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In This Together: Secondary Language Arts Teachers' Responses to Learning Labs

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In This Together:
Secondary Language Arts Teachers' Responses to Learning Labs
Lisa Anne Britten

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In
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For the Degree of
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Lisa Anne Britten

Abstract

Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law in 2001, literacy leaders and other school administrators have been challenged to increase student achievement to meet the law's rigorous student proficiency goals and avoid penalties. To avoid the sanctions associated with not making adequate yearly progress (AYP), school and district leaders have been challenged to provide teachers with professional development that effectively equips teachers with the knowledge to meet the unique needs of each student in their classrooms. Because research has determined that high-quality professional development leads to higher-quality teaching, and higher-quality teaching leads to increased student achievement, a better solution for professional development was needed to impact a greater number of teachers and inspire sustained changes in their classroom practice. As a result, research into alternative structures for job-embedded, collaborative professional development, such as classroom learning labs, gained traction. In order to describe the impact cross-district classroom learning labs have on secondary ELA teachers from small public schools, a qualitative study was conducted. Interview data was analyzed following a simplified multi-phase interview analysis process to identify, compare and contrast themes. The researcher found that engaging in the classroom learning lab was an overwhelmingly positive professional development experience that resulted in rich opportunities for peer learning, self-reflective learning, and transformational learning.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Providing meaningful professional development (PD) for in-service English Language Arts (ELA) teachers that yields significant results in terms of both staff engagement and student achievement is a challenge for school and district literacy leaders. Increased federal and state government oversight of both reading instruction and assessment, for example through the implementation of the highly-rigorous state standards such as the Common Core (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015) and an increase in high-stakes standardized testing (Klein, 2015), have put increased pressure on ELA teachers to raise student achievement in reading in ways that are often at odds with what they believe to be “right” and “true” about reading instruction.

Reading teachers, reading specialists, literacy coaches, and others whose work is focused around reading instruction have long understood that reading is a complex meaning-making process in which readers utilize mental tools (commonly referred to as *strategies*) to aid them in the comprehension of text (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Farstrup & Samuels, 2002). As a result, quality reading instruction has been characterized by the desire to coach emerging readers in identifying and refining their use of these strategies – including, but not limited to, making connections, asking questions, visualizing, inferring, identifying importance, synthesizing, and “fixing up” misunderstandings – while engaging with authentic texts (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Farstrup & Samuels, 2002). Reading teachers know that “when readers comprehend, they use these strategies continuously and simultaneously” (Ketch, 2005, p. 9). In order to assess their students’ use of these comprehension strategies and lead them to deeper understandings of texts, reading teachers incorporate other elements of the language arts, such as purposeful conversations and written or

graphic expression, into their lesson plans to help students make their thinking visible and exchange ideas (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Ketch, 2005; Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011).

The increased emphasis on high-stakes testing has forced many ELA teachers to turn away from this research-based model for literacy instruction and assessment. Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law in 2001, teachers have been challenged to increase student achievement to meet the law's rigorous student proficiency goals and avoid penalties. The law mandates schools must test students in reading and math each year from grades 3 through 8 and once during high school; test scores are measured against a state's annual achievement target. If test scores show students have failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) by reaching the required target for two years or more, either for all students or a particular "at-risk" subgroup (identified as English Language Learners, students in special education, students from racial minorities, and students from low-income families), the school is labeled as "not making AYP" and is subjected to increasingly-serious sanctions (Klein, 2015). Teacher evaluations are also increasingly tied to student performance on state tests. For example, in the state of Michigan, legislation has mandated that student growth on state tests will account for 25 percent of a teacher's yearly evaluation from 2015 to 2018, and 40 percent from 2018 onward (Oosting, 2015).

The environment created by the emphasis on high-stakes testing has motivated ELA teachers to make changes in their instruction in order to increase student achievement, avoid penalties, and earn positive evaluations. However, the changes they make are often superficial in nature, focused more on increasing content coverage or providing instruction in test-taking strategies (for example, those focused on success with multiple-choice or timed assessments) rather than making deeper improvements in instructional practice (Supovitz, 2009). This is due

to the fact that standardized tests “are generally contrived exercises that measure how much students have crammed into short-term memory. Reading comprehension exams usually consist of...separate questions about short passages on unrelated topics that call on students to ferret out right answers rather than engage in thoughtful interpretation” (Kohn, 2000, p. 316-317). ELA teachers often face increasing pressure from school and district leaders to set aside their beliefs about quality reading instruction in favor of skills-based, test-prep-oriented lessons that help students succeed on standardized tests because “as long as a school or teacher has adequate test scores, what happens in the classroom is [considered] irrelevant” (Kohn, 2000, p. 323). When ELA teachers feel forced to teach in ways that conflict with their pedagogical knowledge and values, this leads to feelings of cognitive dissonance, the mental stress or discomfort that arises from having to hold – and possibly act on – two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time.

Although students and parents across the United States have been taking the lead in organizing test boycotts and other forms of protest against high-stakes tests, teachers have often been slow to act in defiance of the new standards and associated testing requirements (Kohn, 2000). Kohn (2000) suggests that this may be due to fear of losing their jobs or feelings of being isolated, deskilled, or powerless. It is clear that today’s ELA teachers need safe spaces to reconnect with one another, bridge the cognitive dissonance, and discuss how to provide quality reading instruction for students within this high-stress, high-stakes, standardized-test-driven environment. Literacy leaders, such as reading specialists and literacy coaches, can meet the needs of ELA teachers by designing professional development opportunities that invite teachers to have meaningful conversations about reading instruction within the structure of a safe,

supportive, collegial environment. A form of job-embedded, collaborative professional development called “classroom learning labs” may help literacy leaders to do this.

Importance of the Problem and Rationale for the Study

At the same time changes to the law brought about reforms in assessing student achievement and determining progress, the prevailing beliefs about what defines effective professional development for teachers were being “reformed” as well. The increased emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing has impacted the form and content of professional development opportunities teachers are most likely to receive (Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009). As Kohn (2000) suggests, “The more that scores are emphasized, the less discussion there is about the proper goals of schooling, and the more educators are reduced to finding the most efficient means for what has become the de facto goal – doing better on tests” (p. 323). Traditional professional development strategies for increasing teacher effectiveness have been reexamined and critiqued (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Andree, 2010; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapely, 2007), with an eye for providing teachers with professional development that will help them to better-prepare students for high-stakes tests (Kohn, 2000; Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009). The emphasis is often on, as one team of researchers put it, the production of “paint-by-number teachers and cookie-cutter students” (Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009, p. 1) who can excel on tests, rather than on purposeful, reflective, and research-based instruction (Weglinsky, 2005).

When considering professional development opportunities for in-service teachers, districts have traditionally turned to an approach in which participants sit and receive information, while “university professors, school principals, program developers, authors, and teacher leaders tell teachers about ways in which they can improve their teaching” (Brancard &

Quinnwilliams, 2012, p. 321). This solution is founded on the idea that teachers need more direction about how to teach; they may lack knowledge about the students in their classrooms, not understand the content they are asked to teach, or lack understanding about best practices for teaching the content or for assessing students. It assumes “if professional developers supply information, teachers will change the way they teach and students will learn more” (p. 321). This “set and get” model for professional development is problematic when considering the needs of today’s ELA teachers. It not only devalues these teachers as potential sources of pedagogical expertise (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Andree, 2010; DuFour, 2007), but also reduces professional development time for teachers to connect with one another on the instructional issues that matter most to them. Another disadvantage of a “set and get” model is that this approach only impacts a small number of teachers (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002) and does not reflect the way adults learn best (Knowles, 1980; Van Meter & Stevens, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978).

Because research shows that high-quality professional development leads to higher-quality teaching, and higher-quality teaching leads to increased student achievement, a better solution for professional development was needed to impact a greater number of teachers and inspire sustained changes in their classroom practice (Stewart, 2014). As a result, research into alternative structures for job-embedded, collaborative professional development, including professional learning communities and related models, gained traction (Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010). This marked “a shift from passive, intermittent PD to that which is active, consistent, based in the teaching environment, and supported by peers” (Stewart, 2014, p. 28).

In a “traditional” professional development model, the hired expert arrives, imparts knowledge, and leaves after the in-service day is finished or the conference is over. It is up to

those in the audience to glean what information they can during the training session and then put the pieces of it into practice throughout the school year without the expert's ongoing assistance. In contrast, job-embedded, collaborative professional development models are founded on the belief that the expertise is already in the room: no outside experts are needed because collectively, the teaching staff already has the experience and knowledge necessary to reach professional learning targets if time to collaborate and a suitable structure are provided (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Andree, 2010; DuFour, 2007).

Ongoing, job-embedded, collaborative professional development may be the answer literacy leaders are looking for when considering the needs of ELA teachers in an environment characterized by an emphasis on high-stakes tests. Because this form of professional development is *collaborative* (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Andree, 2010; DuFour, 2007), it honors the expertise that ELA teachers bring to the table and invites them to share what they value about reading instruction in a collegial setting with those who can empathize most. Because it is *job-embedded* (Croft, Cogshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010), it focuses on the day-to-day pedagogical struggles of ELA teachers as they work to bridge the cognitive dissonance caused when they must reconcile the demand for increased student performance on multiple-choice "reading comprehension" tests with what they know is essential for true meaning-making while engaging with authentic texts. Because it is *ongoing* (Brancard and Quinnwilliams, 2002), it creates a sense of community and has the potential to reduce feelings of isolation for ELA teachers who may feel that they are alone in their endeavors. More research into emerging models for job-embedded, collaborative professional development, such as classroom learning labs, will aid literacy leaders, such as reading specialists and literacy coaches, in making

professional development choices that both recognize the unique challenges that today's ELA teachers face and provide opportunities to explore solutions in a safe, collegial structure.

Background of the Problem

Various models for job-embedded, collaborative professional development for both teachers and administrators have emerged over the past decade. According to Roegman and Riehl (2012), these can be described as both “formal and informal efforts to improve instruction through the observation and analysis of teaching and learning, with the aim of understanding not just the process of instruction but also the work that students do and what they are actually learning” (pp. 924-925). While many of these models share characteristics with one another, the evolution of structures, purposes, participants, and roles reflects a desire to meet the variety of unique needs schools and districts have. By combining effective elements from several models, literacy leaders can design professional development opportunities for ELA teachers that honor teachers' expertise and support them as they navigate between the demands of high-stakes tests and the value of research-based best practices.

Characteristics of Job-embedded Professional Development in Education

From conference hall to classroom. One characteristic that job-embedded, collaborative professional development models share is the desire to move the majority of learning out of the auditorium or conference hall, shifting the focus to the classrooms and buildings where teachers and administrators work, the problems they are currently facing, and the questions they are grappling with in the moment (Stewart, 2014). According to a document published by the National Staff Development Council, job-embedded professional development “is primarily school or classroom based and is integrated into the workday, consisting of teachers assessing and finding solutions for authentic and immediate problems of practice as part of a

cycle of continuous improvement” (Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010, p. 2).

Emerging ideas about the value of job-embedded professional development were adapted into models for school administrators’ use over a decade ago. The idea of “instructional walkthroughs” (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2004; Protheroe, 2009), described as “brief, focused visits to classrooms designed to give principals and others a quick snapshot of instruction, facilitate collaborative reflection and improvement, and help leaders plan professional development around teachers’ needs,” illustrates this desire to use what is currently happening in the classroom to drive professional development plans (Roegman & Riehl, 2012, p. 925). A similar model called “learning walks” (Bloom, 2007), developed by the Institute for Teaching at the University of Pittsburgh, links classroom observations with collaborative learning and planning for future professional development (Roegman & Riehl, 2012).

Building on instructional walkthroughs and learning walks and borrowing from the medical field, a model called “instructional rounds” has emerged in recent years. Roegman and Riehl (2012) explain that in this model, “participants...develop their instructional acumen through visits to classrooms and direct observation of what teachers and students are doing” (p. 922). Elmore (2007) explains instructional rounds were first designed with networks of administrators in mind, although they have come to include teachers and other district employees, as well. He goes on to share that, in the original model, administrators from various districts would visit a “host” school. The principal or superintendent hosting the instructional round would share a “problem of practice” with the participants, defined as a problem contingent upon the interaction between teacher, student, and content, which can also be observed within a brief window of time (Roegman & Riehl, 2012). After the pre-observation meeting, participants would break into small groups and observe a number of different classrooms for a short time,

taking descriptive notes about what they see and focusing on the teachers, the students, and the instructional content as they relate to the given problem (Roegman & Riehl, 2012). After observing classrooms, the participants would meet together to analyze their observations, draw conclusions about the connections between their observations and the original problem, and brainstorm solutions to the problem (Roegman & Riehl, 2012). Information gained from instructional rounds helps district leaders understand how decisions they have made impact current classroom practice, aids them in developing appropriate solutions to current problems, and informs their thinking so that future decisions continue to create a climate that is supportive of teaching and learning (Roegman & Riehl, 2012).

Learning through constructive dialogue. A second characteristic of job-embedded, collaborative professional development is a focus on learning from peers through constructive dialogue. When brought together in small groups to discuss questions or problems, adult learners are able to share ideas and information with one another, challenge one another's thinking, and arrive at conclusions or solutions that might not be possible alone (Van Meter & Stevens, 2000; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006).

The Japanese practice of "lesson study" (Perry & Lewis, 2009), although not adopted extensively in the United States, is one such example of how collaboration and dialogue can improve teacher effectiveness. During a lesson study, "teachers...select a topic for instruction and very carefully design and refine a pedagogical method for teaching it" (Roegman & Riehl, 2012, p. 925). A similar, but more common approach in American schools occurs when teachers gather together to discuss student work; when such meetings are structured through routines and protocols, time for reflective discussion can be included so teachers can draw conclusions about the implications of the results for lesson design and future instruction (Blythe, Allen, & Powell,

1999; Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2009; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003).

