CONNECTING THEORY, TRAINING AND PRACTICE:
BUILDING TEACHERS’ CAPACITY WITHIN AN ELEMENTARY LITERACY INTERVENTION

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CONNECTING THEORY, TRAINING AND PRACTICE: BUILDING TEACHERS' CAPACITY

WITHIN AN ELEMENTARY LITERACY INTERVENTION

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DEDICATION

“I’m not making this up, this is from the heart, I feel like I have the best job and I really enjoy learning new things about it.” – Intervention Teacher

I found this line in an interview and pinned it to the bulletin board in my office. Not the most elegant quote in the whole data set, but there was something about the sincerity about this teacher's statement that stayed with me, with a post-it note saying “Honor this community.” My intention has been to treat every aspect of my data with respect for these educators who have shared their experiences doing this difficult work.
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ABSTRACT

CONNECTING THEORY, TRAINING AND PRACTICE:
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Helen M. Anderson
Diane R. Waff

Research suggests that instructional interventions can impact student learning most effectively when teachers receive support for implementation (Danielson, Doolittle, & Bradley, 2007; Songer, et al., 2002). This is particularly true for interventions targeting struggling students within Response to Intervention structures (Akerson, Cullen, & Hanson, 2009; Harris, Graham, & Adkins, 2015; Martin-Kniep, 2008;). Professional learning communities (PLCs) provide one structure to provide teachers with the needed instructional support to implement instructional interventions (Akerson et al., 2009; Danielson et al., 2007; Martin-Kniep, 2008; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008). Implementation literature largely examines two aspects of these PLCs in relation to teacher’s practice: 1) teachers’ fidelity in implementing the curricular intervention, and 2) how intervention training within the PLC impacts on students’ academic performance. Absent from the current research is an examination of the ways in which teachers develop their capacity within PLCs, particularly when that PLC directly supports teachers’ implementation of a curricular intervention. Drawing on data from a large-scale evaluation study of an early literacy intervention, this dissertation explores how
teachers describe the ways in which their capacity is built within a PLC. Using a critical feminist framework, this study examines interview transcripts, program artifacts, and analytic memos to surface the themes and discourses used by teachers to forward a theory of how PLCs can influence teachers' practice.

This study found five key features of this intervention's PLCs that teachers described as developing their capacity: 1) theoretical texts directly connected to teachers’ practice; 2) a resource-orientation to students; 2) a developed sense of personal responsibility for students’ progress; 4) informal collaboration with colleagues outside the PLC space; and 5) peer observation with direct, non-evaluative feedback conversations. These features, when situated within existing literature, provide the groundwork for greater research around PLCs and how they can serve as a support of teachers’ capacity-building and implementation of instructional interventions.
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CHAPTER 1: 
INTRODUCTION

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have become a central feature in education, as schools and district seek to improve students’ outcomes by supporting teachers’ practice. These communities carry many different names – PLCs, communities of practice, inquiry communities – and each draws on different bodies of literature and takes a different stance toward the relationship between knowledge and practice. While these communities are not uniform, they do bear some common characteristics: a shared purpose for the community, a focus on student outcomes, collaboration among participants, an openness to problems of practice, and respect for local knowledge and experience (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; DuFour, 2005; Wenger 1998). When learning communities embody these characteristics, they can foster several positive characteristics, most notably that teachers frequently become more reflective practitioners, thoughtfully tackling problems of practice and improving student outcomes as a result (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Sykes, 1999).

This is not to say that professional learning communities are the long sought after silver bullet for improving education. PLCs can be executed poorly, most notably when they are “perceived as a mandate for collaboration, as increased pressure to meet benchmarks for student achievement, as unsupportive of [teachers’] learning needs and improvement efforts, and as creating more paperwork and teacher-evaluation criteria” (Talbert, 2010, p. 563). Despite this, PLCs are widely considered within the literature as one of the better methods with
which schools and districts can provide meaningful professional development for teachers in direct support of teachers’ reflective practice. PLCs can support teachers in myriad ways, including helping teachers navigate shifting policies and initiatives. PLCs provide the necessary collaborative spaces for teachers to “adapt to these changes” while also “[managing] the dynamics of the classroom and the school” (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008, p. 146).

