagement, and student engagement is thought to mediate the association between students' motivation and learning outcomes” (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 433-434). The days of teachers allowing students to fail because “they just are not motivated,” must come to an end in our school in order to ensure that all students achieve. We must find ways to motivate each student.

Creating strong relationships with students can impact motivation levels. According to Toshalis and Nakkula (2012), “students' psychological connection to school affects motivation levels and participatory behaviors. Feeling welcomed into, included in, and validated by school can exert a profound effect on a student's capacity to engage and his efforts to achieve” (p. 5). Lawson and Lawson's (2013) explain that students are not able to separate their emotions from their school setting. What happens outside of school impacts their ability to learn. Students that

have strong relationships with teachers are more motivated to learn because they have that positive emotional attachment at school. Teachers can help student motivation levels through positive relationships with students (p.436). Building relationships comes more naturally for some teachers. For other teachers, building relationships must be an intentional process. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) explain how this intentional relationship building can occur:

Motivating students to apply themselves in the classroom requires knowing them, knowing their beliefs and anxieties, recognizing the different social pathways they may have taken to arrive in the classroom, and customizing approaches that are responsive to each student's individual zones of proximal development—all student-centered basics—but it does not require making things easy for them or dumbing things down. In fact, being both supportive and demanding seems to be the ideal. (p. 12)

Teachers sometimes have a difficult time understanding how to reach this balance of being supportive and demanding. Cordova and Lepper's (1996) argument is similar. They share the importance of authenticity in lessons and collaborative projects with peers to help intrinsically motivate students (p. 715). Growth mindset, self-efficacy, and grit come into play with student's motivation in school. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) look at mindset as a motivation factor:

Studies by Carol Dweck and others have shown that if a particular student believes intelligence is largely a matter of effort, then that student is likely to be more motivated to exert effort, attempt difficult academic tasks, and persist despite setbacks, confusion, and even failure. However, if a student believes intelligence is a fixed entity (i.e., a stable "aptitude" determined at birth and resistant to external influence), then difficulty with a particular activity (e.g., math) is more likely to be interpreted as evidence of lack of intelligence in that domain (e.g., "I'm just stupid at math"). These students frequently expect less of themselves, underrate the importance of effort, and overrate how much help they need from others. (p. 5-6).

Growth mindset must be taught and carefully nurtured to increase motivation.

Often times, students that are disruptive to classrooms are grouped together for the good of the whole student body but at the detriment to those students. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) touch on a topic that concerned me for my own school when they state, "Grouping the so-called

“unmotivated students” together and sequestering them from the supposedly motivated students is likely to exacerbate existing motivational dispositions” (p. 5). A better practice according to Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) would be to use student-centered practices to determine individual student motivations. Motivation is often impacted by outside factors. If we as educators can identify the barriers to motivation, we have a better opportunity for addressing students’ motivational needs (p. 5). Our special education self-contained classroom had several of these “unmotivated students” and it was a hotspot for behavioral issues. It was my hope that by focusing on increasing learner agency that these students would take ownership of their learning and be more motivated to learn. I wanted these students to embrace the following mindset:

Students who are encouraged to take risks, to view mistakes as opportunities for learning, and to understand the need for help as an indicator of a growing mind will likely experience school as opportunity rather than threat. In an environment in which they consistently feel protected from others’ judgments and prepared to overcome their own insecurities, the motivation to achieve has the opportunity to flourish. (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 14)

Accomplishing that requires a mind shift for teachers as well. “Regardless of their achievement level, the motivation to try is enhanced if the student believes (or is taught to believe) that she can acquire new skills and improve on existing ones through focus and effort” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 6). Why would a student try if he or she did not think it was possible to accomplish the task at hand? “This observation is at the core of expectancy-value research. It argues that we are motivated to devote energy to those activities in which we expect to succeed, and we subsequently tend to value those activities over others” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 10). Students that know that they are capable of succeeding have a higher likelihood of success.

We cannot have a conversation about motivation without touching on the differences between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. “Extrinsic rewards have been found to diminish intrinsic motivation to the extent that they are interpreted by the individual as an attempt to

control his or her behavior” (Patall, Cooper & Robinson, 2008, p. 273). Intrinsic motivation is found when learners are able to control their own behaviors. Letting go of some teacher control to empower students with agency should increase motivation.

Just as we have found in other elements of learner agency, teachers are motivated in much the same way as students are motivated. Hargreaves and Fullan (2013) found, “The best way you can support and motivate teachers is to create the conditions where they can be effective day after day, together” (p. 37). This increases collective efficacy which has a high impact on student success.

Learner Engagement. Student engagement is a phrase that is widely used in schools. It is included in most teacher evaluation instruments. What does true engagement look like? “Motivation and engagement are closely related. Motivation is an internal state, while engagement is the manifestation of motivation behaviorally. Student engagement leads to higher achievement in the classroom” (Conley & French, 2014, p. 1021). Most educators agree that student engagement is essential for student learning. “Student engagement in school is fundamental to positive educational and life outcomes, including learning, achievement, graduation, and persistence in higher education” (Cooper, Kintz, & Miness, 2016, p. 109). Without engaging students in learning, learning does not happen. “Engagement is the direct (and only) pathway to cumulative learning, long-term achievement, and eventual academic success” (Parsons, Malloy, Parsons, & Burrowbridge, 2015, p. 224). Student engagement has different levels. Merely looking busy is not enough. Compliance is sometimes mistaken for engagement.

What Is Engagement? “Student engagement as a state of being behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively immersed in class” (Cooper, Kintz, & Miness, 2016, p. 111). Notice that engagement is not defined as students sitting quietly in their seats looking at their teacher.

Parsons, Malloy, Parsons, and Burrowbridge (2015) more explicitly define engagement as follows:

Engagement has most recently been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, consisting of affective, behavioral, and cognitive components. Affective engagement emphasizes interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm. Behavioral engagement relates to effortful participation. Cognitive engagement encompasses strategic behavior, persistence, and metacognition. In addition, engagement is currently conceptualized as a dynamic, malleable construct. (p. 224)

Similarly, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) found four different types of engagement including academic engagement, behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and psychological engagement (p. 16). Understanding that engagement is a complicated and multi-dimensional concept is the first step in addressing how to increase individual student engagement.

Why is engagement so important? “Engagement is ‘a robust predictor of students’ learning, grades, achievement test scores, retention, and graduation” (Parsons, Malloy, Parsons, & Burrowbridge, 2015, p. 21). Luckily, student engagement can be increased. Lawson and Lawson (2013) discovered:

Engagement is malleable, namely, it is amenable to improvement via pedagogy and other interventions. The second is that engagement represents a direct pathway to learning. That is, once engagement occurs, powerful learning outcomes often follow it. The third is that engagement is theoretically distinct from students' motivation. (p. 435)

We cannot continue to do the same old things and expect to get different results. Some of my teachers have moved away from low engagement practices, but others are very much entrenched in practices that include worksheet driven instruction. Parsons, Malloy, Parsons, and Burrowbridge (2015) outline very common low engagement practices including worksheets. They explain that worksheets, “fail to engage students because they violate students’ need for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Finding the right answer, when seemingly done just to please the teacher, presents little enticement for students to think, and new learning is unlikely to

occur” (p. 228). As a school leader, I am interested in cultivating high engagement practices. Research has found, “Collectively, high-engagement teachers illustrated greater willingness to understand and provide support in response to individual students’ sources of disengagement. Less engaging teachers were more likely to dismiss such students as unreachable” (Cooper, Kintz, & Miness, 2016, p. 128). There has been a culture of teachers believing that some students are unreachable in my school. “PISA researchers described engagement as the ‘student characteristic [that] has the largest correlation with achievement in reading literacy” (Parsons, Malloy, Parsons, & Burrowbridge, 2015, p. 224). If we really want to improve our school, we must mold our teachers into high-engagement teachers. Cooper, Kintz, and Miness (2016) look at engagement through a lens of support. They found that teachers that are identified as supportive teachers identified student lack of engagement as an area that they could change by offering levels of support. Less supportive teachers were more likely to see student engagement as dependent on factors outside of the teachers’ control (p. 129). Through this view on supportive teachers versus less supportive teachers, I see some connections to our earlier discussion of collective teacher efficacy. If teachers believe they can make a difference, it seems they expend more effort to increase student engagement.

Learner Choice. If we think about learner agency in its most simplistic form, we are simply saying that learners need to be able to make choices in their learning. While providing students with choices is not a cure all for educational engagement, according to Lane and Ennis (2015) it can be a small thing that makes a big difference:

By making simple shifts in how teachers provide instruction, teachers can reduce the likelihood of challenging behaviors (e.g., disruption) occurring and increase engagement. Incorporating instructional choices into daily lessons is one such strategy that can be used by educators in a range of contexts to achieve the shared goal of maximizing the amount of time students spend engaged in high-quality instructional activities and support students in engaging in self-determined

behaviors such as choice-making, which can ultimately offer them a sense of control that may improve the quality of their life. (p. 474-475)

Often when students misbehave, they are looking for control even in very young students.

“According to self-determination theory, not only does choice enhance intrinsic motivation, but conditions that are experienced as controlling will also diminish intrinsic motivation” (Patall,

Cooper & Robinson, 2008, p.271). According to Ennis, Lane, and Oakes (2018):

Providing instructional choice is a versatile strategy for use in the classroom as choices may be offered to individuals, small groups, or to an entire class throughout the day to promote engagement in classroom activities. It is important to note that as a motivating operation, a choice offered in the morning is not likely to affect behavior later in the day but has positively affected behavior displayed immediately following the choice offering. (p. 78)

Teachers have a difficult time sharing control, but by offering a few choices, they may find that they have more control over the things that matter to them including improved student behavior.

Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) note based on self-motivation theory, “choice should result in positive motivational and performance outcomes. That is, people will be more intrinsically motivated to persist at a task to the extent that the activity involves their personal choice and/or provides opportunities to make choices (p.271). Our teachers have embraced flexible seating which is a great starting point in offering students autonomy through choice. Taking this choice making to an instructional level helps to further motivate students.

Offering students choice provides them with a type of student voice that connects them on an emotional level. “Student views and perceptions are important areas to consider when designing effective educational experiences. In school reform efforts, emphasis is often placed on achievement measures, whereas student attitude also plays a large role in school success” (Gentry, Gable, & Rizza, 2002, p. 542). Students and adults alike need to feel emotionally connected to find success in school. Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) demonstrates the emotion connected to having choices:

Brehm (1966) showed in his work on reactance theory that when people have choices, but then an alternative choice is explicitly eliminated, people experience a state of psychological reactance in which they will be highly motivated to regain and defend their personal freedom. According to reactance theory, this threat of restriction or elimination of individuals' ability to choose will cause them to evaluate more positively the alternatives they were not allowed to choose while evaluating the remaining alternatives more negatively. (p.271)

It seems that there is some controversy in the effectiveness of choice. Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) shared the counter arguments related to choice. They share that not all choices are created equal. Choices that connect to student's personal motivation and interests are more effective. Also, if students do not think choices are important, they will not be motivated by them (p. 272-273). Another perspective on choice is presented here by Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008), "Presumably, and consistent with the ego-depletion perspective, choice becomes 'overwhelming' and 'demotivating' when there are a large number of options" (p. 273). Also, according to Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) found that too many choices can overwhelm students and have the opposite effect desired on intrinsic motivation (p. 273). This research provides great topics for discussion as teachers wrestle with the element of choice in learner agency. Research has determined that not all methods for implementing choice are as impactful as others.

Royer, Lane, Cantwell, and Messenger (2017) discuss student "buy-in" in the following passage, and I would argue that you could replace student with teacher or learner and it would be just as applicable:

It is possible providing choice increases student "buy-in," meaning students take more ownership over self-selected assignments and tend to be more engaged, more likely to finish tasks, and have less opportunities to behave inappropriately. It is not known whether the act of choosing is empowering enough to motivate increased task engagement, whether choosing a preferred task or reinforcer is what increases engagement, or whether it is a combination of the two. (p. 90)

“Choice can increase motivation when a student has clear preferences, appreciates the options provided, enjoys the act of choosing, and benefits from the outcome of choosing” (Royer, Lane, Cantwell, & Messenger, 2017, p. 102). Giving students choices without overwhelming them with too many choices seems to be the consensus of the research.

Learner Voice. People generally want to be heard and understood. We want for our ideas to be valued. “We use the term student voice activities to refer to those pedagogies in which youth have the opportunity to influence decisions that will shape their lives and those of their peers either in or outside of school settings” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 23). Teaching students to use their voices in a productive manner supports the construct of education. Cook-Sather (2006) describes the term student voice as seen in the literature today asserting, “young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling, that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults, and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education” (p. 28). Without voice, there is no ownership. “Educators must recognize children’s right to express their views, respecting the children and their opinions and actively listening to them in matters that are important to them” (Quinn & Owen, 2014, p. 194). If students are not listened to, they often find unpleasant ways of exerting their voice through negative behavior. Paganelli (2017) passionately states the importance of student voice and student agency:

There’s a movement toward really engaging students individually and giving them that voice. The idea behind student voice and student agency is that our students can take control of facets of their own learning, and isn’t it liberating to think that we could give that to our children? I want my kids to have it, and every educator I know wants all of us to have that. (p. 7)

Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) share the possibilities associated with listening to student voice when they describe student voice as a shift in the roles of students in their educational journeys, “they facilitate the development of the social and cultural capital students need to apply new skills

to real-world situations” (p. 28). The research clearly shows the importance of including students’ voices when designing education. “(Education) It can be a shared learning journey or a matter in which children must succeed, or not, subserviently, in what is required of them” (Catling, 2014, p. 351). We have found in our context that this succeed or not mentality has hampered student achievement. According to Toshalis and Nakkula’s (2012) research:

Whereas most curricula and pedagogy seek to change the student in some way, either through the accumulation of new knowledge, the shifting of perspectives, or the alteration of behaviors, student voice activities and programs position students as the agents of change. In this way, student voice is about agency. At its core, student voice is the antithesis of depersonalized, standardized, and homogenized educational experiences because it begins and ends with the thoughts, feelings, visions, and actions of the students themselves. This makes student voice profoundly student centered. (p. 23).

Educational decisions are so often made without listening to the accounts of the students that will learn from these decisions.

Valuing student voice on a school level is important, but valuing student voice on a classroom level can have far reaching impact on individual students. “Teachers must view students as valuable and meaningful, while integrating students’ lives, experience, and culture into the classroom and subject matter” (Hill, 2013, p. 146). In schools that value learner agency, student voice is heard. Researchers have discovered underlying school values that breed learner agency. “If we want to understand and engage children, we must listen to them about matters that are important to them” (Quinn & Owen, 2014, p. 199). Listening to student voice makes adults uncomfortable sometimes because they do not want to hear that their students do not feel safe or that they feel like their teacher does not like them. “Leadership and staff in the (highly effective) case study school make the conscious decision to ‘put children first’” (Beaudoin, 2005, p. 24). Putting children first involves putting aside our adult feelings to listen to student perceptions. “The children believe that teachers and leaders respect them and are genuine in their efforts to

actively listen to student voice, even if they don't always agree" (Quinn & Owen, 2014, p. 195). They have found that these values can be embedded in the teaching practice. "Teacher authenticity and taking the time to genuinely listen to children about important issues, especially with regard to their own learning, can be embedded into pedagogy" (Quinn & Owen, 2014, p. 195). Planning for opportunities for students to create, collaborate, share ideas, and argue their points are all ways that voice can be added to teaching practice. "Individually, children see and feel the benefit of their teachers listening to them, collaborating with them, and encouraging them to act as leaders in their own learning" (Quinn & Owen, 2014, p. 199). This connects to the level of engagement students experience. Catling (2014) states:

I have argued for the centrality of children's engagement as participants in learning through a range of ways we can involve their voices as co-participants. If we want the children we say we do empowered and social individuals, critical and independent learners, informed and seekers after knowledge and participants in and contributors to our society and lives then, whatever the school's pedagogy currently provides, be critical, be open, be creative, be challenging, be inclusive and continually recreate it as a place of and for learning together. Children's voices empower pedagogy. (p. 367)

Voice is connected to all elements of learner agency. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) articulate voice as almost synonymous to learner agency, "With agency as its defining feature, student voice activities sometimes place a high priority on facilitating students' unique self-generated expressions and actions over educators' and schools' needs for predictability and efficiency" (p. 31). Student voice is how we measure learner agency. Letting students share their purpose, explain what motivates them, rate their own levels of engagement, articulated their beliefs about their abilities, and tell us their goals is how learner agency is realized.

While student voice can be shared effectively without the use of technology, there are new possibilities for the development of student voice through game based platforms. "One source of contemporary educational innovation which invites student voice and agentic engagement has

been computer-based games and simulations” (Rector-Aranda & Raider-Roth, 2015, p. 3). The 4 C’s of 21st Century Skills of creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking all describe student voice. “Students in the 21st century need opportunities to build the key skills and competencies that support their growth as individuals and citizens and that also enable them to act autonomously and flourish in their future lives” (Quinn & Owen, 2014, p. 193). Game based learning and simulations are a great way to let students express themselves which is highly motivational. Another empowering aspect of these games and simulations is that they afford students a measure of control often lacking in traditional education (Rector-Aranda & Raider-Roth, 2015, p. 4). This promotes autonomy.

Learner Self-Efficacy. Self-efficacy or the belief that what you do will make a difference in your level of success is an important element of learner agency. “Like students with a mastery-oriented mind-set, students with high self-efficacy value learning over ‘looking smart’ and respond to academic setbacks by increasing effort or trying new strategies” (Conley & French, 2014, p. 1025). Self-efficacy can be taught. Toshalis and Nakkula’s (2012) research specifically speaks to elementary students’ self-efficacy:

Even during the very early elementary grades children appear to have distinct beliefs about what they are good at and what they value in different domains. In fact, even though students may have experienced difficulty in a domain, if they believe they will do well they tend to do so and will continue to prefer that domain over others. This self-fulfilling prophecy propels continued domain-specific success and can help build students’ resiliency as they experience frustrations or challenges within that domain. (p. 11)

Student’s expectations for their success is the second highest effect size (1.44) of all of John Hattie’s meta-analysis. It is second only to the effect size of collective teacher efficacy (Donohoo, 2017, p. 6-14). As you can see, students believing they can achieve with hard work and teachers believing students can achieve with hard work is a recipe for a successful school. “The higher teachers’ sense of efficacy, the more likely they are to tenaciously overcome

obstacles and persist in the face of failure. Such resiliency, in turn, tends to foster innovative teaching and student learning” (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004, p. 4). When teachers do not give up on students, students achieve more. “Teacher efficacy influences student achievement through teacher persistence’ and highly efficacious teachers ‘view student failure as an incentive for greater teacher effort” (Donohoo, 2017, p. 14). “When teachers have greater self-efficacy, they work harder to design mastery experiences and that in turn increases students’ self-efficacy” (Donohoo, 2017, p. 16). When learners experience success, they believe they can experience success again in the future.

Conceptual Framework

After conducting the literature review for this study, a conceptualization of the study was illuminated. I have also come to the realization that learner agency is a complex issue and that the interaction of the teachers within the Professional Learning Community is a significant factor in increasing learner agency in both students and teachers. I created the graphic in Figure 1 to help clarify the connections between the existing research and this study.

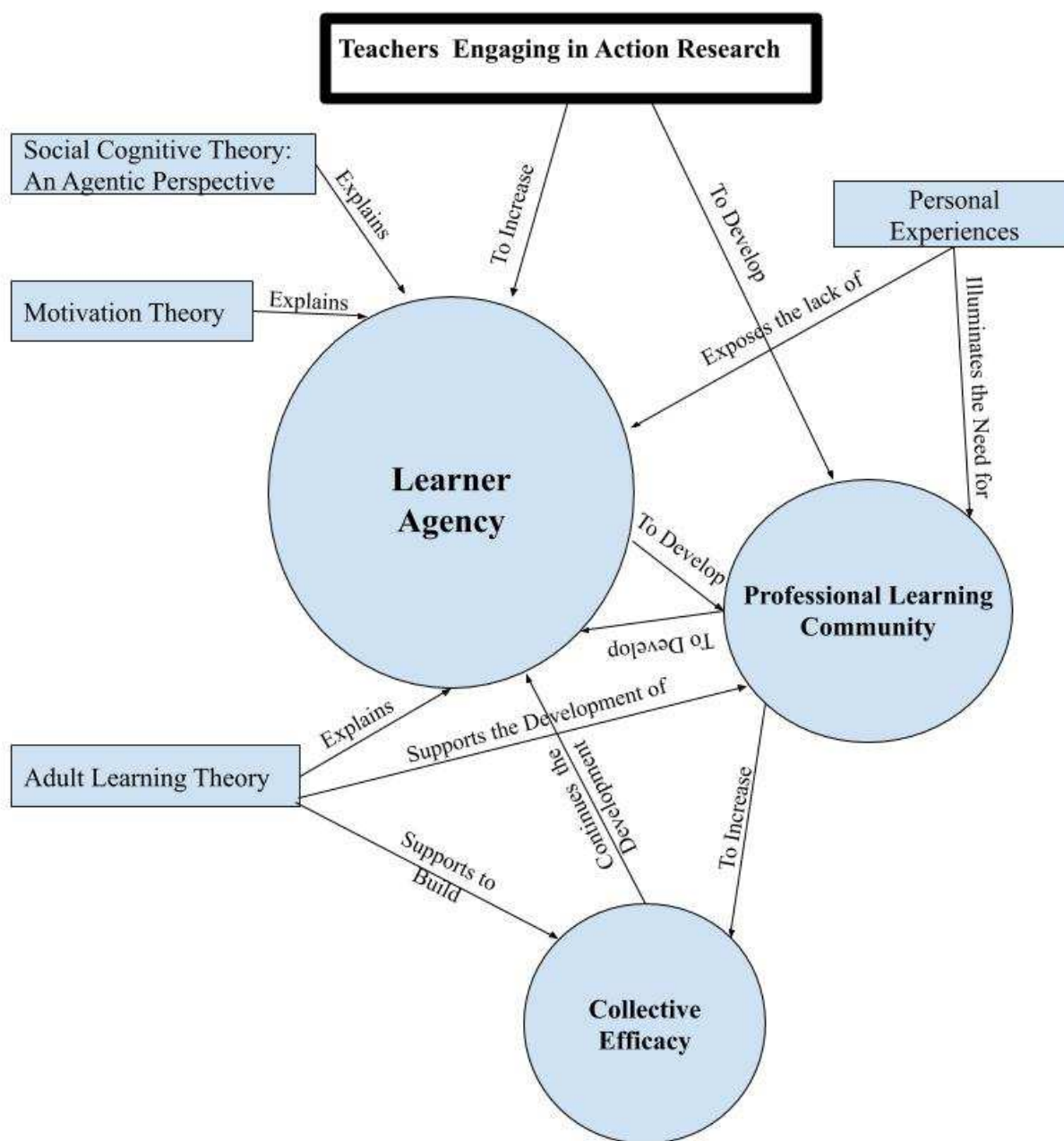


Figure 1. Graphic Overview of the Conceptual Framework

Influence of Researcher Experiences

My experiences as a teacher and school leader have an impact on the lens that I see this problem of practice through. I know the power of engaging in action research as a teacher

because I have had occasions to do that in my work and it was powerful in my practice. While I did not realize it at the time, I was a part of a Professional Learning Community engaging in a cycle of inquiry or action research to improve my practice and my school. Dillon (2018)

describes a PLC as a group of people engaging in:

An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators and is used as a way to organize teachers into working groups of practice-based professional learning. (p. 63)

I have seen the results of empowering students and teachers with their learning and in creating common goals and values. The experiences I had working in a professional learning community helped me recognize the need for building this type of collaborative culture in this school context. The fact that no one in the school knew the mission or vision of the school made it clear that there was no shared vision. The conversations that I engaged in with students and teachers solidified my belief that there was a lack of learner agency and collective teacher efficacy.

Contextual History

Schools are very dynamic environments. The culture of a school has so many intricacies that interplay to create a feeling of trust or uncertainty. Mercer (2012) captures this idea here:

Although there is a tendency to refer to contexts as if each were a single unified concept, they are themselves neither static nor monolithic. Instead, they need to be understood as representing dynamic systems composed of a multitude of components which can combine and interact in complex, unique ways. In referring to the important role played by contextual factors, care must be taken not to oversimplify their character. (p. 43)

While I attempted to give a brief overview here of the contextual history, I was a new principal in this context. I had only the conversations that I had engaged in and the data provided by the state to share. This context was in a state of rapid change at the time of the study with the departure of

a principal that was here for seven years and the introduction of a new leader with new ideas in the context.

The following is a snapshot of recent data at that time for the elementary school in this study. According to the latest ESEA School Report, the poverty rate is 69.82% and the attendance rate is 95.46%. The report finds that only 7.32% of students with disabilities achieved in English Language Arts (ELA) and 14.63% achieved in Mathematics. Black or African American students ELA and Math achievement was 48%. Only 38.89% of Hispanic/Latino students achieved in ELA and 41.67% achieved in Mathematics. English Learners achieved in ELA at 48.65% and in Mathematics at 54.05%. Economically Disadvantaged students achieved at a rate of 50% in ELA and 50.71% in Mathematics. White students achieved at a higher percentage of 60.71% in ELA and 66.07% in Mathematics. Compared to state averages, the Students with Disabilities and Hispanic/Latino sub-groups are below average and of the most concern to me as principal even though the disparities among all sub-groups is a concern. These areas concern me because I think the low achievement scores are tied to the teacher efficacy issues addressed in this study. I am sure that the scores of the students with disabilities led to the decision to make reading and math achievement in special education a school wide goal for the school year.

The elementary school participating in this study is one of many elementary schools in a large urban school district in Northwest Arkansas. Each elementary school has a unique culture, and each has taken different paths to professional development. The school principal of seven years just retired this summer, and I was hired as principal. One of the reasons I was hired was because the superintendent wants this school to become an innovative school that focuses on the development of individual students.

