At the Core of School Reform: A Culture of Commitment, Collaboration, and Collective Leadership

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AT THE CORE OF SCHOOL REFORM: A CULTURE OF COMMITMENT, COLLABORATION, AND COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

A Dissertation
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
in
Educational Leadership

by
Lari Ann Nelson
December 2014
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Approved by:

Dr. Louie Rodriguez, Committee Chair, Education
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ABSTRACT

Public education in America today is a product of more than a century of reform. Innovators of each era have attempted to transform the education system to match their ideals and beliefs. Educational reform efforts to improve learning for all students have been an issue of debate since the founding of America – seeking for equality and quality of education. The most recent educational initiative an emphasis on accountability via high-stakes tests, many schools are now branded as “failing” and requiring program improvement. As such, leaders search for reform models that will save their school from further sanctions.

Of the plethora of scientifically-based reform models available to schools, one urban elementary school in southern California chose to adopt and implement the Core Knowledge Sequence to bring new life to their school. This study explores elements of school culture necessary for a school reform effort to thrive. Research has indicated that teachers who work in a supportive culture are committed, collaborative, and are able to participate in significant decision-making maintain their motivation and satisfaction in teaching – which is at the core of successful school reform (Huberman, 1993; Helsby & McCulloch, 1996).

This case study explores the experiences of teachers at one elementary school as they initiate a reform effort using the Core Knowledge program. Core Knowledge is based on the premise that a grade-by-grade core of common learning is necessary to ensure a sound and fair elementary education. It is not
a curriculum per say, but rather the specific content taught. This study examines faculty members’ perspectives on their school’s culture as they begin the implementation process of this program.

In addition to learning about how each participant defines, describes, and experiences the school culture, efforts were made to determine how and in what ways certain strategies were utilized to change, maintain, or contribute to the development of the current school culture—through the lens of how teacher commitment, collaboration, and shared leadership influenced its reform efforts. Further, the impact of external stressors on school culture was explored with a focus on the challenges to maintain a positive work and learning environment. The data in this study provides insight that can help other schools undergoing a similar reform effort.
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To my mother and grandmother—two of the finest role models a person could have. Thank you for your love and great examples of passionate teaching and compassionate service to others.

Lastly, to my brother Troy for his continual support and encouragement to finish what I started!
DEDICATION

To my mother and grandmother, two of the greatest teachers I know.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The American school system has a long history of reform efforts. The emphases of most reform efforts have included programs designed to improve areas specific to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. However, no matter how remarkable the reform design may be, “nothing will take hold until the culture is right. Programs will not improve until people improve” (Hawkins & Wagner, 2008 p. 6). In order for a school organization to have long-lasting success with a reform effort, they must first build and shape a culture that can serve as a firm foundation.

Many researchers have defined school culture and climate. Some use the words interchangeably; others delineate the difference between the two. Most commonly, climate is referred to describe those physical things that can easily be seen by observers, whereas culture describes the underlying belief and value systems of the organization’s members. There are various instruments available that schools can utilize to measure the climate and culture of their school community, specifically focusing on variables such as trust, openness, cooperation, leadership, vision, and instruction.

Prior research on this topic has found that schools with successful and effective reform efforts have a positive culture with a strong conviction of student learning. These schools contribute their positive culture to strong commitment to the program, school, and students; effective teacher collaboration based on
trust, openness and unity; and a sense of teacher empowerment in decision
making (Huberman, 1993; Helsby & McCulloch, 1996). Schools desiring to
implement a successful school reform program must first build and shape their
culture around these ideals before real change can take root (Freiberg, 1998). In
other words, culture is influential in improving schools (Gruenert, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers at
one elementary school as they initiate the reformation process using Core
Knowledge. Core Knowledge is based on the premise that a grade-by-grade
core of common learning is necessary to ensure a sound and fair elementary
education. It is not a curriculum per say, but rather the content to be taught.
The goal was to gain a better understanding of teachers’ perspective of
implementing the Core Knowledge Sequence. This study examines faculty
members’ perspectives on their school’s culture, including teacher commitment,
teacher collaboration, and shared leadership, and how it influences its reform
efforts of becoming a Core Knowledge School. In addition to learning about how
each participant defines, describes, and experiences the school culture, efforts
were be made to determine how and in what ways certain strategies were
utilized to change, maintain, or contribute to the development of the current
school culture. Further, the impact of external stressors on school culture was
explored with a focus on the challenges to maintain a positive work and learning
environment. The data in this study provides insight that can help other schools undergoing a similar reform effort.

Research Questions

How do faculty at one Core Knowledge school experience, describe, and define the school culture during school reform efforts?

- What commonalities emerge among teachers who are committed and able to sustain school reform efforts?
- What is the role of teachers in supporting the school change process?
- How do teachers, if at all, experience, describe, and define a school culture that empowers teachers?

Definition of Terms

1. Culture: the behaviors, values, and beliefs of the members of an organization in regards to their interactions with one another. These rules for working together are generally unspoken and unwritten. Culture is a powerful component that shapes a person’s work satisfaction, work relationships, and work practices.

2. Climate: the part of culture that is easily seen by anyone interacting with the organization. The unique tone of the building, the feelings one has while in the building, and the order of things broadens the definition of school climate.
3. Professional Learning Communities: “those environments that foster mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as the professional staff work and learn together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone (DuFour & Eaker, 2008, p.6).

4. Core Knowledge: an educational reform movement developed by E. D. Hirsh, Jr in 1986 based on the premise that a grade-by-grade core of common learning is necessary to ensure a sound and fair elementary education.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational reform has involved everything from curricular changes to community involvement. Newman (1991) writes, “The history of education in America has been punctuated repeatedly with powerful slogans that mobilize the energy of practitioners, researchers, and policy makers, recent cultural literacy, and effective schools” (p. 9). This study explores the experiences of teachers at one elementary school as they initiate the reformation process, using Core Knowledge.

This literature review will explore elements of school culture necessary for a school reform effort to thrive. Research has indicated that teachers who work in a supportive culture are committed, collaborative, and are able to participate in significant decision-making maintain their motivation and satisfaction in teaching – which is at the core of successful school reform (Huberman, 1993; Helsby & McCulloch, 1996). To better understand these elements of a supportive culture, the first section of this chapter will present research on school culture, teacher commitment, teacher collaboration, and teacher empowerment.

Because this study will be conducted at a school implementing Core Knowledge, it is necessary to have a better understanding of this educational reform. To this end, the second section of this chapter will include the history of education in America and an overview of major reform efforts, including Core
Knowledge. A description of Core Knowledge and research on the teacher’s role in implementing Core Knowledge will also be shared.

Section 1: School Culture

Schmoker (1999) claimed that cultural transformation should be at the core of any school reform effort. Reform efforts will not be effective until schools have a clear definition of culture and can to identify their present culture. Culture and climate have many definitions; in some cases they are used in the same context, but each is distinctly different (Bulach et al., 2008). Bulach et al. (2008) made the distinction between climate and culture defining climate as the organization that can be seen in schools by all stakeholders and identified culture as the unseen beliefs and values of the faculty. They illustrated this idea using an analogy of an iceberg. Climate is the tip of the iceberg because it is the part that is seen, while the culture is the larger unseen portion beneath the surface. Gruenert (2008) claims, “If culture is the personality of the organization, then climate represents that organization’s attitude” (p. 58).

Culture is a powerful component that shapes a person’s work satisfaction, work relationships, and work practices. Culture is something that cannot be seen, except through its physical manifestations in the work place. The culture of an organization can be identified by looking at the facilities, listening what the employees brag about, seeing what members wear, observing how they interact with others, examining daily work practices, etc. - similar to how one gets a feeling about another person’s character. Culture is the behavior that results
when a group arrives at a set of - generally unspoken and unwritten - rules for working together. Barth (2006) defines culture as “how we do things here.”

In his book *On Purpose: How Great School Cultures Form Strong Character* (2011), Samuel Carter identifies four common traits of great school culture. He studied twelve schools to identify features that contributed to each school’s extraordinary culture. Within this study, he finds four overarching themes about how school cultures are made and how great school cultures drive achievement, namely:

1. A strong belief that culture determines outcomes
2. A nurturing but demanding culture
3. A culture committed to student success
4. A culture of people, principles, and purpose

A school’s performance will never improve until the school culture is one where people feel valued, safe, and share the goal of self-improvement (Delisio, 2006). Positive school culture has been recognized as the foundation of successful schools and a strong predictor of the academic success of students (Van Horn, 2003).

An organization’s culture determines its climate (Gruenert, 2008). The unique tone of the building, the feelings one has while in the building, and the order of things broadens the definition of school climate. An effective educational system is built on creating a learning climate that is engrained in its culture to motivate its members to do their best, encourage them to be creative,
and challenge all their learning senses. The culture and climate of a school, like any other organization, determines whether or not the school can achieve excellence (Gottfredson & Hollifield, 1988).

Witcher (1993) identified characteristics of positive school climate to include an emphasis on academics, an ambience of caring, a motivating curriculum, professional collegiality, and closeness to parents and community in her definition. She found that within such schools, an atmosphere or climate that generates high faculty morale is evidenced by increased job satisfaction along with a feeling of connectedness and an increased sense of school pride. Pepper & Thomas (2002) concur, adding that teachers in a school with a positive climate experience less job-related stress and burnout and the school has a lower attrition rate.

Haynes (1997) expounds on the phenomenon of school climate as multidimensional, stating, “In general, school climate refers to the quality and consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community that influence children’s cognitive, social, and psychological development. These interactions include those among staff, among students, and between home and school” (p. 322). In particular the principal’s influence on school climate impacts the feelings that teachers have about their work (Littrell, Billingsley & Cross, 1994). Teachers who believe their principal to be supportive find work more rewarding and experience a more productive and motivating work environment.
The experience of the teachers working in a school with a positive climate benefits the learning and success of their students (Van Horn, 2003).

The importance of including at least some measure of school climate in any educational reform effort is clear. Freiberg (1998) explains that a healthy school climate contributes to effective teaching and learning. According to Freiberg the reverse is true, that an unhealthy environment may be a substantial barrier to learning. To illustrate his point, he explains that much like the air we breathe, school climate may be ignored until it becomes foul.

According to Hoy and Tarter (1997), a healthy school climate is one where the integrity of the academic programs is continuously upheld, teachers are protected from unreasonable outside pressure, and principals earn the respect of their teachers as well as their superiors. The principal leads by example and the teachers respond with collective spirit of collegiality, enthusiasm, and commitment that spreads throughout the organization. Schools with a healthy climate have been shown to positively impact students (Hoy, 1991), as well as the level of job satisfaction experienced by the teachers (Taylor & Tashakorri, 1994). The students in a healthy school respect the academic achievement of their peers and there are harmonious interpersonal relations at all levels in the organization.

In contrast, Hoy and Tarter (1997) describe a sick school climate as one that is constantly under attack from within and without. In a sick school, parents and other influential community groups interfere with the goals of the
organization. The principal is powerless to buffer the faculty from the excessive outside influences and is unsuccessful in settling disputes that arise between faculty members – resulting in low teacher morale and, ultimately, poor student achievement.

Because the health of a school’s culture can greatly impact teacher morale and their effectiveness to improve student achievement, it is important to recognize how culture can evolve and change in the midst of the change process. **The Change Process and School Culture**

Strategies for reform or improvement can be developed according to the unique characteristics of schools. Fullan (2002) states that to begin the change process there must first be a moral purpose. Moral purpose means acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of the people it affects. He says leaders must understand the change process. They must understand the complexity involved in change. The single common factor to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve. There must be the creation and sharing of new knowledge. People won’t share information unless they are committed to the project and that also includes that they believe there is a moral purpose (Fullan, 2002).

Change creates disequilibrium, which can be uncomfortable. Teachers must understand what is happening and make sense of the process for themselves (Fullan, 2002). Once they start to make meaning of the change and it has coherence, new patterns in culture may emerge. When the changes are
perceived positively it creates energy, enthusiasm, and generates other positive changes.

Fullan (2002) states that schools can improve “literacy and numeracy scores in the short run, while the moral and working conditions of teachers deteriorates over the mid to long run. To accomplish lasting reform, we need fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and of the teaching profession itself” (p. 3). Fullan further claims that in many organizations, the “problem is not the absence of innovations, but the presence of too many disconnected, episodic, piecemeal, superficial implementations” (p. 12). Hong (1996) shares her experiences in her book Surviving School Reform: A Year in the Life of One School. She conveyed “the odd juxtaposition of drudgery and exhilaration that comes with school change” (p. xvii). She describes how change in the 1980s and 1990s (with reform efforts such as cooperative learning, whole language, hands-on math, technology, mainstreaming special education students, and multi-age grouping) can affect a school community in deep, personal way.

In order for reform efforts to work, there must be a culture of teacher commitment, collaboration, and collective decision-making (teacher empowerment). Hong states:

As each school embarks on its own path to change, each school creates itself. Given enough time, critical support, and latitude to make its own way, a school can develop a shared history with an internal ethic and
culture to provide consistent direction and stability while each change is being absorbed, in the process, individuals within the school community begin to develop a bone-deep commitment to the program that they themselves are helping reality, they discover that they perhaps can make the impossible possible (Hong, 1996, p. 185).

A Culture of Commitment

Regardless of the origin, all school reform models have the common goal of improving education either with school-wide efforts or in a specific area. Despite program design or funding available, ultimately the success of the reform depends on keeping major stakeholders, including the teachers, committed to the change over time.

Policymakers have assumed that problems in schools are directly linked to lack of direction, excessive discretion, and low accountability within the educational system. Therefore, most school reform initiatives have assumed that changing one specific design element would change what happens in the delivery of instruction in the classroom. This reasoning implied that the existing conditions could best be corrected through external regulation and bureaucratic control (Rowan, 1990). However, creating a culture that will sustain real change must have strong teacher commitment. Sarason (2002) claims those who will be the object of change (i.e. teachers) must understand why the change is necessary and what the change means for them. They must be willing participants and must invest or ‘buy-in’ to the cause.
Nias (1989) studied 54 elementary schools over a 20-year period. One contributing factor to success of schools was the on-going commitment of the teachers to create an educational environment dedicated to student learning and academic success. The researchers found that the word ‘commitment’ appeared in almost every interview. Commitment was used to describe teachers who are ‘caring’, ‘dedicated’ and who ‘take the job seriously’. Committed teachers shared that they often felt a sense of professional pride and job satisfaction; while those with lesser commitment declared that the demands put upon teachers are a great a burden and life consuming (Nias, 1981).

Another study described committed teachers as:

Displaying…degrees of dedication and commitment, working long hours as a matter of course and accepting the open ended nature of the task involved…(making)…the maximum effort to do the best [they] possibly can and a constant quest for improved performance. (Helsby et al., 1997, pp. 9,10)

Teacher commitment is also associated with the words: courage, integrity, honesty, caring, and fairness (Jackson, 1993). Other indicators of teacher commitment include enthusiasm for the job and the people with whom one works.

Day (2007) found:

Teachers who are committed have an enduring belief that they can make a difference to the learning lives and achievements of students (efficacy
and agency) through who they are (their identity), what they know (knowledge, strategies, skills) and how they teach (their beliefs, attitudes, personal and professional values embedded in and expressed through their behaviors in practice settings) (p. 12).

Sarason (2002) claims that “between the beginning and end points of the change is psychological space empty of the turmoil of personal change. Wish and hope blot out what they have previously experienced about personal change” (p. 31). He points out that “resistance to change should be regarded as a given from day one even if it is not overt” (p. 32). Even when school personnel willingly say that they will participate in change efforts, there are “the forms, depths, and subtle manifestations” of resistance that they will experience (p.30). Therefore, teacher commitment should be a key consideration to sustain teachers’ effectiveness when implementing a reform change.

A school culture that recognizes and appreciates teacher commitment is an essential factor to maintain and increase further commitment, as well. On the other hand, cultures that put total emphasis on student performance on high-stakes testing or highly invested initiatives, teachers often feel judged for what they do (Day, 2005). Collaborative cultures enhance teacher involvement which likely leads to and sustains teacher commitment (Rosenholtz, 1989).

A Culture of Collaboration

The term collaboration is used by school personnel to describe interactions between individuals working to find solutions to an identified problem students may have – this can range from as few as two individuals talking
informally in the hall to a group or team of teachers meeting to develop a specific plan. Although collaboration has many definitions, it essentially means an interactive process involving individuals with varying levels of expertise who work together to solve a mutually-defined problem (Idol, Nevin, & Paolucci-Whitcomb, 1994).