One example of shifting policy is the implementation of curricular interventions aimed at helping students identified as “struggling” academically. Professional learning communities provide an essential supplement for curricular intervention implementation, as these spaces provide teachers the opportunity to problem-solve issues of implementation and practice, exploring ways in which the new intervention informs their existing practices, reshapes them, and builds upon them (Bergstrom, 2008; Boote, 2006; Lieber et al., 2009; Martin-Kniep, 2008; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008). Beyond merely supporting teachers pedagogically, the literature concludes that when curricular interventions are implemented in concert with a PLC aimed at including teachers in the process, the outcomes on nearly all metrics were improved.

Another way professional learning communities support teachers’ practice is by providing spaces for developing teachers’ capacity. Capacity-building refers to the ongoing process of reflection which teachers use to improve instructional strategies in order to meet students’ needs (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995/2011; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008; Shulman,
Capacity is supported any number of ways, but the literature points specifically to the collaborative meaning-making processes of PLCs as helpful in advancing teacher’s capacity-building. Supportive PLCs provide the structure and space for teachers to openly trouble issues of practice, as well as collaboration around solutions to those problems of practice (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Bryk, 2009; Ziechner, 2003).

This capacity-building appears to be particularly built when professional learning communities leverage peer observations as part of their structures, when instructors have the opportunity to observe one another’s practice and discuss openly the observer’s notes on the instructor’s practice (Cosh, 1999; Gosling, 2002; Martin & Double, 1998; Parise & Spillane, 2010). Situated in and supported by PLCs, these moments of observation and collaboration provide instructors with the opportunity to build their capacity with immediacy (Peel 2005; Parise & Spillane, 2010). In some cases, instructors reporting changes in their teaching practice as soon as the next lesson. This collaboration around peer observation is, however, largely bounded within higher education. Peer observation as a capacity-building tool or as a component of PLCs is absent from the K12 setting, an opportunity for research.

Another particularly under-theorized aspect of capacity-building is the use of informal collaboration by educators to inform, troubleshoot, and refine issues of practice (Harris & Anthony, 2001; Stevenson, 2004; Stevenson, 2008). These informal collaborative conversations take shape in a number of ways – in the
hallway, before or after a meeting, over the phone or e-mail – but the driving factor is that these are collaborations appear at first glance to meet teachers’ needs in a more immediate sense than structured PLCs can. However, given the off-the-cuff nature of these collaborations, they can be difficult to conceptualize, theorize, or evaluate in most research contexts. Informal collaboration lacks the structure and regularity that researchers prefer, but recent research appears to be attempting to understand how these collaborations contribute to teachers’ understanding of their practice, and this study aims to contribute to this developing body of research.

I seek to understand how each of these bodies of literature inform teachers’ practice within an instructional intervention. In this study’s context, teachers participate in a professional learning community that is aligned to a particular instructional intervention, in which teachers observe one another’s practice and are encouraged to collaborate with peers in order to troubleshoot problems of practice and implementation. While this context may appear narrow initially, there are two particularly compelling reasons it is used as a site of study. First, the instructional intervention has widespread use throughout the U.S. and has been recognized by the What Works Clearinghouse as a recommended instructional intervention for schools. Second, while this context appears particularly specific, PLCs have such widespread use in professional development settings that seeing how a particular PLC operates may shed light on techniques, practices, and structures that PLCs everywhere can adapt for their specific contexts and needs.
Research Questions

The research questions posed in this study seek to address gaps in the literature regarding the impact of professional learning communities on teachers’ practice and perspectives, particularly noting how teachers view their students’ abilities and needs and teachers’ capacity to meet those needs.

1. How does participation in a professional learning community inform the perspectives and practices of teachers?
2. What is the relationship between teachers’ experience and their perception of
   a. students’ needs, and
   b. teachers’ own capacity to meet those needs?

The literature of both curricular implementation and capacity describe the positive role PLCs can play in both of these endeavors. However, little is understood about how teachers self-describe their experiences within the PLC and how these experiences map onto program theory that guides implementation of a curricular intervention. This study aims to provide perspective on these topics and forward a better theory of how PLCs and collaboration can forward teachers’ practice.

The Story of the Question

This inquiry is drawn, in part, from my experiences as a high school teacher and as a participant in collaborative learning communities. Early in my teaching career, I became aware of the language my colleagues and I used to talk about students and their abilities. In meetings, I would cringe when my fellow teachers would refer to “those kids,” rather than “our kids,” and this was compounded by beliefs that some students “just don’t get it and never will.” The pervasive notion that my students who struggled academically will never grasp algebra or grammar
or the nuances of history was disquieting, particularly because these notions were
grounded in a singular vision for student success one that has always
“promoted...dominant beliefs and values,” particularly ones that allowed for the
security of the white middle-class (Willis, 2008, p. 53).