Finally, the emergence of data-informed “collaborative inquiry” within the structure of a professional learning community brings teachers and administrators together to examine the results of student assessments (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Nelson & Slavit, 2008). When the data reveals problems, participants draw on professional experiences and literature about teaching and learning to collaboratively develop solutions (Butler & Schnellert, 2012). In each of these models, the constructive dialogue between participants raises their collective knowledge base (Van Meter and Stevens, 2000); armed with ideas and strategies that have been refined through purposeful conversation, teachers can make more-informed pedagogical decisions and in turn, become more effective in the classroom (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Nelson & Slavit, 2008).

Support from instructional coaches. A further evolution that is found in some job-embedded, collaborative professional development models is the inclusion of an instructional coach. Unlike “traditional” professional development, in which the expert speaks while the audience passively listens and takes notes, the role of an instructional coach in job-embedded, collaborative professional development is to serve as a resource on the side, providing support while the participants work together to identify problems and solutions (Bean, 2004; Kern, 2009). This marriage between “traditional” models and job-embedded professional development results in the best of both worlds: participants have access to an individual who is well-versed in theory, pedagogy, and best practices, but they are also highly-valued for their own expertise and experience. An effective instructional coach is just as willing to guide participants to their own solutions as he or she is to provide suggestions and resources (Garmston, Linder, & Whitaker, 1993). Within a job-embedded, collaborative professional development model, the coach may

act as a “host,” perhaps guiding the conversation by following a pre-set routine or protocol, to help participants keep the conversation on track and enforce group norms (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003; McDougall, 2015). In addition, the coach may help participants clarify and refine their thinking through cognitive coaching techniques (Garmston, Linder, & Whitaker, 1993), or lead group members to make connections between theory and practice (Van Es & Sherin, 2008). Because the instructional coach is a member of the school or district staff, he or she is also a resource that is available after the PD session is over, either to meet with a cohort of teachers at various times throughout the school year or to answer individual questions.

When considering how best to meet the needs of ELA teachers through job-embedded, collaborative professional development, literacy leaders have much to consider. By law, ELA teachers are expected to raise student achievement, which is currently measured quantitatively by student performance on high-stakes tests (Klein, 2015). Understandably, many ELA teachers are anxious about the requirements and are willing to make sacrifices in the quality of their instruction in order to “teach to the test,” meet performance benchmarks, and therefore, remain employed (Weglinsky, 2005; Oosting, 2015). This sometimes means sacrificing, at great cost to a personal, pedagogical sense of integrity, a commitment to what research has shown defines quality instruction (Kohn, 2000; Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009). Reading specialists, literacy coaches, and other district literacy leaders can help ELA teachers bridge what sometimes seems to be two irreconcilable approaches to instruction by providing meaningful professional development where conversations between educators can take place. In this high-stakes, achievement-driven environment, job-embedded, collaborative professional development for ELA teachers must (1) base itself in the classroom, not only to focus on the tangible, day-to-day instructional needs of teachers but also to create a sense of empathy around the real pedagogical

challenges they face each day, (2) provide a framework for learning from peers through constructive dialogue, which values participants' expertise and creates a sense of community, and (3) rely on an instructional coach to moderate conversation and support participants' thinking, creating a collegial environment that fosters professional growth. A classroom learning lab (Haug & Sands, 2013; Houk, 2010) is a job-embedded, collaborative professional development model that meets each of these requirements. While many studies examine each of these elements independently and have found them to be effective, the idea of bringing them together into the structure referred to as a "classroom learning lab" has not been explored through a vast amount of research.

A study by Haug and Sands (2013) included 42 teachers from three high schools in the same large, suburban school district. The researchers focused on how participating in a classroom learning lab model (coined "Literacy Labs" in the study) over two years influenced teachers' pedagogical choices and in turn, impacted student engagement. After analyzing data collected from classroom observations, student surveys, and student work, and after interviewing instructional coaches, the researchers determined that classrooms in which the teacher participated in the Literacy Lab had higher levels of student engagement and student satisfaction (Haug & Sands, 2013). In addition, teachers in these classrooms were more consistent in following workshop and gradual-release models (Haug & Sands, 2013).

Brancard and Quinwilliams' (2012) study focused on the impact of classroom learning labs on teachers in a middle and high school with high percentages of English language learners. They analyzed data collected from 22 teachers who participated in learning labs over a two-year period, including documents produced collaboratively by the teachers during the learning labs, teachers' descriptions of their own learning, and field notes collected by the researchers while

watching learning lab sessions or coaching sessions with individual teachers (Brancard & Quinwilliams, 2012). The researchers determined that 75% of the teachers who participated in the classroom learning labs made and sustained positive changes in their practice. These changes “corresponded with changes in teachers’ beliefs about what students can do and how students learn, as well as changes in their beliefs about their roles and how teachers can work together” (Brancard & Quinwilliams, 2012).

Statement of Purpose

The limited body of research around classroom learning labs presents a need for developing of new avenues for exploration. For example, if the individual elements that compose a classroom learning lab have been found to be effective, then further research is needed into what environments, and for which teachers, a classroom learning lab model may work best. This study builds on previous research about classroom learning labs by examining the impact they had on secondary English language arts (ELA) teachers from small public schools with few professional development opportunities to discuss instructional best practices with colleagues who work in a similar grade level and content area context. In particular, this study looked at how participating in a classroom learning lab with cross-district peers can create a setting for constructive dialogue that leads to teacher learning and reduces feelings of isolation.

By focusing on the experiences of a smaller, more localized group of educators, this study provides a snapshot of the impact participation in classroom learning labs has on ELA teachers who work in small schools. The findings will inform literacy leaders and other school administrators considering incorporating classroom learning labs into their districts’ PD offerings, with the goal that professional learning for ELA teachers in small schools is more meaningful, engaging, and effective. In addition, because this study focuses on a classroom learning lab that

includes teachers from two different school districts, it may provide insight into how cooperation between districts in the form of shared professional development can provide meaningful benefits.

Research Questions

The central research question is: How do cross-district classroom learning labs impact secondary ELA teachers from small public schools who have few professional development opportunities to discuss instructional best practices with colleagues who work in a similar grade level and content area context?

Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

This study utilized qualitative methods to delineate the current beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of secondary ELA teachers around the classroom learning labs experience. Therefore, the data collection included: audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews of participants with observational notes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994); audio-recordings and observational notes of the pre-learning lab and post-learning lab cohort meetings; observational notes of the in-classroom session (focusing on participants' comments and reactions during the in-classroom experience); and follow-up e-mail correspondence, as needed, to collect any additional information or to make clarifications.

Interview responses were coded and analyzed using a multi-phase process (Cantrell et. al., 2009), which begins with identifying themes, followed by comparing and contrasting the themes to look for trends. Before interviews began, permission was granted by the Human Research Review Committee at Grand Valley State University and participants signed a consent form.

Definition of Terms

Job-embedded professional development – As defined by Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, and Powers, (2010), job-embedded professional development is “teacher learning that is grounded in day-to-day teaching practice and is designed to enhance teachers’ content-specific instructional practices with the intent of improving student learning” (p. 2). Job-embedded professional development is characterized by teachers working actively and collaboratively to discover solutions to “authentic and immediate problems of practice as part of a cycle of continuous improvement” (Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010, p. 2).

Classroom learning lab – For the purposes of this study, classroom learning labs are a research-based coaching model and professional learning opportunity for teachers in which “...‘host’ teachers with some expertise to share invite ‘guest’ teachers to observe a lesson in the host’s classroom. Host and guests subsequently engage in a facilitated conversation about teaching and learning, featuring the content and context of [the] host’s lesson” (N. DeFrance, personal communication, November 5, 2014).

Host – As described by Houk (2010), the host is a teacher who allows other teachers to observe a lesson in his or her classroom as part of a classroom learning lab. According to Houk (2010), “Host teachers are not expected to be perfect in their practice, but should be willing to open their classrooms to colleagues and participate in deep discussions of their own practice” (p. 1).

Guest – As described by Houk (2010), guests are teachers who have been invited to participate in a classroom learning lab; they will observe the host’s lesson and participate in “pre-brief” and debrief conversations. According to Houk (2010), “Guest teachers should be open-minded and willing to learn, and they should take a non-evaluative stance in the classroom they are observing” (p. 1).

Facilitator – As described by McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, and McDonald, (2003), a facilitator is the individual responsible for ensuring a group follows any prescribed protocol and group members adhere to group norms. Houk (2010) adds that the facilitator’s role in a classroom learning lab also includes organizing the group, planning the schedule, and preparing guest teachers by familiarizing them with the protocol and norms.

Norms – For the purposes of this study, norms are standards of behavior that are expected during formal workplace interactions such as meetings (i.e. *All cell phones should be silenced*).

Protocol – As described by McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, and McDonald, (2003), a protocol is a pre-determined series of conversational moves that a facilitator uses to encourage participation in a discussion, ensure equity for participants (for example, shared speaking time), and build trust so that all participants feel safe to contribute.

Pre-brief conversation – For the purposes of this study, a pre-brief conversation is the first major division in a classroom learning lab protocol, and takes place before the classroom observation. During the pre-brief conversation, the host familiarizes the guests with the learning targets and outlines the plan for the lesson that the guests will observe. In addition, guests identify instructional moves they will pay particular attention to during the classroom observation.

In-classroom observation – For the purposes of this study, the in-classroom observation is the second major division in a classroom learning lab protocol, and takes place after the pre-brief conversation. During the in-classroom observation, the guests visit the host’s classroom and observe the host teach an authentic lesson to students. Guests take notes during the in-classroom observation that will be used for discussion and reflection during the debrief conversation.

Debrief conversation – As described by Houk (2010), the debrief conversation is the third major division in a classroom learning lab protocol, and takes place after the classroom observation. During the debrief conversation, participants are encouraged to reflect on what they observed and are guided to make connections between theory and practice.

Conversational moves – For the purposes of this study, conversational moves are words and phrases that a facilitator uses intentionally to encourage and moderate a group discussion.

Instructional moves – As defined by McEwan-Adkins, (2012), instructional moves are “positive and purpose-driven actions, attitudes, and words that highly-effective teachers use to communicate with students during...instruction” (p. 15).

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This thesis focuses on the impact of cross-district classroom learning labs on secondary ELA teachers employed at public schools with small student populations (commonly explained as 400 students or less). In particular, it examined how participating in a classroom learning lab with cross-district peers created a setting for constructive dialogue that led to teacher learning and reduced feelings of isolation. Teachers’ attitudes and experiences were captured in the form of observational notes taken while teachers participated in a classroom learning lab experience for the first time. In addition, conversational interviews were used to document teachers’ reflections on how the classroom learning lab experience impacted them on a personal and professional level.

The individuals participating in this study are members of a teaching staff at a small, urban public school district in West Michigan. In using qualitative methods, the purpose of this thesis is not to generalize, but rather to delineate some of the impacts participating in classroom learning labs has had on these educators. A study encompassing a larger group of educators, or

one following the same group of educators through additional classroom learning lab experiences over the course of an entire school year, was not feasible due to time and resources.

This study utilizes qualitative methods, including observational notes and interviews to delineate the current beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of secondary ELA teachers around the classroom learning labs experience. The nature of qualitative research is such that the knowledge produced may not be generalizable to other people or other research settings. That is, the findings might be limited solely to the individuals included in the research study. To make the findings more generalizable to the general population of secondary ELA teachers at small schools, it would be ideal to study a large number of educators at a variety of research sites over a long period of time. However, the timeline and budget of the study was limited, thus a small number of participants were included at this time.

An additional limitation of this design is that it only gives a snapshot of a point in time. Because the data collected focuses on subjective, mutable points of information like reactions, beliefs, and attitudes, it can only capture what the participants were feeling in the moment of observation or inquiry and may not reflect their future behavior or thinking (Frankel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). Additionally, the data was limited to those individuals who were willing and able to participate in both a classroom learning lab experience and a conversational interview. As a result, the data collected may not be a representative sample of the population.

Organization of the Thesis

The rest of this thesis is organized as follows: Chapter Two provides a comprehensive review of the important literature related to the individual elements that contribute to the structure and effectiveness of the classroom learning lab professional development model. The research design, including descriptions of the research site, the subjects involved, and the tools

and procedures used for gathering and analyzing the data are discussed in Chapter Three. The findings from the analyses are provided in Chapter Four. Lastly, Chapter Five presents the conclusions drawn and the implications of these findings on future policy and practice. Recommendations for future research will also be included.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law in 2001, ELA teachers have been required to increase student achievement on high-stakes tests to meet the law's rigorous student proficiency goals and avoid penalties. To avoid the sanctions associated with not making adequate yearly progress (AYP), literacy leaders such as reading specialists and literacy coaches have been challenged to provide ELA teachers with professional development that effectively fills in their knowledge gaps (especially in regards to strategies that work best for "at-risk" subgroups) and equip these teachers with the knowledge to meet the unique needs of each student in their classrooms.

Because high-stakes assessments often include skills-based, multiple-choice "reading comprehension" sections (Kohn, 2000), ELA teachers face the question of how best to allocate their instructional time with students. Some believe it is safest to "teach to the test" in order to help students achieve a passing score, which, in turn, affects teachers' annual evaluations (Oosting, 2015). This results in a disconnect between what some ELA teachers actually do in the classroom and what they believe is truly best for improving students' reading comprehension (Kohn, 2000; Weglinsky, 2005). This sense of cognitive dissonance can be repaired through meaningful professional development that creates a safe space for ELA teachers to discuss strategies that work to help students meet the requirements of high-stakes assessments within the context of authentic, research-based literacy instruction. One professional development model that may provide this space for teachers is classroom learning labs.