The term *culture of collaboration* was coined by the research conducted by Nias, Southworth, and Yeomans (1994). They described a collaborative culture as “the relationships between staff as people and the ways in which these influence their collective sense of purpose and commitment to fulfilling their roles in schools” (p. 258). In the schools they studied, this type of culture appears to be founded upon qualities of openness, trust, and support among teachers. Louis, Marks & Kruse (1996) identify five elements that foster a collaborative culture: shared values, focus on student learning, collaboration, de-privatized practice, and reflective dialogue (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995). There is a growing body of literature supporting the position of teachers’ growth and development when they work in collaboration - teaching each other, learning together, and focusing on the successes and challenges of educating students (DeFour & Eaker, 1998).

Fullan (2002) offers the following key ideas related to creating and sustaining a collaborative culture throughout the change process:
Professional learning communities are essential. People in a learning community must have a common culture of expectations and must be held accountable.

Building relationships with and among teachers can have a “profound and multiplying effect on the overall climate of the organization” (p.7).

Effective learning communities share knowledge and collaborate, often creating organizational innovations while maintaining coherence.

Learning communities must have access to appropriate materials and resources.

The culture of the organization must include sharing of information. In turn, sharing of information creates a collaborative culture, which cycles back to more sharing.

Gates (2010) stated, “Teachers hold the key to school reform. Professional learning communities- as well as other related strategies, including collaborative and distributive models of leadership - offer much that is promising” (p. 272). Schools that promote a collaborative environment, also referred to as a professional learning community (DeFour & Eaker, 1998), change the relationship of teachers to their colleagues – thereby reducing the feelings of isolation so common in schools.

Teachers need to be involved in learning in their own community as a community of professional learners (Fullan, 1995). Collaborative communities encourage colleagues to share goals and objectives, learn together, support and
learn from one another, and contribute their own ideas for the greater good; teachers, thereby gain confidence for changing their practice to better meet students’ needs (Lieberman, 1992; Lasley, Matczynski & Williams, 1992). Teacher collaboration must be based on mutual respect, collegiality, and a shared sense of responsibility and accountability (Cook and Friend, 1991). Participants profit from others’ diverse perspectives, training, and experience. Collaboration gives teachers an opportunity to work together to bring about school change. School-based teacher collaboration stimulates greater improvements in teaching and learning, facilitates implementing effective change and provides possibilities for new models of professional development based on shared reflection in the workplace. Teacher collaboration has also been linked in a positive way to teachers’ sense of self-efficacy (Tarter, Sabo, & Hoy, 1995).

In a study conducted in two elementary schools regarded as having exemplary professional learning communities, Gates (2010) identified teachers’ collaboration, shared decision making, and leadership as means for development and innovation. Teachers utilized their personal strengths when dividing up tasks amongst the group and learned from each other as the group shared classroom successes.

Wagner (2001) found that as teachers learn to work together the traditional roles of autonomy and individuality eventually change into a broader sense of community responsibility for learning. As teachers continue to invest in and gain from their collaboration, they find increased commitment to achieve
their goals and feel empowered with the right and responsibility to determine needed changes in the school organization.

**A Culture of Collective Leadership**

Because a critical element of change is to improve the teaching and learning process, much research has emphasized the need to include the empowerment of teachers in school reform (Short, Greer, & Michael, 1991; Blasé & Blasé, 1994; Lightfoot, 1986; Maeroff, 1988). In his book *Improving School from Within*, Barth (1990) points out, “Many are coming to believe that those closest to students and those likely to be most affected by the decisions, should make them” (p. xiii).

The idea of empowerment encompasses the active role of teachers in decision making, shared governance, and collective leadership - particularly on issues affecting the teachers themselves (Blasé & Blasé, 1994). Lightfoot (1986) described empowerment as the opportunities a person has for autonomy, responsibility, choice and authority. Rinehart (1998) defined empowerment as “a process whereby school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems” (p. 65). Another way to think about empowerment is “to consider it as part of a process or an evolution — an evolution that goes on whenever you have two or more people in a relationship” (Pastor, 1996, p. 5).

In their book *Leaders* (1985), Bennis and Nanus declare,

When the organization has a clear sense of its purpose, direction, and desired future state and when this image is widely shared, individuals are
able to find their own role…. This empowers individuals and confers status upon them because they can see themselves as part of a worthwhile enterprise. They gain a sense of importance, as they are transformed from robots blindly following instructions to human beings engaged in a creative and purposeful venture. When individuals feel that they can make a difference and that they can improve the society in which they are living through their participation in the organization, then it is much more likely that they will bring vigor and enthusiasm to their tasks and that the results of their work will be mutually reinforcing. Under these conditions, the human energies of the organization are aligned toward a common end, and a major precondition for success has been satisfied (p. 83-84).

Empowerment entails an emphasis on practices that promote opportunities for collective leadership, rather than simply focus on the outcomes of the reform process (Michael, Short, & Greer, 1991, p. 5-25). Sergiovanni (1995) states that, “Empowerment is when everyone is free to do the things that make sense to them — providing the decisions about what they do, embody the values that are shared . . . it is the natural complement to accountability” (p. 134-135).

Empowerment emerges as a result of increasing teachers’ status, knowledge, and participation in the change efforts. It provides teachers with “the
power to exercise one’s craft with quiet confidence and to help shape the way the job is done” (Maeroff, 1988, p. 474). Starratt (1995) suggests, 

Empowerment is not a process of administrators’ giving power to teachers . . . rather, it is a process that involves mutual respect, dialogue, and invitations; it implies recognition that each person enjoys talents, competencies and potentials that can be exercised in responsible and creative ways within the school setting for the benefit of children and youth. (p. 42) 

Bolin (1989) described empowerment as giving teachers the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and to exercise professional judgment about what and how to teach. Lucas, Brown, and Markus (1991) identified empowerment as a function of the readiness of building level administrators to share their autonomy with those whose commitment is necessary to make the educational program function at the highest degree of efficiency. Lee (1991) agreed, defining teacher empowerment as “the development of an environment in which the teachers act as professionals and are treated as professionals” (p. 36). He explained that empowerment involves teachers being provided with the authority to make decisions, a planning time within the school day to work with colleagues, and to be actively involved in efforts to deepen their knowledge and improve their teaching.

Barth (1988) concluded that schools should develop a community of leaders, whose mission would be to insure that all school personnel become
school leaders in some ways and at some times. The research on site-based management theory indicates that employee performance improves when power is shifted to the site level and when teachers have involvement in decision making; are given the power to act on their decisions; and have the proper information and expertise to ensure that the decisions are well-informed (Heck, 1995; Wohlstetter, 1994). According to Lambert (1995), for teachers to feel empowered with leadership opportunities, the organization must establish:

- A culture of reflective and interactive learning can take place;
- Structures allow for engaging conversations from which meaning and knowledge can be constructed; and
- Structures where professionals are encouraged to seek collective meaning and collective purpose grounded in their practice.

Louis and Marks (1997) centered their analysis on the empowerment of teachers as an essential condition for constructing an intellectually focused school culture. The impact of teacher empowerment was directly related to the implementation of a professional learning community. Essential features include shared norms, focus on student learning, collaborative activity, de-privatization of practice, and reflective dialogue (DuFour, 1995).

Teacher empowerment is often associated with teacher autonomy. The concept ‘teacher autonomy’ has been defined in many different ways, including being multi-faceted – control, influence, and authority, and as the teacher perceiving him/herself to be a participant or shareholder (Sergiovanni & Carver,
A common element that the definitions share is that autonomy refers to the freedom and power of the teachers in their professional activities (Castle, 2004; Friedman, 1999; Short, 1994).

Louis and Kruse (1995) conducted case studies in five urban school districts serving high-need populations over a three-year period. They concluded teacher empowerment was not enough; rather, teachers must be involved in the decision-making in regards to changes in policy and practice. The faculty of these schools collaborated to create common goals, vision, and norms, thereby having a common set of convictions about students and instruction. However, this study also found that the creation of learning communities was not an automatic consequence of teacher empowerment or school autonomy; rather structural supports must be established and maintained in order to sustain change.

Kreis (2001) places the feeling of autonomy on the top layer of Maslow’s Pyramid of Hierarchical Needs, just under the ultimate step of self-actualization. She supports her claim with the article Work in American (1973) which states that worker want, above all else, is to “become masters of their immediate environments and to feel that their work and they themselves are important…” (p. 110). In Kreis’ study, Autonomy: A Component of Teacher Job Satisfaction (2001), she asked 60 school teachers rate their perception of autonomy inside the classroom, and an overall perception of autonomy within their current
teaching position. Kreis found that teacher job satisfaction is positively related to classroom autonomy.

Planning for instruction plays a crucial role in helping teachers feel autonomy, especially when they are able to design unique learning experiences for their students. The role of the teachers in planning, making their own decisions and modifications as they adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their classroom of students and school objectives, is vital (Ben-Peretz, 1990). This feeling of autonomy continues as teachers not only plan activities, but also the actual delivery of that instruction in the classroom (Ozturk, 2012). Teachers’ active participation in curriculum reform efforts is particularly important.

However, with rigorous state and national standards, many school districts have adopted instructional programs that are highly structured, labor intensive, and time consuming. Therefore, supporting creative and self-governing teachers has become more challenging for schools. Teachers no longer feel at liberty to take advantage of a teachable moment at the risk of leaving the scripted curriculum. Some school cultures allow teachers to use materials in a flexible way to teach the standards, while other schools rigidly implement programs.

Conclusion of Section 1

The above review of literature identifies elements of culture necessary for school reform efforts to be successful, namely: teacher commitment, collegial collaboration, empowerment, and collective leadership. To put this research and best practices in context of current school reform efforts, the next section of this
chapter will include the history of education in America and an overview of major reform efforts, including Core Knowledge.

Section 2: School Reform in America

School reform is generally initiated as “planned efforts to change schools in order to correct perceived social and educational problems” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p.4).

The history of educational reform in America is a story of ambitious individuals with lofty ideas, continual struggles, and achieved successes. Public education in America today is a product of more than a century of reform. Innovators of each era have attempted to transform the education system to match their ideals and beliefs. Educational reform efforts to improve learning for all students have been an issue of debate since the founding of America. From the opening of the first known American public school established in 1635 through today, educators and community members have debated how the American government can best educate its citizens, including school standards, curricula, and methods.

The promise of equality and quality of education has been at the foundation of American culture. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (2009) points out that:

Thomas Jefferson’s plan for the common school aimed to secure not only the peace and safety of the Republic, but also social fairness and the best leaders. He outlined a system of elementary schooling that required all children, rich and poor, to go to the same school so that they would get an equal chance regardless of who their parents happened to be. (p. 5)
In the book *The Making of Americans* (2009), Hirsch claims “Our educational thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the schools as the central and main hope for the preservation of democratic ideals and the endurance of the nation as a republic” (p. 3). The founding fathers of America believed that in order for this nation to succeed, its citizens must be taught about democracy and commerce so that they could make informed decisions that would strengthen their government and unity as a nation.

In the 1700s, Thomas Jefferson made several attempts at reforming American schools - when during this time teaching of religious beliefs was emphasized and children spent time memorizing recitations. Horace Mann, later known as the father of universal public education, seconded Jefferson’s conception that democracy required a common school where children were taught the knowledge and skills necessary to remain economically independent and free (Hirsh, 1996). During the early 1800s, education continued to play a major role in preparing citizens for democracy and commerce; however, curriculum taught varied from school to school and most teachers only had an elementary education themselves (Jackson, 2008).

In the mid-1800’s, the concept of a free, universal public school for all children became prominent point of discussions. Eventually, this concept of universal education grew to involve three basic components. First, the schooling is open to all, regardless of religion, financial means, gender, or race; and the school is attended by a wide spectrum of the children in a given community.
Second, the schools are controlled by state and local government and supported with public funds—primarily by local property taxes and state income or sales taxes. Third, core knowledge, skills, and values are conveyed in all the schools within a given district or state, for the benefit of the child, the community, and society (Jackson, 2008).

**Reform Movements of the 20th Century**

One major reform effort of the twentieth century was progressive education. The main components of the progressive education movement included a child-oriented pedagogy, broad preparation of students for adult life, and preparation of students to build a better American society. Building upon the progressive philosophies of John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, and Edward Thorndike, educators turned from teaching by rote memorization to a more child-centered pedagogy. They believed that children were naturally curious about the world around them and should be skillfully guided to explore their interests. This included the belief that teachers should provide opportunities for students to succeed, rather than have repeated failure. They also believed that the child should have choices in what to learn and how to learn it; the obtainment content and skill knowledge would be left to learn in adulthood when one actually needed it (Jackson, 2008).

Traditionalists, on the other hand, opposed progressive education declaring that progressive teaching practices were not as effective as a traditional focus on basic skills and a rigorous curriculum (Traub, 2000). People in this camp his theory believed that public schools should prepare boys and
girls for adult responsibility through systematic training in reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and English and through discipline and obedience. Bagley, a professor of education at the University of Illinois and editor of *School and Society*, insisted on a common core curriculum - one that was to be “the nucleus of a common culture for the children of the nation.” He believed that maturity meant “the capacity to sustain and control effort even if the effort is not pleasurable” (Meyer, 1949, p. 152 & 155). Bagley accused public education of being weak and ineffective, contributing to the outrageous numbers of murder, assault, and other crimes (Meyer, 1949). Ravitch (2000) claims that “whenever the academic curriculum was diluted or minimized, large numbers of children were pushed through the school system without benefit of a genuine education” (p. 16).

Ravitch (1983), former assistant secretary of education during the George H.W. Bush administration, criticized progressive education but acknowledged it was so widely accepted by 1940s, that it was referred to as modern education. She claimed “education reform movements would come and go with surprising rapidity, almost randomly, each leaving its mark behind in the schools” (Ravitch, 2000, p. 16). Although Ravitch’s (2011) position on progressive education has not changed, she has significantly changed her views on education with more recent reform efforts.

In 1983, the American people became very concerned about the decreasing reading and math competencies in school – which began to decline
in the 1960s. This prompted the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Because of increased foreign economic competition and a slowing U.S. economy, *A Nation at Risk* attempted to correct conditions so that America could regain its global competitiveness, maintaining, “Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technology innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (p. 5).

Because American policy-makers have dominated school reform initiatives since the mid-twentieth century, the federal government intervened in school practices using a “reform through policy” approach. These reform efforts were driven by the basic assumption that there are fundamental flaws in the overall system of education that can be corrected by implementing some specific policies which would result in better classroom practices, greater levels of national uniformity, and increasing support by administrators and organizational structures (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988).

In 1991, President George H. W. Bush launched the major education initiative “America 2000” which established a framework to identify academic standards, measure student progress, and provide support students need to meet the standards. The Act outlined goals to be met by the year 2000 in school readiness, school completion, student academic achievement, leadership in math and science, adult literacy, safe and drug-free schools, teacher professional development, and parental participation. In response, the New
American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC) was established and charged with the responsibility to revise how the United States has traditionally organized schools. It was Bush’s hope for NASDC to initiate an “educational revolution” that would “break the mold” and “seek nothing less than a new generation of schools” (U.S. Department of Education, 1991. pp. 54-55).

NASDC was charged to identify innovative programs with world-class standards in English, mathematics, science, history, and geography that would better prepare students for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment (U.S. Department of Education, 1991. pp. 54-55). To this end, NASDC accepted proposals to identify new models for schooling that would accomplish three goals: 1) enable all students to achieve world-class standards in core academic subjects; 2) operate within existing school budgets after start-up costs; and 3) be comprehensive across a school’s systemic organization (Traub, 1999). Of the 700 proposals received, eleven were awarded funding for development and testing in June 1992.

The majority of the awarded reform models were modeled after the progressive education movement of the early-mid 20th century. Mirel (2002) stated:

Six of the eleven designs were learner-centered. Eight sought to change the relationship between teachers and students by transforming the teacher to a coach, facilitator, or guide. All promised to meet world class curriculum standards, but only two focused their learning on students’
explicitly mastering academic disciplines. Nearly all the designs promoted interdisciplinary curricula to avoid what they saw as a key problem of traditional schools: teaching knowledge and skills in isolation…This interdisciplinary focus was the widely shared commitment to use the progressive-inspired project method to engage the interest of students. (p. 68)

Progressive education critics, including E.D. Hirsh Jr. and Diane Ravitch, argued that such models have repeatedly indicated that they are only effective in schools with highly-motivated, affluent student populations, and are less successful in raising academic achievement, especially among disadvantaged children.