This school has not traditionally implemented school level initiatives. The faculty has been compliant in following district mandates to the degree that when the district has moved on to new initiatives, they continued in compliance with previous mandates while adding the new mandates on top of their already overwhelming workload. With two new district and state initiatives, the situation had reached a critical breaking point. The lower grade teachers in this school had recently engaged in the implementation of the Lindamood-Bell reading and intervention program. This program is phonemic awareness and phonics based which is a complete shift from the Reading Recovery and whole language model they had used in the past. Lindamood-Bell provided coaches through the Zoom platform to provide job embedded coaching to every K-2 teacher and interventionist.

The other initiative was the Arkansas RISE initiative. All teachers in the State of Arkansas must have training in the Science of Reading. As a part of the Arkansas RISE initiative, most of the upper grade level teachers were provided with professional development over the summer. Everyone else had to take six hours of off-contract professional development to meet this requirement.

One of the first things I did as principal was to help teachers engage in a process of strategic abandonment of previous mandates that no longer needed to be implemented because they had already been replaced by the new initiatives. This opened lines of communication and allowed teachers to better implement their learning in the classroom. This strategic abandonment continued as teachers engaged in action research to find ways to increase learner agency.

Theories that Inform the Conceptual Framework

The theories that follow informed the conceptual framework for this study. Adult Learning Theory, Motivation Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and partial theories on learner

agency helped with the development of the lens that informed the design of this study and the researcher's understanding of how to conduct action research effectively with adult learners.

Adult Learning Theory. In order to address the issue of increasing learner agency through action research at this Northwest Arkansas elementary school, this school improvement initiative drew from the Adult Learning Theory of Malcolm Knowles to assist teachers in the development of instructional practices that foster learner agency and it provided the lighthouse or illumination for the study as I explored teacher perceptions of their involvement in the action research. Tough (1985) states:

Knowles sees the andragogical process design as consisting of seven elements. One is climate setting, both the physical environment and the psychological climate (mutual respect, collaborativeness, mutual trust, supportiveness, openness and authenticity, pleasure in learning, and humanness). A second element is the involvement of learners in mutual planning, and a third is involvement in diagnosing their own needs for learning. The next three elements are as follows: involving learners in formulating their learning objectives, involving them in designing learning plans, and helping them carry out their learning plans. Knowles relies heavily on learning contracts to implement these three elements, whereas other practitioners might rely on a wider range of methods. The final, very important, element is involving learners in evaluating their learning. (p. 708)

Teachers are the learners in this case. The process of teachers engaging in reflective practice through a Professional Learning Community (PLC) structure to focus on the problem of a lack of learner agency was one vehicle used to build the capacity of teachers and build their collective teacher efficacy. Linder, Post, and Calabrese (2012) suggest that the PLC process is a shift in paradigm from traditional professional development in which teachers sit and listen to experts off site to an engaging process of learning that is ongoing and based on individual teacher and student needs (p. 13). In these collaborative PLC team meetings, teachers developed an understanding of research that relates to learner agency, participated in reflection activities about their own teaching, collaborated with each other to plan for the implementation of research-based

pedagogies for fostering learner agency, implemented research-based practices to foster learner agency, reflected on their personal teaching practice as an ongoing process, and developed classroom practices and school policies that foster learner agency. I then conducted a qualitative study to explore their perceptions of the process.

Motivation Theory. Maslow's Motivation Theory was another illumination for this conceptual framework because in order to change the behavior of the teachers to increase learner agency, teachers must be motivated to change. According to Maslow's Motivation Theory, once a person's basic and safety and security needs are met, they are motivated by belongingness, esteem needs, and self-actualization. Creating an environment at school that gives teachers a sense of belonging is essential for them to be motivated to move beyond their current state. The structure of the PLC can lead to a feeling of belongingness because teachers are part of a team and the online platform helped teachers connect with an even larger group of teachers. By engaging with teachers about their learning as a supportive new principal, it was my hope that I could be a positive factor in the motivation for teachers to learn and grow. Beyond belongingness, teachers also need a feeling that others respect them and hold them in esteem to reach the next level of motivation according to Maslow.

There was already a sound culture of mutual respect in my faculty. This respectful environment allowed the team members to realize they are valued as professionals by their peers by creating a structure for them to work together which is crucial to motivation. The responsibility of developing our PLC to increase learner agency was given to the teachers for this very reason. Building administrators can not merely tell teachers that they have to shift their teaching practices to increase learner agency. Teachers have to be involved in designing the narrative for what that means and how it will look in their classrooms. Teachers must realize that

they are respected and what they do matters. To reach the highest level of motivation which is self-actualization, teachers must be driven by a desire to make the world a better place or make the lives of the students they teach better in some way. In many cases, teachers join the teaching profession to do just that. It is easy for teachers to forget why they are doing what they are doing when they get bogged down in the difficulties of teaching. By creating an atmosphere for reflection through the PLCs and the observation, feedback, and reflection cycles, I set the stage to help teachers remember why they are teaching and why it is important to continue to grow as teachers (Taormina, & Gao, 2013, p. 156-159). Through this study, I determined that this structure of learning was impactful at our school.

Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective. According to my research into learner agency, Bandura is the father of the concept with his ideas on human agency. Bandura (2001) describes his social cognitive theory:

Agency thus involves not only the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans, but the ability to give shape to appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution. This multifaceted self-directedness operates through self-regulatory processes that link thought to action. The self-regulation of motivation, affect, and action is governed by a set of self-referent sub-functions. These include self-monitoring, performance self-guidance via personal standards, and corrective self-reactions. (p. 8)

Bandura (2001) also made the connection between individual agency and organizational agency outlining the importance of collective agency in this statement, “Organizations have to be fast learners and continuously innovative to survive and prosper under rapidly changing technologies and global marketplaces. They face the paradox of preparing for change at the height of success. Slow changers become big losers” (p. 11). As educators preparing our students for this rapidly changing world, we cannot afford to be slow changers.

Learner Agency. Mercer (2012) may describe learner agency best when she states, “Agency is a hypothetical construct like motivation and intelligence. It is an indication of its inherent complexity that conclusive, widely-accepted definitions are so difficult to find” (p. 42). In searching for the meaning of learner agency, I found PowerSchool Learning offered an explanation for the need to increase learner agency and a framework that outlines the elements of learner agency. I found this framework encompassed the bits and pieces that I found in a review of the literature in an easy to understand and all-encompassing format. PowerSchool’s explanation for the need to develop learner agency is as follows:

Learners need to develop the capacity to shape and manage their learning without overreliance on the direction and control of others. As learners advance through the system, they develop a form of ‘learned helplessness’ that keeps them from advocating for themselves. (PowerSchool, Developing Learner Agency, 2018)

The framework that PowerSchool has created includes the seven elements of learner agency that were explored in the review of the literature including learner purpose, ownership, motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, voice, and choice.

Principal Role in Action Research through a Professional Learning Community

My role in these PLC collaborative team meetings was to provide support for the needs of the teams. My role also included participation in an ongoing cycle of observations in classroom settings, gathering and organization of data that was collected, and I provided feedback to teachers based on the observations and data collection through a coaching model. As the building administrator, I was an instructional leader in the provision of support for teachers in the development of sound pedagogical practices in the classroom. Part of the facilitation of the PLC collaborative team meetings was to ensure that teachers had scheduled time to meet and collaborate. I provided research and talking points for each PLC collaborative team meeting that involved the components of learner agency. Another aspect of the PLC collaborative team

meeting facilitation was to create an online platform in Google Classroom for teachers to interact with one another, self-reflect, and share research and resources that they found to support increasing engagement, ownership, purpose, choice, voice, motivation, and self-efficacy.

“Knowles’ assumptions about adult learners stressed self-directed learning, life experiences that serve as a source of information, a focus on problem-centered learning, and an internal motivation to learn” (Linder, Post, & Calabrese, 2012, p. 14). PLC collaborative team meetings either directly or indirectly impact all four.

Synthesis of Conceptual Framework into Research Questions

In designing research questions, I asked myself what the purpose of this research study was. I determined that I wanted to understand teacher perceptions after they engaged in a process of action research to increase learner agency. I was interested in examining the effects this action research would have on learner agency and collective teacher efficacy in this school setting.

Understanding teacher perceptions in the process accomplished several things. As I had hoped, it helped me understand how my teachers perceive their learning and the learning of their students.

It allowed me to find commonalities and differences between teachers’ approaches and their learning. It gave me insight as to what steps we needed to take as a school to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement. Hopefully, it will provide other administrators with some insight as they contemplate engaging teachers in action research to increase learner agency in their schools. This line of thinking led me to the development of my research questions which were meant to gather data about teacher perceptions, capture the process data from the action research process, and collect evidence of collective efficacy which I had hoped would increase through the engagement of teachers in action research to increase learner agency.

Research Questions

Research Question #1

What perceptions will teachers at this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school have about the process of engaging in action research to increase learner agency?

In order for this intervention to be successful, teachers are the main actors that must shift their mindsets and practices. Teachers are the actors closest to the students in this study. By shifting their focus from test scores to fostering learner agency, I was hoping that teachers would begin looking at root causes instead of merely looking at results. They must see the value in changing their practice, and they must feel supported and competent in order for the culture to change which embraces an action research approach to improving practice. Teachers plan what happens every day in classrooms. If their perceptions do not change, then no real culture shift will transpire. This research question was designed to help me understand what practices were most effective in this action research. It was written to allow me to identify teacher concerns and areas of needed support. It also was meant to help me determine if the intervention fully accomplished the goal of shifting teachers' focus from test scores to fostering learner agency. Since this study was designed to examine the action research study, it examines what teachers did with regard to engaging with students to foster learner agency. They collected evidence about student agency in their classrooms. This evidence had an impact on teacher perceptions that they shared with me through one on one interviews. This reflective process allowed student voice to appear in this study.

Research Question #2

What is the evidence that learner agency has been developed as a result of the action research process?

During their action research to increase learner agency, teachers collected evidence of learner agency as they observed students in their classrooms. They provided writing exercises to allow students to voice their perceptions on the different components of learner agency. They shared their evidence with their team members and through teacher reflections. I worked with teachers to analyze the data they collected. I also collected learner agency data through classroom observations and provided teachers with feedback on the evidence that I collected. This research question allowed the evidence collected in the action research study to inform this study.

Research Question #3

How has the action research project influenced collective teacher efficacy?

I kept field notes of any evidence of collective teacher efficacy that emerged throughout the action research process. Hattie's research shows that collective teacher efficacy has the highest impact on student achievement (Donohoo, 2017, p.5). As teachers focused on increasing learner agency and they saw the importance of self-efficacy, I collected evidence of collective teacher efficacy increasing. I also collected perception data from teachers through one on one interviews and a focus group about the influences the action research had on collective teacher efficacy.

Chapter Summary

When we create an educational atmosphere for learner agency to thrive, teachers and students perform better according to the research. Professional learning communities are most successful when teachers are given ownership in their learning and student learning communities thrive when students are given ownership. According to Hattie, the two most impactful factors on student achievement are collective teacher efficacy and student expectations. This study provided an environment to examine both factors in the context of this Northwest Arkansas school.

Research supports developing a strong PLC, engaging in action research, building collective efficacy, and providing learners with agentic learning experiences.

CHAPTER THREE- INQUIRY METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how design-based action research influences learner agency in our school as determined by teacher perceptions. Learner agency for the purpose of this study includes teacher agency and student agency. I hoped to increase collective efficacy of the teachers in my Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school through engagement in a process of design-based action research to investigate learner agency. Design-based action research is action research that is designed to explicitly address a problem of practice through a series of experiences. A theory of action is developed by an educational leader or a school leadership team. A series of steps to address a specific problem of practice that aligns with this theory of action is determined. All actors in the school context are engaged in the series of steps that have been designed to address the action needed to improve the problem of practice (Mintrop, 2016, p. 1-17).

This study was a qualitative study designed to capture the perceptions of teachers that had engaged in a design-based action research process to increase learner agency. It was pragmatic in nature and drew from phenomenology, case study, and action research methodologies. I conducted interviews with all classroom teachers in the school that were willing to participate which included all first through sixth grade teachers, a fourth through sixth grade self-contained special education teacher, and two interventionists. I conducted a follow-up focus group with teachers that were highly engaged in the action research to determine if discussion among peer teachers would result in further rich data. Observations of PLC collaborative team meetings were conducted, and I kept field notes as the action research process unfolded. Teachers also engaged in answering reflection questions on Google Classroom as they engaged in the action research

process throughout the school year. This data has also been used as a source of data for the purposes of triangulation.

Mintrop (2016) describes the combination of action research and design development and explains that they are complementary methodologies. As a new building principal, I identified a lack of learner agency and collective teacher efficacy as a problem of practice in my school. I designed an intervention by encouraging teachers to develop PLC collaborative teams that would meet at least twice a month. I created a platform in Google Classroom to share research and information each month about each of the seven elements of learner agency. PLC collaborative teams discussed this research, identified ways they could incorporate their learning in their practice, and wrote a reflection each month. Teachers collected student writing samples and analyzed them in order to inform their practice. Students engaged in a personalized learning day as a way to help teachers experience our students having the opportunity to steer their own learning. On this personalized learning day, students selected their own topic to research and created a presentation of the information for their classmates. At the end of the seven months of engagement in action research to increase learner agency, this study captured the teachers' perceptions of the action research experience through individual interviews and a focus group.

While this dissertation study was not an action research study, it is important to understand the process that the teachers have engaged in to fully understand the purpose of the study. "Action research unfolds in real time, through a cycle of diagnosing, planning, acting, and evaluating. As data are systematically collected for these various steps, a narrative emerges and explains what happened and why, documented with evidence" (Mintrop, 2016, p. 194). I purposefully gave teachers the full responsibility of the action research decisions. I did not require that they form collaborative teams. They made the decisions about who would serve on

the collaborative teams. I suggested that they meet at least twice a month but did not require that. I provided the research materials and options for professional development credit but did not mandate when they met. I provided common planning time, but they had the flexibility to meet on their own terms. I provided the framework and time for the personalized learning day for the students. It was entirely up to the teachers to determine what writing samples to collect from students for analysis. If the teachers did not write reflections in the Google Classroom, I purposefully did not follow up to tell them that I needed for them to submit those. I did not keep a checklist to make sure that teams were meeting. I hoped that by giving them ownership in the action research that it would increase their learner agency and collective efficacy.

Table 2 outlines the research questions selected for this study and describes the information that was necessary to answer the questions.

Table 2

<i>Overview of Information Needed to Answer Research Questions</i>			
<i>Type of Information</i>	<i>What Does the Researcher/Principal Require?</i>	<i>What is the Source of this Information?</i>	<i>What Method of Information (Data) Collection is Required?</i>
Research Question #1: What perceptions will teachers at this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school have about the process of engaging in action research to increase learner agency?			
<i><u>Contextual</u></i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approval from the District Office to conduct the study • Teachers that are willing to participate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Administrators • All teachers at this school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approval Forms • Informal Discussions (with teachers for scheduling purposes)
<i><u>Demographic</u></i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years of Experience Teaching/and at this school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview Question
<i><u>Perceptual</u></i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Perceptions of the Process of Engaging in Action Research to Increase Learner Agency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent Forms
<i><u>Theoretical</u></i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By engaging in a Professional Learning Community to conduct action research on increasing learner agency in students, teachers will increase their teacher agency and the collective teacher efficacy of the school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers • Personal Experience • Existing Literature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recorded and Transcribed Interviews and possible Focus Groups • Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

<i>Overview of Information Needed to Answer Research Questions (Cont.)</i>			
<i>Type of Information</i>	<i>What Does the Researcher/Principal Require?</i>	<i>What is the Source of this Information?</i>	<i>What Method of Information (Data) Collection is Required?</i>
Research Question #2: What is the evidence that learner agency has been developed as a result of the action research process?			
<u>Contextual</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations and Reflections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and Researcher/Principal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLC minutes, field notes, reflections from our Google Classroom, and Recordings and Transcripts from Interviews and Focus Groups
<u>Demographic</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grade levels of students taught by teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers 	
<u>Perceptual</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers' perceptions of the evidence of learner agency that they collected if any through the process of engaging in action research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview Questions • Recordings and transcriptions of Interviews
<u>Theoretical</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of what learner agency is as defined in this study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing Literature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature Review

<i>Overview of Information Needed to Answer Research Questions (Cont.)</i>			
<i>Type of Information</i>	<i>What Does the Researcher/Principal Require?</i>	<i>What is the Source of this Information?</i>	<i>What Method of Information (Data) Collection is Required?</i>
Research Question #3: How has the action research project influenced collective teacher efficacy?			
<u><i>Contextual</i></u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations and Reflections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and Researcher/Principal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation Field Notes and Recordings and Transcripts from Interviews and possible Focus Groups
<u><i>Demographic</i></u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years of Experience Teaching/and at this School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview Question
<u><i>Perceptual</i></u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Perceptions of the Collective Efficacy of the School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recordings and Transcripts from Interviews and Focus Groups
<u><i>Theoretical</i></u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of what collective efficacy means 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing Literature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature Review

Research Design Map

In Figure 2, I created a concept design map for the study to explore teachers' perceptions after they engaged in action research for the purpose of increasing learner agency.

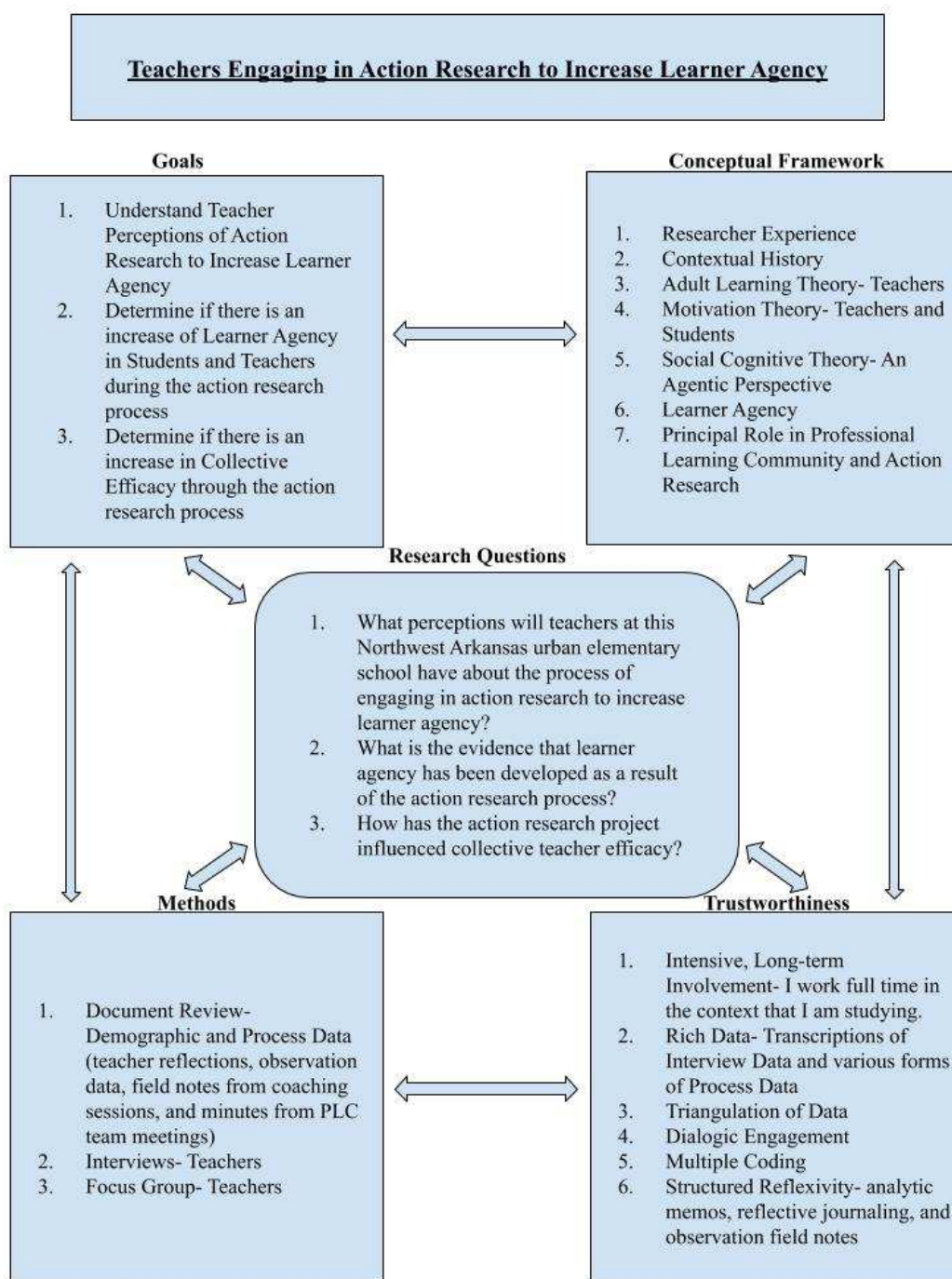


Figure 2. Research Design Map for *Teachers Engaging in Action Research to Increase Learner Agency* adapted from Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Rationale

I designed this study as a qualitative research study because my rationale was to understand and explore the perceptions of teachers engaging in action research to increase learner agency. Creswell (2014) explains that different approaches to research yield different data for different purposes. I am approaching this research through a social constructivist lens to inform my leadership practice because I understand that people act based on their understanding of the circumstances they are in (p. 3-9). Teacher perceptions of the action research they are engaging in are their reality. Understanding teacher reality is essential for educational leadership.

The reason I conducted a qualitative study is twofold. First, it was important for me as a school leader to understand the perceptions of the teachers in my school as I continue to engage them in school improvement efforts. Second, as a researcher, I was interested in understanding the perceptions and thought processes of teachers as they engaged in action research to address problems of practice because the analysis of this engagement has the potential of creating new and innovative practice for educational leaders. Often in education, an Us versus Them mentality arises. Most educational leaders and teachers both have the same goal in mind to provide students with the best education possible to prepare them for adulthood, but the perceptions of what is the best way to accomplish this goal can sometimes collide. Educational leaders must understand the teacher perspective in the process of conducting action research in order to lead in an effective manner.

Education is messy. It involves the complexities of human interaction. There is not one specific way to address any particular problem of practice. School context plays a critical role in the effectiveness of interventions. This study is a snapshot in time of an ongoing cycle of inquiry into how to increase learner agency in a specific school context. Data that was collected in this

study will serve as just one piece of the complex puzzle of school improvement. With a collection of studies of this nature, eventually a clearer picture of teacher perceptions in addressing problems of practice will begin to emerge. It is for this purpose that I conducted this type of qualitative study through a social constructivist lens.

Problem Setting/Context

This Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school serves around 400 students in pre-kindergarten through sixth grades. There are approximately 50 employees including 19 classroom teachers, two and a half interventionists, and two special education resource teachers. One of the classroom teachers teaches a fourth through sixth grade self-contained special education class. Two of the classroom teachers teach special education preschool and one is a regular education preschool teacher. I was a new principal in this school setting. I replaced a principal that had been in the setting for seven years.

This school has a 69% Free and Reduced lunch rate. Student achievement scores in this elementary school are significantly lower than schools with similar demographics in the same school district. Our special education scores are of extreme concern, since our school was just placed on an “Additional Targeted Support” list for performing in the lowest 1% of the state in that subgroup for three years in a row.

The teachers describe the faculty of the school as a “family.” There had been a positive school culture among the staff for many years according to their accounts when I met with them one on one over the summer before I engaged in my first year as principal. Teachers commented that the school had better achievement scores before the school demographics changed. They had a low opinion of parents and have resisted parental involvement. Thus, the positive culture

among the staff does not necessarily translate to a positive culture between the staff, students, and parents.

Teachers reported that students were not motivated and that they did not care how they performed on the state assessments. While the teachers had been tracking some student data, students had not been tracking their own progress or setting goals. Teachers were not using the data they collected in a systematic way. Any data usage had been by individual teachers and not by the collective staff. Teachers began the developing a Professional Learning Community three years prior but stopped when they lost two people due to district restructuring. Teachers expressed a desire to begin developing our PLC again when I met with them, but they needed direction in how to begin and in how to sustain the process.

Research Sample and Data Sources

All classroom teachers at this school that teach kindergarten through sixth grades were invited to participate in interviews. The kindergarten teachers opted out of the interview participation even though they did participate in the action research project. Two interventionists and a self-contained fourth through sixth grade special education teacher also participated in this study. I conducted a focus group after the interviews were completed with teachers that I determined to be highly engaged in the action research through the interviews to gather further rich data through their peer discussion.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative methods were used in conducting this study including semi-structured interviews with teachers, a focus group with teachers, and document review of process data and demographic data.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all classroom teachers in this school context that were willing to participate (See Appendix A for Alignment of Data Collection Instruments with Research Questions and Appendix C for the Interview Protocol). The data collected in these interviews served to answer all three research questions: What perceptions will teachers at this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school have about the process of engaging in action research to increase learner agency? What is the evidence that learner agency has been developed as a result of the action research process? How has the action research project influenced collective teacher efficacy?

The data gathered in the interviews was transcribed and coded multiple times and emerging themes were explored. These themes will inform future decisions in the pursuit of increasing learner agency and in the further development of our professional learning community through action research. Interviews were selected to collect data to answer these research questions because the data that were gathered would be richer and have greater dimension than data that I could collect from a survey or through quantitative methods. Understanding the perceptions of teachers gave me the data I needed to provide these adult learners with the scaffolding or support they needed to provide students with opportunities to further increase learner agency. It helped me understand the barriers teachers were facing in the pursuit of providing students with opportunities for greater agency. It also helped me identify any breakdowns in the action research process itself. Herr and Anderson (2015) described the importance of action research being a process in which the researcher works with others in the context to improve practice. One person in isolation cannot create lasting, transformational change in schools. This type of change requires understanding others' perceptions and

transforming your own perceptions as a leader to specifically meet the needs of your school context. This process means being open and willing to change your own practice (p. 138-141). Listening is the first step toward understanding. Interviews are the instrument I used to help me listen to and understand where we were in our process toward increasing learner agency.