This discomfort drove me to seek out communities of teachers and school
leaders wrestling with similar concerns. Desperate to make sense of my classroom, I
knew I needed “opportunities to engage with others who [faced] similar situations”
(Wegner, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 9). I was fortunate to find the Philadelphia
Writing Project (PhilWP), where I had the opportunity to explore and trouble
myriad elements of my teaching practice. It was through the well-planned,
thoughtful, inquiry-based professional development that I began to inquire into my
own teaching and leadership practices in my schools. My perspective changed
dramatically, reminding me that the practicalities of the classroom are not mutually
exclusive with theory. It was through sharing my practice within a community of
like-minded educators that I began to see the deep complexities and vulnerable
work of teaching. It was the PhilWP community that continued to drive me forward
in my exploration of my own discomfort about how schools were defining academic
success and who we all were presuming could or could not achieve that success.

This is what brought me to my graduate program – a desire to help build an
education system that values the contributions of all community members in
pursuit of a more just world. In my studies, professional learning communities arose
as one possibility to forward this change. I became interested in how learning
communities sought to support teachers’ practice or simply became another top-down professional development mandate (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). These PLCs ran the gamut in support or hindrance of teachers’ practice, spaces where criticality of one’s teaching was supported and ones that were designed to fill time and pass along administrative tasks. These communities, unsurprisingly, differed in participation, depth of discussion, and topic, and where I had experienced a transformation in my teaching practice as a result of a learning communities, I saw teachers become disengaged with the process when the community would not meet their needs.

In continuing my studies, I have had the tremendous opportunity to work with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), on the team evaluating the scale-up of Reading Recovery, an intervention which presents an opportunity for teachers to potentially change educational outcomes for students labeled as having “reading and writing difficulties” (Clay, 1993, p. 1). In participating in the qualitative data analysis for the larger evaluation study, I noticed that teachers in particular spoke about how the community of practice surrounding the intervention shaped their perspectives on teaching, literacy, and students. Due to the large-scale nature of the evaluation study, a fine-grained analysis of all of the qualitative data was an impossible task. The overwhelming volume of data allowed the research team to understand the program in broad strokes, but, as a consequence, aspects of the intervention, such as the role of coaching, the role of the learning community in teacher development, and the impact of parents and
community members on students’ outcomes, became bracketed and removed from the evaluation due to the scope of the grant. These bracketed moments in the data provided a rich opportunity to pursue the research questions presented here.

While the interviews were focused largely on teachers’ experiences around scaling-up the intervention and fidelity of program implementation, teachers frequently referenced their training experiences in richer detail than the original protocol questions requested. Within these interviews, teachers spoke about the learning community and how it mediated their understanding of the program, their students, and their own roles as teachers. I wanted to understand in greater detail the experiences teachers shared about their learning within the professional learning community supporting this intervention. While we on the research team knew the PLCs were an important part of both implementation of the intervention and developing teachers’ pedagogical skills, these descriptions were not central to the CPRE evaluation and therefore became the site for the questions presented in this study. These interviews, in addition to the program materials, have provided insight on the research questions of this study and perspective in my own pursuit of working toward a better education system for all students.
CHAPTER 2: 
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In considering relevant bodies of literature for this study, three issues arise as particularly salient in pursuit of my questions. The first body of literature explores how teachers build and develop capacity over time, particularly through peer observation and informal collaboration. I then examine the research literature regarding professional learning communities as spaces for teacher collaboration and in direct support of teachers’ practice. Lastly, I review literature that examines the tensions that arise when curricular interventions are implemented in schools, noting particularly how fidelity and flexibility can be at odds with one another and how research suggests best supporting implementation in schools. This review is done with a particular eye toward how teachers are positioned within the research, as well as how these issues arise when the curricular intervention is part of a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. These bodies of literature overlap with one another, particularly in thinking about the benefits that PLCs can have both in capacity building and in curricular implementation, overlaps that provide helpful insight in developing this study.