To examine this problem further and provide a background for my proposed solution, a discussion of the theoretical framework that is the foundation of this research will be presented,

followed by a review of the literature. The literature falls into three general categories and will be discussed in this order: (1) a description of classroom learning labs as the result of the evolution of various job-embedded, collaborative professional development models, including their format, structure, and observed benefits; (2) the potential of classroom learning labs for creating space for teacher learning and professional growth through dialogue, including the power of the individual teacher in using *noticings* to drive observation and reflection; and (3) the potential to use this form of professional development to foster teachers' own abilities as peer leaders and peer coaches. Finally, a summary of the reviewed literature will be provided, followed by a conclusion that will identify the gaps in the research that this study will address.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is founded on the constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1978), in which he asserts learning and development is a collaborative activity. Social constructivists build on Vygotsky's work, believing knowledge is first constructed in a social process and then adopted for use by individuals. Two social-constructivist concepts (*collaborative elaboration* and *andragogy*) demonstrate how adult individuals seek and create knowledge in groups, but are also driven to seek and create knowledge through intrinsic motivation.

Collaborative Elaboration

Social constructivists believe individuals make meaning through interacting with others and with their environment. The concept of *collaborative elaboration* proposed by Van Meter and Stevens (2000) states that sharing individual perspectives through collaboration results in learners constructing understandings together that wouldn't be possible alone. Van Meter and Stevens reached this conclusion when they studied the influence theory has on research around

peer collaboration.

Van Meter and Stevens (2000) examined studies around peer collaboration (Golbeck & Sinagra, 2000; Samaha & DeLisi, 2000) and compared and contrasted the studies' theoretical frameworks and findings. Two studies they examined emphasized "cognitive conflict as a mechanism for causing cognitive change in individuals" (p. 114). Golbeck and Sinagra (2000) described peer collaboration as "ideal...for promoting the development of thinking" (p. 22) and as providing "an important context for the disequilibration of thought" (p. 22). Samaha and DeLisi (2000) asserted that collaboration between learners is a vehicle for promoting individual cognitive gains.

Both teams of researchers examined the impact collaboration had on student learning, and based their studies on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which states that individuals develop conceptually when current understandings are challenged by contradictory views (Piaget, 1926). Golbeck and Sinagra (2000) predicted that students working in dyads would learn more than peers who were working alone. Samaha and DeLisi (2000) tested the effects of peer collaboration on the development of reasoning ability; they believed that students who practiced a reasoning task with peers would become more proficient at the task than those who practiced alone.

When considering the work of Golbeck and Sinagra (2000) and Samaha and DeLisi (2000) alongside that of several other researchers, Van Meter and Stevens (2000) determined that Piaget's explanation of how learners construct knowledge could not explain every aspect of the collaborative process. In their words, "no single theory captures all that is important about peer collaboration" (p. 122). They asserted that Vygotsky's sociocultural theory "may offer insight into the co-construction of meaning, but the concept of cognitive conflict must be borrowed from

Piaget as a mechanism to explain individual cognitive change” (Van Meter & Stevens, 2000, p. 122). As a result, they suggested a new theoretical lens – termed collaborative elaboration – through which to examine the effects of collaboration on learning. Their theory of collaborative elaboration combines elements from both Vygotsky and Piaget: learning is constructed through a social process, but the individuals involved in that process may experience cognitive conflict when exchanging ideas with others, which results in new learning when the conflict is resolved (Van Meter and Stevens, 2000).

Andragogy

Social constructivist scholars consider learning to be an active process in which learners should be intrinsically motivated to seek out knowledge for themselves (Knowles, 1980). The work of Malcolm Knowles (1980) around the concept of *andragogy*, which he defines as “the art and science of helping adults learn” in contrast to *pedagogy*, “the art and science of teaching children” (p. 43), is based on four assumptions about the way adults seek and create knowledge.

First, adult learners “have a deep psychological need to be generally self-directing, although they may be dependent in particular temporary situations” (p. 43). This means adult learners aren’t necessarily dependent on an instructor each time they want to learn something; instead, they take responsibility for their own learning, just as they take responsibility for the other details of their lives.

Second, as adult learners “grow and develop, they accumulate an increasing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning—for themselves and for others” (p. 45). Knowles asserts “adults derive their self-identity from their experience” (p. 51), which means they define who they are by the wealth of experiences they have collected over the years: what their occupations are, where they have worked and traveled, what their training and

experience have prepared them to do, and what achievements they have earned. As a result, when adults find themselves in situations where their experience isn't being used, or its worth is minimized, they feel rejected as persons.

Third, adult learners become ready to learn something when they need to learn it in order to cope more effectively with real-life tasks or problems, such as those presented by family, personal interests, or career: "They want to be able to apply whatever knowledge and skill they gain today to living more effectively tomorrow" (p. 45). Adults find satisfaction when they can identify immediate applications of their learning to situations they face at home or on the job.

Finally, adult learners "see education as a process of developing increased competence to achieve their full potential in life" (p. 45). Unlike younger learners, whose learning goals in school center around the mastery of specific academic subjects, adults desire learning experiences that will help them to improve their performance in areas that matter to them, such as in their careers. For example, an adult may take an advanced university course or attend a professional conference in order to increase knowledge that may lead to achieving a career goal, for example, obtaining a promotion or being selected for a new position that requires more specialized knowledge.

Synthesis of Research Literature

The review of important literature in this section will examine classroom learning labs through three different lenses: first, in their evolution in structure and format as a model for job-embedded, collaborative professional development; second, as a space for professional learning and growth through peer coaching; and third, as an opportunity for teachers to develop their own peer coaching skills.

The Foundation, Evolution, and Structure of Classroom Learning Labs

Classroom learning labs have evolved from a foundation built by over a decade of both educational research and practical application in schools and districts across the United States. Through trial and error, researchers, school administrators, and other education leaders have identified essential elements that, when implemented with fidelity as part of a classroom learning lab model, result in greater personal satisfaction and professional learning for participants, and may contribute, in turn, to higher student achievement.

The evolution of models for collaborative, job-embedded professional development.

Over a decade ago, educational leaders began incorporating emerging ideas about the value of job-embedded professional development in education into models for school administrators' use. Over time, this focus shifted as educational researchers observed the value in allowing classroom teachers to participate in similar professional development opportunities. These early models established the foundation for classroom learning labs.

Job-embedded professional development for administrators first emerged as a method of practice to help building leaders become more aware of what was happening in individual classrooms on a day-to-day basis. Conducting classroom walkthroughs, described by Roegman and Riehl (2012) as “brief, focused visits to classrooms designed to give principals and others a quick snapshot of instruction” (p. 925), allowed administrators to work collaboratively with individual educators to reflect on their current teaching practice and make plans for improvement. In their book *The Three-Minute Classroom Walk-through: Changing School Supervisory Practice One Teacher at a Time*, Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, and Poston (2004) outlined methods for short, frequent, informal classroom observations that are eventually followed up by conversations with the teacher being observed. Downey, et al. suggested post-

observation conversations should be collegial in nature, where both teacher and administrator reflect on data collected over time during the classroom walkthroughs and think together about ways to improve instruction. Following the spirit of Malcolm Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy, Downey, et al. asserted teachers – like other adult learners – were more likely to improve their performance when their expertise in reflecting on previous performance was valued. According to Downey, et al., teachers seemed to embrace new ideas more readily when they emerged as a result of self-reflection, rather than when an administrator or other educational leader *told* them how to change.

In 2007, Gary Bloom identified five models for classroom walkthroughs and similar forms of job-embedded professional development for teachers, but made the point that *no* model would be effective unless certain important elements were present in its implementation. In his article, entitled *Classroom Visitations Done Well*, he noted the growing interest in various forms of classroom walkthroughs (sometimes known alternatively as *data walks*, *learning walks*, *peer coaching*, *principal professional learning walks*, and *quick visits*) and observed that, among districts already incorporating them into their practice, “the results [ranged] from thoughtful discussions among practitioners about teaching practice, to the mountains of unused data gathered by self-appointed inspectors” (p. 40). According to Bloom, if classroom walkthroughs are implemented effectively, they have enormous transformative power; however, if they are done poorly, teachers will respond to them with “hostility and distrust, and [walkthroughs] will become one more passing fad in the long and disappointing history of school reform” (p. 41). Bloom asserted that the most effective models for classroom walkthroughs include four essential elements: (1) the purpose of supporting professional learning communities focused on improving teaching and learning; (2) a belief that the practice of teaching should be public and

informed by standards; (3) a grounding in the commitment to support the success of every student and teacher; and (4) an organization around clear and public processes and protocols, including a basis in collected evidence and a continuous cycle of inquiry. In addition, Bloom suggested that schools and districts interested in initiating classroom walkthroughs or similar job-embedded professional development models should approach them purposefully. First, administrators and other leaders should thoroughly consider how the model they chose will help them to reach specific school improvement goals and how the model will fit in with other procedures and protocols already in place in the district, including their inclusion (or non-inclusion) in teacher evaluations. Second, they should identify the desired participants and consider whether or not participation is mandatory. Third, they should outline a protocol for the process that outlines methods for observing, collecting, discussing, and reflecting on data that is grounded in professionalism. Bloom believed that by setting high expectations for the process, keeping it simple, aligning it with the work of professional learning communities, and supporting it adequately with appropriate resources, schools and districts would find success in whatever walkthrough model they chose.

Building on classroom walkthroughs and borrowing from the medical field, a model called “instructional rounds” has emerged in recent years. Roegman and Riehl (2012) explain that in this model, “participants...develop their instructional acumen through visits to classrooms and direct observation of what teachers and students are doing” (p. 922). Like classroom walkthroughs, instructional rounds are short, purposeful classroom observations that value the participants’ expertise and encourage collaborative inquiry. In addition, they include essential elements identified by Gary Bloom (2007), including a clear purpose and protocol, and a reliance on evidence collected during the classroom visit to inform the post-observation discussion

(Marzano, 2009). In the original model (Elmore, 2007), administrators from various districts would visit a “host” school. The principal or superintendent hosting the instructional round would share a “problem of practice” with the participants that was observable within a brief window of time (Roegman & Riehl, 2012). After the pre-observation meeting, participants would break into small groups and visit classrooms to conduct short observations (Roegman & Riehl, 2012). Afterward, the participants would meet together to analyze the data, draw conclusions about the connections between their observations and the original problem, and brainstorm solutions. Information gained from instructional rounds helps district leaders understand how decisions they have made impact current classroom practice, aids them in developing appropriate solutions to current problems, and informs their thinking so that future decisions continue to create a climate that is supportive of teaching and learning.

The value of observing other teachers as professional development. There is an agreement among many researchers that allowing in-service teachers to observe skillful teachers delivering lessons is a beneficial form of professional development. Several past studies (Borko, Jacobs, Eiteljorg, & Pittman, 2008; Rosaen, Carlisle, Mihocko, Melnick, & Johnson, 2013; Brophy, 2004; Kleinknecht & Schneider, 2013) have focused on the use of video recordings to provide a context for discussing the art and craft of teaching. A study from Borko, et al. (2008) found a safe, supportive community was created when the same cohort of teachers analyzed and critiqued each other’s lessons. Rosaen, et al. (2013) noted that reading teachers who participated in analyzing videos of other teachers’ reading instruction found the experience beneficial and were inspired to make changes in their practice. In contrast, while Brophy (2004) found similar benefits to the studies previously noted, she also identified some limitations present in the use of video for professional learning. First, watching one’s own instruction can create a sense of

anxiety for the taped teacher, even if the teacher is viewing the video alone or with a supportive supervisor. Second, including the taped teacher in the group that is discussing the video had the tendency to limit spontaneity of discussion and distorted the group dynamics. Third, she asserted that teachers observing video-recorded lessons require structure and scaffolding to reach the professional development learning goals; just observing videos of quality instruction wasn't enough to create the reflective environment that it takes to inspire change. Additionally, Kleinknecht and Schneider (2013) found teachers who observed their own instruction on video had a tendency to focus on what went *wrong* rather than what went *right*, leading to decreased teacher morale.

The classroom learning lab model. Researchers have found that a rich environment for professional conversation, collaboration, learning, and growth is created when teachers are brought together in the context of a classroom learning lab. By adhering to a protocol (including the emphasis on *noticings* over critiques), including a coach to guide the conversation, and focusing on increased learning for both hosts and guests, classroom learning labs offer teachers the benefits of classroom walkthroughs, instructional rounds, and the analysis of video recordings, while also incorporating the essential elements for success identified by Gary Bloom (2007). In addition, they provide solutions to the problems that observing video recordings can sometimes create. If continued over time, researchers (Bracard and Quinnwilliams, 2002) have found that participation in classroom learning labs can inspire teachers to reexamine and redefine their role and purpose in the classroom and make changes in their instructional techniques. They can also lead to a more collaborative, learning-focused professional culture where teachers see themselves as valued experts and contributors to the advancement of the profession and in addition, feel comfortable exchanging ideas with colleagues with the intent of learning from one

another (Bracard and Quinnwilliams, 2002).

Key elements. While implementation of classroom learning labs may vary slightly from building to building or district to district, several key elements define their structure. Houk (2010) defines a classroom learning lab as “an in-house professional development model that takes place in a host teacher’s room during the normal school day, framed by a pre-observation meeting [for the purposes of this study, later termed as a *pre-brief*] and a debriefing session” (p. 1). First, classroom learning labs are focused on increased student achievement through the advancement of *teacher* learning; the conversation results not only in professional growth for the host teacher but also for the guests. Second, classroom learning labs are by nature collaborative and involve a community of peers; in most cases, unlike classroom walkthroughs or instructional rounds, building principals and other individuals responsible for teacher evaluations are not even invited to the learning lab sessions. Third, classroom learning labs are guided by a protocol that has been pre-determined by the building or district; a facilitator (usually a trained instructional coach or similar teacher leader) ensures the protocol is followed and that norms are established and agreed upon to guarantee a safe learning environment for the host teacher and other participants. Finally, classroom learning labs are grounded in theory and best practices, but also in shared expertise; all participants, including the host teacher, are invited to bring their experiences to the conversation.