Focus Group

A focus group was conducted following the individual teacher interviews. I understood that teachers may have withheld some data if they believed it did not reveal the information that they felt I hoped to hear during interviews. Giving teachers an opportunity to discuss the action research with their peers had the potential of revealing more rich data and to make the study even more trustworthy. As I progressed through the interviews, I had further questions arise that I felt could be answered by conducting a focus group. Questions for these focus groups were formulated based on the individual interviews but were similar in nature to the interview questions. The focus group protocol can be found in the appendices (Appendix D).

Process Data

Process data is the data that emerges through the action research and through this study of teacher perceptions. Process data for this study included analytic memos, observation field notes, PLC collaborative team meeting agendas, and reflections. This process data was used to help answer the research questions. This study was rich in process data that served to fill in any gaps that were not explained through the analysis of data from interviews and the focus group. Detailed field notes were taken as I observed teacher interactions with each other and with students. PLC meeting agendas were reviewed, and data were coded. Throughout the action research process, teacher participants were asked to write brief reflections about the professional

development that they were receiving and about how they could use their new knowledge in their classroom practice. These process data were available for document review and were coded.

The teacher interviews determined that a focus group was needed to further inform the study. Process data was collected throughout the design-based action research process and informed the study by filling in gaps in the qualitative interview and focus group data. The process data was also used as a measure to ensure that teachers were not leaving out vital information due to the nature of the researcher also being the teachers' principal and evaluator in the school context. Figure 3 demonstrates the ongoing nature of the data collection for this study.

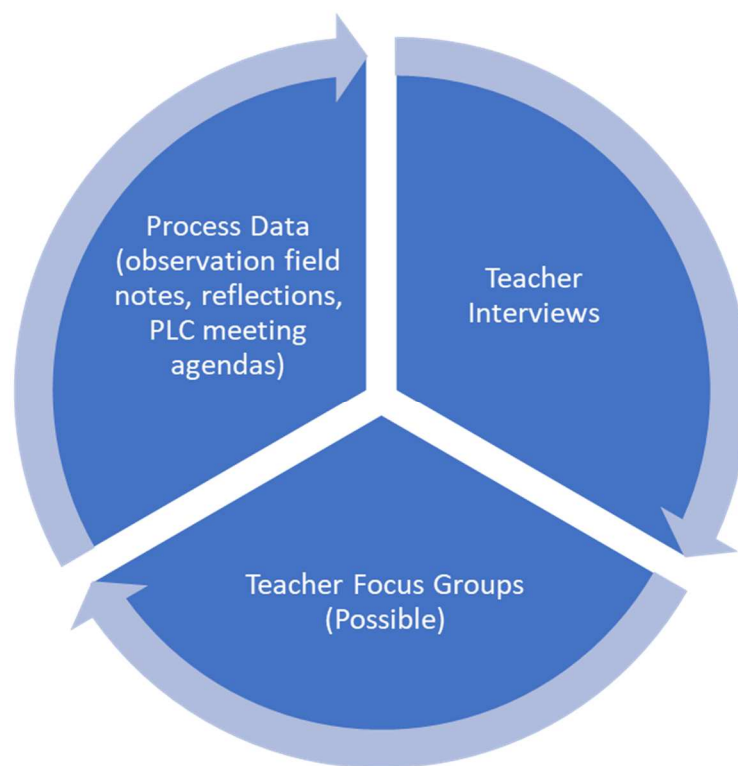


Figure 3. Data Collection Methods Map

Data Analysis Methods

The interviews and the focus group I conducted were transcribed by rev.com. These transcriptions were organized in Microsoft Word documents. Color coding of the text was used to correspond with the codes that emerged in the analysis of data, and the comment feature in Microsoft Word was used to write analytic memos about the text generated from the interviews. The data collected through a process of multiple rounds of coding was analyzed. Analysis of the data began as it came in to avoid memory limitations using reflective journaling, observation field notes, and analytic memos. As discovered in Ravitch and Carl (2016), “Data analysis will be generative and recursive, beginning during Phase One of the study” (p. 335). The data was read and re-read to a point that allowed for familiarity and for the illumination of connections between data. Notes about possible codes were taken as the data was read from the transcriptions of interviews through analytic memos. Engagement in a process of dialogic engagement with peer readers to help identify codes that were missed on the first round of coding aided in analysis. This dialogic engagement at the beginning of data analysis also helped me adjust my questioning techniques to better yield the data I was needing to answer my second and third research questions. Multiple rounds of coding took place to ensure that emerging themes through data analysis were exhausted. The observation and reflective data that I collected through a document review process were coded as well. As part of the data analysis process, a theory that emerged through a process of deductive reasoning was developed. Generalizations were made through the process of inductive reasoning as patterns in the data collection were identified. These processes of deductive and inductive reasoning are included in Chapter Four of this study. Connections between the research that was reviewed about the different aspects of learner agency and the themes that emerged in my data collection and analysis were made to determine if there were

any discrepancies. Reflection was used on these discrepancies to determine if there was further research that needed to be conducted and to determine if there were specific attributes of the context that I studied that added to the discrepancies. Figure 4 depicts the data analysis cycle that I engaged in for this study.

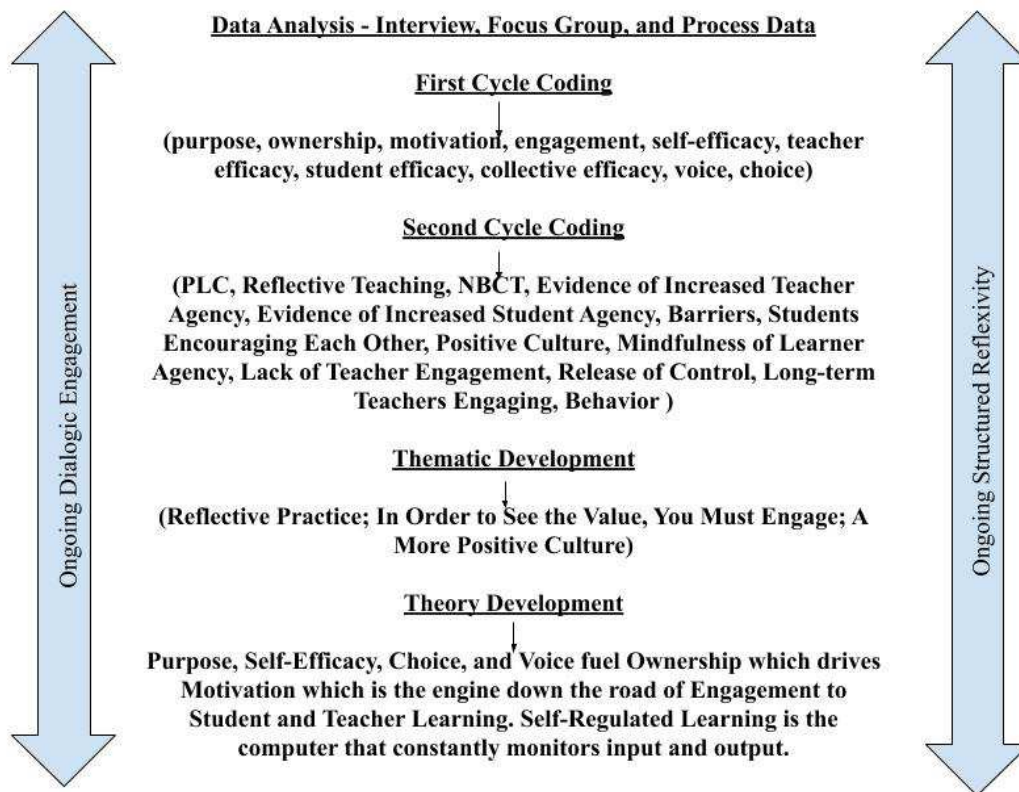


Figure 4. Data Analysis- Interview and Process Data

Trustworthiness

The ethical considerations for this study go beyond informed consent, the approval of the Internal Review Board (IRB) at the University of Arkansas (see Appendix E), the checks and balances provided through the close work with my dissertation committee, and the approval

process that I undertook in my school district. These are all important considerations in determining the ethical grounds of the study but are not all inclusive, Ravitch and Carl (2016) state, “While ethical codes inform your actions, your communication with research participants is what makes your study ethical” (p. 345). In this study, my positionality as an administrator that evaluates job performance of teachers that were participants was the most critical aspect that must be addressed in order to conduct an ethical study. I ensured that participants understood that this study is separate from the evaluation process and that I valued their insight and transparency in the process. I approached the study with transparency and answered questions truthfully that the participants had throughout the process. I did not and will not use any of the data that I collected to inform the teachers’ evaluations. I conducted self-checks to ensure that my feelings about the data that I collected were not being reflected in my teacher evaluations through a process of reviewing analytic memos from my interview data analysis after I conducted teacher evaluations and before I submitted them to ensure that my biases were not reflected in the evaluations.

I explained to all participants that this was a completely voluntary study and that they should feel no pressure to participate. All participants were told prior to the interview that they could elect to stop the interview at any time or skip any questions that they were not comfortable answering. This is included in the interview protocol in the Appendices section of this document. I have and will keep the information that teachers shared with me in the interview process confidential. I used pseudonyms and labels for participants instead of using names as one measure to keep what they have shared as confidential and ensure participant anonymity. All recordings and process data that were collected have and will be kept in a secure location at all times. I also protected participants by not identifying the school or school district that was studied. Since this study was based on teacher perceptions of their engagement in an action

research study being conducted in my school, I will use the data that I collected through this study to help drive further growth initiatives. This could potentially pose a risk to participants if I did not take steps to safeguard the data. Due to this potential ethical concern, I have not and will not share the identity of the people who provided specific data with the other participants or staff members in the school context, and I will ensure that the data shared will not be able to be traced to specific teachers or students by deductive reasoning from those that receive the data.

The nature of the data collection methods designed for this study was a consideration in trustworthiness. The decision to use qualitative semi-structured interviews versus structured interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their thoughts without being hampered by the limits of my interview questions which could impose unintentional biases due to the limited lens I possess as a researcher that has been formed through my experiences as an educator. Since the goal of the study was to examine the perceptions of teachers in the implementation process of increasing learner agency, it was important to encourage participants to share everything they thought and felt about the topic. This not only increased the trustworthiness of the study, it also provided data that can be used to lead transformative change.

Conducting interviews in a safe and private environment was another aspect of trustworthiness. In schools, it is difficult to find a quiet space that will be uninterrupted during an interview that is also out of earshot from other people in the building. As the researcher, I ensured that a space was secure and comfortable for each interview. This increased the trustworthiness of the study and let participants know that I valued their safety and privacy.

Along with being transparent about the goals of my study and the roles of the participants, I used dialogic engagement, multiple coding, and structured reflexivity practices to purposely increase trustworthiness of the study. I included dialogic engagement in my research design at

specific stages of research to help alleviate biases to increase the trustworthiness of the study. As Ravitch and Carl (2016) suggest, I consulted with my critical friends which are three trusted advisors that are outside of the school context that was being studied prior to the beginning of the data collection for the study. I touched base with them again via email after the first three teacher interviews to aid in the identification of flaws in the interview instrument, biases that occurred in the interview process, and to reflect on whether the questions I was asking would provide the data needed to answer the study's research questions. I shared transcripts with my Dialogic Engagement Team as I collected data. They provided feedback to me via email and text messages. Dialogic engagement continued after data was collected in the data analysis cycle of the study. I asked that they identify themes that they noticed as they read the data and to add analytic memos as they read the transcripts. They noticed themes that I would have missed in my initial cycle of coding. I used these new themes or ideas to design new codes for the second round of coding. I then read the transcripts again looking for these new codes. After this second round of coding, I analyzed the data once more to determine if I could extract any new themes based on my findings. I took those themes to my dialogic engagement team to analyze, discuss, and either confirm or refute based on the data they had reviewed. As the last step in the dialogic engagement process, I asked this team of critical friends to read the dissertation produced in the study to analyze whether I had been successful in answering the research questions and to ensure that my biases had been adequately and transparently addressed. Meetings with these critical friends for the purpose of dialogic engagement were recorded to increase trustworthiness and to provide data to reflect upon throughout the data analysis phase of the study (p. 74). Analytic memos, reflective journaling, and observation field notes were other tools used in the structured reflexivity process for this study. "If we, as researchers, do not actively and critically monitor and

challenge our biases and positionality, the complexity and rigor of our studies, no matter how theoretically robust the design, will be undermined” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 204). These exercises helped to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study include the lack of generalizability of the data because this study focuses on a limited sample of participants. Since the study was designed based on teachers’ perceptions of their engagement in action research to address a problem of practice in only one school context, the findings are not generalizable to all school contexts. Although the study is not generalizable to all school contexts, Herr and Anderson (2015) argue that examining this type of research could “offer more valid and convincing results than other forms of research” (p. 83). The reason this type of research has the promise of offering valid and convincing results is that the actors in the context have become the researchers. They understand all the politics and inner workings of the context which can shed light on perceptions and understandings of problems of practice that cannot be understood as deeply by outsiders investigating a context. This insider research can lead to in depth understandings that can be of use to practitioners in similar contexts. Another limitation was that I am the principal in this school context. Because I am the supervisor of the participants, there was a likelihood that they would withhold some information that they may share with someone outside of the principal role.

A delimitation of this study was that I chose to study this one school instead of studying all the elementary schools in this school district. Another delimitation of the study was that it did not include the entire scope of the implementation of action research to increase learner agency in this school context. It captured only the perceptions of teachers and process data after a brief introduction to the implementation of instructional processes that were intended to increase

learner agency. This decision was made in order to create a manageable time frame for this dissertation and to inform the ongoing action research implementation in a cycle of inquiry.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explains the inquiry methods used for this dissertation study. It outlines the qualitative measures that were used in conducting the study and the ethical safeguards that were taken. This chapter also outlines the steps that were taken to ensure that researcher bias was minimized and to increase the trustworthiness of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR- PRESENTATION OF THE DATA AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how design-based action research influences learner agency in our school as determined by teacher perceptions. Learner agency for the purpose of this study includes teacher agency and student agency. I hoped to increase collective efficacy of the teachers in my Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school through engagement in a process of design-based action research to investigate learner agency. Design-based action research is action research that is designed to explicitly address a problem of practice through a series of experiences.

In this chapter, I will present the data that was collected to address each of the research questions. I will also present the themes and a theory that emerged from the data and describe the analysis that produced these themes and the emerging theory.

Research Question One Results

What perceptions will teachers at this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school have about the process of engaging in action research to increase learner agency?

Professional Learning Community

In Chapter One, I shared that teachers at this elementary school had been data conscious but had struggled to be data driven in their instructional practices due to perceived systemic constraints. The Professional Learning Community (PLC) collaborative team meetings that had been held previously were not sustainable with the structure that was in place when the school lost some human resources. Professional development had been provided in isolation from practice since the abandonment of the PLC model. There was a mindset among teachers that there was not a way to have PLC collaborative meetings, unless the district gave us back the human resources that were lost. I knew that changing the mindset of the teachers and providing a

new structure and support for the rebuild of our PLC must take place for teachers to engage in work to increase learner agency. At the heart of our action research to increase learner agency was the establishment and interaction of the PLC. Teachers began working together with a focus on increasing learner agency. This next account is from a teacher that describes the work that she has done in a PLC in the past:

I've been at PLC where it turns into just a gripe session and that's not good for anyone. It's not helpful, it's not ... Then I've had PLCs where we only bring a test result from an interim test, and we only talk about scores, and that's all we do that time. But then, the next time we have nothing to talk about because we already talked about that.

She goes on to describe how the PLC work she engaged in through this action research is different:

I've been to multiple things, but I like having something, "Yes, we need to look at data, yes, we need to talk about how to do that." But having something also that helps us be better teachers, because I can look at data all day, and I still won't know how to help them. But if I have a reason and things to look at like, "Okay, my data looks like this, what can I do with this learner agency that's going to help move the data?"

This view of not having a real focus for meetings and the belief that a PLC is a meeting was common prior to the action research. This teacher's personal experience through the year with the work that she did to build our PLC is described here:

I know for me, I didn't get a chance to talk with them as much (last year), and I noticed that this year, when we're meeting after school, we're a little bit more together, I think. We're talking a little bit more and working things out. Especially that job embedded PD day, going over there and seeing, that was a great thing, because I can see what they're wanting and how I can help get my kids there. We haven't really done that for a while.

This is another teacher's perspective on the process of engaging in the action research with her team that is made up of interventionists, special education resource teachers, and the school speech pathologist:

We've worked monthly with our PLC teams on the different elements of learner agency. I think we've really enjoyed it. We don't all do the same thing. We come from different perspectives, we're all working with struggling kids, and so it's been really great to see how we all use that the same and different, and bouncing

our ideas off of one another. What, say, student voice or choice or engagement is with me is different with them, and so we've been able to pull off of that.

He continued to explain the benefits of working together and his realization that this type of work is not a program:

I may have a situation that's just unique to me, but we've all been able to work on it together and come up with a million neat ideas and just think about ways we haven't thought of before or reinforce what we've known all along, and that's been something that I really like because when you've been in teaching for a long time, you see a lot of programs that come and go, but that's been the standard wherever I've been. It's great to see that we are still reinforcing those core ideas about working together as a staff and working together with kids and what they need.

Since the teachers were asked to form their own teams, every team was made up of different types of teachers. There is a pre-k team, a kindergarten team, a first and second grade team, a specialty teachers' team, an intervene team made up of interventionists and special education teachers, a third through sixth grade literacy team, and a third through sixth grade math team. This teacher from the third through sixth grade math team explains her perceptions of why it was important for this group to be formed in the way that it was:

Yeah, I think having the group that's doing, I mean, I love my literacy buddies but, they look at all of everything differently than we do. And so, having my math people to talk about these things, and things that they can give choice on, I can't give choice on. And so, I have to find different things to give choice on. But, there are ways to do it. But, I'm always a believer in two heads being better than one. And I have a good idea every once in a while. But, you know, if I'm with three people that have good ideas at once, well, then we have good ideas more often.

At the beginning of the year that teacher expressed major concerns about her ability to work with one of the teachers on the team, but as the year progressed, since they had such a good focus for the work they were doing and because there were other teachers on the team, they made excellent progress towards their goals and improving their relationships. One of the other teachers on that team discussed the issues that her team experienced prior to the action research:

I think our biggest thing was, we were doing too many excuses and not focusing on what we can control. Then, realizing that we were being negative. It was a negative effect, giving excuses and wanting to change that mindset, changing the

culture of, okay, yes, we don't want to ignore, of course, things that are going on with our students.

She went on to explain how that mindset changed through the action research process:

That can be an explanation, but that's not an excuse anymore. What can we do? That has been, I think in my PLC group, the biggest change. Then, we're more effective in our time too together. It's more focused instead of we're tired at the end of the day, and, "Oh, this student did this," and, "Oh, we don't know what to do with this one." We'd just throw our hands up. Now, look at what we've been doing and seeing in these articles and seeing from other teachers, and we're encouraged. Okay, recognize these issues of course, but let's not focus on it. Focus on the goal. What do we need to do to help them? What can we control? That's been great.

The development of our PLC has taken a shift in mindset for many of our teachers because it is such a different approach to teaching than what they are used to. Seeing the progress we have made in improving our PLC culture, gives teachers hope for continued growth and success. One of our teachers captures that idea well in the following interview excerpt:

I do see that PLC model as a big paradigm shift, and it's changing the way I look at how I teach and how I engage with even other students in the building. Yeah, I think it's changing my thinking about how I interact with the kids even in the hallway and with the special ed kids. I think I am actively engaging them more and developing a relationship with kids that before I probably didn't actively engage with. I think that idea of the PLC has really helped me.

When I interviewed one of our teachers, she shared her perceptions about the power of Professional Learning Communities. One of our teachers watched a documentary about the Mayo Clinic after taking her husband there to find a diagnosis for an illness that many doctors were unable to diagnose. She likens the team work that she experienced at the Mayo Clinic and learned about through the documentary with our PLC work:

It's basically a PLC but in medicine, and that's their whole premise. That's their foundation, that's what they plan on doing, and they don't deviate from that. He said something about, or one of the doc... I think I don't even remember, it was probably one of the founders said something about, if you take a private practice, someone working, a doctor working independently, you're limited by your own knowledge in your own background and what you know. But if you make a team, then your background, your knowledge, your insight is unlimited because you have all these people, and it just makes me think about where we're going.

She continued to explain the importance of teachers working together:

When a teacher works alone, you're limited by what you know, by what you see, by what you've done before, by what you can find. But if you work as a team, there are so many things we can see and do and help and people have so many experiences that I've never had, and they can bond with a kid that maybe I can't. So, then what we're going to be able to do is unlimited.

Her powerful testimony speaks to the importance of the work we are engaged in at our school:

So, when you see what they did at the Mayo Clinic and what they can do and then it just makes sense. When I think about what we're doing here, which I think is just as vital, just as important, it's exciting to see where we're going to go if we can just... if that's just what we stay true to, if we just stay true to that idea of what we're doing is way too important to try to tackle it alone. And just constantly remind ourselves of that, I think it's going to be exciting to see where we go.

Understanding the power of the team approach to education is now common among our staff.

The increased level of cooperation will make an impact according to the research shared in the literature review.

Elements of Learner Agency

In Chapter Two, I shared research about each of the identified elements of learner agency including learner purpose, ownership, motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, voice, and choice. The research that is presented in the literature review was what guided the design of the action research that teachers engaged in throughout the school year to increase learner agency. This section of Chapter Four presents and provides a discussion of the qualitative data that were collected in this study on each of those elements.

Learner Purpose. Teachers are sharing the purpose with students now, and students are beginning to understand why the work they are doing is important. This teacher shares how she now understands the need for students to understand the purpose for learning:

I definitely think purpose has changed a lot for me, knowing, not just me knowing why they're doing it, but them knowing and being able to tell me. When I give them the standards or when I tell them, "Okay, this is what we're learning today," we try to connect it to real life right now. This helps you on the playground

today, or this helps you in the cafeteria today. How does this help you in your life? Not just, "Well, when you read a book, you have to be able to do this." That's helped giving them a purpose for the learning.

She went on to explain about how they planned for increasing student purpose in their PLC collaborative team meetings:

I have seen purpose was a big one in our meeting, in our PLC meeting, because we all realized that we thought the kids knew why we were doing what we were doing, or we would say, "Oh, well, when you grow up ..." It was like, "Oh, well," shoot, they're nine, they don't care about when they grow up. They care about what's for lunch today. That was a big aha for us, and then we all went in and revamped our lesson plans and added, "What are we learning? Why are we learning it? How will we use it today?" We really talked a lot about being purposeful in what we're doing and why we're doing it. That was a big one for us.

Another teacher shared how the work on increasing student purpose impacted her classroom:

I think that they've seen the purpose in learning. They know how it's going to affect them now. They've been able to tell me how it's going to affect them next year and in the future, even into their jobs and what they want to do for other people.

Teachers also shared how when they understand the purpose for learning that it is more meaningful for them personally as learners:

I realized that when I knew what I was doing something for, I could make a correlation to when I was a learner, and I'm still a learner, as a teacher. And so, I can see, when I know why I'm doing something, I have a better attitude towards the project than when I didn't know.

This interview segment discusses how focusing on the elements of learner agency has increased the focus on purpose in the lessons teachers are designing:

We've been working as teams to really try these or to spend time studying and putting into action, I guess the parts of learner agency. Researching ways to give kids choice and to give them a voice and that kind of stuff. Then implementing it in our classes and then getting together, and we talk about it. It's really helped, I think, us a team to start to be a little bit more focused on the stuff that we're doing in our classroom. We're doing it with a purpose instead of just this is a fun lesson or a fun activity, or we're coming to our meetings together with a purpose. That's guiding a lot of what we're doing and a lot of the decisions we're making. That's been good.

Here is an excerpt from an interview transcript describing similar interactions:

Like when Ms. (Smith) and I talk about what we're doing, to link what the activity is, what to ... It kind of helps us think about, "Well, why are we doing this?" and "Is this the best thing to do? The best activity to have our kids do?"

The next segment is another teacher's perspective on the importance of the action research on the element of purpose and how it relates to her purpose in teaching:

I remember just saying almost daily, "Why are we doing this? Why is this important?" And so, I think that was really good for me to even hear myself saying that to the kids because they need to know that. They wonder that. Even as an adult, I wondered, "Why am I learning this? What am I gonna use this for?" So, that was really nice to put forth that effort and explaining to them why.

This teacher realized that even though she thought she was making the purpose clear, students were not understanding the purpose of their learning before the teacher engaged in action research:

Even though I thought the purpose was relevant and known, they didn't know why, especially being third grade. They're like, "Oh, so we know it on the test," without me ever even saying that. "So we can be better in school. So we can make you happy, Ms. (House)," and I just thought, "No. No, no, no. That's not why." That was a very big piece that I learned with the purpose and relevance, and that the students needed to be aware of that.

Another teacher explained how engaging in the action research changed the way she plans for lessons and engages students in their learning:

Something I have changed is the way I deliver the objective to students. We had a big discussion in one of our PLC's about the difference between a lesson objective and the purpose. Merely changing objectives to "I can" statements doesn't make the lesson purposeful. It doesn't take much time out of our learning to generate real-world purposes for learning. Actually, it's NOT time away from learning, it IS the learning. I've started using "making connections" with our objectives a part of the learning, just like I teach them to do when we read.

When purpose was understood, this teacher shared that ownership and engagement increased:

It's important for students to understand their purpose in learning activities, so they better connect to and take ownership of their learning. When students take ownership in their learning and make personal connections, the learning becomes more meaningful enabling their understanding to be deeper. This has been a great

reminder to me to engage students in understanding why we are working on certain things and make the understanding of purpose priority.

From these accounts about student purpose and teacher purpose, it can be inferred that the process of engaging teachers in action research to increase the element of purpose was successful.