Understanding Capacity and its Development

Capacity and capacity-building have been difficult concepts to clearly define in the literature, and while themes are present within the literature, a cohesive definition for capacity remains missing. After establishing a working definition of capacity and capacity-building for this study, I explore each of the three trends emerging from the literature in greater detail. First, studies frequently examine the
development of teachers’ capacity as connected to constructivist theories of learning and development. Second, the literature stresses how capacity is developed through the careful observation of others in order to understand one’s own practice, particularly through non-evaluative peer observation. Lastly, there is a growing, but still incomplete, body of literature that describes the ways in which informal collaboration can help develop teachers’ capacity, particularly when a new structure or curriculum is implemented within schools.

A significant section of the literature examined capacity-building within the context of professional learning communities, particularly as connected to teachers’ classroom practice. This literature will be discussed with the other literatures of professional learning communities later in this chapter (see “Professional Learning Communities, Capacity, and Connections to Practice”).

Defining Capacity

When conceptualizing teachers’ capacity, a clear, coherent definition remains elusive, a concept that is frequently deployed as universally understood but rarely defined clearly. Intersecting with literature on teacher preparation (Blanton, Berenson, & Norwood, 2001; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Moir, 2009) and professional development (Ball, 2000; Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995/2011; Johnson, 2012; Perkins & Cooter, 2013), teachers’ capacity is most clearly understood as the development of teachers’ “knowledge, skills, and dispositions” throughout their careers and an understanding that “learning to teach [is] a nearly life-long phenomenon.”
McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright (2008) elaborate on this concept of teachers’ capacity:

Viewed as the development of expertise, teacher capacity encompasses teaching as a continuously and rapidly evolving activity...As a consequence, the concept of teacher capacity must include how teachers adapt to these [policy] changes and manage the dynamics of the classroom and the school. On the one hand, such constantly changing circumstances and the normal busy-ness of classrooms demand the establishment of routines just to make the teaching enterprise manageable. On the other, the unpredictability of how these changes in so many different spheres will interact over time suggests adaptability as a critical dimension of teacher capacity...Teachers' capacities are in constant development and change. (p. 146)

Bearing in mind that capacity is “in constant development and change,” the idea of capacity as a fixed destination in a teacher's development is an insufficient definition for capacity. For this study and drawing on the work of McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright (2008), I define capacity as a non-fixed concept, one that describes teachers inquiring into their own practice with a focus on developing a dynamic skill-set in response to diverse student needs and changing education policy. This definition situates teachers’ capacity not as a goal to attain, but as an ongoing process of learning how to best meet students’ needs and develop one’s practice. In trying to build capacity by fostering and developing their practice, teachers “concentrate on refining the interactive, inquiry-oriented instructional strategies” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1039; see also Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

As such, within this study, “capacity-building” is defined as the development of an ongoing reflective practice, mediated and fostered through a variety of professional development opportunities in community with other teachers. Teachers’ capacity is then built and “acquired through experience and through
considered and deliberative reflection about or inquiry into experience” and that “teachers learn when they have opportunities to examine and reflect on” the practices of expert teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 262). This dynamic view of capacity building is particularly helpful when considering how to “[develop] teacher capacity to succeed with every pupil, especially those historically underserved and those with special learning needs” (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008, p. 149). This definition of capacity and capacity-building seeks to capture the ongoing reflection of teachers, particularly when done in community with others.

**Teachers’ Capacity and Constructivism**

Literature examining capacity is situated within constructivist frameworks, focusing on the ongoing process of building capacity an “understanding of practice as socially mediated” (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008, p. 145). Literature describing teachers’ capacity – and developing that capacity – details how teacher learn to improve their practice through the thoughtful reflection on their experiences within the classroom. Thus, capacity is not a fixed point that can be achieved through information dissemination in isolation of practice, but rather constructed directly from teachers’ classroom practice in collaboration with other teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995/2011; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008; Shulman, 1986). This framing of capacity reaches as far back as Dewey, who described capacity as socially mediated and dynamic across a career trajectory, highlighting that teachers are always learning from their practice and building their understanding of practice through their
experiences in the classroom (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008). By approaching capacity in this way, capacity is not only the building of technical skill in teaching, but also the building of teachers’ knowledge in the “formation of strategic pedagogical knowledge” in response to teachers’ classroom and pedagogical experiences (Shulman, 1986, p. 12, original emphasis; see also Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