Classroom learning labs require real-time engagement and meaningful reflection by the participants with an emphasis on future growth. Because there is no video recording to refer to later, during the pre-brief session, participants are asked to identify key areas that they agree to focus on during the ensuing classroom observation. This leads to purposeful data collection in the form of *noticings* that will inform reflection and learning during the debrief conversation. In

addition, learning labs are designed to be non-evaluative in nature (and therefore non-threatening). The lack of a video recording shifts the participants' focus from an emphasis on reviewing past mistakes to focusing on future improvement; instead of forcing the host teacher to relive potentially embarrassing errors in the company of colleagues, the protocol invites the host to consider where he or she might go, and grow, beginning with the very next lesson.

Participants. Houk (2010) identifies three key roles that participants in a classroom learning lab might take: host teacher, guest teacher, and facilitator. The *host teacher* is a teacher who allows other teachers to observe a lesson in his or her classroom as part of a classroom learning lab. According to Houk (2010), "Host teachers are not expected to be perfect in their practice, but they should be willing to open their classrooms to colleagues and participate in deep discussions of their own practice" (p. 1). *Guest teachers* are teachers who have been invited to participate in a classroom learning lab; they will observe the host's lesson and participate in "pre-brief" and debrief conversations. According to Houk (2010), "Guest teachers should be open-minded and willing to learn, and they should take a non-evaluative stance in the classroom they are observing" (p. 1). As described by McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, and McDonald (2003), a *facilitator* is the individual responsible for ensuring a group follows any prescribed protocol and group members adhere to the group norms. Houk (2010) adds the facilitator's role in a classroom learning lab also includes organizing the group, planning the schedule, and preparing guest teachers by familiarizing them with the protocol and norms as part of the pre-brief conversation.

Although building principals and other individuals responsible for teacher evaluations are not normally present during a classroom learning lab, they do share a responsibility in ensuring its success. Gary Bloom (2007) emphasizes the importance of supporting job-embedded

professional development models with adequate and appropriate resources to ensure their effectiveness. Houk (2010) asserts, “Administrators need to understand the value of the lab classroom model and be willing to provide the time, location, and staff resources for implementation” (p. 1). Because classroom learning labs are job-embedded and require no hired speakers, consultants, or other outside resources for their implementation, the most significant financial expense is the cost of substitute teachers, making classroom learning labs a highly cost-effective structure for fostering professional growth. Administrative support in the form of adequate time and the minimal funding required is absolutely essential.

Structure. The structure of a classroom learning lab follows a protocol, a pre-determined series of conversational moves a facilitator uses to encourage participation in a discussion, ensure equity for participants (for example, shared speaking time), and build trust so all participants feel safe to contribute (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003). The specific protocol for a classroom learning lab can vary from building to building or from district to district, but always includes three key divisions of time: the pre-brief conversation, the classroom observation, and the debrief conversation (Houk, 2010; McDougall, 2015).

The pre-brief. The pre-brief conversation, which takes place immediately before the classroom observation, introduces the participants to the structure of the classroom learning lab and establishes goals for the session’s learning. First, introductions are made and norms are established and agreed upon to create a safe discussion environment for all participants. Next, the host teacher provides a description of the lesson guest teachers will be observing and identifies one or more key areas of teaching practice he or she hopes to improve as a result of the ensuing observation and discussion. Guided by the facilitator, guest teachers then identify specific areas they plan to observe during the lesson that align with the host teacher’s goals. For

example, a host teacher focusing on implementing the gradual release of responsibility model within his or her lesson design might wonder how the demonstration portion of the lesson impacts his English Language Learners' performance during independent practice. Guest teachers might volunteer to observe specific students during independent practice and make notes that will inform an evidence-based discussion during the debrief portion of the classroom learning lab. According to Houk (2010), "the term *lab* implies practice and experimentation, not perfection" (p. 1). The pre-brief conversation establishes the fact that, although the host teacher may offer outstanding examples of highly-effective teaching, he or she is not an expert in all things and should not be considered as such. Setting a specific observation focus aligned with the host teacher's goals for improvement during the pre-brief conversation sets the tone: all participants in the classroom learning lab, including the host teacher, are there as a community of learners.

Classroom observation. The second portion of the classroom learning lab is the classroom observation. During the observation, "guest teachers sit or stand, quietly observing and taking notes. They are welcome to sit in close during a teacher-student conference, small-group lesson, or student discussion, simply listening to and observing the interaction" (Houk, 2010, p. 1). While some descriptions of the classroom learning lab model suggest teachers shouldn't initiate discussions with students (Houk, 2010), others welcome it, provided the host teacher's permission to do so is given during the pre-brief session, and with the caveat that guest teachers don't take the opportunity to interact with students as permission to provide students with additional coaching or instruction (McDougall, 2015). The length of this classroom observation can vary from building to building or district to district; most commonly, teachers observe at least one full class period, or one subject-area lesson, from beginning to end so they

can observe the transitions that take place during the lesson from the teacher's initial demonstration to the students' individual practice.

The debrief. The most powerful part of the classroom learning lab experience, the debrief session, invites teachers to have a collegial conversation about the classroom observation, connecting what they noticed to theory, best practices, and implications for future lesson design. The debrief session takes place most-ideally immediately after the host teacher's lesson so the experience is still fresh in the minds of all participants. According to Houk (2010), the debrief session typically begins with a discussion, guided by the facilitator, "of the observation, prompting questions, ideas, and reflections. The questions may include clarification of activities or conversations" (p. 1) that the guests observed while visiting the host's classroom. During a learning lab debrief session, guest teachers' observations are shared with the host teacher in the form of *noticings*. That is, observations from guest teachers are phrased in the form of statements beginning with the phrase "I noticed..." (Houk, 2010; McDougall, 2015), thus making the feedback less confrontational and more constructive for the host. These *noticings* are pre-planned, intentional, and designed to facilitate productive thinking, conversation, reflection, and professional growth as a part of the classroom learning lab process. The host teacher is invited to take notes and then clarify misunderstandings or address questions after all guests have shared. In addition, guests are invited to share the successes and challenges they face in their own classrooms, connecting what they noticed to their own ideas about theory and best practices. As a result, everyone seated at the table is valued for their expertise.

Professional Learning and Growth Through Peer Coaching

Research has shown that the collaborative, constructive dialogue that takes place during classroom learning lab sessions results in extremely-powerful opportunities for participants to

coach one another and, in turn, grow in their teaching practice. These observations support Van Meter and Stevens' (2000) previous work around collaborative elaboration, in which they assert that sharing individual perspectives through collaboration results in learners constructing understandings together that wouldn't be possible alone. In addition, a classroom learning lab protocol emphasizes the value of the experiences and voices of all participants. This practice reflects a key idea in Malcolm Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy: when adults find themselves in situations where their experience isn't being used, or its worth is minimized, they feel rejected as persons. Conversely, a classroom learning lab invites all participants to connect their past experiences to current learning and share these reflections with the group. As a result, all participants feel that their contributions to the dialogue are desirable, and even essential, for the group to progress to new insights.

During a classroom learning lab, the most valuable opportunity for participants to engage in peer coaching occurs when the facilitator invites the host and guests to have a conversation around the guests' *noticings*. Research has shown that these conversations create an environment conducive to professional growth, help teachers redefine their roles and purposes in the context of their classrooms and school communities, and inspire changes in beliefs that lead to changes in instruction.

The power of the individual teacher in *noticing*. One of the beliefs behind classroom learning labs is that shared teacher expertise helps the host teacher to more closely examine and evaluate his or her instructional decisions and practices. Participants are asked to consider what they observed during the classroom observation and make connections to its greater implications for their own teaching practice. Over time, this process can help all teachers involved become more reflective and intentional practitioners. During a learning lab debrief session, participants'

expertise is shared with the host teacher in the form of *noticings*. That is, observations from guest teachers are phrased in the form of statements beginning with the phrase “I noticed...” (Houk, 2010; McDougall, 2015), making the feedback less confrontational and more constructive for the host. These noticings are pre-planned, intentional, and designed to facilitate productive thinking, conversation, reflection, and professional growth as a part of the classroom learning lab process.

Past research makes it clear experts, including experienced educators, are skillful at noticing patterns in their area of expertise (Berliner, 1994; Furlong & Maynard, 1995). Van Es and Sherin (2008) assert that “while experienced teachers may already have the ability to recognize meaningful patterns in teaching, ...*noticing* is a skill that [novice] teachers may need to develop further” (p. 245). Van Es and Sherin outlined three key areas that are essential when teachers engage in noticing: (1) identifying what is important in the teaching situation, (2) using what one knows about the situation to reason about the situation, and (3) making connections between specific events (for example, instructional practices that the teacher used during a lesson) and broader principles of teaching and learning. In a classroom learning lab, the facilitator uses a protocol that guides teachers to engage in activities that require each of these three types of thinking (Houk, 2010; McDougall, 2015).

Identifying what is important. The first aspect of noticing involves the ability to identify what is important in a very complex situation. Teachers with more experience are able to recognize what is important to attend to as a lesson progresses (Van Es & Sherin, 2008). A classroom learning lab protocol is designed to scaffold teachers in this kind of thinking, so no matter their level of teaching experience, guest teachers will be able to key in to what is most important to pay attention to during the lesson. In the pre-brief session of a learning lab,

participating guests are asked to identify a few key areas (such as instructional best practices) they will be intentional about observing during the host teacher's lesson (Houk, 2010; McDougall, 2015). These areas are shared with the entire pre-briefing group, including the host teacher. By identifying what is important *before* observing the host teacher's lesson, participants in a classroom learning lab with less teaching experience are just as likely as experienced teachers to make meaningful observations about the host teacher's lesson.

Using what one knows to draw conclusions. The second aspect of noticing requires teachers to use their background knowledge gained through experience to draw conclusions about the situations they are analyzing. Van Es and Sherin (2008) explain that “for teachers, this means using knowledge of the subject matter, knowledge of how students think about the subject matter, as well as knowledge of their local context to reason about events as they unfold” (p. 246). Olson (et. al., 1996) asserts, while observing the same situation, different people will see different things. In addition, what a person sees is influenced by his or her background knowledge, prior experiences, and beliefs.

When planning their noticings, teachers are asked to look for specific instructional goals and teaching practices that the host teacher is working on. During the debrief conversation, lab participants consider their noticings and provide evidence to the host teacher that supports what they observed (McDougall, 2015). The nature of a classroom learning lab conversation means that both the host teacher and guests will benefit from the wealth of background knowledge that each participant brings to the table. However, teachers are not limited by the conclusions they draw from their experiences alone, but may have their thinking challenged by those whose background knowledge causes them to notice aspects of the lesson in a different way. The ensuing conversation and reflection results in transformative thinking. This is especially

common among teachers who participate in learning labs as professional development over a number of years (Bracard & Quinnwilliams, 2002).

Making connections that lead to professional growth. The third aspect of noticing asks teachers “to make connections between specific events and the broader principles they represent” (Van Es & Sherin, 2008, p. 246). By pre-determining areas for observation and taking note of evidence to support noticings, teachers participating in a classroom learning lab are guided to make direct connections between the host teacher’s instructional goals and specific events that show those goals were met (or not met) during the lesson.

During the debrief session, the classroom learning lab protocol asks teachers to consider and share the broader implications of what they observed and then reflect on what those might mean for their own professional learning and teaching practice. In addition, teachers are asked to share at least one piece of learning that they are taking away from the conversation, including a goal for professional growth (McDougall, 2015). By identifying the best practices and theory behind the host teacher’s instructional choices, and then comparing those choices to their own instructional practices, guest teachers are given an opportunity to self-evaluate and set goals for improvement. Over time, this leads to changes in instructional practice (Bracard & Quinnwilliams, 2002), which in turn can lead to increased teacher effectiveness.

Creating an environment for professional conversation and growth. Participating in classroom learning labs can generate a more collaborative and productive environment for professional conversations and teacher growth. In 2002, Ruth Brancard and Jennifer Quinnwilliams noticed teachers who participated in classroom learning labs for two years changed their thinking about collaboration and professional development. At the beginning of the study, participants saw teaching as a solitary act. However, they “mentioned that the learning

labs reversed the common practice of teaching behind closed doors, of never exposing personal practices to the scrutiny of other teachers” (p. 340). In addition, before participating in classroom learning labs, these teachers considered conversations with colleagues to have no focus or purpose. But by the end of the study, teachers became more collaborative and purposeful communicators. That is, teachers not only believed it was beneficial to share insights and professional opinions with colleagues, but also generated ideas for further collaboration. In addition, teachers used evidence from classroom learning lab visits to drive conversations about instruction and were skillful at using the collaborative protocols found in classroom learning labs to hold meaningful conversations about teaching.

Redefinition of role and purpose. Participating in classroom learning labs helps teachers to rethink, and therefore, redefine their roles not only in their classrooms, but also in the school community. This, in turn, gives teachers a sense of ownership and reaffirms their value as professionals. Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2002) noticed teachers who participated in classroom learning labs changed their thinking about the role of teachers in professional development. At the start of their study, the overarching belief among participants was that “administrators, not teachers, are the school leaders” (p. 336) and these individuals were responsible for teacher learning and growth. By the end of the study, the researchers found participants changed their mindset to see themselves as continuing learners (both on their own and from one another), teacher leaders, and even professional development facilitators, actively engaged in learning with and from one another.

Changes in personal beliefs lead to changes in instruction. Participating in classroom learning labs over a period of multiple years impacts teachers both in terms of their personal beliefs about teaching and learning and in their day-to-day implementation of instructional

techniques. Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2002) found teachers who spent two years engaging in classroom learning labs changed both their “stated beliefs about their own and students’ roles, responsibilities, and capabilities” (p. 320), as well as their instructional practices. By participating in learning lab classroom observations and conversations with colleagues, teachers were placed in situations that forced them to examine their beliefs about their own roles and their students’ capabilities. The researchers noticed a significant number of instances in which teachers’ beliefs before and after participating in classroom learning labs shifted. Furthermore, these shifts in thinking brought about changes in teachers’ instructional practices. For example, the researchers noticed that, before participating in classroom learning labs, the predominant attitude among the teachers they studied was that students were not able to effectively learn from one another (Brancard and Quinnwilliams, 2002). By the end of the study, teachers not only believed this was possible, but also had successfully incorporated cooperative learning strategies into their classroom practice.