Learner Ownership. Without ownership, there can be no learner agency. Learners must have goals in order to work towards them. This teacher describes the role of the teacher and the student in ownership:

Well, it's really eye opening because I didn't realize how important it was for the students to actually understand what it means to own their learning. I've used that term for years, you need to own it, but now I actually understand the whole purpose of that, and that I've gotten more self-confidence by working on that together as a group, meaning with my colleagues as well. But, I just feel like it's so important that it's not just on me, that each child is held responsible for their learning. And it's okay that they're held responsible for that. I always thought, oh, I'm the one that needs to make sure, but it's kinda like we're a little team when we're in the room together.

When asked about ownership, this teacher compared goal setting in the past compared to goal setting after engaging in action research:

Because last year it's like, "Okay, we're gonna reach so many points, there we go." But this year since we discuss it, we talk about, we see that it works, we're supporting each other. Before in the past, we say it, we do it, but now they actually have a purpose. They see what it's doing, it's helping them.

She shared an example of a student that benefitted from this new approach to student ownership:

And I had one student, for an example, he was on below the lowest AR (Accelerated Reader) level. He has excelled so much, he is one of my highest with AR. I mean he was really struggling, but he felt so good when he would reach his goal or get almost to the goal, and we would cheer and make him feel so good. It just pushed him to want to do better and do more. And, I could actually see it working, and in the past it's like, "We set our goal, we do it," but this time, they actually can feel it and have a little bit of self-pride and self-confidence. So that's been a nice thing.

Another teacher described her efforts in engaging her students in goal setting which is an important part of ownership:

We did goal setting after the second interim that we took the maps test, and they had to ... they looked at their scores from the first one; they looked at their scores from the second one; they gave themselves a reading goal and a writing goal. They even wrote down these are things I want to work on. We had them post it to their SeeSaw to where their parents could see their goal, and then they were able to see their growth as well.

She went on to describe the results of her efforts:

They loved doing it, and they even came to me the next week and asked if they could post their AR goals on SeeSaw for their parents to see. I think once they set that goal and then reached the goal and then we celebrated the goal, I think we did an extra recess, if they ... Well, this time we did it if they made growth towards the goal, and then next year we know we'll start earlier and then make growth if you get something but if you meet your goal, you can get something else.

She went on to describe how her perception changed and how her parent communication improved because of the results she experienced:

But, they really worked for it and they did, they and, I was surprised, that was, I didn't think they'd care about posting a goal on SeeSaw. But, we had parents message us like, "I loved seeing that they're keeping track of their work and their progress." So that was nice, I like making parents happy too. I like finding out things about my own kids, so I figured they do too. Keeping them in the loop, and the kids taking the ownership is really good.

Improving the relationships between parents and teachers through helping students take ownership of their learning has been very impactful to our school culture this year. This next teacher described how helping students own their learning impacted their classroom culture:

I think I might've told you this, every kid in my class, there's that graph for fall, spring, winter. Wait, no, yeah, fall, winter, spring, summer. And, they fill out their goal for their reading. So, say their goal is a 12, I am on a 10, I'm almost there. And so, for them to take that highlighter and fill out that bar graph was really a visual for them to look at. And they were so excited, and they even made comments to other kids. Because at first, I was worried about doing this because I thought, oh no, a kid's going to come and say, "I'm on a 20 and you're on a 10," but it did not work out like that. They were so proud of each other. A certain kid walks up, "Wow, that's great. You're on a 12, and I'm so proud of you. It looked

like you made your goal.” And they could see on the graph and each semester how they've grown.

Having students track their own data helped make her student led conferences more powerful as she continues in the following:

And, I thought that was really good, even just for them to show their parents. It was nice for the kids to also show their parents because we used it for our student led conferences, and they brought out, they, they brought out their data notebooks, and they got to show them their Istation scores and then their reading levels, which was really good. And, to hear them explain it was awesome. Because obviously, they understood what it meant. I thought that was nice.

Engaging in the action research to increase student ownership inspired this teacher to help students track their assessment scores as she outlines in the following:

I had given them their I-station scores, and it was at the beginning of the month, so I was about to give their math again. And, I wanted them to see what I saw. I had been tracking their numbers on a spreadsheet. And, I talked to them about what their numbers mean and how important it is for them to show their growth. But, I think whenever I handed them the piece of paper that showed what they've done and their scores throughout the year, they understood why I wanted them to work harder. If they scored an 1800 at the beginning of the year, and then they're in the 1400s in October, that's a problem. And so, when I handed that to them, they were really motivated to score well that month. And, I can remember they blew their scores out of the water, it was really amazing.

Another teacher shared her perception of how the action research about ownership and purpose has changed our students and impacted their self-efficacy in the next passage:

Well, I think it's changed a lot of our students. I think, they have developed ownership of their learning, and they're understanding purpose, you know. Teachers explaining the purpose of why they're doing the work, I think that has helped. I think it's also increased students' self-efficacy by doing learner agency. And, we want our students to make decisions and reflect on their learning because that teaches them self-management skills, and when they do that, they're going to become lifelong learners. And, I think that's our goal is for them to take ownership of their learning. Set goals, that's important. They need to set goals.

This teacher describes how her attempts at increasing student ownership has changed her practice and the culture of her classroom:

As long as they're working towards their, whatever, their goal is, they have that power. I'm proud of them because they own it, almost every single one of them, and then when they think they're okay or if they're tired of that one, they'll move onto another one, but they have a few things they can work on. It's really amazing to see them even team up and say, "I know you're good at this, can you help me with that?" Then, to see them sit together and say, "I'm having problems with mechanics that keeps marking me down." Then, they'll sit and help each other out, and they're allowed to do that. I think that's a big confidence booster for some of those kids to be able to say or have one of their peers say, "I know you're good at this, would you help me with it?" I think that's been amazing to watch, so I love that time.

When asked about her involvement in action research to increase student ownership, another teacher discussed how increasing ownership through the use of data notebooks has changed her practice:

They have a little data notebook and this year something I did different was I actually printed off their Istation results for them, not just for the interventionists or their parents, it was for them to look at. And, we highlighted, okay well, this month you're at a tier two let's hope, I know how to explain to them what that meant of course. But they were excited to see, wow, this month I bumped up, I'm a tier one, yay. And it was exciting for them to understand the results, not just that, this is a test and it's important. But this is what I made, and this is, you know what my goal is.

Even though she did not make a great deal of changes to her practice this year, another teacher spoke about how she saw the value in goal setting with a student that was struggling:

I do think the goal setting one. I, like I said, I put my toe in the water, but particularly one young lady that I work with that I see goal setting being really advantageous for her. It's also helped me to build my relationship with her. I get more positive responses from her through the relationship and through being able to praise her when she accomplishes a goal that she sets for herself. I'm really excited about how I can implement that one further.

Another teacher shared how ownership can change the conversations teachers and students have about behavior in the next account:

I think one thing surprising is, it changes some of the conversations you have with kids too. Because I guess, when they have more power on stuff, or when they have more of a say on some of those things then, when you're having that

conversation of, you know, why didn't you get this done or do you want to re-do this? That sort of changes some of that, you know, that conversation, remember this is a goal that you set for yourself. Or, this was your choice or that sort of thing. And they're more likely to not argue with you because you know, they'll say, yeah, "I made that choice."

In summary, according to the data collected in this study, teachers' perceptions are that increasing student ownership can change classroom culture, relationships with parents, conversations with students about behavior, and collaboration between teachers on designing more purposeful lessons for students.

Learner Motivation. Motivation is what leads to action. Determining how to motivate learners is something that all educational leaders and teachers have faced as a challenge. It is a challenge that is important to understand. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) explain, "...if students are sufficiently motivated to achieve and adequately engaged in classroom learning, their chances of succeeding academically are greatly enhanced" (p. 1). This study captured teacher perception data about both teacher and student motivation.

Teacher Motivation. When reflecting on motivation of students, it is natural for teachers to reflect on their own motivations. The teachers in this context were able to draw conclusions about how their motivation was impacted by the action research they engaged in to increase student agency. For example, this teacher stated, "I would probably say even my motivation, my motivation. I mean, you know I'm pretty positive and high energy, but I think my energy ... I've even increased that." Another teacher explained how the work helped validate her as a teacher:

I feel this year like I've been validated in a lot of things that my own personal philosophies have been validated. And, I've had people tell me, "You're really good at that, you've done that before." And because it's been brought to their attention that this is something that is, what's the word I'm looking for? A best practice or something that's good for us to do as teachers. And they're like, "Oh you already do that." I'm like, "Yeah, I do." So, I feel like I'm validated in a lot of ways.

This was in contrast to how she felt the previous school year, as she describes here:

Last year, I did not feel validated, at all. I mean I felt like I was, well I don't know if I wanna say that on tape, more of an annoyance than, and I just kinda steered clear of everything, because I felt like I didn't know what I was doing. And, nobody validated me. And, we didn't have this going on, for me to say, for the discussion to be brought up, amongst the teachers.

She described the previous state of the school culture:

We had a group of people. We didn't talk about this kind of stuff. So, there was no reason for anybody to acknowledge that each other is doing these things already. And, so we didn't pat each other on the back or encourage each other about it.

She went on to describe how that validation has motivated her to stay in the teaching profession. She was seriously contemplating changing careers, but is now excited to be teaching.

Other teachers described how improved parent involvement efforts that resulted from the process of the action research motivated them in their action research. Here is an example of that from one teacher:

Being able to share, I think even sharing stuff on, and I don't know if this has anything to do with it, but even knowing stuff's on Facebook and putting stuff on Seesaw and all of that, that's part of that, "Hey, look what's happening here." We're excited and hearing parents say things and that makes me more motivated to try things and to work on those kids that just need a little bit more, and just maybe need a little bit more help and that stuff.

This is another teacher's reflection on her motivation in relation to increased parental involvement through our action research efforts:

They (parents) can see what's going on. They can feel like they're not left out, or they're not surprised, and it's made me want to add stuff too. It's helped me with my Seesaw stuff because that's easy to just let it go. That seems to be a really positive thing, the parents feeling like they're a part of what's going on. Even if they can't be a part of it, if they're working, they can still see what's going on through the day. I think they appreciate that. I could imagine they do, that they seem to really enjoy seeing what's happening.

Other teachers described how their interaction with other teachers in our professional learning community increased their motivation. This account by a teacher explains some of that interaction:

I think the increased confidence has probably made more difference than anything. Because I feel like I'm on the right track, and I'm doing the right thing, and I'm by no means perfect, but I can see where I can improve. Where before it was just a struggle to get through the day. Or, feeling like I was struggling to get through the day, because I didn't have anybody to come along beside me and say, "Wow you did a really good job on that." So, when you don't have anybody giving you any affirmation, you don't know if you're doing well or not. And so, you feel like you're struggling all the time.

This is another example from a teacher of how the PLC model supports motivation:

I'm a very social, I need to hear experiences and see how it works and that excites me more so than just reading about it or learning about it. I want someone to tell me, "I've done it, I've seen it, I love it." Then that gets me excited.

Another teacher shared her suggestions for moving forward as a team with motivation strategies:

I know, if we can just realize that we're getting there and maybe if we can figure out a way to visualize the goals we need along the way. For us, not just the kids, but even for us if we could figure out a way to say, "Look at what we've done so far, and then this is next," and really pump that up. Because I think it can for some, I think I could see it getting overwhelming. Some people starting to feel like, "Oh, we just can't do it, so we've got to constantly build them up."

Teachers, just like students, are motivated by different things. This teacher explains how affirmation from the principal increases her motivation:

I am an eager to please type person. I want those people that are in authority over me, I want them to be proud of what I do and be proud of me. I want to work well. I want to work hard, and I want to achieve what they set out for me to do. I will usually do whatever I can do, whatever it takes, to make that happen. Thankfully, I have a principal that recognizes and encourages that, so my motivation has been really good. You know that old saying, "You get more bees with honey than you do with vinegar." I think I'm a bee, and I think I'm getting honey.

It is important as school leaders that we remember to encourage the efforts of our teachers, and engaging teachers in action research provides many opportunities for such praise in effort.

Student Motivation. People are motivated in different ways and to different degrees.

That is why it is difficult to motivate all learners. This teacher describes her biggest challenge in increasing learner agency:

In my students. Being able to figure out what motivates them is hard. Because if a kid says, "I can't read." Well, we can read the pictures. Let's try our best. And sometimes that doesn't work or if figuring out what drives them to become successful, I think, is the hardest thing for me if it doesn't work because you got to get to know each kid. If this kid doesn't ... If they're not motivated by this then we've got to figure out something different. So, I think that's probably the biggest challenge for me.

Perseverance is a struggle with regard to motivation for some students when they do not find success on the first try as this first-grade teacher shared:

I can present something new to them, and they're motivated to succeed at that. But when they don't achieve at first or feel like they can get it perfect the first time, then their motivation is like, "I'm done." So, I have a lot of difficult keeping them motivated to keep trying.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid was discussed by this teacher as she voiced her challenges in motivating students that do not have their basic needs met:

I looked at students who are in my class that don't have those basic needs met. So, it's really hard for us, or me, to move them to that higher level of that pyramid when those basic needs, I know at home, haven't been met.

Even though this is a challenge in motivating students to be engaged in learning, my concern is that sometimes teachers rely on Maslow's pyramid as a crutch or an excuse for not reaching or engaging students that could be reached through a strong relationship with the teacher, appropriate interventions, and a safe classroom environment.

Several teachers spoke about their personal learning about motivation that transpired through the action research. Here is an example of one of those reflections:

Motivation was a big eye opener for me because I know what motivates me that I'm only one person, so getting to learn the different levels of motivation and the different ways kids are motivated, that was an eye opener. Now I can motivate with physical things, or I can motivate with like, "Oh, well your grades will reflect this," or, "Oh, well, you're going to do better on your test if you do this." Because some of the kids are big on getting to show off about their work and what they can do, and some would rather not get the attention, and they just want to be motivated by you coming and having a conversation with them quietly and telling them that you're proud of them. The different motivations have been eye opening, voice is a big one.

Another example of a teacher learning from the action research can be found in the following script:

The motivation one, as far as kids goes, we also had a huge discussion about that because we assume people are motivated the same way we are. I am motivated by food, great. Well, my class, not all of them are. Some of them are motivated by, "Hey, we're going to do a lesson about how to shoot a basketball." I had more engagement and motivation from students that week when we studied the history of basketball, and we watched videos, and wrote how to's on the proper form of shooting a basketball. I had more kids involved and engaged and begging to go outside and practice shooting a basketball that week than I did if I made pies or had food. It was like, "Okay, motivation is definitely a huge factor for these kids." But it has to be their language, just like love languages.

Our intervention team did a survey of their students to find out what motivates them and were surprised by the results. This interventionist shared about her learning:

We did one little experiment activity on engagement and motivation, and we did a little assignment with our students, and we had them to write on speaking notes how they're motivated or engaged when they come to our groups. And we were surprised by outcome of that. On our anchor chart that we did we had games, rewards and just life's success, just succeeding. And, we were surprised because we thought more of our students would put that they liked the games. I think that's what our team thought, that they would put games. And, I kind of thought rewards, because they like getting in the treasure box. But, they put to be successful in life. They enjoyed coming to our classes and being successful because they knew that that would help them later on in life.

Another teacher was surprised at the level of motivation her students had when she engaged them in an authentic writing assignment:

I was shocked about learning what things motivate them. Like, things I wouldn't think they would be motivated to do. Like, we did the Teacher Appreciation, write the letters to one of your, a teacher that impacted you. And, that was the best writing I got all year from some of them. And, I was like, "What? From a thank you letter?" But, they were motivated. They wanted to deliver those to the teachers. I was like, well, I never would have thought that this would be what motivated some of them.

This second-grade teacher shares the types of inputs that she has noticed that motivate her students:

Most of them are motivated by praise. They want their teachers to like them, to be encouraging of them. They really go with that. Even more so than the little points for the school store. They would rather have a teacher tell them, "Oh, that's great job. You're doing great," and be expected to help that teacher, or maybe even that teacher has them help another student. That gives them more satisfaction than a toy or something. That's kind of cool to see. They really like to help, and they really like that verbal praise.

An interventionist reflected on motivation:

We have such a short amount of time and it's very fast-paced, so I think that we are fortunate that we can stay engaged in all of that, and we can laugh when we need to laugh. We get serious when the stories bring out a serious moment with them. They really pull that into their lives. Motivation is not a problem when we're reading or talking or learning these new words because they see these in the classroom. It's really transferring in the classroom. I think that's a great full circle for me with all of this.

A third-grade teacher shared what she learned about how her students were motivated and what her learning was about their motivation:

Third graders, for the most part, they come in, and they still want to learn, but it's lots of times because they want to please the teacher. That has really helped me grow and learn that I'm not okay, where before I was, but after reading some of the things that we've been given and then collaborating and talking and seeing other people's ideas, just a lot of Aha moments, a lot of Amen, moments, and good self-reflection and practice going back into the classroom. Their language is changing, and they know that I'm going to be proud of them and excited for them and there for them no matter what choice they make, but next year, what are you going to do? The next year, what if there's a teacher you don't like? Are you just not going to be motivated and not want to learn because you don't like them? Who does that harm? Helping them just taking that ownership of their learning and through that ownership, they are motivated.

This demonstrates the importance of teacher relationships and interactions with students, because just like the teacher that wants to please the principal, some students are motivated by pleasing the teacher. The next account describes the connection between ownership and motivation and the importance of understanding how each student is motivated:

I know in my last class, I wasn't as in tune with what they wanted to do and why they wanted to do it. I remember complaining like, "These kids won't do anything. They won't finish their work. They won't turn things in. I can't get anyone to do their assignments." It's exactly what it was. They weren't motivated. They were smart enough to do the work. They had no reason to believe that they needed to do the work. I definitely can see a difference, giving them something to work for, either that tangible extra recess or even just getting to post about it and brag on themselves on SeeSaw. I've definitely seen a difference in more kids and not all kids. So, there's still some who just haven't found that magic thing that just gets them up and moving. But, I can definitely tell a difference, giving them something specific to work towards. It really helps.

Another teacher reflected on the motivation she saw and how it increased through the action research process to increase learner agency and stated, "I mean by Christmas, that time frame, I could see a big difference. In just their attitude, and each of them striving for success for their own self." The following quote is a teacher describing how she used encouragement and goal setting to increase student motivation to improve their work:

This semester, I kind of went back and forth about how hard am I gonna be. And, I didn't want to have that one student that was so close, and I wanted to give them a reason to make it. So, I didn't give it to them in a sense that I let them get by with things. I gave them a way to earn it. And so, "oh you're really close, if you spend an extra 30 minutes on this, I bet you can get there." And they did it, 'cause they wanted to get there. And so, that was my way of having them earn it. But they might not have earned it had I not given them that opportunity. Because, I want them to succeed. I want them to feel some pride in what they do.

This teacher reflected on purposefully planning for motivation at the end of the school year when student engagement becomes more difficult:

I think it's helping to just think about instead of just, "Here's something to do to keep their attention? How am I going to motivate them for this?" Then I can look some stuff up. Yeah, we have a lot. We still have a ways to go, but I think it's

definitely better than it was at the beginning of the year, and it's definitely better than it was at this time last year.

She recognizes that motivation drives engagement. Motivation seems to have a very strong role as an element of learner agency.

Learner Engagement. Every instructional observation tool that I have observed has engagement as a component or indicator of teacher effectiveness. The research is clear that engagement is important and directly observable unlike motivation which is an internal construct. Engagement is different from motivation in that it is a behavioral action. Researchers Lawson and Lawson (2013) have determined that:

(E)ngagement is theoretically distinct from students' motivations. Although student motivation may reflect the direction of students' energy toward school and/or the classroom, engagement is thought to represent the affective, cognitive, and behavioral activation of that energy and direction. For this reason, some researchers have defined engagement as energy in action. (p. 435)

For the purposes of this study, learner engagement included both teacher and student engagement explained through the perspectives of the teachers that engaged in the action research to increase learner agency.

Teacher Engagement. There were varying levels of teacher engagement in the action research process. Some teachers jumped right in and were change agents in the process, others gradually waded in, and others could be described as more compliant than engaged. The teachers that really embraced the process were the ones that met regularly with their teams and shared ideas about how they were implementing their learning in their classrooms. This is an account from one of the teachers that had a high level of engagement:

I liked having other people to throw stuff off of because sometimes we get down on ourselves and we say, "Oh, I'm not doing this." To have those team members to say, "Oh, no, you do. Remember you did this and this is part of that." That helps. Then also to see someone else's point of view. I liked going through it together instead of just, "Here, learn it yourself and reflect on it and then move on." Being able to hash it out with each other helped a lot. I like that process.

Another teacher described a shift in the culture of the building that created a safer environment through the engagement in action research this year:

So even though I had the desire last year (to be more engaged in the building with other teachers), I really didn't know how to do it. And I still don't ... I'm not great at it, but I feel like I've got a support system now that I didn't have before. Because we're in these conversations, and we're talking about it. And, I feel more comfortable talking about these things. Because last year, I sort of felt like if I talked about these things that I'm talking about my weaknesses. I didn't wanna be preyed upon my weaknesses, if that makes sense. But I feel safer this year than I did last year.

One teacher described her feelings about engagement in the action research when she stated, "I'm not scared to jump in and do new things if I need to. I like to keep the kids engaged and test out different methods and different ways of doing things." This next statement is from a teacher expressing her excitement of the new level of teacher engagement this year:

I think having everyone involved in the engagement part and go back to the pep rally we did, that was everyone was involved and that was so much fun. The videos that everyone made, so it's neat to see people come out of their rooms and participate and stuff.

Engagement by the teachers was a critical element to the success of the action research process. Their level of engagement directly correlated to the success they found in their classrooms. One teacher that struggled all year with behavior issues in the classroom described a time when she allowed students to make choices in their assignment and in where they sat in the classroom. She said that the students behaved better than they did all year when they engaged in that activity, yet she did not continue using the practice to increase learner agency. I had a hard time understanding why she had not continued in the practice as I was listening to her describe that success during the interview. She had obviously read the research, but she was lacking the implementation part of the engagement in the action research. Teachers that were not highly engaged in the action research consistently stated poor student behavior for the reason behind

their students' lack of engagement. Teachers that were highly engaged stated that student behavior was much better as a result of the practices they implemented to increase student agency. I am curious about whether those teachers that struggled with student behavior might have had a more positive year if they had been more engaged in the action research to increase learner agency.

Student Engagement. Engaging every student in the classroom can be a difficult task for teachers. This teacher explains some of the struggles she had with student engagement in this reflection:

Student engagement, that's probably where I struggle the most. Because I kind of have a routine, and I think that they get bored with the routine sometimes. And so, I know that's one that I need to work on, because I find myself getting the most frustrated or exasperated when my kids are not engaged. And, I have to take a step back and go, they're probably bored. It's probably because we've been doing the same routine, it's different work, but same routine for three weeks now. I need to change it up a little bit and do something different. And, I need to work on that one. That one's one that I need to work on.

Another teacher invited our Technology Integration Facilitator into her classroom to help her find ways to increase student engagement. She shared part of that experience when she was interviewed:

One of the ways they did was, and she showed us how to do the flip grids. They were making stories using those little bots, so they would draw their story and then they had to program their little bot to do it. Then at the end, they had to tell about what their bot was doing. It was, they took ownership of what they were doing to create their ... They were very proud. I mean, they went, and they talked about it, made a little video of what they had done, and what they're bot was doing. They were very ... I don't know. It's totally different. They really had good input and focus on everything. It was really interesting to watch. Especially those that have had a lot of behavioral problems and didn't want to work, actually do better than some of the other kids on getting this done, and being very conscientious about how they're movie is going to be and what they were doing, and how their bot was going to go. They really got involved in it a lot more. Yeah, I mean, just doing different things to try and reach more kids. Because not every kid wants to do a poster project or something like that. We have to learn, I

have to learn about the bots too, because I don't know much about how to do it either. They were teaching me.

This is a good example of the teacher also being a learner in the classroom. One of our interventionists described how her efforts in increasing engagement helped her build stronger relationships with the students she serves:

It's been fun to get to know them as individuals even more with this, and they're more engaged in that, and then they're bouncing ideas off of each other through these stories, or if one doesn't understand it, they'll say, "Well go back and let's look," which is fun. "Go back in the story. Let's go back and see. When you said that, did you picture this?"

Another interventionist discussed how she sees engagement increasing throughout the school:

I've seen more units, project-based learning going on. Teachers are stressing the purpose of learning, and I've also seen more student choice being offered in the classrooms. And, I wanted to say I like the fact that we are engaging students with fun activities, like our Dr. Seuss Week, and we're going to use the Humphrey book, because when we do fun activities that seems to reach the students that don't find learning exciting. Because learning comes easy for those students that thrive and are interested. But we've got to reach those students that aren't real excited about school or learning, and I think we are reaching those by doing some fun things. Because we haven't done a lot of fun things since I've been here in this seven years, so I've been really excited about that.

Several teachers shared that they have a different approach to student engagement this year.

Here, a teacher describes how engagement has evolved in her classroom:

I think last year would have been more how are we going to survive the rest of the year? Now we're talking more about, okay, how are we going to get them engaged and then not give up on the learning also? We're talking instead of just projects, we're going to do literature circles or book clubs. We're going to do book clubs, and we're going to do some real focused teaching on stuff like that. Which, again, is going to give them some voice and stuff. We're going to try to keep that going through the end of the year, so we don't go crazy for the next month. Then, we don't lose this last month of teaching. If not, it's just you might as well put movies on, so we don't want to do that. But, no, I think it's been different, it would have been easy to just say, "Oh, testing is over, now we're done. We'll just coast for the rest of the year." But, we're not doing that, and that's good, I'm glad.

This next description is from a teacher that relates other elements of learner agency to increased student engagement:

They're more engaged when they understand what they're doing, and they're more engaged when they have more choices, instead of me dictating, "You're gonna do five projects and these are the five projects," whereas I can say, "Okay, I need you to do five areas. Pick something from each area in how you want to display it."