Recent trends have placed attention on standards-based education and student performance on standardized tests (Student Achievement, retrieved 1/1/13). Each state developed a set of standards or a list of what students should know and be able to do. The controversy lies in the inconsistency between states and the vagueness of the standards. In 2001, Congress authorized the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which was also founded on the premise of high standards and measurable goals to improve education. NCLB stipulated that federal funding, such as Title I, was “contingent upon schools teaching to state academic standards and measuring student achievement against those standards with a statewide, standardized achievement test” (EdSource, 2002, p. 4). The goal of this Act was for all students to score
proficient on state standards tests in English Language Arts and Mathematics by the year 2014. Schools and districts who failed to meet the annual yearly growth targets would be subjected to sanctions, including being labeled as a failing school. After four years with this label, schools would be sanctioned with at least one of the following: replace school staff, use new curriculum, decrease school management authority, appoint outside experts, extend school year/day, or restructure (EdSource, 2002).

As many schools are now branded as “failing” and requiring program improvement, many schools search for reform models that will save their school from further sanctions. There is a plethora of scientifically-based reform models available to schools. Some school-wide models, such as First Things First – developed in 1996 by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, call for a rigid set of curriculum, materials, and instructional strategies (Institute for Research and Reform in Education, 2006). Other reform models, such as the Coalition of Essential Schools developed in 1984 by Sizer, call for personalized instruction to address individual needs and interests (Coalition of Essential Schools, retrieved 1/1/13).

Traub (2000) visited several public schools throughout the nation specifically looking for “ambitious models for change that recreate schools from the bottom up” (para. 1) and compiled a guide of twenty-four school-wide reform models. The effectiveness of each program was rated based on quantitative measures including test scores, grades, and graduation rates. Only three of the
twenty-four models [Direct Instruction (K-6); Success for All (PreK-6); and High Schools That Work (9-12);] were rated to have strong evidence for improving student achievement – none of which were included on NASDC’s original list of the eleven reform designs (American Institute for Research, 1999.) All three were teacher-centered. In the first two models, teachers read from a script while students were directed to give choral responses. The third model offered a rigorous academic curriculum combined with a strong vocational program (Traub, 2000).

E.D. Hirsch, Jr.’s Core Knowledge was one of the twenty-four programs studied - which was rated as “promising” (Traub, 2000). Core Knowledge is unique for several reasons. First, CK has a detailed curriculum from PreSchool – eighth grade. None of the other reforms explicitly define the curriculum for language arts, history, geography, and the arts. Second, Core Knowledge does not direct teachers to use a specific method for instruction. Third, Core Knowledge does not have an implementation strategy. The Foundations prescribe techniques, but rather allows each school to implement according to their own needs.

Hirsch believed that American education needed a reform to counter the current lack of student preparation, lack of rigorous standards, and lack of a nation core curriculum. He claimed that is was essential that children gain actual knowledge in school, not just cognitive skills, because real knowledge is essential for students to make sense of and make connections to their world.
(Hirsch, 1987). He also believed that this knowledge was necessary in order for “the American population to retain a capacity to communicate across group divisions” (Finn, 1997, p. 6).

**Core Knowledge**

Because this study will be conducted at an elementary school implementing Core Knowledge, it is necessary to have a better understanding of this model. This section will review the history, philosophy, components, and criticisms of Core Knowledge, as well as recent research conducted analyzing Core Knowledge and teacher efficacy.

**Brief History of Core Knowledge.** *Core Knowledge* is a phrase used by Hirsch (1996, 1987) to describe what he sees as a common core of information necessary for all citizens to know in order to live and prosper in the American culture. Hirsch argues that because there is an overall lack of learning, there is a specific achievement gap between affluent and disadvantaged children. He believes that delivering a content-based curriculum founded on this ‘core knowledge’ will break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy, stating that cultural literacy is the only sure way to overcome "the social determinism that now condemns them to remain in the same social and educational condition as their parents" (Hirsch, 1987, preface).

In 1986, Hirsch, established the Core Knowledge Foundation, a non-profit, nonpartisan organization based on the philosophy that “Educational excellence and equity demands a strong foundation of knowledge for all children—and a coherent plan for teaching what every child needs to know”
The foundation formed an advisory committee made up of a diverse group of parents, teachers, scientists, professional curriculum experts, and consultants in multicultural traditions to analyze numerous reports from state departments of education, other professional organizations, and successful educational systems in other countries to compile a list of topics deemed to be necessary core knowledge. This list was refined and sequenced by teams of educators from three different regions across the U.S. under the assumption that children are cognitively capable of understanding challenging concepts (Core Knowledge Foundation, 1999; Ravitch, 2000; Hirsch, 2001).

Then in 1990, at a national conference sponsored by the Core Knowledge Foundation, this sequenced list – known as the Core Knowledge Sequence (CKS) – was fine-tuned by the nearly 100 school teachers, curriculum specialists, school principals, district superintendents, officers of national organizations, scientists, and representatives of various ethnic groups who attended (Hirsch, 1996; CKS, 2010). The CKS asserts to provide a sequential program of challenging topics that encourages the integration of common core standards with a coherent, cumulative, and content rich curriculum (CK Foundation, 2010; Johnson, Janisch, & Morgan-Fleming, 2001). Although the CKS has been periodically updated and revised, there is more stability than change (CKS, p. vii).

**Philosophy of Core Knowledge.** The Core Knowledge program is based on the premise that what children learn at any given moment depends on what
they already know – in essence, knowledge builds on knowledge. Additionally, that what a person knows already is a result of previous learning experiences. In a world where current events and technology are constantly changing, proponents of Core Knowledge believe there is a consistent “core” of knowledge and skills that children should know. Hirsch and his supporters believe, “Every child should learn the fundamentals of science, basic principles of government, important events in world history, essential elements of mathematics, widely acknowledged masterpieces of art and music from around the world, and stories and poems passed down from generation to generation” (CoreKnowledge.org).

Hirsch and his colleagues at the Core Knowledge Foundation have developed the Core Knowledge Sequence (1998, 2010). Realizing knowledge builds upon knowledge, and students learn grade by grade, the Core Knowledge Sequence (CKS) outlines content so that knowledge, language, and skills build cumulatively from year to year. This ensures that children enter each new grade ready to learn - with a core foundation of knowledge to build upon. This also avoids repetitions and gaps that often occur in education that is dependent solely upon teacher or student interests, i.e. “repeated units in multiple years on the rain forest, with little or no attention to the Bill of Rights, world geography, or exposure to other cultures” (http://www.coreknowledge.org/about-the-curriculum). In theory, because of the cumulative, sequential way that knowledge and skills build over time, students enter each new grade well-prepared with a shared base of knowledge and skills.
Supporters of Hirsch do not discount the knowledge and experiences of students from non-dominant sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds; rather, they propose that there is a core of knowledge that all Americans should know in order fully understand most U.S. newspapers and magazines. Hirsch’s research found that reading is not based solely on decoding sounds to make words, but that there also requires background information that is core to American society. The belief of core knowledge of Americans does not mean that background knowledge of American culture has more value than the culture of other groups. But, rather, that there is basic knowledge that Americans need to know in order to understand mainstream media - to pick up any newspaper or magazine or turn on the television and understand what is being conveyed.

To illustrate this idea, Hirsch used the following sentence: “Jones sacrificed and knocked in a run” (Hirsch, 2006a, p. 1; Hirsch, 2006b, p. 68). He points out that, although the literate person in England would be able to read this sentence and would know a meaning of each individual word, he/she might not understand what the entire sentence means (just as Americans may not understand a sentence about the British game of cricket). Hirsch proposes that mainstream America (writers, news commentators, politicians, educators, etc.) assume that their audience possesses “relevant background knowledge that goes beyond vocabulary and syntax – relevant knowledge that is far boarder than the words of the sentence” (Hirsch, 2006a, p. 1).
He further explained that in order for the average person from the United Kingdom citizen to understand the sentence, ‘Jones sacrificed and knocked in a run’, the writer would need to provide the necessary background knowledge – i.e. Jones was at bat, what a baseball bat is, the concept of innings and outs and what a run is, the baseball diamond and bases, what a fly or a bunt is, etc., which would require a whole book to be written just to understand that one sentence.

The Core Knowledge *Foundation* claims their Sequence provides the specificity needed by clearly identifying important knowledge in language arts, history, geography, math, science, and the fine arts. Although Core Knowledge outlines content to be taught, it does not specify how it is to be taught - thereby declaring their program allows teachers to devote their energies and efforts to creatively planning how to teach the content to the children in their classrooms (http://www.CoreKnowledge.org).

In the opening letter from Hirsch found in the Core Knowledge Sequence, Hirsch (2010) states:

Today, more people recognize that a core curriculum is critical to significant educational improvement. Growing acceptance of our fundamental proposition is now being evidenced in the promising decision of several states to get behind a common core of K–12 standards in language arts and math… Standards alone are not sufficient to guarantee success. The effectiveness of the new language-arts standards will
depend on the implementation of coherent, cumulative, and content-specific grade-by-grade curricula infused into language arts and the other subjects. (Hirsch, 2010)

Although the national common core standards are finally being adopted, they still lack the specificity Hirsch advocates. For example, a common core standard states that third grade students should be able to “recount stories including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text” (CCS); however, this standard is skill-based and not content-based, which leaves the specific selection of fables, folktales, and myths up to the teacher or the textbook company – thereby inconsistencies in background knowledge across the nation.

Several years after Hirsch’s initial list of these core topics was developed (Hirsch, 1988), independent researchers investigated whether reading comprehension did in fact depend on knowledge of the topics included on this list. There was found an “unambiguous correlation between knowledge of these topics and reading comprehension scores, school grades, and other measures of reading ability” (Hirsch, 2006, p.7). One researcher examined the New York Times by computer over a period of 101 months and found that “any given day’s issue of the Times contained approximately 2,700 occurrences” of terms from Hirsch’s list, which “played a part in the daily commerce of the published language” (Willinsky, 1988).
Critics of Core Knowledge. Hirsch (2006) explains that in order for children to improve their reading comprehension, they must acquire extensive background knowledge – particularly in the early grades. In other words, teachers should spend as much time on teaching content knowledge as on explicitly teaching actual reading skills. He further claims that this is particularly important for disadvantaged minority students, who often come to school lacking the vocabulary, general knowledge of the world, and experiences of their middle-class peers – known as the knowledge deficit theory (Hirsch, 2006). Bourdieu (1977) referred to this idea as cultural capital – the accrual of cultural knowledge, skills and abilities possessed and inherited by privileged groups of society. He argued that either one is born into a family whose knowledge is deemed valuable or that one could acquire this knowledge through formal schooling.

There are many who take great offense to the knowledge deficit theory or idea of cultural capital. Researchers question the notion that children are disadvantaged if they are not born into a family whose knowledge is already considered valuable (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Delgado & Bernal, 1998, 2002; Yosso, 2005). They argue that all people, regardless of race or rank, possess valuable knowledge. However, they claim the knowledge that is recognized as most valuable is determined by the middle to upper classes and that this select group believes that others who do not possess their knowledge can be taught it through formal schooling and thereby able to become upwardly mobile on the
social ladder. Bourdieu (1977) claims the theory of social reproduction explains why minorities and disadvantaged students do not perform as well in school as their counterparts who belong to the white, middle to upper socioeconomic classes; in essence background knowledge minorities are not as valuable.

Yosso (2005) argues that when society and mainstream educational systems are founded on the idea of deficit thinking, or the belief that those without the normative cultural knowledge and skills have a ‘deficit’, they limit themselves by the “omission of the voices” of minorities (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). This, in turn, leads schools to revert to what Paulo Friere (1973) termed the ‘banking method’ or the idea that students are empty receptacles in which teachers deposit knowledge thought valuable by the dominant society.

Core Knowledge Components and Training. Schools that embrace the Core Knowledge philosophy and adopt program agree to commit to the following: to teach all of the topics in the CKS; to teach the content at the designated grade level, moving topics only to meet explicit state expectations; and to exemplify implementation practices outlined by the Core Knowledge Foundation. The Core Knowledge curriculum is meant to be taught for at least fifty-percent of the school curriculum, allowing ample freedom to address state and district requirements. Schools beginning implementation are considered Friends of Core Knowledge. Those schools wishing to be recognized as an Official Core Knowledge School must work with the Foundation in ongoing collaboration to follow an implementation and professional development plan.
Schools typically spend three to five years acquiring the professional development and resources required to implement the CKS with the high level of fidelity required to become an Official CK School (Core Knowledge Implementation Practices Guide, 2010). Once the school has earned this distinction with 100% implementation of the CKS, it can become a visitation site or model to others who are implementing or considering implementing CK curriculum.

As mentioned before, Hirsch and his colleagues at the Core Knowledge Foundation created the Core Knowledge Sequence, which specifies a common content for American schools and provides a planned, sequential curriculum in language arts, history, geography, mathematics, science, visual arts, and music for students in pre-school through eighth grade. The specific content taught at each grade level is further expounded upon in teacher handbooks upon in a series of books: What Your [First, Second, etc.] Grader Needs to Know (Core Knowledge Foundation, 1991, 1997). History and Geography textbooks and teachers’ guides are available through a third party vendor that includes all of the CK content at each grade, as well. The Foundation has recently compiled a reading program for K-3 grades that integrates much of the content for language arts, science, and social studies domains. Together, these materials form a spiraling curriculum. For example, in science all grade-levels learn about the human body, but as it spirals each year the content goes more in-depth – kindergarten begins with five senses; first grade learns the body is made up of
systems; second explores cells and the digestive and excretory systems; third grade studies the muscular, skeletal, and nervous systems, along with vision and hearing; and so on (Core Knowledge Foundation, 2010).

For schools beginning the journey to become a Core Knowledge school, the Foundation offers a variety of professional development classes. The initial three-day training includes an overview of the Core Knowledge program, development of a school-side plan, alignment of CK topics with state and district standards and assessment, information about resources and parent involvement, and lesson development and assessment. Additional workshops and webinars are offered by the Foundation, including school-site visitations to monitor and assess the school’s implementation.

As Core Knowledge provides the curriculum to be learned at each grade level, it does not mandate how the content is to be taught. Teachers often work as partners or grade level teams to design units, create activities, and write lesson plans. Many units are available to other teachers through the annual CK national conference and found online at the Foundation’s website.

Research on Core Knowledge and Teacher Efficacy. Because Core Knowledge is described as clear, specific content, some believe that this description is a euphemism for a “scripted” or “canned” program – where teachers are not able to insert their creativity into the classroom. Hirsch (1996) believes that decisions related to methods of teaching should be left to the teacher; therefore not all Core Knowledge classrooms look the same, as
teachers are permitted to tailor to their own student population and communities. Thereby, the Core Knowledge Sequence directs teachers what to teach, but does not tell them how to teach – allowing teachers to choose which techniques and strategies they will use to teach the specific content to the students in their classrooms (Core Knowledge Foundation, 2010).

Valine-Wheeler (2010) concludes that because teachers have control over planning and delivery of Core Knowledge lessons, they find the Sequence liberating, not confining. The Core Knowledge grade specific teacher handbooks contain some teaching suggestions, but they do not mandate any particular way. Because Core Knowledge provides the rich content conducive to the development of critical thinking skills, teachers are responsible for planning lessons with opportunities for students to apply the content, make connections, question the facts, analyze them, and problem solve with them.

Most teachers enjoy content that is interesting; typically finding the research and study process for Core Knowledge lessons enjoyable (Datnow, Borman, & Stringfield, 2000). In the first systematic national study of Core Knowledge in the years 1995-1998, Datnow et al found there was a high level of classroom autonomy. Their mixed-method design studied six schools that were identified by the Core Knowledge Foundation as advanced in their implementation of the program. Each school was visited a total of five times over the course of three years. Researchers conducted school staff interviews to identify the successes and challenges they faced in implementing the Core
Knowledge Sequence, as well as completed classroom observations to assess schooling experiences. During the final year of the study, teachers completed a questionnaire that included questions about the implementation of the program and the Core Knowledge topics taught. The qualitative data indicated that implementation of Core Knowledge enriched the professional lives of the teachers because they took ownership of the lesson plan activities they developed, enjoyment was added to their lives, and team cohesion among teaching staff increased. This study found that the majority of teachers “welcomed the idea of implementing a pre-established, highly specified curriculum” (p. 187). They attribute this to the fact that Core Knowledge does not ask the teachers to reform their instructional approaches (the how), but rather to change the curriculum (the what). However, “Core Knowledge [is] not a simple matter of buying materials or following a method” (CK Foundation, 1995). Additionally, the teachers in this study indicated a positive effect on their professional lives and, that although they taught the Core Knowledge content, they used progressive teaching methods – which is ironic, as Hirsch criticizes progressive methods and advocates traditional methods.