Leadership Development for Teachers

Participating in a classroom learning lab as a guest or host can be an empowering experience for a teacher. As they voice their noticings and realize their feedback and expertise is a valuable, and in fact, *necessary*, part of the process, they may develop a confidence in their leadership skills that may inspire them to take on additional leadership roles in their building or district. Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2002) noted, after participating in classroom learning labs as guests, eight of their study participants moved on to hosting labs themselves, and of those eight, two later became interested in the roles of teacher-leader and coach.

Once classroom learning labs have become an embedded part of school culture, they can become a coaching environment for new teacher-leaders as well. According to Diane Sweeney

(2007), “More and more, school districts are looking toward school-based coaching as a method to directly influence student learning” (p. 39). Peer coaches are faculty members who work alongside their colleagues to help buildings and districts meet instructional goals by guiding peers in best practices for quality instruction. Sweeney suggests many peer coaches are assigned to this informal leadership role with little guidance for how to face the complex challenges that it presents: “The shift to teaching adults from teaching children is dramatic. ... Many coaches are in roles that are poorly articulated, are not trained in the complexities of adult learning, or face a school culture that hasn’t been adequately prepared” to accept peer coaches as leaders in a professional development context (p. 39). Sweeney’s research focused on the use of classroom learning labs as a foundation for developing teachers into knowledgeable and capable peer leaders by “[providing] them with the opportunity to learn [their role] in the context of their real work” (p. 39). Sweeney found that using the context of facilitating classroom learning labs to train peer coaches helped them to become more reflective and intentional facilitators.

Summary

The constructivist principles of Vygotsky provide a strong foundation for explaining how adult learners seek out and create new knowledge in the context of classroom learning labs. Van Meter and Stevens’ (2000) concept of *collaborative elaboration* supports the idea that the collaborative environment of the classroom learning lab process, and its reliance on the participants’ background knowledge and professional expertise, guides teachers to draw conclusions about instructional practices that they would not be able to reach on their own. Malcolm Knowles’ (1980) concept of *andragogy* explains why the classroom learning lab process is appealing to adult learners. First, classroom learning labs allow teacher-learners to be self-directed in their own learning and set learning targets for themselves. Second, the structure

of a classroom learning lab both invites and requires the wealth of expertise that both the host and guest teachers bring to the discussion. Third, learning labs offer teachers a way to reexamine instructional challenges and consider potential solutions through reflection and goal-setting. Finally, learning labs help teachers to reach their full professional potential by becoming more effective in the classroom and, if they so choose, as teacher-leaders or peer coaches.

Using *noticings* to effectively guide teacher observation, feedback, and reflection is a cornerstone of classroom learning labs (Van Es & Sherin, 2008). Sharing noticings (as opposed to suggestions or criticisms) creates a safe environment for discussion where host teachers feel supported and guest teachers feel valued. By *identifying areas for noticing* before engaging in classroom observation, both novice and veteran teachers are scaffolded to make meaningful observations about the host teacher's classroom practices. When *using background knowledge to draw conclusions* about their noticings, teachers' expertise is shared with the whole group, allowing each individual to benefit from the knowledge of the whole. Finally, by *making connections* between individual noticings and the instructional best practices and philosophies they represent, and then comparing those choices to their own instructional practices, guest teachers are given an opportunity to self-evaluate and set goals for improvement. Over time, this can lead to changes in guest teachers' instructional practices and impact student achievement.

A rich environment for professional conversation, collaboration, learning, and growth is created when teachers are brought together in the context of a classroom learning lab (Brancard and Quinnwilliams, 2002). If continued over time, participation in classroom learning labs can inspire teachers to reexamine and redefine their role and purpose in the classroom and make changes in their instructional techniques (Sweeney, 2007). It can also lead to a more collaborative, learning-focused professional culture where teachers see themselves as valued

experts and contributors to the advancement of the profession and in addition, feel comfortable exchanging ideas with colleagues with the intent of learning from one another (Brancard and Quinnwilliams, 2002).

Conclusion

The classroom learning labs protocol is, first and foremost, a structure for making observations and generating conversation. By inviting ELA teachers to observe each other's lessons in an authentic way, classroom learning labs validate the day-to-day challenges that they face in reconciling the environment created by high-stakes testing with their desire to provide students with research-based instruction in reading comprehension. By asking teachers to engage in collegial conversation, classroom learning labs create a sense of community in which peer expertise, shared in the form of peer coaching, is welcomed and valued.

The literature suggests that the elements of the classroom learning lab model are individually effective in promoting professional growth for teachers. When combined as a classroom learning lab, these elements contribute to a safe space for teachers to discuss instructional practices in a way that validates who they are as adult learners, helps them to become more purposeful observers and analyzers of instruction, encourages them to share and learn from one another, and ultimately results in changes of thinking that help them to feel comfortable and confident in incorporating research-based practices into their instruction.

Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

The aim of this study was to delineate some of the impacts participating in classroom learning labs have had on educators in a small, urban school district, including an examination of how participating in a classroom learning lab with cross-district peers can create a setting for constructive dialogue that leads to teacher learning and reduces feelings of isolation. The central research question of this study is: How do cross-district classroom learning labs impact secondary English language arts teachers from small public schools who have few professional development opportunities to discuss instructional best practices with colleagues who work in a similar grade level and content area context?

To answer this question, this study included the coding and analysis of audio-recorded, semi-structured research interviews of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) using a multi-phase process (Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2009). This process began with the coding of interview transcripts. Themes were identified and then were compared and contrasted to look for trends. In addition, the data collected included the following: (1) observational notes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), (2) audio-recordings and observational notes of the pre-learning lab and post-learning lab cohort meetings, (3) observational notes of the in-classroom session (focusing on participants' comments and reactions during the in-classroom experience), and (4) follow-up e-mail correspondence, as needed, to collect any additional information or to make clarifications.

This chapter will begin with the design and rationale of the study, followed by descriptions of the participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis procedures. A short summary of the research design will conclude the chapter.

Design and Rationale

This study used qualitative methods to delineate the current beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of secondary ELA teachers around the classroom learning labs experience. In using qualitative methods, the purpose of this thesis was not to generalize. Instead, the goal was to describe some of the impacts that participating in a classroom learning lab experience has had on these educators.

Participants

Characteristics of the participants. The participants in this study are both in-service ELA teachers at the same secondary school in Michigan. Both teachers had several years' teaching experience at their current grade level and neither had previously participated in a classroom learning lab experience. The first participant, Charlotte, has been teaching in the district for her entire career, less than five years. During that time, she has only taught sixth grade ELA and is the only teacher in the district who is currently assigned to teach that subject at that grade level. Elizabeth, the second participant, also has similar years of experience but became a certified teacher later in life. She teaches eighth grade ELA, and like Charlotte, she is the only teacher assigned to that subject at that grade level. Both teachers are very active in the district, volunteering their time after school to take on extra duties or to assist colleagues.

Elizabeth and Charlotte work in a very small urban school district, only one square mile in size. Because, the district is so small, it is often confused with or considered a part of neighboring districts by those who don't understand the district's borders. The district has four buildings: an early childhood center housing preschool through second grade, an elementary building for third through fifth grade, a combined middle and high school building for sixth through twelfth grade, and an alternative high school.

The district's student population includes a high percentage of English language learners, mostly from Hispanic backgrounds, as well as a large population of students who receive free and reduced lunch. Charlotte and Elizabeth deal regularly with the challenges of teaching ELA to English language learners, as well as with side effects of poverty, such as transiency. These barriers have resulted in consistently low scores on state tests such as the MEAP. Despite these challenges, both teachers are very passionate about their students and their teaching careers and regularly seek ways to improve their instruction.

Both Charlotte and Elizabeth expressed the same amount of prior knowledge around the topic of classroom learning labs. For both of the participants, this form of professional development was entirely new.

Because purposive sampling methods were used to select participants for this study, and due to the nature of qualitative research in general, it is noted that the knowledge produced may not be generalizable to other people or other research settings.

Research Setting

Data was collected and analyzed in two different locations: the location of the classroom learning lab experience and the location of the semi-structured interviews. A description of each research setting follows.

Classroom Learning Lab location. The classroom learning lab experience took place in a secondary school in a nearby school district (hereafter referred to as the “host district” and “host school”). With permission from the building principal and host district, the two participants traveled to the host district to participate in the classroom learning lab experience arranged by the researcher for purposes of this study. The host site for the classroom learning lab was chosen by the researcher for two reasons: (1) the host teacher's familiarity with

classroom learning labs and willingness to host a classroom learning lab as an element of this research study, and (2) the similarity in grade level and content area of the host teacher's classroom to those of the research study participants.

The classroom learning lab experience took place on a typical school day in the host school building. The pre-brief and debrief portions of the learning lab took place in a private location within the host school building with no other teachers or students present. The observation portion of the classroom learning lab experience took place in the host teacher's own classroom. Students were present during the host teacher's lesson (as watching the interaction between student and teacher is essential during a classroom learning lab experience), but their names, voices, and images were not recorded by anyone present.

Interview location. The semi-structured interviews took place in the participants' own classrooms after the regular school day had finished. Classroom doors were locked to provide security and privacy for the participants. With written permission from the participants (see Appendix E), the semi-structured interviews were recorded by the researcher for later analysis. One interview was conducted with each participant.

Data Collection

The instrumentation used in this study included (1) audio-recorded, semi-structured research interviews of participants along with observational notes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), (2) audio-recordings and observational notes of the pre-learning lab and post-learning lab cohort meetings, (3) observational notes of the in-classroom session (focusing on participants' comments and reactions during the in-classroom experience), and (4) follow-up e-mail correspondence, as needed, to collect any additional information or to make clarifications.

The classroom learning lab audio-recordings and observational notes and the audio-recorded, semi-structured research interview data were collected separately on two separate occasions. The process for gathering the data is described in the following sections.

Audio-recordings and observational notes during a classroom learning lab. The researcher pre-arranged and obtained administrator permission for each of the study participants to participate as guest teachers in an authentic classroom learning lab experience in another local school district. This classroom learning lab experience took place in the classroom of a cross-district colleague who worked in a similar grade level and content area context. The researcher attended the classroom learning lab to collect audio-recordings of the pre-learning lab and post-learning lab cohort meetings. Conversations were recorded with the consent of the research participants, classroom learning lab facilitator, and other guest teachers present so that they could be reviewed later. The researcher also took observational notes during these meetings and during the in-classroom session to capture participants' in-the-moment reactions to the classroom learning lab experience.

Audio-recorded, semi-structured research interviews. The researcher arranged separate, private, semi-structured research interviews with each of the participants on mutually-agreed-upon dates after returning from the classroom learning lab experience. Interviews took place after school in each of the participants' classrooms with no students and no other colleagues present. Conversations were recorded with the formal consent of the research participants so that they could be transcribed, coded, and analyzed by the researcher later. The semi-structured nature of the research interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) allowed for the structure of a pre-planned interview protocol (see Appendix A) that could be supplemented with additional questions to probe conversationally for additional information or elaboration if the

need or opportunity arose.

The researcher planned to contact research participants through GVSU e-mail if follow-up correspondence was needed after the conclusion of the interviews. In the case of this study, the participants' comments were clear and it was determined that no follow-up correspondence was necessary.

Data Analysis

The data analysis methods used in this study followed a simplified multi-phase interview analysis process based on methods used by Cantrell, et al. (2009) in a more complex study. To analyze the data, a preliminary set of codes representing themes was developed based on the content of the interview protocol (see Appendix A). Each transcript was read and coded independently by the researcher. For example, the researcher identified comments that provided evidence that the participant learned from peers during the classroom learning lab process. These were marked on the transcript with "PL" to signify "Peer Learning." As comments marked with these preliminary codes were compared and contrasted, potential additional codes were identified, and the preliminary code list was elaborated and revised. For example, comments marked with the code "PL" were later *also* marked with either "PB" (pre-brief), "CO" (classroom observation), or "DB" (debrief) to identify the part of the process where learning occurred. Table 1 indicates the three major themes that were identified during the preliminary analysis process and sub-themes that were identified during the analysis to differentiate between the participants' unique experiences. Transcripts were revisited and marked with these, and other additional codes, as necessary (see Appendix B). Once coding was completed, counts were calculated for each code within and across all teacher utterances at the sentence level in order to aid in identifying patterns and themes in the data. In addition, the researcher collected data about

Table 1

Secondary Teachers' Responses to Classroom Learning Labs

Themes	Sub-themes
Peer Learning (PL*) Self-Reflective Learning (SL) Transformational Learning (TL)	Location of learning: - Pre-brief discussion (PB) - Classroom observation (CO) - Debrief discussion (DB)

** Codes used are identified in parentheses following the theme or sub-theme.*

classroom learning labs' impact on reducing feelings of isolation and participants'

recommendations concerning a similar classroom learning lab experience for other teachers.

The findings presented in Chapter Four compare, contrast, and describe trends in the themes identified during data analysis. Illustrative quotes from the audio-recorded classroom learning lab pre-brief and debrief conversations and semi-structured interviews were included to lend context to the findings.

Summary

This study utilized qualitative research methods. Data collection included included (1) audio-recorded, semi-structured research interviews of participants along with observational notes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), (2) audio-recordings and observational notes of the pre-learning lab and post-learning lab cohort meetings, (3) observational notes of the in-classroom session (focusing on participants' comments and reactions during the in-classroom experience), and (4) follow-up e-mail correspondence, as needed, to collect any additional information or to make clarifications.

The first phase of the research process involved audio-recordings and observational notes that were taken to collect participants' in-the-moment reactions to the classroom learning lab process. The second phase involved audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews with the participants. An interview protocol (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) was prepared that could be

supplemented with additional questions to probe conversationally for additional information or elaboration if the need or opportunity arose. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using a simplified multi-phase interview analysis process (Cantrell et al., 2009). Specific comments from the interview transcripts and researcher's observational notes were matched to the results of the interview analysis to illustrate and lend context to the findings. Data that reveals the classroom learning lab's impact on both Charlotte and Elizabeth will be explained in Chapter Four as the results of the study are explored.

Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

This study sought to capture the ways in which cross-district classroom learning labs impact secondary ELA teachers from small public schools who have few professional development opportunities to discuss instructional best practices with colleagues who work in a similar grade level and content area context. To delineate the impacts a classroom learning lab experience has had on the study participants, findings will be presented thematically, following trends that were discovered while analyzing the interview transcripts. This chapter presents the findings from the study. A short summary is provided to conclude the chapter.

Findings

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed three key areas of learning for Charlotte and Elizabeth: (1) peer learning, (2) self-reflective learning, and (3) transformational learning. The theme of *peer learning* describes learning that occurred while collaborating with others, for example, in the context of a collegial conversation during the debrief session of the classroom learning lab. *Self-reflective learning* refers to learning that may have taken place during the classroom learning lab or afterward, as the participants reflected on their experience and considered what implications it had for their own teaching. Finally, *transformational learning* is learning that inspired the participants to make some kind of change, either to new thinking or new behavior, as a result of the classroom learning lab experience. Additionally, Charlotte and Elizabeth provided data about the impact of the classroom learning lab experience on feelings of isolation and offered recommendations for colleagues concerning participation in a similar experience.

Peer learning. Participants communicated a variety of ways in which they increased their professional learning as a direct result of interacting with other educators during the classroom learning lab. However, each teacher found different aspects of the learning lab process to be more impactful on their overall learning.

Charlotte found the prebrief and debrief sessions of the learning lab to be the most helpful. She commented that “being able to hear [the] different perspectives” of the host teacher and the observers, including the other guests and the facilitator, was valuable. Charlotte spent much of her time during the classroom observation observing a group of male students as the teacher led the class through a literature lesson about text features that incorporated the gradual release of responsibility in its lesson design. The students she observed struggled with following some of the directions for a group activity around the novel *The Outsiders* because one of the students had recently been absent for several days. His lack of understanding of the progression of the story and the fact that he didn’t understand a concept taught on a previous day made it difficult for the group to progress in completing the activity independently. As a result, she came away from the lesson with a different perspective than another guest who had observed a group of what the host teacher described as “high-achieving” girls, who immediately dived into the activity and completed it with confidence. The girls’ conversation included academic vocabulary about fiction text features that the host teacher had explicitly taught earlier in the week and had revisited during the lesson, while the boys that Charlotte observed struggled to instruct their peer about them so that they could make progress in completing the activity. When comparing her observation of the group of boys with observations of other student groups by other guests, Charlotte found her initial conclusions about the success (or non-success) of this portion of the lesson might not have been completely valid. She realized not all participants

would have the same noticings during the classroom observation, which led to richer conversations in the debrief session, including insights that she might not have been able to reach alone. In her words, “Maybe [another participant] observed something differently than I did... It’s nice to share that in that post-meeting, like, ‘Oh, I missed that.’” By including the noticings of every guest in the de-brief conversation, a classroom learning lab allows all participants to gain a clearer picture of what was happening throughout the classroom at every point in the lesson, leading to more accurate conclusions about what pedagogical choices were most effective.

Elizabeth characterized herself as a “visual learner,” and consistently cited the classroom observation as the most impactful part of the learning lab process for her. She enjoyed being able to watch the host teacher in action and compare the host teacher’s lesson design, classroom management style, and classroom routines to those in place in her own classroom. She liked the teacher’s use of the digital projector at the beginning of the class period to display the agenda for the hour, which helped students to visualize what the day’s lesson would involve as the teacher talked them through it. One of the routines that most impressed her was when the host teacher informed the class that they were going to watch a short video clip as an introduction to a warm-up writing activity. The teacher asked students to put their desks in “movie-watching position.” Immediately, all students shifted their desks from a four-student group format into neat rows facing the projector screen. After seating themselves, they opened their iPads to a blank Google Doc to prepare to take notes from the video. The entire process took less than two minutes; it was obvious that students had been trained in the procedure and that it had been practiced many times until it became automatic. Elizabeth reflected that,

Throughout college, you’re kind of *told* how you can do things [such as] how you can set up your class and classroom management, how you’re going to run a day, but it isn’t until

you're actually in and doing it that you know what works and doesn't work...so to be able to see other people doing it makes you kind of see it from a different perspective. The classroom observation portion of a classroom learning lab allows teachers, like Elizabeth, who learn best from seeing a lesson in action, to picture how the components of a lesson design interact with effective classroom management routines to create an impactful learning experience for students. This may, in turn, allow visual learners like Elizabeth to picture how similar routines and lesson designs would flow in their own classrooms.

Self-reflective learning. Both participants indicated ways in which they gained new insights by self-reflecting on their classroom learning lab experience.

Charlotte revealed she had feelings of self-doubt as a teacher before participating in the learning lab. In this, she expressed the idea that she had often felt like she, and her students, were “so far behind,” due to factors such as her students’ low English language proficiency rate, which had a negative impact on standardized test scores. Participating in the learning lab and watching the other teacher and her students in action prompted her to realize that the pedagogical choices she was making for her students – for example, implementing the gradual release of responsibility within her lesson designs – would be effective, but she needed to give herself and her students the time necessary to make success happen. Charlotte noted a point in the host teacher’s lesson where gradual release of responsibility was very apparent. After the host teacher read passages to the class from a shared novel, *The Outsiders*, she modeled identifying and labeling text features found in fiction texts. Quotes representing various text features were written on sticky notes and arranged on a graphic organizer. After working through this activity with her students, the host teacher invited them to then return to their desks and complete a similar activity with the books that they had self-selected for independent reading. Charlotte was

impressed not only with the use of gradual release of responsibility, but with the host teacher's use of authentic texts, both shared and self-selected, throughout the lesson. She reflected on the fact that the majority of her students were English Language Learners at varying levels of proficiency, but believed they could achieve the same kinds of success with tasks that required more independence – such as working with self-selected books – if they were given adequate time and scaffolding through the gradual release model. However, her students were slow to reach this level of independence due to their English proficiency, and in the past, she had often felt concerned about giving them the time to try. Participating in the learning lab reduced the stress she had felt about her students' progress. Although she wasn't "seeing [results] right away" with her own students, observing the other teacher's lesson design validated some of her own pedagogical choices and reassured her that she was on the right track in continuing to pursue the gradual release of responsibility and the use of authentic texts in her lessons.

As a result of watching the host teacher's lesson, Elizabeth felt more committed to making some instructional shifts in her classroom that she had been deliberating over before participating in the classroom learning lab. She discussed reading books about curriculum and instruction during the summer months and considering changes to her instruction that would make it better both for herself and for her students. However, she had been worried about letting go and shifting her ELA instruction to more of a workshop model in which her students had more independent time to work. In her words, "I'm a coddler...I'm not ever quite ready to let go at the end of that gradual release." Elizabeth found watching the host teacher's lesson, which included effective use of gradual release and a workshop model focused around authentic texts and writing experiences, was empowering. She said, "...seeing it makes you think, 'It's doable'."

By watching someone else effectively use the lesson design she had in mind, Elizabeth became more resolved to use the same structure with her own students.

Transformational learning. Because this study wasn't longitudinal, evidence of actual changes that teachers made to their instructional practice as a result of participating in the classroom learning lab was not observable. However, both participants indicated a *desire* to change their instruction and classroom management as a result of this professional development session. Both were impressed with the host teacher's effective use of the gradual release of instruction as an aspect of her lesson design, and both also indicated that the host teacher's highly-effective use of classroom routines to create a smooth-running classroom environment and use time wisely were features they would like to incorporate into their own classrooms.

Charlotte indicated participating in the classroom learning lab made her "realize what [she] should be doing" and inspired her to set goals to raise the bar for herself and her students. She resolved to provide her students with more time to apply the reading strategies they were working on in class to their own self-selected texts, and to trust her students with more independence as a part of the gradual release of instruction.

Elizabeth also said that the learning lab inspired her to make changes. Because she works with so many English Language Learners who haven't reached full English proficiency, she explained that her focus in past years was on remedial instruction and getting students ready for "the test." She explained that watching the host teacher use authentic texts in her classroom to support student learning about fiction text features inspired her to revisit what she believes is most valuable about reading instruction, giving up some of the "test prep" in favor of lessons oriented toward authentic reading and writing experiences for her students.

Elizabeth also indicated her desire to continue observing the host teacher in future

classroom learning lab sessions to assist her in the transition. In her words, “I would like to go watch it again...I would like to pay more attention [to some specifics]. You know, it’s like a kid in a candy store. When you walk in, you’re...looking at everything, and you’re listening to everything...and you’re very overwhelmed by the whole thing, whereas, if I could go again...I could zero in on some specifics.” During the writing of this thesis, I learned that, although Elizabeth hadn’t had a chance to return to the original host teacher’s classroom, she had been invited to become part of a classroom learning lab cohort with other ELA teachers in her own district in a district-sponsored professional development experiment unrelated to this study. At the time this thesis was written, Elizabeth had chosen to host a classroom learning lab for other ELA teachers in her district and was making plans to visit another ELA teacher in her building as a classroom learning lab guest.

Both participants expressed the desire to stay in touch with the host teacher as a way to continue the conversation and, in turn, continue their learning. Exchanging ideas with a cross-district peer in order to increase professional learning was a new practice for both participants.

Charlotte mentioned that creating “a network of teachers outside of [her] classroom” as a result of the classroom learning lab was a helpful resource. After the classroom learning lab experience was over, Charlotte e-mailed the host teacher a few times to ask more specific questions about classroom setup and curriculum.

Elizabeth also expressed a desire to remain in contact with the host teacher. However, this participant expressed some reluctance to continue e-mail or call the host teacher, as she felt a single classroom learning lab experience wasn’t a strong-enough foundation on which to build a collegial relationship where that sort of continual contact would be welcomed. As a follow-up question to her comments, I mentioned to Elizabeth that some schools create cohorts of teachers

that visit one another in classroom learning labs throughout the school year. She was excited about such an opportunity, and said that she would “absolutely” participate in something like that and would be willing to share in return “if the roles were reversed.”

The evidence collected during my interviews with both Elizabeth and Charlotte indicates that both teachers felt some form of cognitive dissonance as a result of the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the emphasis on student achievement on high-stakes tests. Both Elizabeth and Charlotte work in a district with a large percentage of English Language Learners, most of whom are at varying degrees of proficiency, which gives them anxiety about having students who are “behind,” as Charlotte expressed. This led them both to teaching to the test and being fearful about giving their students too much independence and choice. Elizabeth talked about connecting with other ELA teachers in her building in relation to teaching the Common Core standards, but still had the feeling that there was something missing that she could do to improve her instruction within the structure imposed by the standards. She felt that incorporating the gradual release of responsibility and a workshop model, along with the use of authentic texts, would create a better learning environment for her students, but needed to *see* another teacher actually doing it in order for her to feel comfortable with giving it a try herself. The classroom observation and pre- and post-observation conversations that take place during a classroom learning lab allowed Elizabeth and Charlotte to imagine possibilities for themselves and their students that they had previously been hesitant to attempt. Seeing another ELA teacher fearlessly – and successfully – implementing research-based best practices for reading comprehension instruction, despite the mandate to prepare students to perform well on high-stakes standardized testing, gave Elizabeth and Charlotte the courage to consider changes that would result in more authentic instruction for their students.

Impacts on isolation. Both teachers indicated some feelings of isolation as a result of each being the only teacher in the district assigned to teach in their specific grade level and content area contexts.

Charlotte described her current situation as sometimes feeling like she is in “[her] own world.” She felt classroom learning labs provide valuable feedback and networking opportunities. She believed building relationships with educators from other districts was still valuable professional development. In her words, “Even though they’re not [employed by] the same school district, [cross-district colleagues are] still teaching the same subject and grade level. That would help me out within my own classroom.”

Elizabeth believed her district’s adoption of the Common Core state standards had helped to reduce feelings of isolation due to the fact that the Common Core requires more vertical alignment between grade levels. She discussed the “common ground” ELA teachers who teach Common Core have with one another in terms of similar academic vocabulary and curriculum. She now finds it more necessary than ever to communicate with the ELA teachers who teach the grade levels directly before and after her own. However, she believes that there is still a danger present in being the only ELA teacher in her building at her grade level. That is, she revealed a worry about becoming “stagnant” and believed participating in classroom learning labs would expose her to new ideas for instructional strategies and help her keep the presentation of the curriculum “fresh” for her students.

Recommendations to colleagues. Both participants in this study said they would strongly recommend the classroom learning lab experience to their colleagues. Although differed in which teachers they would recommend to participate, they agreed that potential participants need open minds for the learning lab process to be successful.

Charlotte believed teachers who participate in classroom learning labs should have a willing desire to be there. She believed if a teacher was required to go, for example, by building or district administration, it would be “a waste of everyone’s time.” She recognized classroom learning labs require a certain level of willingness and trust on the part of the host and guests in order for the experience to be impactful. In her words, if a participant was “willing to do it,” in other words, to be a willing and active participant in the learning lab process and conversation, then she would “definitely recommend it.”

Elizabeth’s opinion was somewhat different. She said she “would recommend it to everybody, to people who are interested in it [and] people who aren’t interested in it.” Her word of advice was “to keep an open mind and try...give it a chance.” She saw the classroom learning lab process as an opportunity to seek out new ideas from other educators with no strings attached: “It doesn’t mean you have to agree with what they do. It doesn’t mean that you have to change anything that you’re doing, but if you go into it with an open mind, it might stir something in you about something that you already do...it might trigger something within you about something... Just see if the experience helps.” She described the learning lab process as “not intimidating,” and characterized the debrief discussion as an opportunity for the host to receive “gentle feedback” and for the participants to ask and answer questions. It was obvious through her comments she believed that, as long as participants came to the learning lab process with an open mind, it was very low-risk and would likely prove to be a valuable investment of time.