An early elementary teacher shared how she adjusted her delivery of the curriculum to increase student engagement this year:

When I stop and think about how I've improved in engagement this year, I think about my Seeing Stars and my VV (Visualizing and Verbalizing) because in past years I've felt like it was drill and kill, and it wasn't fun. So, this year I've tried to really work on engaging them in those lessons because I feel like if it's not fun then, I'm not getting them all on task, and they're not all gonna pay attention. So, especially for VV. Like today we were talking about, pretty brutal but it was in the VV notebook, it was about a killer whale, and we were all talking about what we were picturing but at first, before we started, I brought up the picture. What the orcas looked like, what it was. We talked about it, and I had never done that before. So, I think just being able to have that conversation in VV and especially in Seeing Stars, is all drill. Turning and talking during Seeing Stars, doing things like that, has helped those areas of my teaching this year.

One of our veteran teachers shared how her idea of student engagement has evolved:

I would have said, probably 10 years ago, student engagement was a quiet classroom. But, I don't necessarily agree with that statement any more. I see great engagement when I have the kids working on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) projects. I think this year my engagement was even more than it's ever been, because I did have a little bit more structure in the STEM project, a few more goals. Okay, by this day, you need to finish this part. It seemed to help with engagement, and it seemed to help with their results, too.

Another teacher explained how her understanding of student engagement has changed through the action research that we engaged in to increase learner agency:

Something else that struck me. Students can look engaged, and they may be engaged because they're teacher-pleasers. But that doesn't really mean real engagement. That's not the kind of engagement you want, where they're engaged because they want to learn it. And so, that's something that I think is important about that and making sure that it's a real engagement with that.

A sixth-grade math teacher describes how the level of engagement of one of her students with disabilities has changed because of feedback that she received from him when she provided an opportunity for him to share his voice:

Even now, I'm still not pulling him with that group. He's working on regular schoolwork. Now, he has to have some additional support. He has peer support. He does have peer support for that, but he's just blooming as far as he's trying to answer questions, and he's engaging in the lesson, and he is participating way more than he ever, ever did prior to that.

There is no magic solution as to how to engage all learners, but there are steps that teachers in this study used to increase engagement by using research-based strategies that they have learned through the action research process.

Learner Self-Efficacy. Carol Dweck (2019) states, “A growth mindset is the belief that human capacities are not fixed but can be developed over time, and mindset research examines the power of such beliefs to influence human behavior.” The culmination of her research demonstrates that people that have growth mindsets are able to excel in comparison to people that have fixed mindsets (p. 481). I was surprised when I brought up the term “growth mindset” to my teachers during one of our professional development trainings at the beginning of the school year, and only two teachers had heard the term. There are a plethora of resources for teachers on growth mindset, and it would be uncommon these days to attend a conference where growth mindset is not mentioned. Growth mindset is related to self-efficacy especially when considering factors that teachers can impact to help students be more efficacious. When we believe that our efforts will result in growth or success, we are said to have self-efficacy. The most effective constructs that we used as a tool to increase self-efficacy was the idea from Carol Dweck’s work of “The Power of Yet.” The phrase “Believe in the Power of Yet” was common language used throughout the school to build learner self-efficacy. Teachers researched on their

own about growth mindset and began sharing what they were learning with each other. One teacher shared the following:

I've learned a lot from some of the other teachers on wording things to where the kids feel like even with the power of yet, just saying, "Well, I can't do it right now, but I will, I'll get there. I can't do it yet." Asking them like, "Oh, well, that sounds like a problem, how are we going to solve it?" Putting it back on them, and them getting to say, "Oh, well, I can solve this problem, I can figure this out."

She shared this experience she had with a student relating to self-efficacy:

Even today, I had a student telling me something about another student was doing something and all I said was, "Oh, that sounds rough. I bet you can figure out what to do about that." Just telling him like, I believe you can do it, gave him that, "Oh, I can do it, I can figure this out."

She described further how she facilitated the increased student efficacy of her students:

I'm giving them tasks that they do feel a little challenged, and I can just go ask a friend, go ask someone who's already figured it out, see what their thoughts were, see how they did it? How did they get through the problem? I think seeing other people being successful builds them up a little bit, so then they start believing in themselves a little bit more.

Self-efficacy is important for students and teachers. This teacher explains her ideas about how the two fit together:

And self-efficacy is another one that I've worked real hard on. I'm trying to develop that student self-efficacy. Well, I think that kind of feeds off of teacher efficacy. I think you need a teacher that's high energy, upbeat, positive, setting high expectations. And, I think that transfers over to the students. Of course, encouragement and praise. Students just feed off of that. They love it.

Another teacher conveyed the idea of self-efficacy to her students for the first time as a result of the action research:

Although some of these things, I mean, of course, you can't be around for 24 years without ... I mean it's like, "Oh, I know." I've always heard of teacher efficacy, and always liked that word, but I've never thought of it as far as, before this year really, as far as telling the kids about efficacy.

While this teacher had heard of teacher efficacy before, most teachers in our school had never heard the term prior to our engagement in the action research.

Teacher Efficacy. In order to gauge teachers' perceptions about their own self-efficacy, I asked the question directly in the interviews about, whether or not they believed that their self-efficacy had been impacted through the action research process. The following remarks are the answers that teachers shared:

I knew there was something I needed to be able to do and differentiate instruction. And, I knew that in my mind. And, when I asked somebody, "What do I need to do?" I really didn't get anything. And this year I don't know if it's all of this, or it's just growth, or what it is, but I feel like this year I've got a direction to go, because we talked about differentiation, and we talked about in our PLC meetings about different ways that we can help the struggling students. And, I've gotten ideas from other teachers, and I just feel like I have more power to help those struggling students this year than I did last year, because I have more support from other teachers, and from administration, if that makes sense.

One of the teachers used the term "Power of Yet" when describing where she was in her thinking about her teacher efficacy:

But I feel like I'm where I'm supposed to be and I feel like even the things that I'm not, I haven't done yet, I haven't reached where I want to. But the games not over, we're still gonna work on it. You know, it's gonna get better because we're gonna ... I'm gonna keep working on it. So, and that goes back to that, the "Power of Yet," you know.

Another teacher explains how her students' level of self-efficacy helps her accomplish more and feel like she is making a difference:

It has, I really feel good about it. I feel like I've really accomplished a lot more this year. They've really shown me that it is important to try to stay positive with them, and the happier I am for them, they like to please me, and they want to do their best and their colleagues to brag on them, and things. It feels good, because a lot of them don't get that anywhere else but here. And, I feel like it's really ... I go home sometimes I rethink about things that they've said with the power of yet, and it just makes me smile. So, I feel like, wow, I'm really accomplishing something

This teacher feels more confident in her teaching because she can articulate why she is teaching what she is teaching as a result of the action research:

Let's say I think more, definitely, and that, I mean, I keep going back and saying it, but I feel like knowing the purpose has made me the most confident. Because if you were to walk into my room and you were to ask, "Why were you teaching that?" I can tell you why I was teaching it like, "Well, because I know for a fact that they needed this because this and that and this is why we're doing this lesson, and then we're going to watch this and that's going to teach it."

Increasing self-efficacy requires shifting mindset, here is a segment of an interview that discusses how shifting that mindset impacted her efficacy:

I think you have to constantly remind yourself and to look at these kids and not to say, "Well, you're doomed to be below grade level forever." We're dooming them to what kind of life? We've got to decide that it's not going to be acceptable. I think seeing that I have to get them on grade level, I have to give them that opportunity, or I'm just setting them up to fail. It's overwhelming, it's challenging. It's scary, but I think it's almost like you have to, you don't have a choice, or they're not going to have it. And, what's their life going to be like? If I decide today that, "Nope, you're on a second-grade level and that's all you can do." I've changed how what I expect from kids and what I expect from myself.

When asked about her teacher efficacy, this teacher talks about using self-talk to increase her teacher efficacy:

There's always a little bit of doubt. I think that comes from always wanting to do better, but it does help me feel like, "Okay, I can do this." But it also sometimes makes you a little more unsure because you're going out on your own, and you're hoping it works. But when it does work it's nice, but when it doesn't then it's like, "Maybe I should have gone the other way." But for the most part I think it is, it's helping, this year's been good for that.

Increased confidence in one's ability to make a difference through teaching is so important to student success. This teacher explains how her confidence has improved through the action research process:

I think that I'm more confident than I've ever been. I think so because I was always questioning myself. I'm a new teacher, am I doing this right? Am I doing this right? Are they leaving knowing what they need to know? And, I know now that they're leaving with what they need to know. And, I think it's not that I wasn't doing a good job before. I just didn't know.

She went on to explain how her perspective changed:

I was always looking at the bad part. Oh my gosh, I dealt with so much behavior today. Did I even get in all the plans that I had planned or now it's just more like, wow, I look back on the positive things more than I do the negative, and I think that's good for me to think about that. And, I think I definitely feel confident about my students, for sure, and myself.

This account from a teacher explains that she needs encouragement just like her students do to believe in herself and that working as a PLC helps with that:

I think seeing other people being successful builds them up a little bit, so then they start believing in themselves a little bit more. That's hard, that's even hard for me. I sometimes need that, words of affirmation too, or else I'm like, "This is hard, I can't do this." Then as soon as someone's like, "I noticed that you're doing great in this," and my co-teacher is really great at that, and she builds you up and you're like, "Oh, okay, maybe I am making a difference, okay." Then it's just giving them that path to where they start believing in themselves really helps. I do enjoy seeing that light bulb where they're like, "Oh, Okay, I got it."

This teacher describes how learning about learner agency has helped her feel like she is on the right path, "So, I feel like learning about that and seeing how giving them a choice made a difference, that I was on the right path." Another teacher describes her growth mindset:

I believe that I'm here for a reason, and I do the best that I can with what I have and what I know, and I will keep pushing myself to grow. But, I like to believe that I can do it, I can succeed.

One of our new teachers explains the struggle in increasing teacher efficacy:

I don't know that it's changed a lot but there are times that it ... because there are times that I go, "Really? Am I doing ... am I really making a difference here?" But then there are other times that I honestly say, "Oh, that is helping so-and-so." I can see how that's working. And like I said, that kind of feeds back into it. So, I mean, I don't ... I'm not sure that it's a lot of growth, it's almost like a see-saw.

This special education teacher explains how her teacher efficacy has changed through the incorporation of more inclusive practices during the action research process:

I think that I saw that they could actually complete an assignment, that's a grade level assignment, on their own for the most part, which I was weary of, and be able to present it. That shows actual understanding and learning. Yeah, I kind of doubted it. It makes me think, well, I need to either up my game or get them out

there into those positions to where they are expected to do more. I think that they'll raise their goals more that way.

This teacher explains the importance of her students knowing that she believes in them:

I think that it's really important that they know that I think they can do it. And, I tell them often, which sometimes just telling them isn't good enough. But I tell them I would never give them something that they couldn't do. Because I would never set them up to fail that way. So, anything I had them, they're gonna be able to do, it just might take some work. And that's what we're here for.

Here's an example of how teacher efficacy is increasing. This teacher explains how she thinks what we are doing through action research will help us meet more students' needs:

I think this is a great start, and I can't wait to see what we do with it next year as far as getting in our groups and being able to set the interventions and setting the needs of the kids more. I think this has been Ground Zero for some people and a refresher for others, but I... I want to see... how we can cover more needs with the kids. I think we're going to be able to do that.

Here is another example:

To see like the research and, "Oh, hey, I do that," and to see those wins, those moments where I'm not learning something completely new, I'm just realizing the stuff I'm doing is helping in this way. That's been good, we've noticed that a lot. Some of the things we're doing that we're doing right, and then things we can tweak to make better to go for that.

When our teachers began to see the impact they were having, their efficacy seemed to increase which aligns with the research presented in the literature review. Here is an example:

Then coming here, learning how little ones work, and also for me, up until this year, I really, and I knew it was a struggle, giving third graders choice, truly motivating them, not because they're supposed to learn, that's why they're supposed to be here, but that they want to learn. This year has been very good for me to be reminded but also to learn, my third graders can do this, and being patient with that.

An upper grade teacher describes her excitement about the more open learning environment that this action research has created and her excitement for what that will mean for the future, which is an indicator of her increased efficacy:

Then getting help from people, that's been a big thing too because I always felt like if I asked for help, then that's somehow saying that I don't know how to do it. Going to other people like Ms. (Golden), she's a huge resource because she's able to see things from a different perspective because of the kids she works with. Then Ms. (Beenhere) has been doing this forever and being able to go to them and pick their brains and say what are some options? That's, I think, that's been a little different this year so I'm excited to see what happens in the future.

This teacher describes her perception about how our work is making a difference and increasing her efficacy and the importance she sees in us as a collective increasing our efficacy:

I see that but I do see a little bit more hope for the kids, they're going to get there. If we do this for a few years, by the time they get up to us, we're going to have so fewer kids in that tier three because we've hit them so many... not hit them, but we've met their needs along the way. We're not going to have these kids. We won't have as many with huge gaps like we do now. I think I see that, it's just going to have to be, we're just gonna have to realize that's going to take some time, and it's not going to be next year, it's going to take a couple of years, but we'll get there.

As is evident by the data, we still have work to do to increase our teachers' efficacy, but we are beginning to make some progress. Being aware of the importance of teacher efficacy, is a step in the right direction.

Student Efficacy. From my observations throughout the action research process, I determined that it was much easier to increase levels of student efficacy than it was to increase teacher efficacy. One student that has a severe speech impairment was nervous to speak on our video announcements when his teacher selected him for the honor. He practiced and overcame his fear. He did an excellent job presenting the announcements. When I told him that his hard work paid off when we went off air, he said, "You know Mrs. Childress, I didn't think I could do it, but I thought about what you said about the 'Power of Yet' and realized that I just hadn't done it yet. Now, I did it." His words helped me realize that what we were doing to increase learner agency was very powerful. "I don't know it today, but I'll know it tomorrow." Or, "I don't know it yet," I like hearing those things, because it makes me see that something's getting through, you

know,” explained a teacher about the changes that she heard in the conversations between her students in her classroom. Here are some more stories from our teachers explaining what they witnessed with their students:

I'll hear someone say, you didn't reach your AR goal, but you haven't done it yet, but you will. And they just giggle, and they'll point it out, if I say it. And I don't realize sometimes I'm saying it. Or, you don't have it yet, but and they'll say it to each other. And, they really like saying that. I think it makes them feel like less stress. They know that it's coming, and they'll get it, you know?

Students began encouraging others as this teacher described:

When they come to a difficult time, or if they hear me speaking with a student about having a tough time, they will talk about, "Don't give up," or, "You just don't have it yet." So, they do. In fact, the first time I heard them do it, they kind of did it on their own without me prompting anything, and I thought, "They're really internalizing it." So, I was really proud of them.

Students took hold of the idea of the “Power of Yet” which increased their student efficacy.

Another teacher stated:

They love that “yet.” When every time they hear that word “yet”, there is an extra emphasis in yet because we've said it so much. Believe in the power of yet. I've said that several times in the classroom. You're not getting it yet. We will get it. We will get it. Yeah, I've heard them start to apply that in their own vocabulary.

These are just a few examples of the how teachers shared that students were beginning to increase their self-efficacy through their interactions with each other and by believing in the “Power of Yet.”

Learner Voice. A teacher summed up the importance of learner voice in this statement, “With their voice, it's important for them to feel like what they have to say actually means something. And, they like that as well.” It is a motivator when you believe people are listening to what you have to say. This is why people are constantly checking how many “likes” they have on their social media posts. It is a natural human desire to want to be heard. This teacher

shares how being a new teacher in our school has been a struggle with regard to her voice being heard:

I'm a very visual, social person, so that's how I'm engaged, so I've noticed that. Voice has been a little weird for me this year, same reason. I know, I've been on leadership committees, and I haven't been on leadership committees and I know it changes every year, and I think definitely being new and just not knowing how everything works here has been something for me that sometimes I feel like voice gets a little lost for me. There's a lot of really great go-getters, and so that's just something I've been learning is how to still have a voice without having too much voice, I guess.

After interviewing her, I purposefully found ways to feed her need for her voice to be heard.

That enlightened me to the importance of having in-depth conversations about our work with my teachers. Another teacher shared how she felt like this interview process allowed her voice to be heard:

I appreciate the fact that you are asking this. Listen, thank you for wanting to hear what I had to say because that's, I think, a big part of a campus climate, is knowing whether you're going to be heard or just listened to. With all of the new and the scary things, I think it's very important that we feel comfortable saying yes or no, or, "I'm not sure," or, "Oh, whoa."

This teacher gave this advice to a teacher from another school after she learned the importance of student voice during our action research:

"Hey, have you asked their opinion, have you asked, you know?" And they're like, "What?" I'm like, "It's okay to do that. You know, let the kids have a voice." I said, "You'll be really surprised of how they feel about it, or what they wanna say about it. And why are we learning this, and they're going to tell you why."

The value of being able to advocate through voice is explained here:

It's not necessarily always just an academic skill, but those are life skills, because they have to be able to work independently at any job. They have to be able to advocate for themselves or stand up and speak for themselves.

After changing her practice to incorporate more opportunities for student voice, this teacher noticed:

I can see them exhibiting a voice and talking amongst their group and giving examples of how it could work, or ideas of how they could change it to make it work. And that brainstorming process. I think there's a lot of this going on in my science classes.

Taking opportunities to allow students to express themselves has been a change for this teacher in her practice:

We just stopped one day, and we talked about what made it easier for them to learn or to express when they didn't understand something, that what they say drives my instruction. I wanted them to know, "I don't just come in here and just tell you what to do all day long; I want you to be able to tell me what you need, what you struggle with or what you think we do best and build on those kinds of things."

An interventionist shared a great realization that she had about voice through the action research process:

When something's wrong, instead of when a child comes up to you instead of just checking them head to toe, "Where does it hurt?" Then it's the earlobe, and I might not have every gone there. In an intervention, when they're struggling and I see that, I don't just get a checklist out; now I say, "Well tell me what's the problem," or, "Where does it start to be hard for you," depending on the age of the kid, "and what do you feel really good about?" Then, "What worries you about, your reading?" Then when they can show me, they show me the breakdown sometimes quicker than I could figure out. Now sometimes, they can't voice it, but I think that the change that I've seen most, is letting loose and letting them tell me more what they need than what I think they need.

Making purposeful moments for students to share feedback on how we can improve practice was one new way teachers provided for increased student voice this year:

I did it at the end of the semester, and I'll probably do it at the end of the year and say, "What is something we do that you think works for your learning or the way you learn and what just doesn't work at all?" See how... and have them tell me why, and then use that next year. If I get those kids again, use that to tweak some things and just see where those kids are. Because if I'm doing something that's driving them crazy, you're just making them miserable, you don't want to do that anymore.

Another teacher shared how increasing student voice improves the learning environment:

I have realized how important student voice is when setting a positive learning environment. When the students feel as if their opinion and or their input matters, they put more into their assignments and their classroom behavior. The students do understand more than I often give them credit for, and it is so important to let them express their knowledge in so many different ways.

In speaking about sixth graders that will move on to junior high next year, this teacher explains how listening to student voice is improving end of year behavior:

I think we're seeing just giving them that voice helps them just feel like they're still part of this. They're not already gone, that they still feel like they're part of this family and they're part of the class and they still have something to contribute.

Another teacher describes how giving students' opportunities to voice their learning is improving her classroom environment:

They share their strategies often to the class, whether that's in small group, whether that is to the whole class, and they bring their thoughts and their explanation up to the document camera, and they become the teacher, so they are heard quite a bit. So much so, actually, when we do have a day where we have just kind of have to get through some things because it's just an odd day, it's almost a little deflating to them because they're so excited to share their knowledge.

She noticed an increase in her students' confidence levels with the increased opportunities for learner voice:

They're not embarrassed to get things wrong when they share their strategies with each other. If anything, it's fun because when they're up there explaining, they'll now go, "Oh, no. That's not right. Hold on one moment, Ms. (House)." Then they can take a moment. They know, just give everyone a moment, because they've all had a chance at being up there, and then they correct themselves.

Increasing learner voice must be purposefully planned and can have a great impact on school culture and individual learner motivation. It is a simple way to improve learner agency.

Learner Choice. I purposefully saved learner choice for last in the design of the action research to increase learner agency for three reasons. First, some teachers were already providing some choices such as allowing students to choose their seating in the classroom and using stations or rotations. Second, according to the research, there is some debate about the effectiveness of student choice compared to the other elements. Lastly, it is probably the simplest element for teachers to manipulate in the classroom. Teachers in this context already had the idea that giving choice was a good practice, but they did not understand fully why it was a good practice. Something I noticed was that directly after I introduced the concept of learner agency, teachers picked up on the element of choice and began implementing more choices before we even read the research for any of the individual elements. Although learner choice was presented in the last month of the action research that is being studied in this dissertation, it was the first element to be impacted in the classrooms. Several teachers spoke about the ways that increasing students' opportunities to make choices impacted their classes. Here is one teacher's perception:

I have a must do and a may do list. And so, they have assignments that I need from them, and then have assignments that they can do, and they choose which ones they want to do. And so, I think that that gives them incentive to finish their must dos, so that they can go do something that they want to do. And, they really like that, and that's been a really big.

Another teacher already allowed students to choose stations, but she also adjusted her practice:

But I've given more choices within the choices. So, they have a lot to pick from, and they like that. And I notice when they pick their own and they're making it on their paper, it gives them a little bit of self-confidence, and a little pride in what they're doing as well.

When asked how the action research impacted her practice, this teacher shared about how giving choices that are appropriate for struggling learners can build students' self-efficacy:

I feel like so many kids get embarrassed and they don't like other kids knowing that they can't do it. That goes to that self-efficacy, they start doubting

themselves and, "Well, now my friends know I did bad on this because I'm in this group." I feel like if I can just make it to where everyone has choices, then you don't really know why I'm giving you the choices that I'm giving you because it's manipulated to where they don't necessarily feel singled out.

An upper elementary teacher shared her thoughts about choice and what she learned from the action research to increase learner agency:

I think I just look at it more as, I need to shift the focus from me all the time to the kids, and give them more of a choice in what they learn, as opposed to me dictating what they learn all the time.

This account is from a teacher that struggled with discipline this year. I discussed this teacher's experience in the section about engagement and not understanding why she did not continue in this practice:

We've had choices like, when completing an assignment ... I think this we had to do a paper, and they could choose a spot anywhere in the classroom, and the thing was as long as you can see the board and you sit quietly. They responded very well to that. In fact, that was probably one of the better activities they did when they had that choice to go and sit next to somebody, but they knew that they had to pay attention and continue to make good choices in order to keep the choice that they made, or who they chose to sit by. It was good, and I was able to move quicker through the activity to keep their attention held.

Here is an excerpt where a teacher discusses the ease of adding more choice in her classroom:

It gave them that choice of what order they were going to do things in and then even what they were going to do when they were done. That's a pretty powerful thing to be able to say, "Well, you know, this is what she chose," And then as sixth graders giving them any kind of freedom, they appreciate that. That's been a big change that we've done this year.

Another teacher shares the ways she has provided choice and explains that it takes more time to plan:

It's not a topic of discussion 'cause everybody sees their own agenda as being their prescription for what they need, and everybody's is different. Now, everybody has 30 minutes of MobyMax phonics and spelling, but whether you do 30 minutes of it at home or 30 minutes of it at school, or you do five, 10, 15, 20 minutes at five minutes a day, I don't care, and it's at their own pace. Because then, at the end of my agenda, I also have a passion project. Right now it's those colonial

projects. Sometimes it's just, "Pick a topic. What are you passionate about? What do you want to learn about? How do you want to teach it to the rest of us?"

When asked how this was different from her previous practice, she shared, "I've not ever done it that way. It's just always been a, 'Write something in journal, do a spelling activity, read an AR book, come to small group.' Predictable and boring, but now it takes a lot of thought."

The teachers that shared the next two ideas seemed to understand from the research that not all choice is created equal and that too much choice can be detrimental:

I've just noticed that what I thought I was doing ... Like I thought I was giving students choices, and I was, but I wasn't thinking enough about the choices I gave them. One thing that strikes me as one of the things said that ... you need to limit their choices ... which I think I have known that, but just really being very thoughtful about what choices I give them. Our sixth-grade class does much better with that. And they seem, when you give them choices and try to ask for their input, they seem to me really to take hold of that and want to do it.

This statement really highlights the importance of the teacher as a facilitator of choice.

She said, "Then giving them that choice. A facilitated choice but teaching them to make those good decisions and those strong choices, asking those high-level questions and knowing that those third graders can do it." Even though choice was a present element in our school, teachers now have a much better grasp on the types of choices that are most effective.

Barriers

Every teacher in this study voiced barriers to either increasing learner agency or to engaging in the action research to increase learner agency. Barriers are important to highlight, because in order for transformation to occur in schools, school leaders must find ways to mitigate those barriers.

Barriers to Increasing Learner Agency. One barrier to true teacher agency is the desire to please the principal. I realized in this study that I can be a barrier to teacher agency if I am not very purposeful as the instructional leader. This next story shared with me by a teacher during her interview made the importance of everything that we do and say as principals very clear to me:

I think we were talking the other day, and not in a bad way at all, but I said, "Our principal jumped out of a plane, you know." You set the bar really high for new things, and then we kind of laughed like, "I can't even step out of a car," or, "I can't get in a Jeep," something like that, so we're all at different levels like that and we see your enthusiasm and your wanting to try new things, and I think we have a lot of people that really want to please. And, when you have people that are perfectionists or... I think that we all want to do what you want us to do.

I didn't ever think about how personally jumping out of a plane would relate to teachers' thoughts or conversations about making changes to their practice. That is a lot of responsibility.

Meeting individual student needs for motivation was a struggle for teachers in this study. They identified that as one of the barriers they faced in increasing student agency. Here is what one teacher shared:

Those kids that I just can't figure out what motivates them, what engages them, how can I give them choice that's going to get them excited and that's going to get them wanting to do the work and believing in themselves?