Analytical Lens

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of teachers at an urban school in California who are undergoing reform changes using the Core Knowledge Program in response to a sanction given by the federal government after being considered a failing school for four years or more.
The task of implementing the Core Knowledge Program proves the unique learning community required of a CK school. The literature is consistent of components of an effective learning community – committed teachers who share values and vision of what the school can become experience a supportive culture and exercise leadership as they create and implement the curriculum through collaboration. More simply, a school undergoing the reform requires a culture of commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership. The case study that follows will use these lenses to explore the experience of teachers as they transition to the Core Knowledge Program.

**Components of Culture for Effective School Reform**

| Commitment                      | • dedication vision/mission of school  
|                                | • enthusiasm for the job  
|                                | • belief in being able to make a difference  
|                                | • committed to change over time  

| Collaboration                   | • PLC built on mutual respect and trust  
|                                | • planning time to create engaging learning  
|                                | • sharing of knowledge and ideas  

| Collective Leadership           | • teacher empowerment  
|                                | • shared culture of expectations  
|                                | • shared decision making  
|                                | • shared responsibility and accountability  

*Figure 1. Components of culture for effective school reform.*
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

A review of the literature reveals that school climate and culture – specifically one of commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership – play an important role when implementing and sustaining school reform. The literature clearly indicates that teachers should be at the center of reform if significant and lasting changes are to occur (Fullan, 2002; Lambert, 1998; Lieberman, 2000). This study is focused on exploring the relationship between school culture and school-based reform by analyzing the thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of faculty members at one elementary school in a large urban district in southern California.

This research seeks to tell teachers’ stories about the transition to implementing the Core Knowledge program – using the analytic lenses of teacher commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership. To this end, the researcher conducted interviews with the faculty members and participants completed the Bandura’s Instrument Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale. Accordingly, the central research question for this study is:

- How does faculty at one Core Knowledge school experience, describe, and define the school culture during school reform efforts?

Sub questions include:

- What commonalities emerge among teachers who are committed and able to sustain school reform efforts?
• What is the role of teachers in supporting the school change process?
• How do teachers, if at all, experience, describe, and define a school culture that empowers teachers?

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology for this study, including the research design, description the sample, review the data collection instruments, and summary the data collection procedures.

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was chosen for this case study. The qualitative data includes semi-structure interviews and the quantitative methodology involved Bandura’s Instrument Teacher Efficacy Scale survey. The decision of a case study was selected as, according to Sarason (2002), the context is of utmost importance in order for anyone to understand the interpretations and conclusions of reformers. Stake (1995) states that we must seek to understand people and programs both for their uniqueness and commonality. To truly find the pulse of the culture of a school undergoing reform efforts, “you should talk to those who have been through the wringer” (Sarason, 2002, p. 22). A case study of one school provides multiple and diverse interpretations as seen through the eyes of the teachers who are the agents of change in the “ringer”. If the actual perspectives and experiences of those experiencing the change are not sought, nothing meaningful will be added to the literature on educational reform and school culture. Sarason (2002) cautions,
Concrete instances of why and how the experience is inevitably so fraught with pitfalls for thinking and action; why from the beginning to the end your ideas, you as a person, and those you seek to change will experience the *sturm und drang* of change. The key word here is experience of a very personal nature, the stuff we are reluctant to reveal or write about because such revelations will demonstrate the obvious. The process of planning and acting is emotionally and cognitively rough stuff and we are imperfect organisms (p. 12).

A qualitative case study design was selected for the center of this study as it contains features which allow the researcher to obtain rich descriptions and detailed information to better understand of the phenomenon under investigation. Kaplan & Maxwell (1994) propose that the goal of understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the participants and its particular social and institutional context is largely lost when textual data is quantified. The essence of a case study is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken; how they were implemented; and with what result (Yin, 1994; Schramm, 1971).

As presented in the literature review, teacher commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership all have an effect on school culture. Therefore, additional data will be collected using Bandura’s Instrument Teacher Efficacy Scale (2006) to shed some light on these teachers’ perceived empowerment to influence school culture and change. Bandura (2006) believes, because human
behavior and perceived capabilities differ depending on the domain being assessed, measurement tools must be tailored to the domain of function and its task demands. To this end, Bandura developed the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale used in this study. Bandura’s Instrument contains thirty items and is anchored in a 10 point Likert scale. There are seven subscales on this instrument to measuring teacher self-efficacy: efficacy to influence decision making, influence school resources, instructional efficacy, disciplinary efficacy, efficacy to enlist parental involvement, community involvement, and efficacy to create a positive school climate. It has a theoretical foundation (Bandura, 1986), a broad knowledge base (Bandura, 1997, 2006; Maddux, 1995, 2002), and a proven record of application in the workplace (Bandura, 1997, 2004; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Previous studies have established the construct validity of the instrument to demonstrate that teacher self-efficacy (beliefs about one’s ability to accomplish specific tasks) influences the tasks he or she chooses to learn and the goals they set for themselves. Self-efficacy also affects employees’ level of effort, motivation, and persistence (Bandura & Locke, 2003). This instrument will provide additional data regarding teacher self-efficacy as the purpose of this research is to identify the extent teacher commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership play in the development of school culture in the mist of reform change.

Sample

This study was conducted at a small K-6 elementary school in a large urban area of southern California. This school is labeled as a Program
Improvement (PI) school because they have not met the Annual Yearly Progress goals set forth by the federal government since the 2005-2006 year. Due to this sanction, the school began a site-based reform effort of changing the curriculum by implementing Core Knowledge®. At the time of this study, this particular school employed 18 fully credentialed classroom teachers and approximately 520 students. The ethnicity of the student population is: 74% Hispanic or Latino; 15% White; 4% Black; 2% Asian; 5% other. Students who are learning English as a second language comprise 42% of the total student population. This school is considered as high-poverty with 84% of students identified as socioeconomic disadvantaged (defined by those eligible to receive free/reduced price meals program).

Respondents to this study consisted of twelve faculty members who willingly volunteered to be interviewed. All participating teachers have been on staff during the time of reform model exploration and the decision to select Core Knowledge model.

Data Collection Instruments

The primary source of data was collected from semi-structure interviews with all study participants – eleven teacher and one administrator. This qualitative method was intended to discover a participant’s perceptive; a perspective, which is uniquely theirs and directly tied to their life experiences. According to Yin (2003), the qualitative aspect involved in interviewing participants as opposed to quantitative nature of surveys allows for a “guided
Table 1

Participants of Study

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Teacher pseudonym name</th>
<th>Total years taught</th>
<th>Number of years at fruit grove elementary</th>
<th>Current grade level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Arborist</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Apple</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Apricot</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Cherry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Fig</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Grape</td>
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<td>Mrs. Mango</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>K</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Orange</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Peach</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Plum</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
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</table>

conversation rather than structured queries” (p. 89). An interview that is semi-structured ensures that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee, yet allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting the information from the interviewee. The researcher had a list of questions for each topic explored: teacher commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership. All questions were asked with similar wording to each interviewee, and follow-up questions were offered if necessary to ask for clarification as well as to confirm the accuracy of their data (Cresweld, 1998).

Bandura (1997) believes that teachers’ sense of efficacy is not constant across the many different types of tasks teachers are asked to perform. Therefore, he constructed a 30-item survey which was used in this study to
compliment the interview data. This measure attempted to provide a multi-
faceted picture of teachers’ efficacy beliefs without being too narrow. Self-
efficacy has a theoretical foundation (Bandura, 1986), a broad knowledge base
(Bandura, 1997; Maddux, 1995, 2002), and a proven record of application in the
workplace (Bandura, 1997, 2004; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Bandura’s 30-
item scale points out that teacher’s sense of efficacy is not necessarily uniform
across the many tasks asked of teachers. Therefore, this measure has seven
subscales, for of which were used for this study: efficacy to influence decision
making, efficacy to influence school resources, instructional efficacy, and
efficacy to create a positive school climate. Each item was measured on a 5-
point scale anchored with the notations: “nothing, very little, some influence,
quite a bit, a great deal.” Previous studies have established the construct
validity of the instrument to demonstrate that teacher self-efficacy (beliefs about
one’s ability to accomplish specific tasks) influences the tasks he or she chooses
to learn and the goals they set for themselves. Self-efficacy also affects
employees’ level of effort, motivation, and persistence (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to conducting this study, approval was granted from the Institutional
Review Board at California State University in San Bernardino and permission
was given by the school district and site principal. Participants at the selected
school for this case study were contacted via email message explaining about
the study and inviting them to participate (Appendix #). All participants
completed a consent form (Appendix #). Appointments were made with responding volunteers to conduct an interview and a link to take the self-efficacy survey on-line was given.

In order to acquire insights into the teachers' perceptions of school reform efforts, semi-structured interviews were the primary means for data collection conducted by the researcher. Interviews were conducted in order to gather perceptions of the school’s current climate in the midst of change and what they believed the attributing factors were. The secondary data source used was a survey using the Bandura’s Instrument Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale. Each teacher signed an Informed Consent that outlined the voluntary and confidential nature of the experience (see Appendix #). Interviews with the faculty members were conducted after school hours in the teachers’ classrooms, as approved by the site principal. The duration of each interview was approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were digitally recording and later transcribed by the researcher. The online survey tool, “SurveyTool.com”, was chosen to distribute the survey and collect data.

Data Analysis Procedures

The focus of this study was to gather individual teacher responses via interview and survey. Analysis of data is necessary to guide what will be examined and for what reason. Yin (1994) describes data analysis as the process of examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of a study. He suggests the following
analytic techniques: pattern-matching, explanation-building, and time-series. Trochim (1989) argues pattern-matching as one of the most desirable analysis strategies. This method compares an empirically based pattern with a predicted one, thereby increasing the internal reliability of the study if the patterns match. As such, this was the technique used in the analysis of this study.

After the interviews were conducted, transcripts of audio tapes were made. Then the transcripts were analyzed using an open and axial coding system to identify themes and organize patterns of information to find commonalities and differences. Coffey (1996) describes the process of coding qualitative data as, “enabling the researcher to recognize and re-contextualize data, allowing a fresh view of what is there” (p. 46). Data from the teacher-efficacy scale was also compiled as added information to the study.

Limitations of Study

First, because it is impossible to control for the influence of other school variables affecting school culture in a time of change, – including school leadership, student population, and individual states of mind of the teachers – these related factors may have affected the results of the study. Second, as this was a case study focused on the culture of only one elementary school implementing Core Knowledge, findings cannot be generalized to all other schools. Finally, the researcher in this study was also an elementary principal implementing Core Knowledge in the same school district. The researcher had to become aware of her biases through the use of field notes as interviews were
conducted, as not inadvertently bias results by slanting the results of the study. The researcher took every precaution to limit researcher bias. The next section will outline further information on precautions made for validity.

Data Validation

Yin (1994) suggests using multiple sources of data as the way to ensure construct validity, as well as allowing for a triangulation of evidence. Within the qualitative phase of this study, the researcher strived for authenticity and minimizing misrepresentation. Once the digital recordings were transcribed, the researcher compared them against each other again to ensure accuracy. Additionally, the researcher utilized field notes taken during and after interviews, as well as data from the completed online teacher self-efficacy surveys to serve as a form of triangulation.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to examine how the faculty at one elementary school implementing the Core Knowledge program experience, describe, and define the school culture during school reform efforts. As the review of literature indicated, three key elements of culture are necessary for lasting reform - teacher commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership. The researcher conducted interviews with faculty members, and asked participants to complete the Bandura’s Instrument Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale. This section of the research paper presents findings gathered from these faculty participants regarding their perception on extent to which these three elements are present at their school. Accordingly, the central research question for this study was: How does faculty at one Core Knowledge school experience, describe, and define the school culture during school reform efforts? Sub questions include: What commonalities emerge among teachers who are committed and able to sustain school reform efforts? What is the role of teachers in supporting the school change process? How do teachers, if at all, experience, describe, and define a school culture that empowers teachers?

This chapter presents an analysis of data collected from twelve faculty members (see table 1) who voluntarily participated in this case study. Using the methodology outlined in Chapter 3, data were initially coded and chunked as
themes and patterns emerged. The main themes of teacher commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership, including multiple sub-themes within each, will be discussed with specific examples from this case study’s data. This chapter will be divided as follows: 1) introduction of the case study school, 2) how the Core Knowledge program was adopted, and 3) emergent themes from the data as identified via the lens of commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership.

Introduction of Case Study: Description of School Site

As described by those interviewed, Fruit Grove Elementary is a close-knit, community school. Students living within the school boundaries walk to/from the school; they do not have students bussed in from outside the neighborhood. At the time of this study, approximately 50 students were on transfer for the Core Knowledge Program and were thus transported by their parents. The staff views the small population of approximately 500 students as a benefit, because they are able to know many of the students and their families. The principal shared, “That’s helped us maintain that helpful, caring idea or culture.”

However, the small size also has its challenges. Mrs. Apricot, a teacher at Fruit Grove for 22 years, noted,

Part of the problem is the small (grade-level teacher) teams…which makes it difficult for collaboration – not because they are not willing, but because more brains are better. Also, because it is a small school and the numbers of students fluctuate, so do the numbers of teachers causing a
number of positions to disappear. So that means that not only are the teams small, but that they often change from year to year. So sometimes you're training a new person every year (personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Although there are fluctuations in the number of classroom teachers on the faculty due to the changes in class sizes and total enrollment, there is a core of teachers who have been at Fruit Grove Elementary for 20+ years. This too has been a strength, bringing a familial bond amongst staff, but also has its drawbacks. Mrs. Orange, a veteran teacher of Fruit Grove for 26 years, commented:

The biggest challenge of the school culture [is that] many of the teachers are stuck in a place. I don't know how to say this, but… an old style of teaching. Old fashioned teaching versus staying new, connected, modern and moving forward. Even the approaches to teaching, the outlooks on technology, and the way kids learn. The approaches that we have to change in education do not mean using the same basal readers, where kids sit there and teachers feed them information (personal communication, May 5, 2014).

However, according to several participating teachers, the implementation of Core Knowledge has brought a renewed enthusiasm amongst the faculty and community. Over the last two years, Fruit Grove Elementary School’s student population has grown with incoming student transfers, as well as students returning from transfers to other schools for the Core Knowledge program. This
has necessitated adding five teaching positions to their faculty for the next school year. One teacher shared, “We’ve got quite a few younger, energetic, excited teachers – especially in upper grade. We have a really strong upper grade team here. I think that we have done a really good job … of getting [students] excited to learn again” (Apricot, personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Once considered a white, middle-working class neighborhood is now laced with poverty, multiple families sharing one house, a high Hispanic and Spanish-speaking population, and parents with little education or ability to help their children at home with their school work. The language is a great barrier in communicating with the parents, as very few staff members are bilingual. Mrs. Apple shared, “We are a low-income school which sometimes means the parents aren’t that well educated and the kids don’t have the background knowledge that more affluent others may have” (personal communication, April 14, 2014).

All interviewees talked about the changing demographics of the area. Mrs. Cherry added, “[The demographics] are changing. We’re getting more kids from foster homes and with all kinds of issues. It’s getting…it’s sad. We have more kids with emotional issues.” Mrs. Fig stated:

[The school] has changed a lot in the almost 30 years I’ve been here. You still have some families that are very concerned about their children’s education. All of them are. But some of them, I’ve seen over the years,
other things have interrupted their desire to help their children get a better education – whether economics, which has been most of it, or problems that the parents are dealing with. But the socio-economic level has definitely decreased. That doesn’t mean that no one is interested in helping their child; they all are. It’s just that some have more interruptions than others or lack the ability to help them. (personal communication, May 19, 2014)

Mrs. Guava commented:

The last 10 years, the population has changed. [The school has] a totally different clientele. I hate to say it, but the parents were much more professional. Now the parent can’t help with the homework. Part of it is a language barrier and part of it is that they just don’t have the knowledge themselves because our standards and curriculum are at a much higher level than what some of our parents are used to having to deal with. So that’s a challenge. (personal communication, May 6, 2014)

Another challenge the teachers encounter is student behavior that is not conducive to learning. Mrs. Peach shared, “It just makes teaching hard when you are constantly dealing with discipline – and often don’t have the parents who will back you up” (personal communication, May 5, 2014). She continued, “I do think our discipline is lacking. There are some really out-of-control behaviors that should be taken care of in a much quicker fashion by parents and staff alike.” Another teacher commented that much of the principal’s day is dealing
with discipline, which prevents him from visiting classrooms and supporting implementation of the Core Knowledge program (Plum, personal communication, May 19, 2014).