Summary

This study used an analysis of semi-structured interview responses to capture the ways in which cross-district classroom learning labs impact secondary language arts teachers from small

public schools who have few professional development opportunities to discuss instructional best practices with colleagues who work in a similar grade level and content area context.

The researcher identified three major themes that characterized the participants' reactions to participating in a classroom learning lab: (1) peer learning, (2) self-reflective learning, and (3) transformational learning. In addition, the researcher collected data about classroom learning labs' impact on reducing feelings of isolation and participants' recommendations concerning a similar experience for other teachers. After identifying these themes across the interview transcripts, the researcher also identified additional sub-themes (as shown in Table 1) to help further compare and contrast the participants' responses.

During the interviews, both participants identified specific ways in which they learned from the classroom learning lab experience, both externally through the classroom observation and interaction with other colleagues during the prebrief and debrief discussions, and internally by self-reflecting on the experience. Each participant indicated ways the experience inspired them to change aspects of their instruction or classroom management. Both participants showed a desire to continue a collegial relationship with the host teacher after the classroom learning lab experience was over. However, one participant felt that belonging to a school-year-long cohort of teachers would help to develop a stronger foundation for ongoing communications. While one participant identified strong feelings of personal isolation that she believed could be reduced by participating in classroom learning labs, the other believed that the risk of personal isolation was more of a risk of becoming stagnant. She saw the classroom learning lab as an opportunity to consider new ideas and keep things "fresh" for her students. Finally, both participants agreed strongly that participating in a classroom learning lab was a valuable experience. However, they

disagreed on which teachers should be asked to participate. Both indicated that having an “open mind” was an important quality for anyone participating in a classroom learning lab.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Summary of the Study

School and district literacy leaders, such as reading specialists and literacy coaches, are challenged by the need to provide meaningful professional development for in-service ELA teachers that results in meaningful learning for teachers that in turn, impacts student achievement. Federal and state mandates such as No Child Left Behind have led to the adoption of highly-rigorous state standards, including Common Core (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015), and an increase in high-stakes standardized testing (Klein, 2015). Poor performance on state tests is not only tied to an increasingly-harsh series of sanctions for schools and districts (Klein, 2015), but also can lead to poor evaluations of teachers' job performance (Oosting, 2015).

The pressure to raise test scores is especially difficult for ELA teachers because the tasks that students are usually asked to complete on standardized tests of "reading comprehension" are usually multiple-choice exercises that focus on short term memory recall (Kohn, 2000), rather than the higher order thinking skills and strategies that research shows are essential for authentic reading comprehension (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Farstrup & Samuels, 2002). As a result, many ELA teachers feel pressured to teach in a way that contrasts with what they believe is most valuable about teaching students to comprehend text. They exchange lessons about making connections, asking questions, visualizing, inferring, identifying importance, synthesizing, and "fixing up" misunderstandings while working with authentic texts for instruction on success with the passage style and format of standardized tests (Supovitz, 2009). Administrators sometimes add to the pressure; it is noted that, in some places, "as long as a school or teacher has adequate test scores, what happens in the classroom is [considered]

irrelevant” (Kohn, 2000, p. 323). Cognitive dissonance arises when ELA teachers feel forced to teach in ways that conflict with their pedagogical knowledge and values.

This high-stakes, high-pressure environment creates a lot of stress for teachers. Due to feelings of isolation or powerlessness, many teachers choose not to act in defiance of the new requirements (Kohn, 2000), but instead attempt to cope with the cognitive dissonance while “teaching to the test” in the hopes of raising test scores and protecting their jobs. In this atmosphere, ELA teachers need a place to reconnect with one another, bridge the cognitive dissonance, and discuss how to provide quality reading instruction for students. Literacy leaders, such as reading specialists and literacy coaches, can meet the needs of ELA teachers by designing professional development opportunities that invite teachers to have meaningful conversations about reading instruction within the structure of a safe, supportive, collegial environment. A form of job-embedded, collaborative professional development called “classroom learning labs” creates a space for literacy leaders to do this.

This study aimed to collect and analyze data that could be used to inform future discussions around the central research question: How do cross-district classroom learning labs impact secondary ELA teachers from small public schools who have few professional development opportunities to discuss instructional best practices with colleagues who work in a similar grade level and content area context? This study did not seek to generalize, but rather to use qualitative methods to delineate some of the impacts participating in a classroom learning lab experience has had on these educators.

To answer this question, data collection included (1) audio-recorded, semi-structured research interviews of participants along with observational notes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), (2) audio-recordings and observational notes of the pre-learning lab and post-learning lab cohort

meetings, (3) observational notes of the in-classroom session (focusing on participants' comments and reactions during the in-classroom experience), and (4) follow-up e-mail correspondence, as needed, to collect any additional information or to make clarifications.

The data analysis methods used in this study followed a simplified multi-phase interview analysis process based on methods used by Cantrell, et al. (2009) in a more complex study. To analyze the data, a preliminary set of codes representing themes was developed based on the content of the interview protocol (see Appendix A). Each transcript was read and coded independently by the researcher. As comments marked with these preliminary codes were compared and contrasted, potential additional codes were identified, and the preliminary code list was elaborated and revised. Transcripts were revisited and marked with these as necessary. Once coding was completed, counts were calculated for each code within and across all teacher utterances at the sentence level in order to aid in identifying patterns and themes in the data. In addition, the researcher collected data about classroom learning labs' impact on reducing feelings of isolation and participants' recommendations concerning a similar classroom learning lab experience for other teachers.

For the participants in this study, engaging in the classroom learning lab was an overwhelmingly positive job-embedded professional development experience that resulted in rich opportunities for peer learning, self-reflective learning, and transformational learning. The classroom learning lab experience also kindled a desire to continue the collegial relationships begun during the learning lab conversations. Participants agreed they would recommend classroom learning labs to other educators, but disagreed as to which educators should be asked to participate. Both participants agreed that anyone participating in a classroom learning lab experience must go into it with an open mind for the experience to be most impactful.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to capture the ways in which cross-district classroom learning labs impact secondary ELA teachers from small public schools who have few professional development opportunities to discuss instructional best practices with colleagues who work in a similar grade level and content area context. While the findings of this study cannot be generalized, the evidence supports findings that occurred in larger studies. First, the findings of this study support the work of Van Meter and Stevens (2000) around collaborative elaboration, which found that sharing individual perspectives through collaboration resulted in learners constructing understandings together that wouldn't be possible alone. In addition, the findings support the conclusions of Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2002) around the impacts of classroom learning labs on teacher learning and instructional practices, increased collaboration, and professional growth. This study also collected evidence about the impact of classroom learning labs on feelings of teacher isolation.

Discussion

Collaborative elaboration. While this study is too small to be generalized to the population of all teachers, the data collected during this study seems to support Van Meter and Stevens' (2000) work around collaborative elaboration. They asserted collaboration allows learners to construct understandings together that they wouldn't necessarily reach by themselves. The debrief portion of a classroom learning lab creates an especially-rich opportunity for learning from peers in the form of a collaborative discussion. During the semi-structured interviews, Charlotte was able to articulate the impact that the collaborative discussion of the debrief conversation had on her learning. She noted that "being able to hear [the] different perspectives" of the host teacher and the observers, including the other guests and the facilitator,

was valuable. She realized not all participants would have the same *noticings* during the classroom observation, which led to richer conversations in the debrief session, including insights that she might not have been able to reach by herself. In her words, “Maybe [another participant] observed something differently than I did... It’s nice to share that in that post-meeting, like, ‘Oh, I missed that.’”

Charlotte’s words reveal her belief that her learning was enhanced by the presence of others. Without colleagues to share their own insights, Charlotte’s learning would have depended entirely on her own ability to observe and analyze the classroom learning lab through the lens of her own knowledge and past experiences. Her conclusions would have been flavored by her perceptions alone. However, with colleagues present to share their points of view and perhaps challenge Charlotte’s thinking, Charlotte had the opportunity to reach conclusions scaffolded by the observations, experience, background knowledge, and perceptions of others. This supports Van Meter and Stevens’ (2000) assertion that together, learners are able to construct understandings together that they wouldn’t normally be able to reach on their own.

Teacher learning, collaboration, and professional growth. Results from this study also support the conclusions made by Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2002) around the impacts of classroom learning labs on teacher learning and instructional practices, collaboration, and professional growth.

Changes in instructional practices. Results from this study support findings that classroom learning labs inspire shifts in thinking that lead to changes in instructional practice. Participating in classroom learning labs over a period of multiple years impacted teachers both in terms of their personal beliefs about teaching and learning and in their day-to-day implementation of instructional techniques. Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2002) found teachers

who had spent two years engaging in classroom learning labs changed both their “stated beliefs about their own and students’ roles, responsibilities, and capabilities” (p. 320) as well as their instructional practices. These shifts in thinking brought about changes in teachers’ instructional practices.

Results from the semi-structured interviews indicated that participants in this study learned both by observing the host teacher’s lesson and by participating in related discussions, and also by self-reflecting on the experience and considering its implications for their current teaching practices. Both participants indicated specific plans for changes that they wanted to make as a result of participating in the classroom learning lab. For example, Elizabeth remarked on the learning lab’s ability to “empower” her to make changes that she had previously been unsure about. This observation supports Brancard and Quinnwilliams’ (2002) finding that classroom learning labs can support shifts in thinking. As a direct result of participating in the classroom learning lab and observing the host teacher’s success with the workshop model and gradual release of responsibility, Elizabeth’s worry about her desire to implement similar structures in her own classroom and lesson design shifted to feelings of resolution and confidence.

Increased collaboration. Results from this study support previous findings that participating in classroom learning labs encourages teachers to become more collaborative. Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2002) noticed teachers who had participated in classroom learning labs for two years changed their thinking about collaboration and professional development. By the end of the study, teachers became more collaborative and purposeful communicators. With that, teachers not only believed that it was beneficial to share insights and professional opinions with colleagues, but also generated ideas for further collaboration.

While the size and length of this study differ from that of Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2002), both of the participants in this study indicated a strong desire to continue collegial relationships with their learning lab's host teacher. When presented with the hypothetical idea of belonging to a year-long cohort of other teachers who engaged in classroom learning labs together, Elizabeth found the idea very exciting and indicated her willingness to participate. It was clear from their responses that both Charlotte and Elizabeth found value in the conversations they had during the classroom learning lab experience, and that they believed that additional collaboration, either by continuing collegial conversations through phone calls or e-mail or through participating in additional learning labs, would provide similarly-valuable experiences. The participants' desire to stay connected with their learning lab colleagues, even across districts, supports Brancard and Quinnwilliams' (2002) conclusion that participating in classroom learning labs encourages teachers to become more collaborative, perhaps in ways they had not considered before.

Professional growth. Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2002) also found participating in a classroom learning lab as a guest or host can be an empowering experience for a teacher. As they voice their *noticings* and realize that their feedback and expertise is a valuable, and in fact, *necessary*, part of the process, they develop a confidence in their leadership skills that may inspire them to take on additional leadership roles in their building or district. Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2002) noted that eight of their study participants moved on to hosting labs themselves after first participating in classroom learning labs as guests. Of those eight, two later also investigated the roles of teacher-leader and coach.

At the time of the writing of this thesis, one of the participants willingly volunteered to be the first to host a classroom learning lab in her own building, unrelated to this study, with a

cohort of other English language arts teachers. Participating in this study gave her the courage and confidence needed to take the first step into the role of a classroom learning lab host, as neither participant had any background knowledge about classroom learning labs before agreeing to participate. This supports Brancard and Quinwilliams' (2002) assertion that classroom learning labs can increase teachers' confidence, inspiring them to take on new roles.

Teacher isolation. This study looked at the impact of cross-district classroom learning labs on secondary ELA teachers from small public schools who have few professional development opportunities to discuss instructional best practices with colleagues who work in a similar grade level and content area context. While both participants in the study admitted to feelings of isolation and agreed that classroom learning labs had an impact, the participants disagreed on the symptoms of isolation that were alleviated by this form of professional development. Charlotte clearly indicated the classroom learning lab's ability to connect her to a wider professional network reduced her feelings of isolation. However, Elizabeth believed that, due to the vertical alignment demanded by the Common Core state standards, some of her previous feelings of isolation had already been addressed because she found it more necessary to communicate regularly with other ELA teachers in her building. She characterized her current state of isolation more in terms of becoming stagnant, rather than in a lack of a professional network. Interestingly, Elizabeth was also the participant who was most-interested in forming long-term relationships with a cohort of other teachers for the purpose of conducting classroom learning labs throughout the year. Clearly, the classroom learning lab experience seemed to have potential to meet a need for her that the requirement of vertical alignment did not yet address.

It is possible that, for Elizabeth, participating in classroom learning labs meets a need for her as an adult learner. As asserted by Malcolm Knowles (1980), as adult learners "grow and

develop, they accumulate an increasing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning—for themselves and for others” (p. 45). As a result, when adults find themselves in situations where their experience isn’t being used, or its worth is minimized, they feel rejected as persons. Elizabeth’s desire to “give back” to colleagues through the classroom learning lab experience by participating as a host is evidence that she feels like she has something valuable to share that she believes others will value, too.

In addition, it is possible that classroom learning labs meet the needs of ELA teachers like Charlotte and Elizabeth in an increasingly data-driven teaching environment fueled by scores generated by high-stakes, standardized tests. When students are reduced to test scores that are consistently measured year after year against an ever-raising bar, it is difficult for teachers not to feel discouraged. In the attempt to feel less “behind,” as Charlotte noted, and prepare students for success on standardized tests, ELA teachers may choose to give up what the research indicates is most important for authentic reading comprehension instruction and give in to the idea of “teaching to the test” (Kohn, 2000; Weglinsky, 2005). This results in a sense of cognitive dissonance, where the desire to *do* better and *be* better for students is mitigated by the fear of student failure on high stakes tests and resulting poor job-performance evaluations (Weglinsky, 2005). Classroom learning labs offer a safe space for teachers like Charlotte and Elizabeth to make connections with teachers who have found a comfortable middle ground. More importantly, experiences like classroom learning labs that encourage conversation about best practices with peers validate what ELA teachers like Charlotte and Elizabeth know to be true about reading instruction – that students are much more than their test scores and reading comprehension is far more than being able to choose the correct answer on a multiple choice test.