This teacher echoed the same sentiment:

It's like I don't want you to fall through the cracks, but I don't know how to reach you. Not feeling like I know enough to get through to them like specifically with reading or something like, "Okay, well, I've never taught kindergarten. If this kid is not believing in himself because he only reads kindergarten words and feeling down because he's not where he needs to be in third grade, I don't know how to support him in the best way."

What she continued to say reflects the teacher's shift in mindset with regard to the barriers she faces:

So, then that to me falls on, "Okay, well, then now I have a new purpose, I need to go research and figure this out." Things like that, just short comings of my own, and then, just not connecting with all of the kids. I think those are the biggest issues that I can think of.

Here is a similar account from another teacher:

In class we motivate them, but then there are some that just, you know, they struggle. They struggle to get on the computer, they struggle to have someone who is reading with them at home every night so they can come back ready to take an AR test. So, and of course if you're struggling to meet your goals, you're not going to be as apt to share.

Finding that formula for motivation and support was also difficult for this teacher:

As far as barriers, it's just the struggling students, you know? And sometimes they come in, and they don't have self-confidence, whether it be something that's happened at home, or somewhere outside of school. And a lot of times they'll shut down because they're embarrassed if they don't know it, or something like that. So that's kind of a barrier just to try to work around that.

Here's another similar account:

Sometimes, like I was saying, there's just kids that I cannot figure out. I don't know what engages them, like they just are stone faced or they don't get excited about things, or they are ones who like no matter what I do, they want to complain.

Another teacher shares how student behavior can be a barrier to learner agency:

I have a difficult sixth grade class, so I have seen the smallest amount of change with the sixth grade. Because behavior is such an issue in there, so maybe a lot of their needs aren't met, their basic needs aren't met. And that prevents me from getting them to that place.

Motivating a student that spoke no English was a barrier for one teacher:

Well, I did have one who I had ... he spoke no English and so I felt like ... I tried my best with him, and I tried connecting with him and getting him to be motivated and want to do it and believe that he could do it. I just don't know that I ever, and of course he moved, and I just feel like that's one I wish I could have done more for. Definitely, that sometimes there's the language issues that become a barrier.

This next teacher describes how her thinking about time can impede her development of student agency in her students:

Well, I can't think of any barriers as far as this because I see this is the right thing to do and what would help. Sometimes I think I might have barriers as far as feeling like I just want to get right to things and go straight to teaching and not stop and give this enough thought. Yeah. Except that doesn't really make sense because it shouldn't take any more time. But just, I guess, just my ... Always keeping this at the forefront of my mind and thinking about it.

Another teacher explains how she as a teacher can become a barrier by focusing on excuses about why kids are not learning:

It would just be me. I think of all of my different learners that I have. Every one of them is unique in their learning and have their different abilities. Honestly, the only barrier would be me, and that was fun also. That was another thing this year. There's been so much learning that I probably could go on for an hour or more of the things that I have learned about how I can be better for my students. There's no more excuses. I think so often I use excuses, their background, their home life, of why they are the way they are, so when I would say I wanted all students to learn.

What teachers see as barriers to learner agency gives the principal an understanding of the type of support teachers need to continue in the pursuit of increasing learner agency.

Barriers to Action Research. The barriers to the action research are mostly systemic in nature. The exciting thing about that is that systemic issues are fairly simple to address. Other barriers to the action research stem from behavioral issues and teachers not having the proper skill set to mitigate those factors. Through coaching and support, those issues will improve in time.

This is an account by a teacher that struggled with behavioral issues in her lower elementary classroom this year:

This has been a more challenging year than I've had in the past. With my students, I've had to reflect a whole lot. Going through these learner agency elements, I can see so many things that I want to do and that I have plans for next year, but this year has just been a lot of reflection and learning my kiddos and seeing what's best for them. I've run into a lot of behavior in the classroom, and it's almost a one-on-one behavior issue not one that you can address a whole group.

From my observations, if this teacher would have taken more steps to increase learner agency in her classroom, much of the behavior issues would have been minimalized. At the same time, I understand that when you are already overwhelmed as a teacher, it is difficult to implement new practices.

Several teachers mentioned that time was a barrier to the action research. One teacher stated, "I think what was hard for me is to find the time to sit down and do that." PLC team time was after school, so scheduling with other teachers became an issue. The teachers had the option to meet during their common planning time during school, but none of the teams selected that option. Here is an excerpt from an interview describing the difficulty of meeting after school:

I think our PLC meetings this year, having them be after school has been difficult because for whatever reason people can't always meet. But when we have met, they've been enjoyable, and they've been on task, and that's not always how they were before.

Another teacher shares how having the meetings afterschool makes her feel overwhelmed:

We do have to have more meetings after school so that kind of cuts into that time. That makes me feel like I don't have all my ducks in a row. I don't feel like I have all my ducks in a row always. I feel like I'm pulled from one direction to the other. I want to do it all well, but finding the time to do it all well is where I feel overwhelmed.

This description of the time issue includes the personal responsibility this teacher had:

Well, with me, my biggest issue is time. That's my biggest thing and I always ... When I'm at work, my pull out is spent planning and getting copies made and getting everything ready to support the kids and have everything ready to go for the kids and all of that. Then I even I stay late after school to make sure everything's done and ready, and then it's just finding the time to do the reading, do the research, do post it or remember. I need to be better about setting an alarm like I have to respond to this or do this.

Another teacher shared how family obligations impacted the time she had for the action research:

Just finding the time with kids or doctor's appointments or hair appointments or needing to leave after school. That's been a little bit hard just finding the time to

get through all the reading, and then, post about the research or the questions. That, it's hard to remember and to have time to get it done.

This teacher explained that the design of the study focusing on a different element each month overwhelmed her because she did not have enough time to feel proficient in the implementation of each element before the next was introduced:

When we need to do something, we want to do it and do it well. And to do it as well as we felt like we needed to do it, took a lot of time. And we just didn't feel like we had all that time. So, even though maybe we did a little bit of it, maybe we didn't feel like we did it as well as we wanted to and therefore it was overwhelming because we didn't feel like we could do it as well as we wanted to.

Adjustment to entering back into a classroom from an instructional facilitator position was a barrier for this teacher along with her family obligations:

Well, and I think my sense of overwhelm came from, I am going back into a classroom this year. So, that was a learning curve for me. And, I do have two very small children at home who I can't, I can't put, I have to be mom when I leave here at four. And, but then, I still have to be teacher and grade papers and meet with parents and talk with parents and deal with students. So, it was just, that's what made it overwhelming for me, is just having the time to devote to doing the reading and the videos and things like that. Because at this stage in my life, I'm, there is no time for anything.

This teacher struggled with finding balance between her professional and personal life. She said, "I think, yes. Having a daughter at home, that's kind of tough because it's separating your personal life and your professional life. It's hard. That is hard. But, I try my best to be engaged when I'm here." Another teacher stated, "Well, for me, being absent so much, and I've missed a lot of my own team times with my team." Missing so much school made that teacher feel very disconnected from the action research.

The fact that I was a new principal and had not had time to form relationships with or build trust with teachers was a barrier. This teacher shared that being afraid to ask me what the purpose behind the work was started the process for her as a barrier:

Maybe I was afraid to ask. Because I didn't want to be the only one that was like, "Why are we doing this?" I don't want to look like I'm not doing it, or I'm not willing to do it. But I am a why person, so I really want to ask why, but I didn't because I wanted to be respectful of your position and why you had been asking me to do. I think if you were to start all over this year for next year, I think I would have been more inclined to be like, "Can you tell me why? Why this is happening?" And maybe, I would have known you better in a way that I felt like I could ask you in that way.

Even though she is the only one that shared this sentiment in the interview process, I did have a few teachers through the course of the action research ask me about the purpose. I am certain that there were others that were afraid to ask like this teacher was.

Research Question Two Results

What is the evidence that learner agency has been developed as a result of the action research process?

Evidence of Increased Student Agency

Teachers have changed the way that they think about and interact with students through this process of action research. This is an example from one of the sixth-grade teachers:

That's changed a lot of, I think, the relationships with kids too because you're on the same team with them at that point, "I'm helping, we're working to this goal." I think that's added a lot, and that comes into a lot of the learner agency like giving them a purpose for what they're doing and giving them their voice and all of that. But I think it's also changed the way that I interact with the kids a lot. It's not so much, "You do this because you have to." It's, "Okay, we're on this journey together and I'm going to help you meet these goals because they're your goals and they're important."

Here is another example of an upper elementary teacher changing her practice to allow for increased student agency in her classroom:

I think the biggest change I have noticed is that I am more thoughtful about activities I choose for my students, and I am more observant of student engagement. One of the articles we read mentioned that students are sometimes engaged because they are compliant rather than truly engaged and learning. That resonated with me. I have tried to share some of this learning with my students and tell them I want them to take ownership of their learning and that is why I am trying to give them choices and get their input.

The following excerpt is from a teacher describing how self-efficacy is increasing due to a change in expectations from teachers due to involvement in the action research process to increase learner agency:

I see that changing, and then I also see the kids not saying, "It's too hard or I can't do it." Those excuses haven't really been accepted as much this year, and so I'm seeing that change. I think it's going to take some time, but I think that's going to be a powerful thing when kids know they can't say, "I can't do it," like that's not going to be an option.

This is happening in the interventionists' classrooms with younger students as well:

One of the things I have changed is, instead of me always trying to figure out just where my students struggles begin, and start trying my methods, I am now asking them what they think their struggle is. Kind of like when a child comes up to us on the playground crying, we ask them to "stop, take a breath and tell us what hurts." Having them stop and think about where things began getting hard, has helped them pay more attention to their learning and helps me be more purposeful in my instruction. I think one of the elements I have enjoyed seeing in the students, is self-efficacy.

She shared the following examples of students interacting with increased self-efficacy:

One occasion, a 2nd grader encouraged another by saying they would learn 3 syllable breaking. He said, "Remember! The power of yet! We will learn this!" One of my 4th graders got frustrated at not knowing how to pronounce a new vocabulary word. Then she stopped and said, "I don't know it, Yet!" I love that they are seeing the future of their learning.

Teachers from all grade levels have witnessed an increase in learner agency this year. In a written reflection, one teacher shared:

One example of learner agency was when I showed my 5th graders their Math ISIP scores. Before this day, the ISIP was an arduous task that required gentle coaxing to complete. Sometimes, bribery....(don't read that part boss). HAH. This day was different, I showed them their scores for the entire year, and they all made it a mission to get a higher score this particular month. When they knew they were capable of greatness, GREATNESS was what they achieved. Everyone's score significantly improved.

This teacher wrote about the increased level of motivation in her classroom:

When students can showcase their learning through their own creative-making decisions, the engagement level increases. Students look forward to coming into

class and getting busy. They want to come in at recess, and it's hard to get them to stop working!

One of our interventionists wrote:

I am reminded that so many of our students don't get to make choices in their lives. I can see the ideas in this article giving them something they will love, some control over their day. Feeling a sense of ownership and building confidence in their thinking, is empowering. In our small groups, we set performance goals to be achieved in increments of time. They now want to see the materials and lessons they will be doing when these goals are accomplished and are excited.

During an interview, one of the other interventionists commented about what she witnessed when she went into different classrooms:

I've seen students more engaged, taking more ownership of their learning. Since I go and pick kids up, you know, pick my kids up, I've seen more student choice in the classrooms, and I think teachers are doing more purpose of learning. And so since I pick kids up, I also see that in other classrooms as I'm picking them up.

Our self-contained fourth through sixth-grade special education teacher spoke about an increase in student agency, more specifically with their self-efficacy, when we started using a more inclusive model by sending some of her students to science and social studies in general education classrooms and when we started helping them set their own learning goals:

I've seen that they put more effort with their projects a lot more than they did in my classroom. Also, they saw themselves as being able to do what their peers can do. I think that having them look at their own voice, their own goals and stuff like that, they really wanted to achieve more, especially when they were in with their peers. I thought that that was a really good thing. I thought we did really well, and those teachers did really well putting them in, and expecting this higher expectations out of them. I thought it made a whole difference.

Another teacher spoke about how the increased student ownership has improved her relationship with parents:

They take responsibility so much more now. Also, the parents. Actually, that has been fun. The parents, I have had less complaints this year, and I've never had 50 third graders before, so parents are super involved and want to know how they can help and why the students are doing what they're doing, because also, especially in math, they're like, "Oh, I didn't do it that way." I didn't hear a lot of that this year because the students were able to communicate with their family

more than ever why they're doing what they're doing and how it's helping them. That's been nice.

This teacher describes students taking ownership of their learning and choosing more challenging tasks when given a choice:

We've had our WIN time on Fridays, so they get to do What I Need time and they get to choose what they're going to work on. To see what they choose to work on is it's amazing because it's stuff that they need help on, and they're not just choosing the easy stuff. To choose that, this is what I want to work on, means they believe that they can get better at that. That's fun to watch, to see them make that choice or to ask, "Can I read a book and take a test on it and see how much better I do?" Those things, it's to see their confidence build with that it's amazing.

That same teacher describes how she uses student voice to improve her practice to meet their needs:

"Are there things I need to know about this? How did this work? What do you want to do again? What would be..." They seem to like that a lot, and they've been honest. Like when you say, "What's something I need to know about how things are going in here?" You'd think they would just say, "Oh, everything's great," but they're pretty honest, and not in a let me tear you down kind of way, but in a real helpful kind of way. That's been I love that part.

Another teacher described a time when her students were confident enough to use their voices to explain their misunderstanding:

I had one student, we were talking about writing, and we were saying don't make things a list. I don't want your writing to sound like it's just a list. They just kept giving me lists, and I was like, "Guys, I don't understand, I keep saying no lists. I don't want this and then this and then this and then this." They never got it, and finally one day, they're like, "But Ms. Fun, that's not a list." I was like, "What? What are you talking about?" They were like, "Like a grocery list. I didn't put bullets and one word." I was like, "Oh, okay, well, I'm saying this wrong. I am not reaching you where you ... I'm not thinking like a third-grader, I'm not voicing what I'm trying to get across to you all in the right way."

Another indicator of increased student agency in this school is the fact that six teams from this school placed in the district's STEM competition representing third, fourth, and fifth grades. Last year, only one team placed in the whole school. Out of the other nineteen schools competing, the most team placers that any school had was three teams. One of the teachers that

had two teams place, recalled that the work we were doing in our action research helped her become more of a facilitator this year. She had never had a team place in the four years that she has participated in the program. She had a hard time giving the students the autonomy that they needed to be successful, until she was faced with the research that supported giving students voice, choice, and the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them. She said that she had a better attitude going into the process because she finally saw the value or the purpose behind the work. She allowed more time for the work and had more patience in the process than she ever had before. She mentioned that in the past students had a more difficult time persevering through the tasks and would only redo the projects one or two times if they didn't succeed at first. She said that this year all of our students were cheering each other on and saying, "Believe in the Power of Yet," when their teammates would get frustrated. She said that one of the most powerful things that she let go this year was the creation of the groups. This year, she let the students form their own teams. Another teacher that also had two teams place had this to say, "But to me that's what the engineering project was about, developing a plan, analyzing your plan, what's not working, what can do to it to make it better. They all did that, so to me that was a huge success." She also mentioned that she gave students more time in class to work on their projects to prepare for the competition by adding it to their list of choices because she could now see the purpose behind the work and saw her role in facilitating the work to allow for student agency.

Evidence of Increased Teacher Agency

As an administrator, I have always heard that it is most difficult to get your veteran teachers on board when you are trying to make changes in a school. I came into a building full of veteran teachers. The average years of teaching experience of my staff is 18 years. While we had a few obstacles through the action research process, getting veteran teachers on board has not

been one of them. This next teacher is a 25 year veteran teacher in my building. She has never taught anywhere else. She describes how her agency has increased this year:

So a lot of this stuff I feel like I've seen in myself too like what motivates me to do things? Not only have I learned how to help students, this has been good for me, like what stands out for me. What's my purpose? What motivates me to work harder and get stuff done? Definitely seeing kids taking on these things and taking on the ownership and getting excited, that motivates me. If I start seeing them moving and reaching goals, that motivates me. Seeing the kids succeed is what keeps me excited about what I do.

Another teacher with 29 years' experience reflected on the action research process during our focus group:

Oh, I definitely think I have more tools in my toolbox. More things to look at. More things to think about. Because I'm such a, because I'm a math/science person, I tend to be very structured and controlled. I'm a control freak too. But, by looking at it and thinking of it, my brain just started processing, what would that look like in math? What would that look like in science? And how can I incorporate that? And I think, yeah. It gave me some more tools to think about in planning that I didn't have before.

This teacher with 28 years' experience when asked if the action research had impacted her agency said, "Yes, because its' made me more aware of learner agency and looking for it more and feeling responsible. That's my job to make sure that they (students) get it and seeing that when they do, that things work better." A teacher with 25 years' experience shared evidence of her increased confidence that she has gained through the action research process in the following excerpt from her interview:

And I just really like that I'm brave enough now to step out of my box and do some different things. And because I see that it's okay, and I'm not just stuck doing the same thing. And I just feel better, I have lot more confidence.

This veteran teacher, with 38 years of experience teaching, realized in the interview how the work of increasing student agency pertained to teachers as well:

I think that it would be nice for us to, "What is my voice? What does it look like on the campus when I want my voice or my choice?", or, "How am I engaged as a teacher?" Looking at the staff, not just the learner, but what motivates me to

come in and do these things, or how am I taking ownership. I think we've talked a little bit about that, but I don't think we could've done it first, because you see how it works with the kids. Maybe that sparks something with us.

An interesting phenomenon of this context is that teachers that have been teaching five to ten years feel like they are still new teachers. They have made comments throughout the year to me about still feeling like beginning teachers. The next excerpt is from a teacher that has been teaching nine years that is teamed with a teacher that has taught 28 years:

We got into a habit of, because Ms. (Beenhere) and I plan together, we got into a habit of teaching the same thing every day. We got away from that this year because we have different sets of kids and they have different needs, so we might be teaching the same topic or even the same novel, but we're going to go about it completely different ways. We gave ourselves that freedom instead of you come up with fifth grade plans, I come up with sixth grade plans and then figuring it out, we just plan.

This demonstrates an increase in her agency because she finally feels confident to design instruction based on her students' needs.

One of the interventionists describes an increase in her agency even though she teaches a very prescriptive intervention program that is closely monitored by program coaches:

I think the thing that's different for me from last year is branching out and giving them more voice and choice in the lesson, and we also talked with our consultants about this. We were pretty tied to the program last year, and this year, when we expressed a concern about this very thing and using these elements, they gave us some more freedom. They let us kind of manipulate the lessons a little bit more because they saw how engaged the students were.

Another teacher describes how the ownership of her teaching has increased as a result of engaging in the action research:

It's increased a little bit more of, yeah, like my pride of what happens in my room because it's more of what we're creating as a class instead of let's get through this because this is on our lesson plan. It's almost a little bit more artistic because you're able to flow with it, and I think the kids feel it's a little bit more genuine. It's a lot more personal. I do, I feel like it's mine now, so when I go into something, it's more, "Hey, look at what we did together?" Instead of someone else's plan that I'm trying to weed through or figure out or something.

Some teachers gained more confidence this year as a result of engaging in this action research. One teacher that just joined our school this year stated, "I've seen more growth in the way I teach this year, from start to now, than I did in all seven years at my old school." Another teacher shared:

I think my self-efficacy this year has gone up a lot. I've always felt a little behind everyone else, like a little bit less, less quality than some of the others. I think this year I felt better having the people around me to help and try different things and stuff, I think that's helped. I think that's what I've had to work on this year a lot is feeling like I belong where I am instead of feeling like I constantly have to... I can't even think of the word, like I constantly have to prove myself. This year I feel like, "okay, I'm okay." I have something to contribute, that kind of thing, I guess, that's what it is. Because I never felt like I had much to contribute, so I constantly had to work at it. I think that's helped me a lot this year.

Even though Ms. (Kindness) had a very difficult year, she was able to see growth in her agency as a learner:

That's the thing about having a difficult year is I have had to increase my learner agency, because I am trying to figure out what's working best for these kids. What works one week, for example last week, did not work this week. So, I'm having to find what works best for them and find ways to help bring these learner agency elements to them and engagement. I've done some on my own, trying to take ownership of my job and teaching to them and meeting their needs and things like that.

Herr and Anderson (2015) propose, "Action or practitioner research has been put forward as a way to reprofessionalize practice in the face of increasing attempts to standardize and deskill professional work" (p. 79). I would agree that the teachers in this context have had the opportunity to grow in their professionalism through their engagement in this action research by developing their own sense of agency. That is evident in the responses of the veteran teachers, in the increased confidence of the teachers with fewer years teaching experience to design their own instruction, and in the willingness of the interventionist to let her voice be heard to improve the highly prescriptive program instead of submitting when she as a professional knew how to improve her students' results.

Research Question Three Results

How has the action research project influenced collective teacher efficacy?

Donohoo (2017) defines collective efficacy as, “The judgements of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute the courses of action required to have a positive effect on students” (p. 3).

Fourteen out of the fifteen teachers that I interviewed spoke in some way about how there are differing levels of teacher efficacy throughout the building. They all said that they could see us moving toward an increased level of collective teacher efficacy even if not in those exact words. To understand the baseline of where we were prior to the action research, you must know that outside of writing shared lesson plans, there was little to no collaboration. There were no building wide celebrations. There was not a shared mission or vision. Teachers had decided that students’ home lives and lack of motivation were something that they were unable to overcome. One teacher went so far as to say, “My kids can’t pass that test.” There was a common culture of understanding that as educators it is our job to give students the opportunity to learn, and it is completely up to the student whether or not he or she would take advantage of the opportunity. It was the educator’s job to teach and the student’s job to learn. Students failing a class because they had multiple missing assignments was the norm.

When asked about the collective efficacy of our school, one teacher said, “I think we're all making an attempt to change our mindset and how we approach our lessons and our teaching. I think we're all making that attempt.” A teacher that teaches at her same grade level explains how her expectations, teaching practice, and how the mindset of her grade level band has changed this year:

For us to not accept that either, "Oh, yeah, you're right, that's a little above your reading level, so you probably can't do that. Let me make it easier for you." I'm

seeing a lot of our choices change when we talk about what we're going to give them and the lessons we're going to do and what we're going to expect from them. I'm seeing some that change because we're realizing we're doing them a disservice if we don't bump that level up. Some of that's just boosting their confidence and then it's also convincing ourselves that they can do it also.

Another teacher spoke about some more shifting in teacher mindset:

I believe that when the evidence is out there, say someone in your classroom and a child is just discouraged or something, but when they start seeing the progress and the good feeling all around. Sometimes somebody's afraid that they could take a chance, well, and I think I'm seeing more of that. We have lots of room to grow, and we have a lot of good people here on the campus who are willing to share and willing to receive new information. I think that can't help but rub off.

Here is a different account from a teacher that has also witnessed some shifts in the nature of collaboration and conversation:

You'll see things that they've posted outside of their classroom about setting goals, or different activities that they've done that are related to one of these Learner Agency attributes or however you wanna say it. But I think in our talk, whenever we're meeting together in our PLC meetings for them to say, "I tried that, and this is what happened." That's really encouraging to hear. And they might not have any evidence hanging up on the wall, but at least you can hear them talking about what they've done.

This teacher discusses how teachers are beginning to take responsibility for all students and not just their own:

I think it's just the attitude has gotten more positive, I think. Even I think among the teachers, just this attitude of instead of, "Oh, well, that's that group, that's the low group, they're Special Ed, they're below grade level, they're ELL. Let's look at everyone else. Now it's this. Oh, no, okay, so what are we going to do with them?" We still have a long way to go, but I can see that shifting, that it's not their kids and my kids, it's not these are my non-IEP kids and then there's theirs. It's what are we going to do for all of them?

Here is a similar account by a teacher describing how teachers are taking an interest in all of our students:

I think it's just more people get involved, and we all work together on these things. It's more of, it's not these are my sixth graders, or these are my fourth graders, and these are my special ed kids. I think it's we learn to make it more as this is all of us, we're all teaching everybody, so it doesn't matter if I have to go down to kindergarten classroom and work with a couple of kids down, you know

what I'm saying? I think in that way, if we all took ownership of everybody, that's how it pulls everybody together a lot.

Even though teachers notice that other teachers have a long way to go in changing their mindsets, it seems as though they can see a shift in the overall mindset of teachers shifting. Here is an account by a teacher that is new to the building sharing her experiences:

I hear a lot of people saying that they are seeing growth and they're celebrating those kids even for making little growth like, "Oh, my gosh, you're still in red but now you're high red. Look at this, this is awesome. You keep going up and you'll see you'll go straight up." Then there are some who, and they're always going to be that way, that they still say, "Well, they're Special Ed and they're always going to be Special Ed and we can't expect someone in Special Ed to be on grade level." I don't know how much that will change, but I like to see it as we're doing good things and kids will grow.

One of the interventionists shares what she is witnessing as teachers engage in the action research toward a shared focus:

Well, you're always going to have those teachers that aren't quite on board. So, I do believe we have a few of those. But, I've also seen teachers that I think it's opened their eyes and caused them to reflect on what they're teaching, and the what is their standards and how they're working on those, you know, to improve what's important to teach meaning right down to what they need to teach. And how they are teaching, and that's through using learner agency by stating the purpose, giving kids choices, letting students have a voice.

This veteran teacher shares how the interactions with her colleagues has changed with having a shared focus through the action research:

I've sensed a lot more positive feelings with everyone. We're not, and like I said before, we're not running to each other fussing about things, and complaining and feeling like we're just not seeing any results. We actually share more positive things with each other, and better understanding of what we're doing, and what makes sense. I don't feel like I'm the only one doing it. It's like we're all doing it together, and that helps each other. If that makes sense. I don't know if that makes sense, and I like that.

Another veteran teacher shares how she sees teachers more freely speaking about their practice, "I think the conversations between all of us, we have kind of a common thread running through

here right now. I think I've seen teachers go to each other more freely; they feel freely or more safe.”