This constructivist framing underscores the evolving, ongoing nature of building teachers’ capacity, which is a development across a career and not a finite end. In order to foster this type of capacity, “teachers must be able to ask hard questions of themselves and their colleagues, to try something out and study what happens, to seek evidence of student learning, and explore alternative perspectives” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1040; see also Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995/2011). Capacity is developed and fostered through teachers’ reflection on both their experiences within their own classrooms and on the expert practice of others, particularly when those peers share similar frameworks or curricular mandates (Floden, Goertz, & O’Day, 1995, p. 21). Additionally, by understanding capacity-building as an ongoing constructivist process, this pushes back against “policies that seek to control or direct the work of teachers,” instead focusing on “strategies intended to develop schools’ and teachers’ capacity to be responsible for student learning,” thus viewing “knowledge as constructed by and with practitioners for use in their own contexts” (Darling-
This constructivist framework also allows for theory to influence teachers’ practice directly, as that theory is immediately situated within teachers’ practice, not removed from it:

Teachers learn by doing, reading, and reflecting (just as students do); by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see. This kind of learning enables teachers to make the leap from theory to accomplished practice. In addition to a powerful base of theoretical knowledge, such learning requires settings that support teacher inquiry and collaboration and strategies grounded in teachers’ questions and concerns. To understand deeply, teachers must learn about, see, and experience successful learning-centered and learner-centered teaching practices. (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995/2011, p. 83)

Teacher learning cannot “occur in college classrooms divorced from practice or in school classrooms divorced from knowledge about how to interpret practice” (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 8). With capacity framed as a development of reflective practice across a career, as a journey and not a destination, the constructivist stance inherent in this provides teachers with a powerful opportunity to foster and develop their own practice in concert with other teachers and in dialog with theory.

**Capacity-Building and Peer Observation**

Observing one’s peers can yield positive benefits for both the observed instructor and the observer, particularly when the goal of the observation is development of pedagogical knowledge and skill. This non-evaluative peer observation is in line with “the Vygotskian (1978/1934) tenet that...a more knowing other can guide [an individual’s] development to a greater extent than the
[individual] can alone” (Blanton et al., 2001, p. 180). The literature of peer observation as a capacity-building tool draws on this tenet, where instructors are paired up in order to share instructional practices and foster reflection (Cosh, 1999; Gosling, 2002; Martin & Double, 1998; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Schuck, Aubusson, & Buchanan, 2008). While often observations can be and are used as evaluative tools, research overwhelmingly demonstrates that peer observation is more effective at improving instructors’ practice when the goals is “to give constructive feedback” (Gosling, 2002, p. 2).

In conceptualizing peer observation models, the literature largely draws on Martin and Double’s (1998) process model (Figure 1). This process model illustrates the stages often identified for peer observation; more importantly Martin and Double (1998) highlight the importance of these observations to operate in a cyclical manner and with a spirit of collaboration and relationship building between the observer and the teacher being observed (see also Gosling, 2002). In this process model, the pair of instructors meet before the lesson to discuss what the feedback goals for the teacher – what does the teacher want to improve about his/her instructional practice and how can the observer provide insight for the instructor in meeting those goals (Martin & Double, 1998). The lesson is taught, with the observer taking a non-participatory role in the lesson, making notes on what he/she observes in the classroom (Martin & Double, 1998). After the lesson, the two instructors meet again to discuss what the observer witnessed and how those observations inform the original goals (Martin & Double, 1998). This process model
stresses the importance of open conversation among participants, with both instructors taking a learner’s stance, in which feedback is heard with an open mind (Martin & Double, 1998).

Several studies have taken up this model (or one very similar to it) to understand the process and benefits of peer observation of teaching. These studies largely conclude that peer observation is a positive aspect of professional development, for both participants; however, the findings of these studies are broad descriptions of non-specific benefits resulting from peer observation (Bozak, Yildirim, & Demírtas, 2011; Cosh, 1999; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; McMahon, Barrett, & O’Neill, 2007; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Patrick, 2009; Peel, 2005; Richards & Lockhart, 1992; Teberg, 1999). Studies conclude that teachers report positive changes in the practices, and participants report that feedback is helpful, though there are few details on the types of instructional shifts instructors made in response to peer observations (McMahon et al., 2007; Richards & Lockhart, 1992). Instructors report that their practices changed, but not how those changes
occurred in their practices, as these studies did not provide details on the content of the debrief conversations or the subsequent lessons of either instructor (Bozak et al., 2011; Cosh, 1999; McMahon et al., 2007; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Richards & Lockhart, 1992; Teberg, 1999).