The fact that Fruit Grove Elementary is a small, urban school with approximately 500 students and only 18 teachers, this gives the school a familial feeling; however, being small also brings them challenges. There is a core group of teachers who have been at Fruit Grove a very long time and are a tightly knit cohort. Students and their families have factors that inhibit full participation in academics, including being socioeconomically disadvantaged and speaking a language other than English. The principal’s time is spent addressing student discipline issues which prevents him from being in the classrooms. All of these factors regarding the school’s culture play an important role this case study and the overall analysis.

Choosing Core Knowledge for Fruit Grove

In the interview with the site administrator of Fruit Grove, Principal Arborist explained how the school came to choose the Core Knowledge program as an effort to reform the school. Years prior, under the vision of a new superintendent, site principals were encouraged to “brand” their school – “to put Fruit Grove on the map, so to speak, for a lack of a better term” (Arborist, personal communication, June 6, 2014) At that time, Fruit Grove had not met their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals and was identified as Program Improvement (PI) - Year 4 under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act
Principal Arborist had heard about Core Knowledge, as there was another school in his district that had adopted it the prior year and were having great success. He researched the program online and then went to visit the other school in his district. He claims,

For me, that was the sales point, because I saw in the children the excitement and engagement. I also saw, even more so, excitement and engagement in the teachers. So I thought, “This is something that every school should be doing.” So that got me to the point where I’m then in front of my teachers and selling it to them. (Arborist, June 6, 2014)

Because Principal Arborist has found that his staff responds best when he uses a “pull through” rather than a “push down” method, he first approached faculty members he views as unofficial leaders or those who have the respect of the other staff. These key leaders researched Core Knowledge online and discussed it with their grade level teammates. Many of these pivotal people were interviewed for this study and mentioned that their role in bringing Core Knowledge to Fruit Grove was as “cheerleaders”. One such key teacher commented, “So that’s what I felt my role was - to kind of be a cheerleader. Really pushing it at the beginning, but by the end, I didn’t have to push. They were sold” (Peach, personal communication, May 30, 2014.) Principal Arborist arranged for substitutes to release all of his teachers to visit the Core Knowledge school he had visited previously. Mrs. Grape remembered, “We spent a day and got to go in all the grade levels and see what the Core Knowledge program was.
We immediately jumped on board with that excitement” (personal communication, May 30, 2014). Mrs. Apple recalled,

[Mr. Arborist] went over the philosophy of it and held a discussion with the staff [to find] what's the buy-in. He told us, “If you’re not interested, you’re welcome to go somewhere else. If you’re behind it a 100%, we can do great things with it… We knew that it would be something that would require a little bit of extra work, but it would make a big difference. The attitude of everyone is really important. (personal communication, April 14, 2014)

Mrs. Lemon shared,

We wanted something different. We wanted to specialize. A lot of us liked the idea of the arts and the music. And, just being a special school. It looked like a great program and we went for it. I’m not sure everyone had enough knowledge to make the decision. I’m not sure that our school was ready to jump in with both feet. (personal communication, May 1, 2014)

Nonetheless, Fruit Grove Elementary began teaching some Core Knowledge content unit the 2012-2013 school year. Then in the spring of 2013, their restructuring plan was presented to the district school board and approved. Fruit Grove Elementary then became a “Friends of Core Knowledge” school in the fall of 2013.
Major Themes

In this next section, each major theme will be discussed with specific examples from this case study. The main themes were: teacher commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership with multiple sub-themes which were either boosters or barriers to a positive school culture (Table 2).

Table 2

Boosters and Barriers to Positive School Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher commitment</th>
<th>Boosters</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging content</td>
<td>Several new programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher excitement</td>
<td>Lack of materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student excitement</td>
<td>Lack of time to cover content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher creativity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Built in weekly planning time</td>
<td>Inefficient use of planning time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members come with individual strengths</td>
<td>Lack of materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collective commitment to the program</td>
<td>Lack of vertical communication/articulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective leadership</td>
<td>Leadership team compiled of site administrator and teacher representatives from each grade-level Staff Meetings/Weekly informational memo from administrator Individual responsibility for student achievement</td>
<td>Lack of administrative follow-through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of vertical communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One staff member perceived as having too much influence over decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Divisions among faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of colleagues not taking full responsibility for student achievement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme #1: Commitment

Culture is a powerful component that shapes a person’s work satisfaction, work relationships, and work practices. Schools with a healthy climate have been shown to positively impact students (Hoy, 1991) as well as the level of job satisfaction experienced by the teachers (Taylor & Tashakorri, 1994). As presented in the review of literature, a school culture that recognizes and appreciates teacher commitment is an essential factor to maintain and increase further commitment. Nias (1981) found that committed teachers often feel a sense of professional pride and job satisfaction; while those with lesser commitment declared that the demands put upon teachers are a great burden and life consuming. To what extent was the commitment of the faculty at Fruit Grove Elementary?

Teacher Buy-In and Commitment. Principal Arborists shared one of the challenges in bringing Core Knowledge to Fruit Grove was staff buy-in, claiming, “Teachers who have been here a long time tend to be galvanized and recalcitrant in their way of thinking. They are easy to receive new ideas, but because of one thing of another, the ideas do not grow into fruition sometimes” (personal communication, June 6, 2014).

Participating teachers were asked how they felt about their job. Ten of the eleven explicitly proclaimed that they “liked” or “loved” their job. One described teaching as her calling in life, especially in a school with a high needs population. Another said that she is “lucky” because her job is also her hobby,
stating, “I am constantly on the internet finding new ways to teach skills and
ideas. So, it’s my job and my hobby. It’s my passion.” Mrs. Plum declared:

I love my job. When I tell others I have 37 kids or I say I teach sixth grade,
they say, “Oh my God! How can you?” I absolutely love it! I was meant
to teach upper grade. I absolutely adore these kids. I have a fantastic
class. They’re a hoot. They are excited about learning. They make
connections like crazy across academic areas because of Core
Knowledge. I absolutely love my job… I can’t see myself doing anything
else. (personal communication, May 19, 2014)

Although the teachers may enjoy teaching, they may not enjoy certain
aspects of their job. Mrs. Orange shared, “I love being able to teach. I don’t like
the behaviors I have to deal with [or] the parents screaming at me for one reason
or another” (personal communication, May 5, 2014) Others shared that the
school year ebbs and flows – the beginning of the year is high energy and by the
end of the year they are “done” and ready for summer. The one teacher who did
not openly state that she enjoyed her job confided:

In general, I have really had a hard year. A really hard year. I’d quit if I
could. Isn’t that sad for me to say? Maybe tomorrow morning I wouldn’t
say that, but right now it’s real. I don’t feel as effective of a teacher as I
used to be. Half the time I feel like a failure because of the things that I’m
dealing with. It’s lack of communication. It’s lack of support. It’s a lot of
things… I like Core Knowledge. I love the things that we get to learn. I
love the things we (students and teachers) get to learn…We’ll see if the principal stays here, if [Core Knowledge] continues or if it’s discontinued (Lemon, personal communication, May 1, 2014).

Ultimately the success of any reform depends on keeping major stakeholders, including the teachers, committed to the change over time. Next, the participants were asked to talk about the Core Knowledge program and their commitment to making it work at Fruit Grove Elementary. One teacher admitted:

I would say that if I knew every one of our teachers was 100% committed, it would definitely work here. I don’t know how committed other people are at doing every part. I feel like a lot of them are trying to do bits and pieces. But it doesn’t work that way. [In my grade-level], we love it. We’re excited. It’s been fantastic… I have no idea what other people are doing, or what’s working or not working in other classrooms. I just know there are a lot of people who are definitely not at full implementation. And really, if it’s going to be successful, it has to start in primary and go all the way up. When knowledge builds upon knowledge, you need to have knowledge to build upon (Plum, personal communication, May 19, 2014).

Numerous teachers claimed that teaching Core Knowledge has re-energized teaching for them. Mrs. Mango claimed, “To me, Core Knowledge has brought back teacher creativity – which is nice because I think that many teachers had that taken away from them” (personal communication, May 19, 2014) Mrs. Orange stated:
I love doing the Core Knowledge. It’s fun and exciting. It makes me want to come to school every day. It just makes sense. Look. See? It gives me goose bumps! The excitement that I have for what I’m doing and the time I spend planning, I don’t care, because it’s interesting to me and the kids are interested in what we are learning (personal communication, May 5, 2014).

Mrs. Cherry adds, “I look forward to [coming to school] more with Core Knowledge. It makes it more exciting. I’m learning with the kids. It’s challenging, but it is more exciting… the things we’ve learned this year in second grade is just amazing” (personal communication, April 14, 2014). Mrs. Peach shared,

I think [Core Knowledge] is way more fun to teach. I feel that I learn more as I teach and the kids gets more excited about it. They absolutely loved the stories… I felt they get way more excited about what I teach from Core Knowledge than what I teach that’s district-curriculum based… So, I know personally, I got excited about teaching again. I got excited about being able to create things and not have to be so rote (personal communication, May 30, 2014).

Although, excited about the new program, one teacher expressed her reservation about fully committing to it. Because she has been teaching in the same district for a couple of decades, she has seen programs come and go as the district jumps to incorporate new programs or ideas frequently. Another
expressed her concern because, in addition to adopting Core Knowledge, the
district has adopted a new reading program for grades K-2 this year and will be
fully implementing the Common Core State Standards the following year.
Essentially, learning and juggling three new programs/ways of teaching has
been stressful for some.

Mrs. Mango, a newer teacher to Fruit Grove, commented,

I am for [Core Knowledge]. I think with more experience and as the years
go on I could embrace it more every year. The first year has been difficult
because of the push for early literacy and learning the new [district
adopted reading program]… for me, Core Knowledge has been, “let’s do it
because we are a Core Knowledge school” and beginning to implement it.
But for me, I would add more and more every year. It’s not the driving
force this year. It’s kind of secondary (personal communication, May 19,
2014).

Another teacher replied, “I think I’m pretty committed… I can’t say I’m sold
enough to stay at this school, which is pretty sad… Knowing myself and where I
am, I will probably carry Core Knowledge with me where ever I go” (Peach,
personal communication, May 30, 2014). (As a side note, this teacher
transferred to another school at the end of the school year.)

Principal Arborist also admits that there are some resisters on his
teaching staff, stating:
I say I have a core of my hundred-percenters, but then there are other people who those hundred-percenters tend to drag along. It seems like the 80/20 rule – I get 80% of my problems from 20% of my people. I also get 80% of my work out of 20% of the people. (personal communication, June 6, 2014)

**Barriers**

Barriers to teacher commitment at Fruit Grove Elementary surfaced when analyzing the interview transcripts, namely: lack of materials; lack of time; too many new programs.

**Lack of Materials.** Several teachers shared their frustration about Fruit Grove’s lack of materials to teach Core Knowledge over the past two years. Principal Arborist admitted, “I did not anticipate the amount of materials that would need to be purchased to get going on this trail.” He continued, “My downfall was the materials. The printed materials were thin and it made my teachers work harder than they probably should have - than if I had money to spend on those materials” (personal communication, June 6, 2014). Mrs. Guava recalled:

*We went to [the other Core Knowledge school] and said, “Ooo, this is fantastic!” Then we go, “Where’s our materials?” That’s the frustrating part. We have to dig up all of our own materials. We go on the internet and search it out… We have to dig through it all and put it together. Now the frustrating part is how do we fit it all in with everything else we have to teach?* (personal communication, May 6, 2014).
Mrs. Apricot added,

I think [our biggest challenge] was the lack of curriculum materials and the need to constantly create your curriculum and activities for the students to do that align to the standards. Core Knowledge gives you the what to teach, but doesn’t really give you what to teach it with … At the beginning of the year I was gung ho and now towards the end of the year, in addition to teaching and planning, I’ve had to create a lot. It’s exhausting (personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Mrs. Plum recalled visiting the nearby Core Knowledge school and being amazed at all that their teachers were able to do their first year of implementation. She then shared how frustrated she was because of their lack of materials, saying, “Ours is pretty much, like, here’s your manual. [Mr. Arborist] bought the books and what not - not the handbook. I’m talking, ‘Here’s the Sequence’, but told us ‘you need to figure it out’ and that was pretty much it” (personal communication, May 19, 2014). Another teacher shared, “The materials are scattered everywhere… A lot of times we are pulling things out of a hat. We’re searching the internet for our lessons” (Grape, personal communication, May 30, 2014).

Time Is a Factor. Another hurdle teachers identified was lack of time – not enough minutes in the day or days in the school year to teach all of the Core Knowledge content as outlined for each grade-level. Mrs. Apricot shared:
It was impossible to cover all of the content. It was just impossible. At the beginning of the year, we thought we would be able to do a lot more than we were actually able to do. It required us to adjust our plans a lot (personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Mrs. Plum also identified the lack of time as a huge hurdle. She stated, “It kind of freaks me out that we were only half way done (with the content). But then, I have to remember that the kids didn’t come to us with any of this at all” (personal communication, May 19, 2014). She explained that it was important to her to not race through lessons, saying, “We have to do enough with it and feel like they are truly learning and interacting and seeing those connections. Otherwise, there’s no point in doing it.”

Multiple Programs. The last major hurdle was the challenge of connecting Core Knowledge with the district adopted base programs. One teacher exclaimed:

The challenge is connecting [Core Knowledge] to our base program and making those connections and getting it to fit in. It’s making sure that we are teaching the standards, but at the same time, we’ve got this new reading program that they (the district) want us to teach with fidelity. So this year it was hard to get them to fit in and actually have it all flow. It’s planning. That’s the biggest challenge, knowing what we can cut out (Cherry, personal communication, April 17, 2014).
However, those interviewed felt that overall the benefits of implementing Core Knowledge outweighed the challenges. Mrs. Apple commented, “Sure it’s more work, but to me it’s much more fun to plan” (personal communication, April 14, 2014). They not only agreed that Core Knowledge was more exciting to teach, but many also shared that they felt their students were getting a more well-rounded education. Mrs. Cherry claimed:

In the long run, I think [our students] will be better equipped to deal with life. I am thinking of those college entrance exams. They ask for things, that if you did not grow up in a home where you were exposed to these cultural things or weren’t an avid reader, you just wouldn’t know (personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Theme #2: Collaboration

The next contributing factor to positive school culture and lasting change explored was teacher collaboration. Hord (2004) contends that a school must have supportive conditions including, “when, where, and how the staff regularly come together as a unit to do the learning, decision making, problem solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community (p. 10).”

Time. Fruit Grove Elementary has built in collaboration time in their weekly schedule. Students attend school an additional fifteen minutes on Monday, Tuesday, Thursdays, and Fridays and use these banked minutes in order to be dismissed one hour early on Wednesdays for teacher collaboration. Every interview participant mentioned how important and valuable this weekly
time to meet in professional learning communities (PLCs) was to them to develop assessments, review data, and plan instruction. Mrs. Grape articulated:

I think they are extremely important. I don’t know what we would do without them. My teammate and I completely depend on one another to discuss whatever assessments we are doing, how the kids are doing with it, and then from there to plan our instruction. It’s how we do everything. I really love Wednesdays for the time because it just sets aside a larger chunk of time to have those discussions, verses trying to squeeze it in after school before we need to leave or before school. Not to say that we don’t do that also, because we do. We pretty much plan every day. To us, PLCs are just super important for planning (personal communication, May 30, 2014).

Mrs. Apricot also talks with her collaborative partners daily, saying:

We have a regular collaboration time every Wednesday, but with my team this year, we are collaborating every day about what worked and didn’t work. We are constantly talking about our lessons and materials. I mean we talk after school. We talk before school. We talk on the way walking in from recess with the kids (personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Without question, participants valued the time allotted for collaboration when used as intended. Many teachers shared that their planning time was not limited to the scheduled collaboration on Wednesday afternoons, but rather confer and share with team mates on a daily basis. They found value in
teaching each other, learning together, and focusing on the successes and challenges of educating students – which has been linked in a positive way to teachers’ sense of self-efficacy (Tarter, Sabo, & Hoy, 1995).

How collaborative teams spend their Wednesday PLC time varied. In addition to planning Core Knowledge lessons, teachers had other areas that needed their time. Mrs. Apricot continued:

I would say this year it’s been about 60% of our time [is spent planning of Core Knowledge], because we are doing both the Core Knowledge and covering the material that we have to in order to meet state standards. There is not always a match between what the state standards are in social studies and science and what they are in CK. They don’t always match up. So in order to hit both, sometimes we’ve been focusing on CK and that content and other times we’re focusing on our state standards - like our California geography. We work a lot on science because, as a 4th grade teacher, the information on the upcoming test for the state is based on 4th grade standards. So we must…prepare the students so they can do their best on those tests (personal communication, April 14, 2014).