After we had been working together to increase learner agency for six months, a teacher approached me with an idea to celebrate Read Across America Week as a school. She said that it was something she always wanted to do but was afraid to ask. I told her it was a fabulous idea and asked her to facilitate the effort. Also, a few weeks later, a group of teachers approached me about having a fun theme and some celebrations leading up to state testing. They had not done anything like that for the past several years. This is the account of those experiences shared by the teacher that facilitated Read Across America Week:

We've all recognized Read Across America week individually with our own classrooms or grade-wise. You know, first grade did these things, but this year we did it school-wide, and I thought that was a lot of fun. I'm very surprised at how many teachers jumped in and helped and decorated. Even if they weren't able to participate, their comments were very friendly and encouraging and just made it seem worthwhile that it was helpful to preschool all the way up to sixth grade.

This may be common practice in most schools, but this was a huge shift in the way we operate together as a school. Another teacher shared about this experience as well:

And our school, as a whole, has really stepped it up on motivation. I mean, it really wasn't that big of a deal before. I mean, for just testing ... I mean, Read Across America, we made everything more exciting, and so I think that that's really good for our school as a whole and that made me think about my kids also just in my class for me. So, I think it was great. I think that's probably where I grew the most this year.

Another teacher goes more in-depth about how the school pulled together to prepare for testing:

I do think I've seen it, a big change in attitude in at least the four of us on our fifth grade/sixth grade team in wanting to do things to encourage the kids. Like the decorating of the hallway and wanting to be a part of that, and the pep rally before testing, wanting to develop that and wanting to have that. Across the board I've seen more in the whole school, upper elementary, as far as that goes.

This next excerpt is from a teacher that is talking about the culture of the building coming together:

We're all on a team and it's no longer... it doesn't feel as much one side of the building and the other side of building. It feels like we're blending a little better. I don't know if everyone feels that way, but I feel like we're getting a little bit better at communicating from one side of the building to the other. I hope that keeps getting better because I hate the... I don't know, it's ever been a competition, but I still feel like I hate the us versus them. I think all of us feeling like we have ownership and everything that happens is opening up some doors. So, we're kind of that two ends of the hall are starting to talk to each other. That's nice.

While we have not arrived at a high level of collective efficacy yet, there is evidence that we are heading in that direction. This teacher relates how our action research on increasing learner agency has added to the collective teacher efficacy:

I guess, if I'm looking at my motivation and our school's, we know what we're working towards. So knowing that, it's a little bit easier to work towards it. It's like you have that purpose or, yeah, you have that reason to work. We're not just working for the same thing all the time, we have something that we want to see, and we want to get there and so it makes you want to do it. Then you're, also since we're working with each other, I'm not in my own little room doing my own little thing, and I can just slack off if I want to.

This next teacher gives an account of how she sees the work that we are doing as a school having an impact on students' futures:

With those students, when I was in eighth grade, those gaps were so large. It was just daunting to even try to fill. So to know that each year, especially here at our school, now that we're all on the same page. We all have the same goal for these students. The thought of giving those students to those junior high teachers with minimal gaps, just that overwhelming sense of those students. I can see the graduation rate, the percentage going up. All students knowing they can learn and thrive, and especially in these formative years, it gives me chills.

This enthusiasm for the future of our students is evidence that there has been an increase in collective efficacy. Another teacher shares her experiences with the shift in mindset that has occurred in this context:

I think it's just a different way of thinking and we've had to really shift and think about, you know, have to constantly remind ourselves, "It's my power, I have to figure this out, or we have to figure this out, and we don't have these excuses anymore." Sometimes I think because it was so different, it's been so different in the past, it's just going to have to be constantly something we remind ourselves and we check each other when someone says, "Well her mom doesn't ever make her do her homework." It's like, "Okay, so what are we going to do about that?"

Knowing what John Hattie's research says about collective teacher efficacy gives me hope that our test results will improve with this increased level of collective teacher efficacy. What I am certain about is that teachers are having different conversations that are in the best interest of students.

Themes

As the data was analyzed three themes arose including reflective practice, the inability of teachers to understand the value of the action research to increase learner agency until they engaged in the action research, and the development of a more positive culture in the school setting through the engagement in the action research.

Theme One- Reflective Practice. As I was conducting interviews and coding the transcripts from interviews, I noticed the theme of teachers talking about being more reflective in their practice. Sellars (2017) explains the importance of reflective practice:

Reflective practice, over time, allows you to become skillful and making informed judgments and professional decisions, and this empowers you. It is because of its potential to impact positively on individual practice that reflection is arguably the most important of the many professional attributes that characterize successful teachers at every stage of their careers. (p. 2)

Although I built in purposeful written reflection activities in the design of the action research, for some reason, I did not expect for the teachers to recognize the power of the reflection and to speak about it in the interview process. Because it became such a common thread in the interviews, I believe it is a theme that should be discussed. The idea of teachers recognizing the shift in and the importance of their reflective practice is a powerful result of the action research they engaged in to increase learner agency. Teachers began really asking themselves why they were doing what they were doing and helping students understand their purpose in their work. Some teachers realized through reflection that they should be connecting with teachers from outside of our school building in order to learn from teachers that teach the same subjects at the

same grade levels that they teach. This is an example of the increased learner agency that was a result of increased levels of reflection.

Leaders, me included, often send articles to teachers in hopes that they will read them and apply them to their practice. Teachers revealed in the course of data collection that they seldom read those articles and that engaging in action research increased the accountability for their learning which in turn increased the amount that they were reflecting on their practice. The teachers in this school context had forgotten that they are, or maybe never thought of themselves as, learners. Since the action research began, many teachers were challenged more than they had been in years and through their reflection began to find enthusiasm in their teaching that they had lost. Several teachers made comments about this increased enthusiasm during the interviews. Some teachers talked about how the action research made them feel like they were in college. A few teachers that opted out of being interviewed were frustrated by being asked to read research and reflect on their practice. One of them said, “We are not in college.” This idea of not learning if you are out of college is foreign to me. I was not expecting this idea to arise through the process, although it should not have been a surprise to me. I knew that my staff was not in the practice of learning together. I even remarked that the learning was missing from the Professional Learning Community after I did my initial meeting interviews before the school year began. Not all teachers were frustrated when they mentioned the action research in correlation with college. Here is an account by teacher that looked at the process in a positive light:

I think it just makes you, I think when you come out of college, you have all that knowledge. I mean it's right there ready for you. But over the years of teaching, you kind of forget. Having graduated 20 years ago, I think this year, it kind of like puts a, it kind of puts stuff back into what we had learned in college. It made you rethink what you were doing. Am I still doing these things? Have I laxed on some? I think, especially like going through and during our PLC meetings when

we were collaborating with other teachers, they were like, well we did this, but are we doing it to an extent? I think it made us reflect on it more, or it made me.

Knowing that this reflection led to students setting their own goals for our NWEA Maps tests and 88% of them meeting those goals within 3 months is very exciting to me as a school leader. It also helped build this teacher's efficacy. Every teacher that I interviewed spoke about the increased level of reflection that they experienced as a result of engaging in action research to increase learner agency.

Theme Two- In Order to See the Value, You Must Engage. Early in the data collection process, a theme began to arise that the teachers really did not understand why we were engaging in the action research at the beginning of the process and that they really did not see the value in the work, until we were several months into the learning and implementing process. This was interesting to me as a school leader because I had presented the idea of learner agency and all of the research and evidence that supported the need for increased learner agency in our school. I explained that our Director of Elementary Education had given us a directive to select a problem of practice and begin action research to address it. I also explained the design of the action research including what elements of learner agency that we would study each month. What I learned was that just like with students, just because I said it, did not mean that they understood it. They did not understand the purpose even though I had explained the purpose to them. Several teachers mentioned that they would like to start back at the beginning now that they understand the value. I believe some of the problem was their lack of background knowledge in the beginning about the subject, which was understandable as, I was just learning about the importance of learner agency myself. Another difficulty was that the teachers were in a transition state with me coming in as a new school leader. They were uncertain about who I was and what I was about. They were not in a position yet to trust me as I was introducing them

to the action research process and to the research on learner agency. Many teachers in this study said things similar to what this teacher shared, “It’s like I didn’t realize how important it was, until I put it into play and saw results.”

I intentionally did not make the action research mandatory. I asked that they participate, gave them the responsibility of deciding who was on their teams, left the scheduling of how they met up to them, and had them decide how they would implement the new learning in their classrooms and how they would collect data. I designed it in this way so that I could foster their teacher agency, which I determined had been missing in the compliance driven culture of the school. This was very difficult for our teachers because they wanted me to tell them exactly what to do. It was impossible for them at that point to really understand how much they would gain from engaging in the process. That was echoed in the data collection. They knew that it must be important, or I would not be asking them to devote so much time and effort to it, but they did not fully understand the purpose.

Some teachers understood parts of learner agency before we began the action research but did not understand how the pieces fit together, as this teacher stated, “Well, I understood pieces of it, but I didn’t understand how it all came together, how it all fit and worked together, and I think that was an eye opener for me.” Another teacher expressed that it would be difficult to understand the value until you have engaged in the process:

I guess I didn’t understand how incredibly awesome this was going to be until we started getting into it, but I don’t know if you could change that. I’m a big picture person, so I did feel like at times I was getting pieces of it, but honestly, I think you could’ve given me. I mean, you did give us the big picture. Maybe I guess what I’m thinking is you truly don’t get it until you go through it. I don’t know if you could change that.

I believe that this teacher is correct in her statement. Although I tried to help teachers understand the value at the onset of the study, I believe that it took them seeing the evidence and the practice in place before they could really see the value. None of the fifteen teachers that I interviewed understood the value of the action research to increase learner agency when they began the process, but they all had positive reactions to what they learned and how it had impacted their practice.

Theme Three- A More Positive Culture. Another theme that ran through the data collection was that the engagement in the action research had created a more positive school culture. Teachers are expressing more positive thoughts about what we are capable of doing as a school. They are working together to create a warm and inviting learning environment. They are having conversations in the teacher's lounge about how to better meet the needs of students instead of complaining about them. During the interviews, teachers spoke about how much happier they are and how much better people are working together. Several teachers described how their students were more supportive of each other as a result of the action research. Teachers are excited about the way that students are encouraging one another which leads to a more positive culture as well. This excitement has impacted our parent engagement as well because teachers are sharing more information with parents about their students' growth and students are able to share their goals and progress with parents. Teachers shared that they have experienced more positive interactions with parents due to the action research that they engaged in to increase learner agency. Shifting to a more positive culture has been a pleasant impact that the action research to increase learner agency has made in this school context.

Emerging Theory of How the Elements of Learner Agency Drive Learning

“Motivation is sourced internally, but teachers can provide the fuel needed to power it.” Maryellen Weimer

When I began the process of building an understanding for what the concept of learner agency was, I found a concept map that made sense to me that also aligned with the research that I was ingesting at the time. This concept map included a circle in the middle with the term learner agency and circles connected to this center circle with the elements of purpose, ownership, motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, voice, and choice (PowerSchool, 2018). This model depicts these elements as being of equal importance and as equal and stand-alone parts of learner agency as a whole. I was comfortable with that depiction, until I started analyzing the data that I collected for this study. An overarching theme that emerged from the data was that each of these elements are connected. I began wrestling with the ideas of how exactly they connect. Were they merely connected by the central theme of learner agency, or did they have some connection to one another? Were the connections equal among the elements? Were there some elements that were more important than others? How much direct impact do we have as educators on each of these elements for our students? Can learner agency be developed? If we develop the conditions for learner agency, will our learners demonstrate agentic actions? What does that look like? I remember thinking, “It seems like voice and choice are very similar. Teachers mention them together in the data often.” One teacher stated:

I feel like when they have choice, they feel like they can express themselves a little better, and then their voice comes across a little clearer. Because if I'm given an assignment and I'm going to read it and then I have to do a presentation on it, I would rather do a fun creative video about it or not just a speech about it. That shows my voice through what I enjoy doing, and if I got to pick what I got to do, then I feel like the voice would come through. I do feel like those go together.

Another teacher reflected on the elements of learner agency and had this to say, “Just having that voice in the classroom to be able to express their thoughts and their feelings and what they want to learn and how they want to learn. Those were the biggest ones for me, so I guess voice and choice together.” Another teacher relates choice and voice to motivation in the following

statement, “Our sixth-grade class does much better with that. And they seem, when you give them choices and try to ask for their input, they seem to me really to take hold of that and want to do it.” This “want to” could define motivation.

I also thought about how ownership and motivation were mentioned in conjunction throughout the data. One teacher shared the following that connects motivation to ownership:

Well I think of STEM, they are always really invested in those projects, because they want them to work, and they want them to- They want to win, there's the element of competition among them that makes them want to compete with their classmates. And I feel like they really do take ownership most of the time, they really take ownership of those projects.

Another teacher describes her students as unmotivated until they used goal setting to increase ownership. This is an excerpt from that conversation:

I had a lot of students that were really poor struggling readers. And it wasn't simply because they didn't know the words, they just really weren't interested in reading. It's kinda like they'd lost that. It was like it was a chore, that they didn't have fun with doing it. So I thought, what can I do? So we set goals in AR, something we used to do a long time ago, but of course I changed it to fit how we're doing everything this year. But those goals, I mean it's every day that we do prizes and rewards, and it's not necessarily an item that is a prize, it might just be a feel good thing, you know? But they help each other with the goals, and they have to reach a certain number. And they are reading like crazy. And it's like, because I've let them, first I model, then the goal, and then I let them set goals, throughout on their own. It's not just me giving them the goal. I'm letting them to set their own goal.

One of the upper elementary teachers connected motivation and ownership in the following data:

Trying to find out what motivates students. They're all kind of linked as, you know, I mean obviously, I guess, but ... And the ownership, them taking ownership of their own learning. One thing I've tried to do about that is explain more to them what we're doing and why we're doing it. I've actually used the word learner agency and told them, "We want you to take ownership of your learning to care about it, to realize that this benefits you, and it's important to you."

This next teacher connects motivation and ownership and sees the importance of self-motivation in the following statement:

But with third graders, that was a big aha for me was that, oh, just because they look like they're motivated doesn't mean that they actually are, and that I need to also let them know to be motivated for themselves, not for me, because they're not always going to have me. Sometimes they'll say, "Oh, you're just so fun. You do this or that." I think that's great. Some actually say the opposite, but I want them to be able to be self-motivated and self-driven, because they want them to be better for themselves, not for me. Helping them just taking that ownership of their learning and through that ownership, they are motivated.

Motivation and engagement are mentioned as topics that teachers had learned about but had never really learned in tandem. This teacher brought to light:

Well, like I said, learner agency has been good for us to study for the school faculty. We've all read articles or taken workshops on the components. Maybe go to a motivational workshop or engaging workshop, but studying it as a whole I think has made it more effective, because it comes together. Like I said, it's all related, and I didn't realize that at first.

Another teacher eludes to this same idea of not understanding how the elements fit together even though she understood some of the elements:

I think it was a huge paradigm shift for me, just because I've been teaching for so long and my experience being what it is, it was a very different kind of teaching learning type thing and it brought a whole lot of new things into play. Not that I hadn't heard of them or not that I hadn't even used some of them, but seeing it as a whole and how it affects learning and individual learners was impactful for me.

Another teacher shared her thoughts on the cohesive nature of the elements and the purpose behind them:

I feel like I used bits and pieces of it, but not as like a cohesive, you should be thinking about all of these things with your class. Like, I knew to give them choice, but I didn't really know how that helped them. So, knowing kind of more about this is why you need to be doing these things. That helped me.

Other teachers also mentioned how the elements of learner agency fit together.

So, if all of these elements connected, I wondered how exactly they influenced one another. Then, I thought of motivation as an engine because often you will read or hear the term "drive motivation." Motivation is what drives the learner to want to learn. If motivation is the engine through a lens of learner agency, it is fueled by purpose, ownership, self-efficacy, voice,

and choice. Here are two examples that teachers give of students engaging in authentic work that they find purposeful. Teachers were surprised by the level of motivation by some of their students. One teacher stated during the focus group:

I was shocked about learning what things motivate them. Like, things I wouldn't think they would be motivated to do. Like, we did the Teacher Appreciation, write the letters to one of your, a teacher that impacted you. And, that was the best writing I got all year from some of them. And I was like, what? From a thank you letter? But, they were motivated. They wanted to deliver those to the teachers. I was like, well, I never would have thought that this would be what motivated some of them.

The second teacher during the focus group described in a similar response about when her class did a measurement lesson in math using an activity where they made waffles. The students were then allowed to deliver waffles to staff members of their choosing:

I was thinking of the exact same thing when we did the waffles because some of them were like, wanted to get everything just so, so that they could be the ones to deliver the waffles. They wanted and pick who they wanted to take them to. And it was funny because some of them could have cared less and other ones were like, oh, I'm gonna do this and this, and let me be the one to take them.

Once students have taken ownership through purposeful activities in which they have choice and voice and they believe that they can be successful, then motivation can ignite. Pintrich (2003) explains, “The term motivation is derived from the Latin verb *movere*, which means to move. In other words, motivational theories attempt to answer questions about what gets individuals moving (energization) and toward what activities or tasks” (p. 669). Pintrich (2003) also discussed inputs that would increase adaptive motivation in students including efficacy, control, interest, values, and goals (p. 682). These inputs closely mirror the inputs of self-efficacy, choice, voice, purpose, and ownership that are in the model that I developed based on this emerging theory where I described them as fuel for motivation. “Motivation is an internal state, while engagement is the manifestation of motivation behaviorally. Student engagement leads to higher achievement in the classroom” (Conley & French, 2014, p. 1021). When the fuel reaches the

engine to create movement in motivation, the learner is able to move down a road of engagement to reach the destination of learning. This quote found in the literature review of this dissertation describes engagement as the pathway to learning and academic success. “Engagement is the direct (and only) pathway to cumulative learning, long-term achievement, and eventual academic success” (Parsons, Malloy, Parsons, & Burrowbridge, 2015, p. 224). This helps explain and supports the use of the road in the model to depict the element of engagement.

The only part of this model that I really struggled with was the fact that purpose, self-efficacy, voice, and choice also seemed to contribute to ownership and there was a very close tie between motivation and ownership. So, I began thinking of ownership as the vehicle. Figure 5 depicts the emerging theory about how the elements of learner agency work together to reach the destination of learning for both teachers and students.

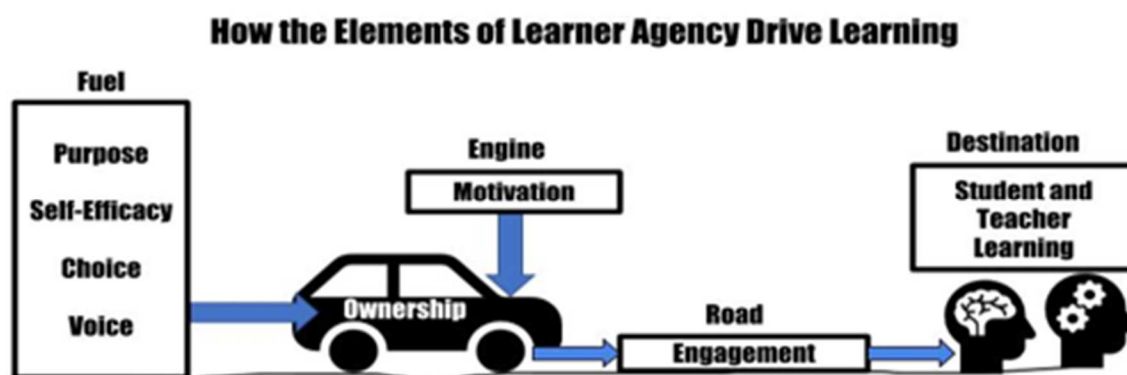


Figure 5 How the Elements of Learner Agency Drive Learning

Understanding this interaction between the elements of learner agency is important because it highlights the areas that teachers can contribute to student agency along with the areas principals and other instructional leaders can contribute to teacher agency. The elements designated as fuel, must be prepared by and/or allowed by teachers or instructional leaders respectively. We as educators can outline and help develop the purpose in our learners. We can

build self-efficacy through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004, p. 5-6). We can give our learners choices within the parameters of the learning goals, and we can provide our learners with opportunities to share their voices. We can also provide our learners with the tools to build ownership through an understanding of goal setting and opportunities to practice setting and obtaining goals. We can provide a picture of the destination of learning through defining and describing clear learning targets. This teacher explains some of the ways that the elements of learner agency are connected in the classroom, and it helped me frame this theory:

I'll ask something like, "Why do we do 'read to self' as a station," when I'm re-directing a student to do the activity correctly. This directs their attention to the relevance of the activity and helps motivate and engage the student. As students understand the purpose, they develop ownership and this helps motivations become more intrinsic. When we are intrinsically motivated our engagement comes from a personal place, which goes hand in hand with ownership. Not only do students need to be personally engaged, but they need to know they have potential and can be successful. Often if they are given a choice that also adds to their ownership, motivation and engagement in activities.

We are unable to directly motivate or engage students, but by providing the fuel and the vehicle and by clearly defining and showing the destination, my theory is that students are more likely to be motivated, engaged, and driven to learn. The learner is the driver. He/she takes ownership of the learning vehicle and with the correct fuel for the engine of motivation will take a journey down the road of engagement to increased learning. In this model, every car requires a different fuel mixture because each vehicle is one of a kind. Some students are naturally self-regulated learners. They are able to put their own fuel in their car. They know when to use their voices to advocate for their own learning. They know how to make choices that drive their learning and even do that outside the parameters of school. They play the game of school well and have the grades to show for it. Self-regulated learning could be described as the computer of the vehicle. Self-regulated learners are able to monitor the inputs and outputs of the vehicle, let the teacher

know when they are about to red line, navigate themselves to the nearest fuel station to ensure continued motivation, and adjust the navigation when they encounter roadblocks. Their motivation is simple because it aligns with the same type of motivation teachers understand and are often driven by themselves. Other students, on the other hand, can be agentic learners, but they need some help with fueling their motivation. The extrinsic reward of a good grade may seem outside of their reach. Until learners learn how to fuel their vehicles, they need the support and guidance of instructional leaders to help them fuel up and navigate the learning process.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter Four, the data was presented and organized to address each research question. It was presented in a narrative fashion to correlate with the presentation of the literature in the literature review of this dissertation to explain how the research and data connects to the school context being studied. There was also a presentation of three themes and one emerging theory that arose from the data analysis.

CHAPTER FIVE- DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how design-based action research influenced learner agency in our school as determined by teacher perceptions. Learner agency for the purpose of this study included teacher agency and student agency. My goals were to understand teacher perceptions as they worked to increase student agency and to determine if the agency of students, agency of teachers, and collective efficacy of the teachers in a Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school increased through teacher engagement in a process of design-based action research to investigate learner agency. Chapter Five will present a discussion about how the research conducted in this qualitative study connected to the problem of practice identified in Chapter One, to the existing literature presented in Chapter Two in alignment with the research questions, and to the selected methodology present in Chapter Three. Recommendations for future research were included and implications for practice and research were described. Conclusions drawn by the researcher are also included.

Discussion

Connections to Chapter One

Chapter One of this dissertation in practice presented a problem of practice and discussed how the problem of practice is a viable subject for study. Problems of practice should focus on instructional or systemic issues, be directly observable, be actionable, connect to the broader strategy of improvement, and be high leverage according to the framework designed by the Carnegie Project on Education Doctorate.

Teachers in this school began working in teams to begin developing their PLC a few years before this study took place. Their efforts lasted less than one full school year because they lost

some human resources and were unable to move past that hurdle. By providing professional development credit or the option to receive compensation for their time in meeting after school, I was successful in jumpstarting our school's PLC efforts. I asked teachers to meet at least twice a month for one hour per meeting, but I did not require it because it was after school hours and because I wanted to empower teachers to make decisions during the action research in hopes that it would increase their agency. As shared in Chapter Four under the barriers to action research, teachers still found it difficult to meet after school. Time was an often cited barrier to the action research, and teams met without all of their members on a frequent basis due to family obligations that pulled some members away. Although this situation was not ideal, it was better than the teams not meeting at all. Based on what was learned through the action research in this school context and the recommendations found in the literature, PLC team time will be built into the school master schedule from now on. Teachers will meet weekly for one hour during their contracted time.

There was a lack of learner agency among students and teachers in this school at the beginning of the action research that is examined in this dissertation. Students were not setting goals, had a low level of self-efficacy, and did not understand the purpose in their learning. Teachers had a low level of efficacy as evidenced by their statements about how factors outside of the school influence were the reasons for poor student performance. They frequently mentioned that our school performed better before our demographics changed. This conversation has changed. It took a turn in November when in a meeting, where it was announced that our school had been placed on an Additional Targeted Support List for our special education sub-population scores, when one of our teachers said, "My kids can't pass that test." This opened the opportunity for me to address that attitude directly. I made it clear that until we change our attitudes about

what our students are able to accomplish that we would continue to see the same results. I acknowledged that we could not change what students were facing outside of school, but that we could change our expectations for them while they are at school. Teachers shifted their conversations to the things that we do have control over. When we began our work on self-efficacy in January, the culture of the whole school changed as we embraced believing in the “Power of Yet.”

At the beginning of the school year when I was choosing a problem of practice to address for the purposes of this dissertation, I was nervous that teachers would think that they were being asked to do more work for my personal gain of a doctoral degree. Even though I knew that this was an important step in creating a better culture for our students, teachers, and community, I was very concerned about the pushback that I would receive and a lack of trust that I may create before I had the opportunity to build any relationships. There is a strong narrative present in education that principals should not change anything in their first year. This narrative is that the first year of the principalship in a building is to solely build relationships. I was relieved when our Director of Elementary Education handed us a binder about how to conduct action research to address problems of practice using a cycle of inquiry during our first principals’ meeting. She explained that we were all responsible for selecting a problem of practice to address in our schools through a process of action research. By that point, I had already determined the problem of practice that most needed to be addressed. This gave me the leverage that I needed to take back to my staff which made addressing the problem of practice much easier to introduce. From the beginning, I was very transparent with my teachers about this dissertation and about the action research that we engaged in throughout the year. As a result, teachers were excited to be a part of this study to share what they learned throughout the year. Also, I kept the Director of Elementary

Education updated throughout the action research project and had the complete support of my district administration.