Recommendations

State and federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have required ELA teachers to increase student achievement on high-stakes standardized tests in order to meet rigorous student proficiency goals and avoid the penalties associated with not making adequate yearly progress (AYP). In this challenging environment, literacy leaders, such as reading specialists and literacy coaches, found a need to provide professional development for teachers that not only helped teachers to meet the unique instructional needs of their students but also helped them to increase their professional expertise.

ELA teachers face the task of helping their students prepare for “reading comprehension” tests that focus on basic skills and short term memory recall (Kohn, 2000), while understanding that true reading comprehension focuses on the effective application of mental tools, termed reading strategies, to help make sense of text (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Farstrup & Samuels, 2002). Attempting to reconcile these two conflicting educational goals is problematic for teachers, and the cognitive dissonance that it produces causes a great deal of stress. Many ELA teachers resort to “teaching to the test” in order to help their students achieve a passing score, as student performance on high-stakes tests can impact teachers’ annual job-performance evaluations (Oosting, 2015). Meaningful professional development experiences, such as classroom learning labs, can create a safe space for ELA teachers, and their peers, to discuss strategies that work to help students meet the requirements of high-stakes assessments within the context of authentic, research-based literacy instruction.

The results of this study indicate that participating in classroom learning labs has the potential to impact teachers in small schools, both personally and professionally. Because past research indicates collaboration is a valuable source of adult learning, literacy leaders should

consider professional development opportunities that incorporate collaboration through professional conversation with other educators as much as possible. Classroom learning labs can connect teachers to a professional network of peers. Literacy leaders in small schools might consider forming cross-district cohorts to engage in classroom learning labs to expand teachers' professional networks and address potential feelings of isolation for teachers.

Classroom learning labs must be supported with adequate resources in order for them to be effective. Literacy leaders must be prepared to advocate for the support of classroom learning labs through the allocation of adequate time and funding. In addition, they must consider the value in continuing classroom learning labs over time. Research has shown that the most benefits appear after teachers have participated for a year or longer.

This study used qualitative methods in order to delineate the current beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of secondary ELA teachers around the classroom learning labs experience. The nature of qualitative research is such that the knowledge produced may not be generalizable to other people or other research settings. That is, the findings might be limited solely to the individuals included in the research study. To make the findings more generalizable to the general population of secondary ELA teachers at small schools, I would find it more ideal to study a large number of educators at a variety of research sites.

I believe that there are a variety of avenues for future research that remain to be explored in terms of the sample population. My study was limited to the experiences of two teachers who taught at the same middle school, facing similar student populations and associated challenges. I would be interested in exploring the impact of classroom learning labs on different cohorts of teachers; for example, I might explore the impact classroom learning labs have on grade level teams or vertical teams (especially vertical teams of ELA teachers). I believe that classroom

learning labs would also be an interesting a context in which to study the professional growth of teacher-leaders or the training of reading or literacy coaches.

I analyzed data from teacher interviews in order to capture the personal impact participating in classroom learning labs had on individual educators. This gave me only one avenue the effect of this particular form of professional development. It would be interesting for me to examine this impact through a different lens, perhaps measuring teacher growth in terms of changes in the quality of student work or through teachers' implementation of a particular best practice as part of their lesson designs. I am curious to know if teachers may not be able to articulate how they have changed over time, as might be expressed in an interview, but can give evidence of it indirectly through the quality of their instruction and the products their students produce.

A final limitation of this study was the time limit. Due to length of this study, it was very difficult to collect evidence of teachers' changing beliefs and instructional practices. I was only able to capture Charlotte and Elizabeth's desire to change, but could not draw valid conclusions about whether that change did occur or would occur for either teacher in the future. I would like to revisit this study with a longitudinal design to see how participating in a classroom learning lab impacts the same group of teachers over a longer period of time with the goal of collecting concrete evidence of change.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

These questions should be considered “leading questions” that will guide the structure and flow of the interview conversations. However, during the interview, the researcher may choose to ask additional questions to prompt further detail or clarification from the research participants as necessary in order to answer the research questions as thoroughly as possible.

- How many years of teaching experience do you have? How many years have been at the your current level [middle or high school]? At other levels?
- What subjects are you currently certified to teach in the state of Michigan?
- How many other teachers in your school teach at the same grade level?
- How many other teachers at your school teach the same subject area?
- What background knowledge do you have about classroom learning labs?
- When reflecting on about your classroom learning lab experience, would you say that your network of professional colleagues has now increased, decreased, or stayed the same as a result of your participation?
In what way has it [increased, decreased, stayed the same]?
- What features of the learning lab resonate with you?
- What did you learn from the learning lab?
- How would you apply what you learned in the learning lab into your classroom?
- Would you recommend the learning lab experience to others? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that classroom learning labs have a positive or negative impact on teachers who feel isolated?

If the participant responds with POSITIVE...

What aspects of the classroom learning labs make them impactful?

If the participant responds with NEGATIVE...

What changes to the classroom learning labs do you think might make them more impactful for teachers who feel isolated?

Appendix B
Sample Coded Transcript

CLASSROOM LEARNING LAB SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

In This Together:

Secondary Language Arts Teachers' Responses to Learning Labs

Lisa Anne Britten

Participant A

- 0:07 So, before you went to the classroom learning lab, did you have any background knowledge about it or was that your first time?
- 0:19 That was my first time. Yeah, I had no background knowledge.
- 0:31 Would you say that, um, you stayed in touch with that person from there? Have you e-mailed her back and forth at all about things?
- 0:41 I did a few times (PL). I haven't since the school year started.
- 0:49 And what did you guys talk about, like how did that go for you?
- 0:51 Um, it went well. We talked about classroom setup and, um, *The Outsiders* because we both do *The Outsiders*, but they're set up differently than we are schedule-wise, so it's a little different. (PL)
- 1:05 A little different, yeah. Do you feel like going there, um, helped you to increase your professional knowledge, like about sixth-grade-level things or...?
- 1:15 Yes... 'cause here being the only sixth-grade-level language arts teacher, I'm kind of stuck in my own world...and by going out and seeing it in other schools and where they are academically makes me realize what I should be doing and gives me some tips and tricks. (PL – CO)
- 1:34 So you're saying that seeing what they did over there maybe helped you raise the bar for your own students?
- 1:41 Absolutely...and myself as a teacher.
- 1:45 What features of the learning lab, as a professional development, kind of resonated with you or really attracted you, if anything...like a professional development for teachers?
- 2:01 The meeting...before and after. Being able to hear everyone's different perspective of what's going on, what's working and what's not working. That whole pre- and

post-meeting was huge. (PL – PB, DB)

2:17 In what way...like, could you explain more about what you mean by “huge”?

2:22 Um, because you can get the thought process. You get the thought process of the hosting teacher and those that observed, because maybe you observed something differently than I did... Because it's...difficult to get around and observe everything in a classroom of thirty students, so it's nice if you were in the opposite end of the room and you saw students doing it a certain way. It's nice to share that in that post-meeting, like, “Oh, I missed that.” (PL – DB)

2:48 What did you personally take away from the learning lab, like what did you learn from it?

2:54 That I'm not crazy. *Laughter.*

2:57 What do you mean by that?

2:58 That some days it just gets really stressful, like “C'mon guys, why aren't you getting this,” and um, I just feel like I'm so far behind. Going to see the other classrooms...I'm not. I'm not, you know, necessarily behind, you know. I'm not losing my mind. What I'm doing is working. I'm just not seeing it right away... So that helped. And it helps to have a network of teachers outside of my classroom, of resources. (SL – CO)

3:29 How did you – or how would you – apply what you learned from the learning lab into your own classroom?

3:35 Um, stuff like procedures, um, maybe the tips and tricks and stuff, like, um, *The Outsiders*, like how she was doing it, um, she would read snippets and then stop and discuss. She did that more frequently than I did, um, and I noticed that they seemed to respond better to that, and I was thinking, “Well, if I stop too frequently, they're not going to remember the story...” You know, the whole... I don't know if that makes sense. ...but with her stopping more frequently, they were getting it better than I thought they would, so that's what I took from it. (PL – CO)

4:16 So it helped you to kind of, maybe, change your lessons or your approach in teaching it with your students?

4:20 Yes, uh-huh.

Appendix C
HRRC Approval Letter



DATE: July 9, 2015

TO: Lisa Britten

FROM: Grand Valley State University Human Research Review Committee

STUDY TITLE: [751119-2] In this together: The impact of classroom learning labs on educators in small middle and high schools

REFERENCE #: 15-154-H

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: July 9, 2015

APPROVAL EXPIRATION: July 9, 2017

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of materials for this research study and your thorough response to the tabled letter. The Human Research Review Committee has approved your research plan application as compliant with all applicable sections of the federal regulations, Michigan law, GVSU policies and HRRC procedures. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please insert the following sentence into your information/consent documents as appropriate. All project materials produced for participants or the public must contain this information.

This research protocol has been approved by the Human Research Review Committee at Grand Valley State University. File No. 15-154-H Expiration: July 9, 2017.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. *Federal regulations require that each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.*

The following information is required in order to maintain current approval with the HRRC. Failure to submit within 30 days, unless otherwise noted, constitutes non-compliance with HRRC procedures and may result in a suspension of approval.

- **The link for the letter of permission from the Learning Lab Host Educator contains a copy of the response to Tabled Letter. Please contact the Research Protections Program (contact information below) to unlock this package so that you can upload the Host Educator letter.**

This approval is based on the HRRC determination that no greater than minimal risk is posed to research participants. This study has received expedited review, 45 CFR 46.110 category 7, based on the [Office of Human Research Protections 1998 Guidance on Expedited Review Categories](#).

Appendix D

Permission to Conduct Research at the Host School



Grandville Public Schools

4261 Schoolcraft Street SW
Grand Rapids, MI 49534
Phone (616) 254-6041
Fax (616) 254-6043

June 1, 2015

To the Human Research Review Committee at Grand Valley State University:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I give Lisa Britten, a graduate student in the College of Education at Grand Valley State University, permission to conduct the research titled, "In this together: Secondary language arts teachers' responses to learning labs" at Cummings Elementary (Grandville Public Schools) in Grandville, Michigan. I have reviewed the details of the research proposal, and give permission for this study to take place at Cummings Elementary School. In addition, I give the researcher, Lisa Britten, permission to interview teaching staff at this site, as described in the research protocol.

I understand that the results of the research study may be published, but names of the school and of the participants will not be used in order to protect confidentiality. I also understand that Cummings Elementary, Grandville Public Schools, its staff, students, and administration will receive no direct benefits from participating in this study other than the benefits of adding to the knowledge base about content area literacy professional development and classroom learning labs.

My permission is contingent upon approval by the Human Research Review Committee at Grand Valley State University.

Sincerely,

David Martini
Principal

Appendix E

Participants' Letter of Consent

Dear Fellow Educator:

My name is Lisa Britten, and I am a graduate student in the K-12 Reading Specialist program at Grand Valley State University. This semester I am conducting a research study titled, *In this together: Secondary language arts teachers' responses to learning labs*. This study will examine the beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of middle and high school teachers who have participated in a Classroom Learning Lab professional development experience.

Because you teach English at the middle or high school level and have expressed interest in participating in a Classroom Learning Lab experience, I am requesting your participation in this research study. Participation will involve conversational pre- and post-learning lab interviews (15-30 min.) where we discuss your past experiences with classroom learning labs and your perspectives on the impact they may have on teachers in small schools. I will also take observational notes during the learning lab session to capture your reactions in the moment. Follow-up e-mails may be used to clarify the information you share. You will also be asked to complete a short survey for the collection of demographic data (years taught, subjects taught, etc.). Your agreement to participate in this study will allow me to collect data about your beliefs, attitudes, and experiences in regards to the Classroom Learning Lab experience at the school where you teach.

After a sufficient number of interviews have been conducted with the research participants and the Classroom Learning Lab session is over, data analysis and writing will begin. All collected data (including interview responses and observational notes from the learning lab sessions) will be coded and your name and any identifying information will be removed. The results of the research study may be published, but your name, the name of the school where you teach, and any specific information about your role within the school or district that could be used to identify you specifically will not be used in order to protect your confidentiality. There are no direct benefits from participating in this study other than the benefits of adding to the knowledge base about content area literacy professional development.

The consent process and research interview will take place face-to-face in a locked classroom in your school building, outside of the regular school day, without students or other adults present. Research conversations will be recorded digitally via a password-protected device, and transcribed into a password-protected file. Prior to collecting data, your name will be replaced with a unique study ID. During data transcription, your responses will be labeled with your unique study ID to protect your anonymity. After transcription accuracy has been confirmed, the digital recordings will be permanently deleted. Any e-mail correspondence with you containing follow-up questions will be handled through my GVSU e-mail address, morseli@mail.gvsu.edu. When an e-mail response has been received, data will be copied from the e-mail and pasted to the password-protected data transcription file, identified only your unique study ID. Once data has been copied, verified, and saved in the data file, the original e-mail correspondence will be permanently deleted. At the end of the semester, the file containing participants' names and their study IDs and the data transcription file will be moved from my computer to a flash drive. At that time, the original data files will be permanently deleted. At the conclusion of the semester, my faculty advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Stolle, will store the flash drive in a secure, locked location in her office at the GVSU College of Education.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

If you have any questions concerning this research study or your participation in this study, please contact Lisa Britten at (616) 891-0152 or morseli@mail.gvsu.edu.

Sincerely,

Lisa Britten
Graduate Student
College of Education
Grand Valley State University

By signing below, you are giving your consent to participate in the study described on the reverse page.

I give my consent to participate in this research study.

Printed Name (First and Last)

Signature

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the Human Research Review Committee at Grand Valley State University:

hrrc@gvsu.edu or 616-331-3197.

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