In addition to their weekly planning time, the principal provided substitutes to release teams of teachers from the classroom to develop long-term plans. As Mrs. Lemon stated, “We have our year planned out. We’ve spent a lot of time planning monthly what we are going to cover. Have we succeeded? No. But we
have a map. Now we can go back and revise” (personal communication, June 1, 2014).

Mr. Arborist believes that most of the grade-level teams collaborate well with one another. He stated:

I only have one that I have to make sure that their PLC, whether it be Core Knowledge or not, that they are using it for the proper reason. It’s not grading papers. It’s not busy work. It’s thinking about the work. It’s analyzing data (personal communication, June 6, 2014).

Others mentioned that there are times when their PLC time is not used properly. One stated that it depended on who was in attendance at the meeting. Another shared her frustration:

Sometimes it feels like the hour is wasted. Sometimes, I don’t know why we are sitting there. But I see them to be beneficial if they are done well. There is a lot more to do. I’m not saying we’re not doing them here or they’re not done everywhere. I guess what I’m trying to say is, I know that they can be very helpful when they are done well (Mango, personal communication, May 19, 2014).

Later, when asked how valuable she felt her collaboration time with her colleagues, she continued, “It depends upon what we are doing. Sometimes I know I could be doing much more in my classroom than sitting in the meeting…but, I couldn’t imagine not having the collaboration. Although some days, I wish I didn’t!” (Mango, personal communication, May 19, 2014). Another teacher from a
different grade-level team shared, “As far as the time used in PLC, I’d say less than 50% of the time are we doing what we should be doing. When we are doing what we should be, we are looking at data and planning” (Guava, personal communication, May 6, 2014).

**Materials.** Because not all the team members had full sets of the materials, some reported that was another obstacle of having effectively run their PLC time. Rather than coming to the meeting prepared with the knowledge of what content was on the horizon and what resources were available, they spent PLC time combing through the Core Knowledge handbook. Most participants mentioned that a large chunk of their PLC time was spent looking on the internet for lesson ideas and content materials (books and videos) that were appropriate for the students in their grade-level.

**Common Commitment.** Another critical sub-theme was the essential need for strong working relationships amongst team members to bounce ideas off of, to make sure they were still going the same direction, to collaboratively develop and analyze assessments, to share the work load, and to each contribute their own unique strengths to the team. Collective commitment and positive working relationships was a key factor of collaboration for Mrs. Plum. She claimed:

> I can’t imagine working with someone who wasn’t absolutely, 100% on board with [Core Knowledge]. I think it would be a nightmare actually. But we both believe in the program. We’re not negative about anything
and we’re doing as much as we can… The partnership, I think, has to be there. It has to be there (personal communication, May 19, 2014).

Fullan (2002) supports this belief and claims the single common factor to every successful change initiative, like Core Knowledge, is that relationships improve. There must be a platform for creation and sharing new knowledge, because people will not share information unless they are committed to the project. Collaborative teams, who are committed in fulfilling their role, feel a collective sense of purpose (Nias, Southworth, & Yeomans (1994).

**Vertical, as Well as Horizontal Collaboration.** Nearly every interview participant shared that they did not know to what extent PLCs were in action at Fruit Grove Elementary. Because collaboration time was spent only with their grade-level colleagues, they weren’t aware of what other grade levels were doing. Many mentioned they would like to have more vertical articulation between grade-levels so that they would know what other grade-levels were teaching and what they should expect their students to know when they come to them. Additionally, because Core Knowledge spirals and repeats topics at different grade-level, they could plan cross-grade level lessons or activities. Mrs. Peach commented:

> I wish there was more vertical teaming, because I feel like when we see how it builds on to one another – that we get to see the bigger picture. Like, what you do matters. If you don’t teach Core Knowledge, it matters, because your kids would know what I need them to know when they come
to me. Or, they won’t be able to do these things and won’t be able to read this or they won’t be able to get this because you said, “Oh. I don’t really have time to spend with them” (personal communication, May 30, 2014).

Essentially, although the teachers value collaboration time with their grade-level teams, they desire a boarder PLC. A PLC is not limited to a grade-level team, but could also be a vertical team, a leadership team, or even the entire faculty as a team. All members of each PLC, as well as the collective total, must be committed to communicate, work together, and use their planning time effectively in order to build a stronger sense of a collaborative culture.

Theme #3: Collective Leadership

The last theme explored was collective leadership. This area encompassed a shared purpose as a school, discussion making, and overall teacher empowerment. For instance, when participants were asked what they would consider the mission or purpose of their school, answers varied. Some could articulate their mission, but others had a difficult time. Mrs. Apricot was quick to respond,

We have our new motto, which is “Knowledge is Power”. One thing that I like about Core Knowledge is that it is based on the knowledge that a well-educated person should have. So, I think that when we teach this content we are giving our students a powerful tool to use for their future, in their future education, and in their future career because they are really going to understand about the world around them – and why things are the way they are, what’s important to our culture, why it is important to our
culture, as well as where they came from and where we came from (personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Most acknowledged that their purpose was to teach students so they will be prepared for their future. Principal Arborist articulated this by saying:

> Education is not just book learning. It’s getting down to the moral character. Basically, we’re building good citizens that we want to move onto middle school and high school. We need to get them to the point. It’s our mission to make sure they are well-rounded in all areas so they can move on and be successful in whatever endeavor they choose later on in life. We can’t do that unless they are speaking, reading, doing mathematics, and that they have a cultural understanding of our society and the world at large. I think that’s what I think we want our students at [Fruit Grove Elementary] leave our school with (personal communication, June 6, 2014).

**Vision.** A culture of shared leadership responsibility is built on a foundation of clear purpose and expectations. Bennis and Nanus (1985) declared that an organization must have a clear purpose which must be explicitly communicated to all of its members. Only then, are individuals able to find their own role in meeting that ideal – which, will empower them because they will see themselves as part of a worthwhile initiative. Thereby, faculty members can move forward in unity towards the reaching that vision. However, some teachers at Fruit Grove were unsure of their school’s mission and took longer to
think and respond to this question. One only confessed, “I’m not really sure” (Mango, personal communication, May 19, 2014). Another admitted:

I don’t know that we have a clear mission and that’s part of our problem. It’s probably a weakness for us… I don’t feel like I can say we have a clear mission. We did at one point, but it has not been communicated or put at the forefront of our mind in a while (Plum, personal communication, May 19, 2014).

Another answered:

For our school, through the eyes of Core Knowledge, I think we want our students to have a broader depth of knowledge. But I don’t know if I can say it for my school. I think that is where we are lacking. Honestly, I don’t know that we all have the same mission or goal. I think you could ask each grade level and they would tell you that, but I don’t know I could tell you that as a school, to be honest – because we don’t really get that collaboration time with anyone else (Apricot, personal communication, April 14, 2014).

This lack of clarity of purpose is to be an obstacle for this faculty and prohibits them from nurturing a culture of collective leadership, as members are unsure of their exact role. Clearly, the staff needs to participate in defining their mission and then this mission must be manifested over and over so it remains forefront in their minds. This will also enable them to monitor their collective
progress towards that end. Then once that target has been met, they must identify a new or even a renewed vision.

**Role of Teacher Leaders.** Next, participants were asked to share how decisions were made and information disseminated to the faculty. Nearly all participants shared the same process. All faculty members receive a weekly email from the principal on Mondays with announcements and information for upcoming events. For more important information, typically the principal would meet with his leadership team, made up of representatives from each grade-level team. Principal Arborist would share the information with the leadership team, who in turn was to share with their respective teams. Information would then be repeated in a general staff meeting. Other times information comes to the faculty as non-negotiable expectations from the principal or district office.

One teacher who sits on the school leadership team shared her frustration of cancelled meetings and ineffective communication, stating:

*We haven’t had a leadership meeting for a couple of months, I think. But when we had them, it seems that something was always coming up in his schedule on those days… So, I honestly, can’t really tell you. I can say that at the beginning of the year, we’d meet as a team, but this is how it went: He’d bring things up, items with the leadership team, and then the exact same thing we’d do at the staff meeting. It’s more so: “This is what we are going to talk about at staff meeting, so talk to your group” and then*
we have a staff meeting else (Plum, personal communication, May 19, 2014).

By the principal using leadership team meetings to simply preview announcements and information that he later disseminates to the whole group, member leaders are confused as to their role or the purpose of the leadership team. Rather than being a leader, they feel more like a carrier pigeon. This feeling of lack of purpose is reinforced when leadership meetings are routinely cancelled.

**Overall Leadership.** Another contributing factor to teachers’ sense of a lack of purpose is when expectations are identified, but they are rarely held accountable. Another leadership team member responded:

> I do think that some of the decisions are made with a lot of questions and collaboration. But then there are others that are just made by the principal. Usually he communicates and tells us. I don’t feel like there is a lot of follow through. So things are communicated, but accountability is lacking else (Peach, personal communication, May 30, 2014).

This goes back to lack of a clear vision. If teachers do not see that their efforts are valued or that there is not an equal commitment to reaching that vision, regret and discord between the faculty members will influence the overall school culture.

A handful of teachers shared their frustration about how decisions for which materials to purchase were made. One participant responded, “There are
materials that would be very helpful that we don’t have. We’ve asked for, but have not received” (Fig, personal communication, May 19, 2014). Some were frustrated because the classic literature novels purchased were written at a level that was too low for their students. Others were disappointed that, although it was the correct title, it was not the version of the classic novel published by the Core Knowledge Foundation that was purchased – and thereby was not useable with the CK lessons found online. Mrs. Apricot explains:

I feel that there was a huge mistake in some of the books that were chosen. For instance, the Robin Hood book – the one that was purchased was hard to work with because it just didn’t have enough rich language to do much with. So I think that making decisions about the materials that we are going to purchase needs to be based on what those materials actually hold within them rather than on the budget (personal communication, April 14, 2014).

When questioned who makes the recommendations or decisions about which materials were purchased, one teacher responded that there was one particular teacher on staff who is “in charge of all sorts of things and has a lot of power” (Lemon, personal communication, June 1, 2014).

Several teachers expressed their concern about the lack of strong leadership in general from the principal at Fruit Grove Elementary. One stated:

It seems like a republic - “let’s vote”. There’s not enough strong leadership to make the decisions that need to be made. It’s, “How do you
feel about that?” and who has the most clout in this school. Who has the loudest, squeakiest wheel gets the grease, I feel. It goes back to leadership. You need a knowledgeable leader who is strong and who doesn’t get pushed around by his staff (Lemon, June 1, 2014).

Another teacher reflected:

I think when we first started [Core Knowledge], teachers were like, “Great! We can be creative.” And then now, the principal will say, “So and so will be here walking through the school. Make sure you are showing evidence of Core Knowledge.” Make sure you are showing it? You should know whether your teachers have it in your rooms… What I’m saying is that it would be nice to have someone come in and then just have a conversation. You know… “Tell me about the such and such. What are you learning with your students about that? Why do you have the circulatory system on your wall? What is that?” I mean it would be nice to have that conversation instead of, “Be sure to have evidence of it when they visit your room” (Plum, personal communication, May 19, 2014).

Hoy and Tarter (1997) claim that an element of a healthy school climate is one where the principal earns the respect of their teachers. Because these teachers’ obvious lack of respect for their current administrator, perceiving him as weak, easily manipulated, and ill informed, they have great difficulty in
following his lead. They do not feel that their input is valued or that the principal appreciates their efforts.

Yet others commented that they felt the principal had an open door policy, so that if they ever needed to discuss something with him they are able to do so. Mrs. Grape shared, “I've gone in there and shared with him what I've been feeling or what I've been thinking. He can't always act on it, but I feel that he allows me to talk and listens to what I have to say.”

Mrs. Peach serves on the school leadership team and has been appointed administrative designee in the absence of the principal. She shared:

I think being team leader, I feel that I'm heard. I don't feel that [Principal Arborist] is always able to answer. I think there are some things being Admin Designee has allowed me to see. There's a lot of things that go on that teachers just don't even know. [Team leaders] are more of carriers of messages, rather than leaders. I do think that he thinks we are all leaders. He does come to us with things (personal communication, May 30, 2014).

Her belief that the principal views team members as leaders is an interesting point. Her perceptive is unique as she reinforces the frustrations some of her colleagues shared about being disseminators of information, yet also believes he is genuine when he brings information to the staff asking for their input.
Several participants alluded that certain staff members seem to have more influence or power over the principal than others. One teacher had an interesting perspective on this matter:

We have very strong opinionated people on staff that can make it really difficult. They have more influence than others to a certain extent, but they at least rub him in the wrong way enough that they don’t always get what they want. It’s been interesting. The power of play sometimes has been a little bit frustrating (Peach, personal communication, May 19, 2014).

When certain individuals are perceived as having too much power or clout, this may cause other members to feel that they are insignificant or not valued for skills or ideas they bring to the group. This in turn can influence trust and relationships between faculty.

Bennis and Nanus (1985) point out that members of a team are empowered when they know the vision of their organization and their role in achieving it.

They gain a sense of importance, as they are transformed from robots blindly following instructions to human beings engaged in a creative and purposeful venture…. It is much more likely that they will bring vigor and enthusiasm to their tasks and that the results of their work will be mutually reinforcing” (p. 84).
However, Mrs. Mango does not see these elements present at Fruit Grove, expressing:

I feel like our staff is not on the same page. I feel like they have been told, “This is what you are going to do.” And that’s what they do. It’s not because they have really bought into the idea and really want to do in some ways (personal communication, May 19, 2014).

In this statement, she is essentially describing the lack of a clearly communicated vision or a lack of that vision being “claimed” or “owned” by some staff members.

**Relationships.** This led to another key sub-theme – the importance of relationships within teams and with the faculty in general. Collective leadership isn’t limited to the relationship between the administrator and staff members, but also within other PLC groups. Haynes (1997) believed that “school climate refers to the quality and consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community” (p. 322). When these relationships are based on mutual trust and respect, teachers experience a greater level of job satisfaction (Taylor & Tashakorri, 1994).

Interviewees were asked to describe the overall relationship between faculty members. One teacher described:

I’m a pretty vocal person and I feel I’m heard by my team. They don’t always agree with me, and that’s the way things are. Sometimes I think I’m right, and that maybe a flaw of mine, but all the voices are heard. I
think the principal does a good job of that. I feel like at our team meetings I’m not afraid to speak and tell others what I think. Maybe you need to change your ways, or maybe I do. I understand that what I’m doing might not be the best practice (Mango, personal communication, May 19, 2014).

Relationships amongst faculty members influence commitment and collaboration to the program. Mrs. Cherry remarked, “I think [good relationships] makes you more willing to buy into the program and because you know you are going to work together as a team” (personal communication, April 14, 2014). In addition to this teacher’s statement, the correlation between relationships and perceived effectiveness of their PLC was evident when participants discussed collaboration in the previous theme.

Friction between the primary grade and upper grade teachers was very apparent when participants were asked about the relationships between staff. Mrs. Apricot describes, “Because the school is so small, there is somewhat of a disconnect between primary and upper – just because we don’t get to see each other” (personal communication, April 14, 2014). Mrs. Guava agrees, “There is still a little bit of division between primary and upper. Some of them [in upper] don’t think we are really preparing [students] enough” (personal communication, May 6, 2014). Mrs. Lemon claims, “We used to be really close. I see, now, a lot of nit-picking between staff and it’s kind of sad. I like that we try to work together, but I think there’s some competition between grade levels that’s not healthy” (personal communication, June 1, 2014).
It is interesting that Fruit Grove teachers indicated that they valued time working with their individual teaching teams and desired more vertical teaming opportunities. But, currently there is a perceived division between grade levels. This result could be a combination of not having a clear shared vision or perhaps because grade-level PLCs are all functioning independently.

Mrs. Peach, who has taught second – fifth grades, made this observation about a division between the primary grade teachers and the upper grade teachers:

Sometimes it feels that it is upper against primary – which I think is unnecessary. I don’t think upper gets what we do in primary. I don’t think that primary understands that what you don’t teach it here - what it looks like up there. But, being down here, I get. I understand it. Again, I’ve been put enough places that I get to see both sides. But I feel like a lot of times the principal doesn’t say anything; he just lets us kind of go at each other. Instead of really stepping and saying, “No. This is unprofessional. This is how we are going to do it.” He would rather us talk it out amongst ourselves then be the mediator in some cases (personal communication, May 30, 2014).