Empowering students and creating a more student-centered program of education was one of the major themes that was woven in the strategic plan for the district in which this school belongs. I had hoped prior to conducting the action research that this study examined that by engaging teachers to find ways to increase student agency that our school would become a more student-centered school. From the comments that teachers made in their interviews, I believe that goal has been accomplished. While we still have work to do, we are allowing students to have more choices and a voice in their educations. They are setting goals and working towards meeting those goals to increase ownership. Teachers are talking about how to meet individual students' learning needs. Students are taking an active role in their educations.

As far as our school-wide goals, students that have been placed in special education are now being served in a more inclusive environment and teachers have increased their expectations for these students. Some teachers are experiencing better student behavior because they are allowing students to take ownership over their choices. Students in general education settings are now setting goals and tracking their progress which according to John Hattie's work should increase our student achievement (Donohoo, 2017, p. 5-6).

Engaging teachers in action research to increase learner agency addressed John Hattie's two top factors for school improvement including Collective Teacher Efficacy with an effect size of 1.57 and Student Expectations with an effect size of 1.44. These two factors are much more influential on student achievement than socioeconomic status with an effect size of 0.52 (Donohoo, 2017, p. 5-6). Increasing learner agency is high leverage because it directly impacts student learning according to this research. In education, the main goal is to provide every

student with an education that empowers him or her to become a productive citizen. What we found in this school setting was that not only does this research have the potential to increase student achievement, it also improved our school culture. Students are more encouraging of one another. Teachers are experiencing more positive conversations. Teachers that have been disconnected in the past now feel connected and validated or valued. Students are excited about setting goals and reaching them.

Connections to Chapter Two

Chapter Two is the literature review for this study that informed the design of the action research studied in this qualitative work. The conceptual framework contained in that chapter explains the connections of the research questions to the study. The literature review served to help in the development of the design for the action research that this study examines. It also informed this study to gain an understanding for the researcher of the elements of learner agency, collective efficacy, action research, and the development of our school professional learning community.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been the anchor in this study from the beginning:

1. What perceptions and observations will teachers at this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school share about the process of engaging in action research to increase learner agency?
2. What is the evidence that learner agency has been developed as a result of the action research process?
3. How has the action research project influenced collective teacher efficacy?

These questions were important to me as a practitioner in a new context and as a researcher. I had no real hypothesis at the outset of the action research what teacher perceptions would be for the purposes of this study, as I had no relationship with the teachers prior to our engagement in the action research outside of brief introductory meetings with them individually before school started. I entered the endeavor to engage teachers in action research to increase learner agency armed only by the brief introduction that I had at the time to the research on the effectiveness of using action research to build collective teacher efficacy and a surface level understanding of learner agency. I conducted the literature review for this study while tandemly designing and engaging teachers in the action research. Exploring these research questions for the purpose of this study has been an experience that has given me a better understanding of my teachers and the dynamics of my school. It made me a stronger practitioner.

What perceptions and observations will teachers at this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school share about the process of engaging in action research to increase learner agency?

According to research, the practice of engaging teachers in action research to address problems of practice through cycles of inquiry has been an effective practice since the days of John Dewey. Engaging in action research with other teachers makes teachers more reflective and more effective. It is not the gathering of teachers that makes an impact. It is the focus on solving problems together that has the most value. This focused effort by teachers creates a community that helps ground teachers in more of a student centered practice and helps them see themselves as learners and problem solvers (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Gilbert, Voelkel, and Johnson, 2018; Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016; Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). This research aligns with the data that were collected in this study. Teachers in this context noted that they had become more reflective in

their practice as a result of engaging in the action research. They saw the value in working together to better meet the needs of their students. They explained that they had shifted their mindsets through the process from focusing on teaching to focusing on student learning. They ran into barriers during the process, but they did not let those barriers keep them from learning and growing. Their perceptions about working together with other teachers in the action research process were positive. They expressed that it made for a more positive environment and described ways that our school culture was positively impacted.

Teachers' perceptions about their personal agency were directly tied to the success they felt in the action research process. When they saw the benefits of their work, it motivated them to become more engaged. Teachers described the mental shifts that it took for them to increase their learner agency and the learner agency of their students. Their beliefs, thoughts, and feelings had to change before they were fully engaged in the process, but their behavior had to change in order for their beliefs, thoughts, and feelings to change. Mercer (2012) captures the difficult to capture construct of agency in the following statement shared also in chapter two:

Agency is therefore not only concerned with what is observable, but it also involves non-visible behaviors, beliefs, thoughts and feelings; all of which must be understood in relation to the various contexts and affordances from which they cannot be abstracted. (p. 42)

When our teachers began to feel more empowered, it gave them perceptual license to empower their students. When their students became more empowered, teachers reaped the benefits in the form of the improved relationships they formed with their students. Students were reaching goals that they set with the teachers, and they demonstrated improved behavior.

What is the evidence that learner agency has been developed as a result of the action research process?

The perceptions of teachers about the idea of learner agency and their perceptions of the elements of learner agency are of crucial importance to their ability to increase student agency.

“It is only possible to support students’ social learning, enhance students’ active agency and ownership by giving up control and distributing power in practice” (Lehtonen, 2015, p. 1887). Every teacher in this study that was interviewed saw the value in increasing learner agency even though they had varying levels of success in the implementation of practices to accomplish increased agency in their students. Teachers that were highly engaged in the action research to increase learner agency had more success with releasing the control that is necessary to create a more agentic environment. Although we have not reached a high level of learner agency in our school context “yet”, the evidence presented in Chapter Four demonstrates that learner agency was developed in both teachers and students through the process of engaging in action research to increase learner agency. In order for that evidence to present itself in the context, teachers had to release some control to their students and begin to take ownership of their own learning. Students had to put forth the efforts needed to take more ownership in their learning. I, as the principal, had to resist the urge on many occasions to make mandates or to control the narrative in order to empower teachers through the process.

How has the action research project influenced collective teacher efficacy?

The literature review in Chapter Two explains the high effect size and importance of collective teacher efficacy. Schools can overcome student home situations and poverty by having a strong sense of collective teacher efficacy. When teachers in schools work together to ensure that all students achieve, students will achieve according to the research (Donohoo, 2017; Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy, 2004; Lee, Zhang, and Yin, 2011). Through teachers engaging in action research to increase learner agency, teachers in our school began working together instead of in isolation. They started having conversations about how they could work together to increase individual student achievement. They planned school-wide events to increase student motivation

and engagement. Most importantly, the conversations about what students are able to achieve began to change through the action research process. While we still have work to do in the area of increasing collective teacher efficacy, we are definitely improving according to the data presented in Chapter Four.

Connections to Chapter Three

As I described in Chapter Three, this study was a qualitative study designed to capture the perceptions of teachers that engaged in a design-based action research process to increase learner agency. It was pragmatic in nature and drew from phenomenology, case study, and action research methodologies. I conducted interviews with all classroom teachers in the school that were willing to participate which included all first through sixth grade teachers, a fourth through sixth grade self-contained special education teacher, and two interventionists. I conducted a follow-up focus group with teachers that were highly engaged in the action research to determine if discussion among peer teachers would result in further rich data. Observations of PLC collaborative team meetings were conducted, and I kept field notes as the action research process unfolded. Teachers also engaged in answering reflection questions on Google Classroom as they engaged in the action research process throughout the school year.

I found the pragmatic nature of the study to be helpful in capturing the data needed to inform the research questions and to capture the data needed for my growth as a principal in this setting. As a school practitioner, I believe that engaging in a dissertation study that informs my practice was much more powerful than if I had studied an educational setting or problem outside of my context. Working in the context that I was studying presented a few considerations that I would not have encountered if studying another context such as the political nature of implementation and data collection process. Also, it meant being cognizant of my own emotions,

when I did not feel like a couple of teachers were fully engaging. One thing that made the study more powerful was that I was immersed in the work fully from the beginning of the action research process to the qualitative data collection for this study. Constantly thinking about addressing the problem of practice through the research and through my daily practice helped me develop a strong understanding of the power of action research in my school setting.

Limitations

As explained in Chapter Three, the limitations of this study include the lack of generalizability of the data because this study focuses on a limited sample of participants. Since the study was designed based on teachers' perceptions of their engagement in action research to address a problem of practice in only one school context, the findings are not generalizable to all school contexts. Although the study is not generalizable to all school contexts, Herr and Anderson (2015) argue that examining this type of research could "offer more valid and convincing results than other forms of research" (p. 83). The reason this type of research has the promise of offering valid and convincing results is that the actors in the context have become the researchers. They understand all the politics and inner workings of the context which can shed light on perceptions and understandings of problems of practice that cannot be understood as deeply by outsiders investigating a context. This insider research can lead to in depth understandings that can be of use to practitioners in similar contexts. I do believe that this study was rich in data even though it is not generalizable to other contexts.

Another limitation shared in Chapter Three was that I am the principal in this school context. Because I am the supervisor of the participants, there was a likelihood that they would withhold some information that they may share with someone outside of the principal role. Through the triangulation of data including the focus group where teachers were in a conversation

with each other about the action research they were engaged in, I believe that limitation was mostly mitigated because there was a great degree of consistency in the data.

Recommendations

After engaging in a process of action research with my teachers as a first-year principal in a school that was compliance driven versus student driven, I recommend engaging teachers in action research to address problems of practice in any school setting. Problems of practice exist in every school. This research is evidence of the impact that engaging teachers in action research can have on school culture. While I believe that we are just beginning to see the fruits of our labor with regard to increased learner agency and the development of our professional learning community, I know that schools must begin the work well before they reap the harvest especially in problems of practice that relate to shifting school culture and teacher mindsets. I agree with DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, and Mattos (2016) when they suggest in their book *Learning by Doing* that you must begin to engage in the work before everyone is ready because if you wait on everyone to be ready, you will never begin the work.

Implications for Practice

As an aspiring or new school principal, you often hear the advice not to change anything in your first year. I would agree with that statement if the school that you are entering is full of perfect people that have no room for growth. Assuming that there is no school that can be described in that way, I have found through this action research that opportunities for improving student learning and the school environment can be missed if you accept the status quo for your first year. Ask yourself what type of culture you are protecting by not changing anything. In my case, I would have been condoning a culture that believed that not all students could be successful. I would have made no attempts to involve parents in the education of our students. I

would have stood by while students were being underserved and not done anything for the sake of waiting until my second year. At that point, teachers would have wondered what in the world happened because I did not have a problem with what they were doing in the first year that I was there. No matter how hard you try to not change anything in your first year, you are a major change. When the leader changes, even systems that were seemingly in place need to be re-established. Instead of not changing anything, I suggest engaging your teachers in a process of action research to address a problem of practice in your context. Let them tell you what the problems of practice are and empower them to lead the way in making a difference. That is why most of us are in the business of education. Do not be afraid to be a difference maker even in your first year of the principalship.

The implications of practice for moving forward in this context are that I have a strong understanding of the people that I work with now. I have built relationships with them through this difficult work of examining and changing our practices to increase learner agency. I, in most instances, know when to push and when to pull back. I know when I am the support they need and when to send in reinforcements for support. I know that there is nothing that I can accomplish for my students without the relationships I am building with their teachers. I know that driving teacher agency is just as important as driving student agency. Until teachers see the importance of ownership in learning, they have a difficult time releasing control to increase student ownership. I know these things because we have learned so much together through the design-based action research process and because the interviews and focus group for this qualitative dissertation opened the door for teacher voice to be heard. I will in the future continue in this cycle of inquiry to continue to improve my practice and to lead in the improvement of our school practices. I will also make it a point to interview my teachers each year to stay in touch

with their perceptions and to hear their voices about the work we are engaged in together. This work has helped me be more reflective and purposeful in my practice.

The next steps we will take in our action research will be to increase student ownership by adding data notebooks in every class that students will use to track their data. All students will engage in goal setting. As teachers design common formative assessments, they will incorporate a way for students to give feedback to the teacher about how they feel about their learning. Teachers will continue to take the time to help students understand the purpose of their learning, find ways to incorporate choice and voice in assignments, and will continue to learn about how to foster self-efficacy through developing a growth mindset. When the teachers were asked what our next steps should be, they all mentioned that the work and the learning needed to continue.

Here are a few examples:

1. Well, I want us to keep doing this. I don't wanna just next year to just push this aside and move on. This needs to stay with us, and just take each one of them further.
2. I would like to start the year out, I suppose ... Once I do those beginning of the year assessments, just meeting with the students one-on-one and setting goals with them and letting them know this is where we're at and we're going to try to achieve this, and not make it a classroom goal, but an individual, so that they have ownership over that and that they can see their growth versus, "I'm not growing as fast as someone else." But just make it an individual plan for them. I think that would set some motivation and some ownership with them. I would like to give more choices in the classroom. I think that would ... Well, they all tie in together, to be honest. But those are some of my goals. I've always wanted to do math centers which would bring in choice and things like that.
3. Having them have an ongoing formative assessment as we are going, have the goals in their notebook of what I would like for them to learn from their essential standard. This is where you're at. This is where I want you to go, and if they have then in their notebook to constant reflect and go back and, "Oh, I do know this." They can fill in why they know it. They go back through, "Okay, I'm supposed to be learning how," like with life cycles, "I'm supposed to be learning the similarities and differences between animal and plant life cycles. Oh, okay. I do understand that now, and this is why and how I understand it." They can prove that, so they're constantly going back to even though we say it as a group, they

can still go back and have that reflection time. I need to implement ten minutes at the end of the day for them to be reflecting on what do they learn and what they can do better the next day. There's that celebration goal that they can celebrate, but then they also have a goal for the next day or the next week, whatever that may look like.

4. I think I'm gonna have to have refresher to keep myself- And I think that would be something great for our PLC group to discuss. How are we all incorporating these elements of Learner Agency? What are you seeing that's successful?

Keeping the conversation going about learner agency will certainly continue to improve practice over time because it shifts the focus from teaching to learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016, p. 11).

Implications for Research

This dissertation is based on the Carnegie Project on Education Doctorate (CPED) framework that includes identifying a problem of practice and engaging in research to address the problem. It adds to the research base of this type of dissertation in practice. Other researchers addressing problems of practice through the engagement of action research will be able to use this dissertation as one example of qualitative research to help them design future studies.

This study can also serve as a support for researchers that wish to further study the development of learner agency in other elementary school contexts. This study was limited to one school context. It would be interesting to see the results of implementing action research to increase learner agency in multiple contexts with the leadership of different instructional leaders. Since action research is conducted by educators in their respective schools about their personal practice, the path that is taken by each context would look very different. Because the results of this study so closely aligned with the desired results based on the research contained in the literature review, it would be interesting to see if the different paths would lead to similar results of teachers becoming more reflective and collaborative. I would be curious to know if the desired

effect of increasing the levels of collective teacher efficacy would be consistent among all schools that engage in design-based action research to increase learner agency.

Winne and Perry (2012) share their insight on tools that measure self-regulated learning which is one desired future effect for the learners currently developing learner agency in this context. They speak of the Learning and Strategies Study Inventory and the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire. These measurement tools are designed for college students (p. 542). It would be interesting to compare the results of the use of these instruments for the students from this elementary school in which teachers have engaged in action research to increase student agency to the results of students that have not been in elementary schools where a purposeful agentic environment has been developed when these students reach college age.

Conclusion

A problem of practice was identified in this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school of a lack of learner agency among students and teachers. Teachers were engaged in action research through the development of the professional learning community to improve learner agency in both teachers and students by the teachers focusing on elements of student agency and developing the school PLC. The purpose of this study is to explore how design-based action research influences learner agency in our school as determined by teacher perceptions after their engagement in this action research.

A constructivist approach was taken in this qualitative study to inform the research and my practice as an educational leader. Interviews, document review of process data, and a focus group were the data collection methods used in this study. Transparency, multiple coding, dialogic engagement, and structured reflexivity processes were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study and to ensure the quality of the research.

The conceptual framework for this study includes Adult Learning Theory, Motivation Theory, Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective, research on learner agency, and my personal experiences. These have contributed to my lens as a researcher. These theories and my positionality as an insider in this study informed the decision to explore the research questions outlined. These research questions are as follows: What perceptions will teachers at this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school have about the process of engaging in action research to increase learner agency? What is the evidence that learner agency has been developed as a result of the action research process? How has the action research project influenced collective teacher efficacy?

This study helped me meet my research goals of understanding teacher perceptions about their engagement in action research to increase learner agency and determining the evidence of increased learner agency or increased collective teacher efficacy that emerged through the process. This study also contributes to the research base on learner agency, collective teacher efficacy, and teachers engaging in action research.

The data indicated that engaging teachers in action research to increase learner agency increased both student and teacher agency, increased the level of collective teacher efficacy, increased teachers' reflective practice, and created a more positive culture in this school context. Teachers in this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school were unable to really understand the value of the action research, until they engaged in the work. Teachers' perceptions of the work were mostly positive. The most prevalent barriers to the action research, according to this study, included time and family circumstances. Teachers that were new to the school setting also faced barriers because they were adjusting to the new school environment. Barriers to learner agency included negative student behavior, difficulty in identifying what motivates every student

in the classroom, and teachers' willingness to release some level of control for student autonomy. An emerging theory was created out of the data to explain how the elements of learner agency including purpose, ownership, motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, voice, and choice work together to drive student learning. It also explains the role of self-regulation as understood by the researcher in the dynamics of learner agency. That theory proposes an analogy for the interaction of those elements. The analogy likens the interaction to that of a vehicle trying to reach a destination and is as follows: If motivation is the engine of learner agency, ownership is the vehicle. The fuel for the vehicle and engine includes purpose, self-efficacy, voice, and choice. The engine of motivation takes the learner who is the driver down the road of engagement to the destination of student learning. The computer in the vehicle is self-regulated learning that constantly monitors the inputs and outputs of the vehicle and makes needed adjustments.

In a time when the political nature of education calls into question the professionalism of educators, it is imperative that teachers are given the license to move from compliance based mentality to a truly agentic level of professionalism that gives them the autonomy to diagnose the needs of their students individually based on evidence based approaches. Sachs (2016) proposes that in order for teaching to reach the desired level of professionalism that the political realm calls for and to meet teachers' desire to be recognized as professionals, we must move from a compliance mentality as administrators and create cultures of collaboration and trust. Teachers must engage in action research, make decisions based on research, and must work together with their fellow teachers to become advocates for themselves and their students. Engaging in this type of ongoing professional development has accountability embedded in the process because teachers are accountable to the other stakeholders in the school community (p. 413-425). Observing the transformation of the teachers in this school context has aligned with this research

by Sachs. Our teachers, in a short time, have moved past compliance and have become more proactive in the education of their students. They have stopped asking the principal to “just tell me what to do.” They now ask themselves and each other how to meet the individual needs of students based on individual student data. They are identifying learning targets with their students and helping them track their individual progress toward meeting goals. They are changing their practice to empower students because they see the value and because they feel empowered as professionals.

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Appendix A

Alignment of Data Collection Instruments with Research Questions

Research Question 1: What perceptions will teachers at this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school have about the process of engaging in action research to increase learner agency?

Teacher Interviews:

- Tell me about the action research you have engaged in this school year.
- Describe the process you have been involved in.
- Tell me what you now know about learner agency.
- What are your feelings about learner agency?
- Has your practice changed any based on what you have learned through the action research process? Please describe how it has changed or why it has not changed.
- What have been the most valuable parts of the action research process?
- How do you think the action research process could be improved?
- Have you faced any barriers to increasing learner agency in your students?

Process Data:

- Teacher and Administrator Reflections
- Observation Field Notes
- Analytic Memos
- PLC Meeting Agendas

Research Question 2: What is the evidence that learner agency has been developed as a result of the action research process?

Teacher Interviews:

- Have you seen any evidence of increased learner agency in your students? (ex. Purpose, ownership, motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, voice, choice)
- Have you experienced any level of increased learner agency in yourself? In the other teachers?

Process Data:

- Teacher and Administrator Reflections
- Observation Field Notes
- Analytic Memos
- PLC Meeting Agendas

Research Question 3: How has the action research project influenced collective teacher efficacy?

Teacher Interviews:

- Have you noticed any differences in our teachers' attitudes about how they can impact student achievement since we began this action research?
- Are you able to give me some examples?
- Has your teacher efficacy been impacted by your action research? In what ways?

Process Data:

- Teacher and Administrator Reflections
- Observation Field Notes
- Analytic Memos
- PLC Meeting Agendas

Miscellaneous:

- Is there anything else you want to share with me about learner agency, our PLC, action research, or collective teacher efficacy?

Appendix B

Consent Form

Teachers Engaging in Action Research to Increase Learner Agency

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Dawn M. Childress

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ed Bengtson

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study about your perceptions based on your involvement in action research to increase learner agency in your school. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a teacher that has actively participated in your school context to increase learner agency this school year with your professional learning community.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?

Dawn M. Childress

Who is the Faculty Advisor?

Dr. Ed Bengtson

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose of this study is to explore how design-based action research influences learner agency in our school as determined by teacher perceptions. Learner agency for the purpose of this study includes teacher agency and student agency. My goals are to understand teacher perceptions as they work to increase learner agency and to determine if learner agency of students and teachers and collective efficacy of the teachers in my Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school increase through their engagement in a process of design-based action research to investigate learner agency.

Who will participate in this study?

Teachers in this Northwest Arkansas urban elementary school will be the participants in this study. There are expected to be between 16 and 25 participants.

What am I being asked to do?

Your participation will require the following: a one hour one on one interview with the principal researcher, a possible additional one-hour focus group session with your peers, and complete transparency and truthfulness in your answers

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

I acknowledge that it may be uncomfortable sharing your perceptions with me because I am your principal, and I ask that you see me as a researcher that wants the complete understanding of your perceptions. There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

There are no anticipated benefits to the participants of this study.

How long will the study last?

This interview will last one hour. If you are asked to participate in a follow-up focus group, that experience would last an additional hour. This study will take one to two hours of your time.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?

There will be no compensation for the participants in this study.

Will I have to pay for anything?

There will be no cost associated with the participation of this study.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?

If you do not want to participate in this study, you may refuse to participate now or at any time during the study. Your job will not be affected in any way if you refuse to participate.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and the University of Arkansas policy. Audio recordings of interviews and focus groups and transcriptions of those audio recordings will be stored electronically and secured by password protection. The devices they are stored on will be locked in my office or in my home. Data will be shared anonymously to protect participant identity.

Will I know the results of the study?

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Ed Bengtson at egbengts@uark.edu or principal researcher, Dawn M. Childress at dmchildr@uark.edu. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Principal Researcher: Dawn M. Childress

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ed Bengtson

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Interviews will be conducted in a private office setting. Interviews will be semi-structured. The questions below may lead to further questioning at the time of the interview based on participants' answers.

The consent form will be read and signed prior to questioning. Teachers will be the participants of these interviews and will be instructed that they may stop the interview at any time and skip any questions that they are not comfortable answering. I will also explain that the interview is completely voluntary and that they are not required to participate. I will remind teachers that for the purposes of this interview process that I want to hear their true perceptions and that anything they share will not impact our working relationship in any way. I will explain that for the purposes of this study that I am a University of Arkansas doctoral student conducting research.

Warm-up Questions:

- Tell me about yourself as a teacher.
- How long have you been teaching?
- How long have you taught in this school?
- What are your feelings about this school?

Research Question # 1

- Can you describe what action research is?
- Tell me about the action research you have engaged in this school year.
- Describe the process you have been involved in.
- Tell me what you now know about learner agency.

- What are your feelings about learner agency?
- Has your practice changed any based on what you have learned through the action research process? Please describe how it has changed or why it has not changed.
- What have been the most valuable parts of the action research process?
- How do you think the action research process could be improved?
- Have you faced any barriers to increasing learner agency in your students?

Research Question #2:

- Have you seen any evidence of increased learner agency in your students? (ex. Purpose, ownership, motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, voice, choice)
- Have you experienced any level of increased learner agency in yourself? In the other teachers?

Research Question #3:

- Have you noticed any differences in our teachers' attitudes about how they can impact student achievement since we began this action research?
- Are you able to give me some examples?
- Has your teacher efficacy been impacted by your action research? In what ways?

Follow-up Questions:

- What do you think our next steps should be in relation to learner agency?
- Is there anything else you want to share with me about learner agency, our PLC, action research, or collective teacher efficacy?

Appendix D

Focus Group Protocol

The focus group will be conducted in a private conference room setting. The focus group will be semi-structured. The questions below may lead to further questioning at the time of the focus group based on participants' answers.

The consent form will be read and signed prior to questioning. Teachers will be the participants of this focus group and will be instructed that they may stop their participation in the focus group at any time and skip any questions that they are not comfortable answering. I will also explain that the focus group is completely voluntary and that they are not required to participate. I will remind teachers that for the purposes of this focus group process that I want to hear their true perceptions and that anything they share will not impact our working relationship in any way. I will explain that for the purposes of this study that I am a University of Arkansas doctoral student conducting research.

These questions arose from the interview process.

Warm Up:

Throughout the interviews, several teachers mentioned that they would like to discuss the action research that we engaged in with other teachers outside of their teams. This is that opportunity.

Questions:

- Has anything surprised you about the Action Research Process?

- Did you all understand or see the value of the action research before we engaged in it?
- Do you feel more empowered in any way since you've been going through the action research process this year? Explain.
- There is a common theme in the data that the action research has been overwhelming. What was overwhelming about the action research?
- Can you describe your students' experiences with learner agency?
- This is your opportunity to share with each other about the action research to increase learner agency. What would you like to share with your peers?
- Does anyone have anything further to share or any questions?

Appendix E

IRB Exemption Document



To: Dawn Michelle Childress
From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
IRB Committee
Date: 03/05/2019
Action: **Exemption Granted**
Action Date: 03/05/2019
Protocol #: 1812167897
Study Title: Teachers Engaging in Action Research to Increase Learner Agency

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Ed Bengtson, Investigator