Hoy and Tarter (1997) would consider this as a contributor to a sick school climate. They claim that when the principal is powerless to buffer the faculty from the excessive outside influences and is unsuccessful in settling disputes
that arise between faculty members, the results are low teacher morale – and ultimately poor student achievement.

However, not all participants described relationship friction as only between grade levels or staff and administration, but also between the teachers who have been at Fruit Grove a long time and the newer staff members. One teacher, who has only been a Fruit Grove one year, confided that she doesn’t know all of the other teachers; but rather only her grade level and a few others, stating:

I don’t know a lot of the faculty. This is my fourth year here and I finally know all of the faculty’s names… I don’t feel like we collaborate enough, so I think that’s what makes it sometimes hard for us to get along.

(Mango, personal communication, May 19, 2012)

Mrs. Fig, who has been at Fruit Grove nearly thirty years, remarked:

We’ve had a core group of us that have been here a long time, and as that changes, I’m sure the atmosphere does, too. Because we all starting to go. You know, the core group, we socialized on the outside, and that’s a big difference; but I don’t know - maybe they do. But there is a gap now developing between the younger generation and the older one – and that is going to happen. We will eventually retire and it will be all new staff.

(personal communication, May 19, 2014).

Mrs. Orange views:
I’m great friends with many of the faculty here. But overall, I don’t see the newer faculty being welcomed as I hoped they would be by us old folks. I don’t know why. I don’t know if it’s because we don’t see them as much or interact with them as much. We’ve got some phenomenal new blood here. Phenomenal. But I don’t feel the closeness that I once felt here. I don’t think anybody hates anybody. Nobody is out to get anybody. It’s like an extended family with a few step-kids. And I’d like not to have that feeling of step-children out there. (personal communication, May 30, 2014)

In spite of any differences in the number of years taught, the number of years at Fruit Grove, or the grade-levels taught, overall the faculty gets along according to most participants. Mrs. Plum sums it up nicely, stating: “Faculty gets along great. That’s what’s funny… Nobody has even gotten in a squabble or anything” (personal communication, May 19, 2014). Mrs. Cherry described the relationships between faculty members as a supportive family- in part because they are such a small school (personal communication, April 17, 2014).

Commitment and Collective Accountability. Another attribute of collective leadership is group responsibility and accountability for student achievement. All teachers interviewed declared that they feel a great personal responsibility for their students’ achievement. Mrs. Orange admitted:

That’s my job. As hard as it. As much as I want to complain. As many challenges that there are. As many times as I could say, “If only the
parents would…” The bottom line is: it’s my job. That’s what I get paid for (personal communication, May 5, 2014).

One teacher commented, “Overall, I think the teachers are here to give it their all. It’s not an easy job. Not a lot of money. You have to love it” (Cherry, personal communication, April 17, 2014). Although everyone claimed they felt personally responsible and accountable for student achievement, most felt as if their colleagues did not feel the same liability as they did. Second grade teacher, Mrs. Peach stated:

I feel an extreme responsibility. And when I send [my students] to third grade they should be able to write a good paragraph, they should be able to read - maybe not well - but they should be able to read, and they should be able to do certain math skills... I don’t know that everyone on staff feels that same responsibility. If they weren’t [administering the State] testing, they definitely didn’t feel it. And because there wasn’t an accountability to say, “This particular test is just as important as the CST,” that they weren’t seeing it the same. I remember a teacher saying, “Whew, I teach second next year so I don’t have to worry about that test.” And I’m like, “Yes you do! Because if you don’t do what you are supposed to, how will they be ready for the next grade to do what’s required of them? (personal communication, May 30, 2014)

Because Core Knowledge is commutative, building upon knowledge learned in previous grades, it is critical for the all of the content outlined in the
Sequence (2010) be taught. If this does not happen, the program will not be effective or successful. This goes back to teacher commitment – commitment to the program and commitment to the profession. Regardless of whether official testing is administered or not, committed teachers faithfully do what they must do to teach students to mastery of the content.

Mr. Arborist also believed that his teachers didn’t feel the pressure of student achievement because it was a transition year between state standards and the common core standards (which required schools to simply field test questions rather than have achievement results held against the high-stakes criteria of the past decade with No Child Left Behind Act [2001]). He identified:

But pressure sometimes is good, because what doesn’t get monitored, doesn’t gets done it seems like. That seems human nature. When my teachers feel that pressure, then they feel that need to make sure that it’s done well. When teachers don’t have that pressure, then things tend to not get done. I, for one, like the pressure or the accountability that comes with those numbers… But do my teachers, every one of them, feel the burden of achievement? I think there a few. Just a few who are, sort of, just putting in their time. It’s hard to weed them out though.

There are again, just a few, who need a reminder to not admire the problem. To realize that there are things within the locus of our control that can control and there are things that we cannot. I tell them on a regular basis, these few (and I remind you that there are just a few) that’s
all we can do… And the good teachers are the ones that come up with systems and procedures and ways that work within their locus of control.

(personal communication, June 1, 2014)

The principal continued:

Again, about 4 out of my 20 teachers, probably feel, “I’ve taught it. I don’t know why they haven’t learned it.” These are the same teachers who are leaving the parking lot at the contractual, obligatory time. They just tend to make excuses and not find a solution.

Mrs. Cherry agrees that there are a few on staff who don’t appear to feel the great responsibility, stating, “There is probably a small percentage that doesn’t feel the same way, as I do hear grumbling some times. You know, ‘I’m just tired’ or ‘Parents don’t care’ and ‘if parents don’t care, why should I?’” (personal communication, April 17, 2014).

On the other hand, Mrs. Plum shared how she and her teammate share the responsibility for the entire sixth grade:

We work together very well because we don’t have a problem scrutinizing our own teaching. We have no problem saying, “Wow, we did not do very well on that. So what are we going to do that’s different?” We say all the time, especially at the end of the year, “Let’s do this differently next year…” There is no one else in this room. It’s just you and the kids. You can’t rely on anything outside this classroom. This is your control. We have some kids with some really difficult home lives. But, I am only
completely in control of what happens here. And that’s it (personal communication, May 19, 2014).

She continued discussing her personal responsibility within her locus of control:

We have some very negative teachers, and they love to find those excuses. And it’s always parents or they’re lazy or blah, blah, blah. And my thing is, how am I going to motivate them to want to do well? Kids don’t come in naturally yipping and hollering, “I’m going to be advanced in all areas.” Kids aren’t wired that way. But it is so easy to get them there.

You have to have rapport with the kids, too.

As Jackson (1993), found teacher commitment is associated with the words: courage, integrity, honesty, caring, fairness, and enthusiasm for the job and the people with whom one works. When individuals feel that they can make a difference in their students’ education, then they are more likely to bring vigor and enthusiasm to their tasks (Bennis & Nannus, 1985). Students will reflect the teacher’s attitude towards learning. A healthy school culture must have enthusiastic, committed teachers.

Reflecting on the Change Process

When the changes are perceived positively it creates energy, enthusiasm, and generates other positive changes (Fullan, 2002). Participants were asked to describe how their teaching, planning, and philosophy have changed (or not changed) as a result of implementing the Core Knowledge program. Many of their answers repeated ideas previously addressed under the themes commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership. Most said that they were
more excited to teach now and the students more excited to learn. Before adopting Core Knowledge, participants described their job was about skills and textbooks and test preparation, but now it was about content and broadening students’ view of the world. Mrs. Cherry articulated this well, stating:

The main thing is that students need to be better prepared for the world and the world isn’t just what’s in their textbook. They are getting a better understanding of the globe – that we live in a big world and there are different cultures and art and music. Our education has become more global. Well-rounded. And typically, these are the things only our gifted kids got, but now it is for everyone. (personal communication, April 17, 2014)

The teachers reiterated the importance of planning and collaboration, but described planning was much more labor intensive now with the Core Knowledge program. Mrs. Lemon claimed, “Back in the day, when you taught Houghton-Mifflin, it was all laid out for you. It was easy. Turn the page and read what was in the blue box. Teaching is harder now. You have to plan more” (personal communication, June 1, 2014). Mrs. Apricot concurred, commenting:

A lot more time has had to go into planning. A lot more time. Because, I love history so for me that was a benefit in planning things, but what I’ve found is that not everyone has had the same background as me so we’ve had to spend a lot of time making sure that the teachers were educated in what they were going to be teaching. And that the teacher understood
where things fit in history, why they were important, how things connected in time so that we could help it make sense to the kids. So, sometimes planning was just digging into the materials to make sure all our grade-level team understood it. Then, once that was done then we could sit down and really look at the standards and then look at how we were going to take the material that we had, how we were going to teach it, and have the students do activities that would support the standards. So planning. Definitely exhausting. A lot of planning! (personal communication, April 14, 2014)

Overall, teachers said they felt more empowered because they are able put their creativity back into their lessons. Mrs. Mango said it this way, “It’s enhanced. I can take an idea and really run with it” (personal communication, May 19, 2014). Mrs. Fig likes that Core Knowledge lays out the content she is to teach, but allowed her “to pull in other things and ideas when we actually [taught] xyz” (personal communication, May 19, 2014). Mrs. Peach says:

So often we’ve been told, “This is what you teach and this is how you teach. There you go.” And Core Knowledge is just not that way. It is, you need to teach these things, but see how you want to do it. And you get to experience that as a teacher. I think that’s one of the benefits of Core Knowledge. I thoroughly enjoy getting the freedom to kind of move with my students…. And say, “You know, we need to play a game to get us to learn that concept a little bit deeper. Or let’s compare certain things
... and it’s been really fun, because [the students] pull in Core Knowledge now and compare it with other things. (personal communication, May 30)

Teachers feel empowered when they feel free to do the things that make sense to them in order to accomplish the shared vision (Sergiovanni, 1995). Their commitment and sense of empowerment increases as they continue to: invest time and effort, feel autonomy and choice, and gain from their collaboration with others (Wagner, 2001; Lightfoot, 1986).

Advice – Lessons Learned

Lastly, participants were asked what advice would they give a school considering implementing Core Knowledge. The major themes previously discussed were brought up again: need for faculty commitment, need for strong leadership, money for materials, and need for a vision of how the content builds throughout the year, as well as year by year.

To promote faculty commitment, Mrs. Fig recommends visiting another school to see Core Knowledge in action. She said:

You can read all you want in these books, but until you see it implemented in a school and see how it’s actually run and see how the teacher manages that classroom, how she takes this information and where she finds time to put it in, it’s not going to do any good. It’s going to be like, “Great! Another program.” But to see it and see the kids’ reaction, that’s invaluable. So my advice would be to go out and see another school doing it. Ask the teacher questions. (personal communication, May 19, 2014)
Mrs. Plum also advises, “Make sure your staff is 100% for it. Your staff has to be all on-board. I also think the principal has to be very creative, supportive, and in classrooms a lot” (personal communication, May 19, 2014).

Mrs. Grape began, “First thing, starting out, be patient” (personal communication, May 30, 2014). She discussed the lack of time to teach all of the Core Knowledge material and to be patient with yourself as you figure things out the first few years. Mrs. Mango recommends, “To enjoy it. To embrace. To get training. I think you would have a better concept of the final goal or outcome of where this ends up. The big picture of this” (personal communication, May 19, 2014). Mrs. Apricot also believes that training is a must in order to see how Core Knowledge all fits together and builds upon itself. She also explained that vertical dialogue amongst faculty members should continue to constantly remind everyone of the big picture or vision (personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Again, the importance of materials and resources were mentioned. Mrs. Fig insistently stated, “Everybody has to have materials” (personal communication, May 19, 2014). However, Mrs. Apricot warns to be selective in the materials that are purchased:

Carefully look at the materials that you are going to select to use with your students for instruction. Because they are expensive and if you make a mistake, you may not have the money to replace those materials. You need to make sure that the materials you have are going to support the
outcomes you need to meet state guidelines and standards. (personal communication, April 14, 2014)

Summary of Qualitative Data

The research has indicated that teachers who work in a supportive culture are committed, collaborative, and are able to participate in significant decision-making maintain their motivation and satisfaction in teaching – which is at the core of successful school reform (Huberman, 1993; Helsby & McCulloch, 1996). Therefore, these areas were explored at Fruit Grove Elementary to identify the extent that they were present at this point in the school's reformation using the Core Knowledge program. Data was collected to identify how the faculty members experience, describe, and define the school culture during this stage of program implementation. The major themes that emerged included the need for: a clear vision or purpose; strong leadership; total faculty commitment; collegial relationships built on mutual trust and respect; and consistent collaboration.

Data gathered from qualitative faculty interviews indicate that there is great confusion as to their vision or mission as a Core Knowledge school. This is in part because of the general school culture and lack of strong leadership. Overall, the faculty views the staff as divided, rather than as a united front striving for the same ideals. All participants stressed the importance of effective collaboration to share the burden of learning and implementing the new program, but many did not believe that others were fully committed to the program or felt personally accountable for student achievement or program implementation. All
of these factors have fueled a culture that does not align to what the research discussed in chapter 2 claims is essential for successful school reform.

Survey Data

Participants were also asked to complete a version Bandura’s Instrument on Teacher Self-Efficacy (Appendix C). This instrument was modified and did not include questions about community/business partnerships, as that not a focus of this study. Of the eleven teachers interviewed, nine completed the survey online. Overall, teachers felt they had some influence creating a positive school culture, selecting resources, and making decisions at their school site. When it came to instructional self-efficacy, measured by the influence teachers felt they had in helping students learn in spite of outside factors, participants indicated that they believed they had only very little to some influence (see Figure 1).

These findings support the qualitative data collected in that teachers at this school site feel they have some empowerment, but do not feel fully empowered. Additionally, the low score in instructional self-efficacy section coincide with the overall belief that all faculty are not fully committed nor do they assume full responsibility for student achievement. However, because of the low number of teachers surveyed on the Bandura Instrument, conclusions cannot be drawn, but it does illuminate interesting patterns in relation to the qualitative data.
Figure 2. Average scores in each subsection of Bandura’s Instrument: Teacher Self-Efficacy surveyed. Results are comprised of surveys completed by nine faculty members of Fruit Grove Elementary School.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Because it is important to understand the components necessary for effective, lasting school reform effort to occur, the purpose of this case study was to gain a better understanding of teachers’ perspective of their experiences of school reform and school culture using the Core Knowledge Sequence. The school selected for this case study was an underperforming elementary school in an urban area of Southern California and in the beginning stages of implementing the Core Knowledge curriculum. Three areas were explored: teacher commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership. Efforts were made to determine how and in what ways certain strategies were utilized to change, maintain, or contribute to the development of the current school culture. Eleven teachers and the principal were interviewed, as well as asked to complete Bandura’s Instrument for Teacher Self-Efficacy. The following research questions guided this study:

- How does faculty at one Core Knowledge school experience, describe, and define the school culture during school reform efforts?
  - What commonalities emerge among teachers who are committed and able to sustain school reform efforts?
  - What is the role of teachers in supporting the school change process?
How do teachers, if at all, experience, describe, and define a school culture that empowers teachers?

In previous chapters, an introduction to the study, literature review, methodology, and findings from the study were presented. In this final chapter, the findings of this study are summarized, the results are discussed relative to the existing literature, and the limitations of the study are noted. Finally, implications and recommendations for educators and researchers are presented.

Public schools in America are constantly evolving in efforts to best educate students. New approaches to school reform are ever-changing, depending on latest trend or philosophy of education. However, research indicates that in order for any reform effort to be successful, certain elements of school culture are necessary, namely: teacher commitment and collaboration.

Culture is comprised of many elements, with the people at its core. Therefore, when analyzing school culture, it is necessary to look at those in the trenches – the teachers. One way of determining teacher commitment to the school or the reform program is to ascertain their levels of self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as one’s beliefs about their own capabilities and power to attain desired results. He believed that self-efficacy was the driving force which influenced motivation, the amount of effort forth, and the persistence to act. Hayes (1997) adds that the quality and consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community greatly influences the school’s culture. It has also been found that teachers who work in such a culture are able to
participate in significant decision-making and thus maintain their motivation and satisfaction in teaching (Huberman, 1993; Helsby & McCulloch, 1996).

Summary Findings

The data analysis revealed the following results:

1. Teacher commitment was high with most teachers because of the Core Knowledge content was engaging and interesting - teachers and students were excited to learn. Teachers felt like they were able to be more creative with their lessons because of Core Knowledge.

2. Teacher commitment was lower in others because Core Knowledge was just one of many new programs or directions the school was undertaking. The school lacked materials to efficiently implement the program. Because the Core Knowledge sequence is so broad and comprehensive, teachers felt frustrated because they had difficulty teaching it all.

3. Teachers valued their weekly collaboration time with their grade—level colleagues. They recognized that each teacher has his/her own set of strengths and knowledge to contribute. Collaboration was most effective when all team members were highly commitment to the program.

4. Teacher collaboration was difficult when all members were not prepared with materials or time was not used purposefully.
5. Teachers desired vertical planning time with other grade-levels so they could see how what they taught fit into the scope of Core Knowledge through the grade levels.

6. Although the school had a site leadership team, teacher members did not believe they were empowered with many decision making responsibilities.

7. Teachers claimed to respect the principal as a person, but felt he was not a strong leader and lacked follow through.

8. There was a division or disconnect between upper grade and primary grade teachers on staff.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the work of Shaughnessy (1998). He asserts features of successful schools include a culture of: shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice – in which all fall under the umbrella of a Professional Learning Community. All of these features were mentioned to some extent by those interviewed at Fruit Grove Elementary. Some were recognized as being present and strengthening their program while others were void or weak and thus hindering their work. Because commitment and collective leadership fall within Shaughnessy’s definition of a PLC culture, for this section these two factors will be discussed within context of the overall functioning of the school-wide PLC at Fruit Grove. The major themes that emerged in this study included the need for:
a clear vision or purpose; strong leadership; faculty commitment; collegial relationships built upon mutual trust and respect; and consistent collaboration.

The first and most important step in creating a PLC is to define a collaborative purpose, vision, or target. However, the participants of this study were unable to identify a clearly articulated vision or mission. Bennis and Nanus (1985) professed that an organization must have a clear purpose that is explicitly communicated to all of its members, and only then, are individuals able to find their own role in meeting that ideal. Factors identified in this study as inhibiting the school staffs’ joint focus included: too many programs being concerned a priority, a division or disconnect between staff, and ineffective communication and feedback from the site administrator.

There is a common saying in organizational leadership that says, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” However, when staff are not sure what the main thing is, they can easily get bogged down with all of the various tasks teachers are expected to do. This was particularly evident with the primary grade teachers at Fruit Grove. They were not only beginning to implement the Core Knowledge program, but they were also learning the newly district-adopted reading/language arts program. Additionally, all teachers were confused as to which was most important for them to teach – Core Knowledge or the district adopted programs and standards. For the Fruit Grove teachers, the main thing got lost amidst the lengthy to-do-lists and perceived must-dos. With a vision or mission clearly defined and explicitly articulated by the principal and the
faculty members, they would all know where their focus should be concentrated and thus help one another reach that ideal.

Successful organizations, like schools, must not only have a manager, but also a strong leader. Bennis & Nanus (1997) differentiate between the two: “There is a profound difference between management and leadership, and both are important. ‘To manage’ means to bring about, to accomplish, to have charge of or responsibility for, to conduct. ‘Leading’ is influencing, guiding in direction, course, action, opinion” (p. 20). It is impossible to be truly effective or efficient in either of these roles, especially in times of reform, without a clear vision or purpose. However, the role of a leader is not exclusive to the principal, because there are also teacher leaders amongst the staff. If the principal does not clearly define the collaborative vision, then each team leader may pull their team in a different direction from the vision of the principal leader. How can a staff fully commit when they don’t know exactly they are committing to?

All participating faculty members at Fruit Grove agreed about the value of working within grade-level PLCs for lesson planning. Because of the Core Knowledge program does not have scripted lesson manuals, but rather provides lists of information to be taught at each grade, the participants found working with their grade level PLC was key to planning and delivering quality lessons. They were able to utilize their collective creativity – each PLC member bringing his/her own strengths and passions. Through this synergy, teams were able to apply their collective ideas and understandings to their lesson plans. When
PLC time was effectively used, it was a structured opportunity for heightened interaction between faculty which can have a powerful positive influence on each member’s personal perceptions of competence and efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Louis & Marks, 1997).

However, PLCs are not just about grade level colleagues planning lessons together. Other essential features also include a shared, clear vision or target; a shared commitment to and focus on student learning; authentic interactions with one other as a community of learners, including: dialogue, reflection, and targeted feedback (DuFour, 1995; Shaughnessy, 1998). So, although PLC planning time was clearly valued, the overarching premise of a school-wide PLC culture was notably lacking at Fruit Grove.

As discussed in the review of literature, school climate encompasses the quality and consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community (Hayne, 1997). When these relationships are based on mutual trust and respect, teachers experience a greater level of job satisfaction (Taylor & Tashakorri, 1994). However, many relationships within the faculty at Fruit Grove were described as unhealthy. Although, PLCs are founded on relationships and interactions between members, there were clearly delineations amongst the staff – old and new, as well as between grade-levels. Almost all participants stated that they desired more time to collaborate with colleagues.

As discussed in the literature review, effective schools contribute their positive culture to strong commitment to the program, school, and students;
effective teacher collaboration based on trust, openness and unity; and a sense of teacher empowerment in decision making (Huberman, 1993; Helsby & McCulloch, 1996). Based on the evidence from this study, all of these components need strengthening at Fruit Grove Elementary.

Limitations of the Study

Several factors must be taken into consideration when examining these results. This study was a case study of one Core Knowledge school in the beginning stages of implementation, thereby limiting its generalizability to other schools. This study was designed to analyze the role of school culture in one school’s reform effort and not to elicit extensive information on the subject of an effective school culture. This study, rather, analyzed the extent of commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership was present at the case study school.

This study also did not control for the influence of other school variables, which may have influenced school culture. These factors might include, but are not limited to: student population, high stakes testing, common core standards movement, time of the school year data was collected, outside pressures, or individual psychological states of the participants. Therefore, it is not known whether other contextual factors may have mitigated moderated the results of the investigation.
Implications and Recommendations

This study explored teachers’ experiences with school culture during a time of reform using the analytical lens of: commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership. It has implications for school administrators, teachers, and those who train administrators – using the Core Knowledge program or not.

According to Fullan (1993), the new challenge of change is to transform the educational system into a learning organization where change is a normal part of its culture, rather than just the latest new policy or program to come along.

There must be a climate where teachers feel free to take risks and try new things. In order to do this, the principal must discover how to obtain teacher commitment and strengthen their capacity to learn.

As with previous research conducted on this subject, there are key elements that must be present to strengthen the commitment of teachers and other staff members to the reform effort, as well as the school at large. These include commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership.

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) explained that, “If schools want to enhance their organizational capacity… they should work on building a professional community that is characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff” (p. 37). Later, DuFour and Eaker (2002) added, “The most promising strategy for sustained, substantial school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities (p. xi). This has also been described as re-culturing the school. The research conducted by Hargreaves (1997) found that
this may include a paradigm shift in regards to how the school is governed and structured in order for re-culturing to occur.

Many studies have been conducted on the impact teacher participation in decision in educational reform. The literature is clear that when teachers and administrators participate in decision-making activities together, teachers have increased job satisfaction (Conley, 1991; Smylie, 1992; Heck, 1995). Moreover, teacher involvement is necessary to ensure their agreement with and commitment to program decisions (Heck, 1995). The findings of this study suggest that, although there was an established leadership team of teachers and the principal, teachers felt little empowerment in the decision making process. They felt that their role on the leadership team was more or a sounding board or liaison between the administration and their colleagues.

When stakeholders do not understand the vision or recognize their role in bringing it about, this could create discord amongst the faculty. To avoid this unhealthy climate, administrators must be knowledgeable about the change process and the importance of working with the staff to develop a collective vision. This vision must be publicized and put into practice – using it as the analytical lens for every activity planned or decision made (Heck, 1995; Wohlstetter, 1994). Once the vision is established, then effective collaboration and collective leadership can build on that. A positive culture has buy-in or consensus of the members of the organization. This can be fostered by
involving faculty in the decision making process – where members’ opinions are considered and valued throughout (Heck, 1995).

The practice of collective leadership can empower teachers as they accept more responsibilities as school leaders, and thus increase participation in school governance and reform efforts. This increased participation may allow members to better determine cultural needs and make plans and decisions of how to address those needs. Heck (1995) found that when teachers have such input decisions about improving their school via collective leadership, had a significant effect on their commitment to the identified needs and decision made regarding them.

Hord stated, “Rather than becoming a reform initiative itself, a professional learning community becomes the supporting structure for schools to continuously transform themselves through their own internal capacity” (p. 10). Fallan’s (1993) research suggests that educators must, “redesign the workplace so that innovation and improvement are built into the daily activities of teachers” (p. 353). Many teachers in this study shared that the frequent collaboration with their grade-level colleagues a daily necessity and was considered invaluable to them. They were afforded the opportunity to meet one afternoon a week as part of their contractual time. However, as found in this study, teacher collaboration should not be limited to grade level colleagues planning lessons together. It was quite evident that participants felt a disconnection between other faculty members. They desired more purposeful interactions with their colleagues.
Teachers are able to grow and progress when they work in collaboration - teaching each other, learning together, and focusing on the successes and challenges of educating students (DeFour & Eaker, 1998).

This study would be beneficial to principals who are leading their schools through a reform change or who are looking for ways to improve their school’s culture. By reading first-hand experiences of those in the trenches and realizing their needs, the site administrator can anticipate possible barriers and plan accordingly – especially in regards to supporting communication, providing material needs, fostering collaboration, and modeling instructional leadership. Learning about this school’s barriers and boosters of commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership could help principals and other administrators in similar situations reflect on how they can improve their leadership skills and improve school culture.

Teachers, including members of a team and as individuals, would benefit from reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses compared to those in this study. They may consider their commitment to the school and reform effort and their level of collegial collaboration. Teams can analyze the quality and attention of their collaboration time, its impact on school culture, and ultimately on their students’ achievement.

Based upon the findings of this study, further areas for research might include: 1) change the methodology: Because the current study consisted of only one interview per participant at the conclusion of the school year, a similar
study could be conducted at the same school using a longitudinal design to
determine if changes are perceptible over time, 2) *change the focus:* examine
the role of the principal leader in establishing and communicating the school
vision and his/her role in influencing the school culture, 3) *change the topic:*
explore the relationship between teacher collaboration, collective creativity, and
commitment, 4) *increase the sample size:* create a study that would describe
the culture at several Core Knowledge schools and determine whether there are
any correlations between the program and perceptions on school culture, or 5)
*change the purpose:* conduct a study examining the relationship between
teacher commitment, collaboration, and collective leadership on student
achievement.
APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT
Participant Informed Consent
Title: At the Core of the School Reform

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study about teachers’ experiences in the beginning stages of implementing the Core Knowledge program at XXXX School. The investigator of this study is Lari Nelson, school principal and doctoral student in Educational Leadership at California State University, San Bernardino. Information gathered about faculty members’ experiences will not only be useful to other school administrators as they prepare for whole school reform, but will also benefit you as you reflect, identify, and articulate the experiences in midst of the change process of implementing Core Knowledge.

Participation in the study will entail you to complete a short 20 question survey and participate in a 30 minute interview at a mutually agreed upon location, date, and time. Instructional time with not be disturbed or altered in any way. The interview will be audio recorded. All data will be kept confidential and locked in a secure location. The researchers will adhere to all relevant ethical standards and practices for responsible conduct of research in order to maintain the confidentiality of participants’ responses. Your name will not be connected to individual data collected. The results will be presented as a group or under an alias name in all publications and public presentations. As the participants will only represent this one school, Adams Elementary, your responses may be identifiable by others at the school site who may be familiar with the faculty while reading the completed dissertation. If at any time you wish to opt out of the audio digital recording or if you no longer wish to participate in this study, you may withdraw from participation with no penalty.

This project has been submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at California State University, San Bernardino. If you would like to obtain more information about this research, you may contact Ms. Lari Nelson at 951-788-7453 or Dr. Louise Rodriguez at 909-537-5643.

By signing below, you agree to participate in the above referenced study.

__________________________________________  ________________________________
Signature of Teacher                        Date

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED/OPEN ENDED INTERVIEW:

SCHOOL STAFF QUESTIONS
I. Getting Started

1. Describe your teaching background (education, special credentials or certificates, grade levels taught, number of years).

2. How long have you been at this school? What are your overall impressions? What have been the strengths and challenges of the school?

II. Commitment:

1. How do you feel about your job? How do you feel about coming to school every day?

2. Tell me about Core Knowledge and your role in choosing this program for Adams.

3. What do you see as the benefits and challenges of CK?

4. How committed are you to making implementation of CK successful at your school?

III. Collaboration:

1. Explain the concept of a Professional Learning Community (PLC). What role, if any, do PLCs have in improving teacher capacity and student achievement? To what extent do you see PLCs in action at your school?

2. Typically, how often do you spend collaborating with colleagues to plan CK implementation? Please give an example of something that you have worked with your colleagues to plan.

3. How valuable do you feel collaboration/collaborative planning time is with your team?

IV. Collective Leadership

1. What is the mission of the school? What does that look like in practice?

2. Typically, how are decisions made and information disseminated to faculty?
3. To what extent do you feel you influence decision making at your school?

4. Describe the overall relationship between faculty members (including the principal).

5. Do you feel a responsibility and accountability for student achievement? Do you perceive your colleagues feel the same or different about these?

V: The Change Process

1. Describe to me how your teaching, your planning, your philosophy have changed (or not changed) as a result of implementing the CK program.

2. Name one piece of advice you would give a school considering Core Knowledge.
APPENDIX C

BANDURA’S INSTRUMENT: TEACHER SELF-EFFICACY SCALE
BANDURA’S INSTRUMENT
TEACHER SELF-EFFICACY SCALE

This questionnaire is designed to help us gain a better understanding of the kinds of things that create difficulties for teachers in their school activities. Please indicate your opinions about each of the statements below by circling the appropriate number. Your answers will be kept strictly confidential and will not be identified by name.

**Efficacy to Influence Decision making**

How much can you influence the decisions that are made in the school?

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How much can you express your views freely on important school matters?

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**Efficacy to Influence School Resources**

How much can you do to get the instructional materials and equipment you need?

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**Instructional Self-Efficacy**

How much can you do to influence the class sizes in your school?

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How much can you do to get through to the most difficult students?

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How much can you do to promote learning when there is lack of support from the home?

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How much can you do to keep students on task on difficult assignments?

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How much can you do to increase students’ memory of what they have been taught in previous lessons?

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How much can you do to make parents feel comfortable coming to school?

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**Efficacy to Enlist Community Involvement**

How much can you do to get community groups involved in working with the schools?

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How much can you do to get churches involved in working with the school?

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How much can you do to get businesses involved in working with the school?

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How much can you do to get local colleges and universities involved in working with the school?

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**Efficacy to Create a Positive School Climate**

How much can you do to make the school a safe place?

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How much can you do to make students enjoy coming to school?

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How much can you do to get students to trust teachers?

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How much can you help other teachers with their teaching skills?

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APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL LETTER
April 10, 2014

Ms. Lari Nelson
c/o Prof. Louie Rodriguez
Department of Education - Leadership and Curriculum
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Ms. Nelson:

Your application to use human subjects, titled “At the Core of School Reform: A Culture of Commitment, Collaboration, and Collective Leadership” has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The attached informed consent document has been stamped and signed by the IRB chairperson. All subsequent copies used must be this officially approved version. A change in your informed consent (no matter how minor the change) requires resubmission of your protocol as amended. Your application is approved for one year from April 10, 2014 through April 9, 2015. One month prior to the approval end date you need to file for a renewal if you have not completed your research. See additional requirements (items 1 – 4) of your approval below.

Your responsibilities as the researcher/investigator reporting to the IRB committee include the following 4 requirements as mandated by the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46 listed below. Please note that the protocol change form and renewal forms are located on the IRB website under the forms menu. Failure to notify the IRB of the above may result in disciplinary action. You are required to keep copies of the informed consent forms and data for at least three years. Please notify the IRB Research Compliance Officer for any of the following:

1) Submit a protocol change form if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your research protocol for review and approval of the IRB before implemented in your research.
2) If any unanticipated adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research,
3) Too renew your protocol one month prior to the protocol end date,
4) When your project has ended by emailing the IRB Research Compliance Officer.

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the IRB Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval identification number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Sharon Ward, Ph.D.
Chair
Institutional Review Board

cc: Prof. Louie Rodriguez, Department of Education – Leadership and Curriculum
REFERENCES


Marzano, R. J., & Waters, T. (2009), *District leadership that works: Striking the right balance*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.