Peer Observation and Professional Development. Several studies emphasized that peer observation alone would not, necessarily, improve instructors’ practice, and that effective “teaching is contingent on a multiplicity of factors” (Peel, 2005, p. 501; see also Cosh, 1999; Floden et al., 1995; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Schuck et al., 2008). These studies found that when cycles of peer observation were part of larger professional learning communities, they fostered reflective practice and encouraged teachers to “[open] their practice up to scrutiny by a colleague” to both learn about their peer’s practice and their own (Parise & Spillane, 2010, p. 327; see also Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Gosling, 2002). Gosling (2002) elaborates on the benefits of situating peer observation within a professional learning community:

By encouraging staff to think about a collective responsibility for teaching within a department the isolation of lecturers can be removed. Historically there have been a lack of ‘safe’ places where discussion about teaching can take place. [Peer observation of teaching] can play a large role in creating an environment in which such discussions can occur (p. 3)

While the structure and benefits of peer observation have been well-documented, what remains under-theorized are the conversations that follow the observations. These debrief conversations are frequently mentioned purely as a structure surrounding the observation, with some mention of the need for norms
and interpersonal communication skill between the individual (Beck, D'Elia, & Lamond, 2015; Bell & Mladenovic, 2008). These conversations are not examined for how they inform and shape teachers' practice, an important gap in the literature. While some authors provide structures for these conversations, this is presented as a prescriptive checklist for instructors and does not address the learning that may occur within those conversations themselves (Beck et al., 2015).

It is worth noting that the overwhelming majority of research done regarding peer observation of teaching is largely bounded to the practice of teaching in higher education settings, where peer observation, in addition to an instructional improvement tool, is a component of tenure review at some universities. There has been some movement recently of peer observation into the K12 setting, and benefits have been demonstrated in those spaces, particularly with pre-service and new teachers (Beck et al., 2015; Bolen, 2009; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Patrick, 2009). These studies focus on the development of reflective practice in new teachers (Bolen, 2009; Patrick 2009), speak broadly about positive benefits (Parise & Spillane, 2010), or offer a guide for conversations without elaborating on specific benefits of debrief conversations (Beck et al., 2015). While these all discuss the importance of a supportive learning community in addition to the benefits of peer observation, none situate peer observation directly within a professional learning community, as it is in this study's context. Additionally, these studies do not provide any research into how the debrief and feedback conversations following
observations may benefit teachers’ practice, an area of needed research across the literature on peer observation.

**Informal Collaboration and Capacity-Building**

Collaboration can be viewed as a “critical factor in school reform,” yet how that collaboration builds teachers’ capacity remains largely under-theorized (Cook & Friend, 1991, p. 6; see also Slater, 2004; Stollar, Poth, Curtis, & Cohen, 2006). Cook and Friend (1991) set forth the clearest definition for collaboration as a voluntary meeting of individuals who work toward a shared goal with shared responsibility for decision-making and accountability. While this collaboration often occurs within formal structures, a growing body of literature examines how informal collaboration can foster teachers’ capacity, particularly as new systems, technologies, and reforms are implemented in schools (Stevenson, 2004; Stevenson, 2008). Informal collaboration builds on Cook and Friend’s (1991) definition, noting specifically that these voluntary interactions occur in a variety of spaces and ways, building teachers’ capacity and supporting the specific needs of individual teachers (Harris & Anthony, 2001; Stevenson, 2004; Stevenson, 2008).

Informal collaboration should not be confused with collegiality. There is a large body of research about how collegiality can break down teacher isolation, particularly among novice teachers (e.g. Clark, 2001; Miller, 2008; Schlichte, Yssl, & Merbler, 2005). Differing from collegiality, informal collaboration still holds onto the “shared values, goals and/or a common vision of teaching” within a school or district, thus making informal collaboration an important potential source of
knowledge theorizing how teachers navigate their own learning in school-based initiatives and reforms (Harris & Anthony, 2001; p. 384).

There is a significant lack of research examining informal collaboration and how that builds teachers’ capacity (Jones & Dexter, 2014; Rowland, 2012; Stevenson, 2004; Stevenson, 2008). While the existing literature concludes that teachers should be encouraged to “tap into the collective capacity of any assembled group of educators through...conversations” how those conversations influence teachers’ capacity remains unexplored (Rowland, 2014, p. 157). What literature exists makes a strong case that the informal collaboration occurring among teachers provides a necessary supplement to formal professional development (Jones & Dexter, 2014; Rowland, 2012; Stevenson, 2008). These conversations can provide clarification for teachers particularly when those instructors begin implementing new school-based initiatives. Research on how these informal collaborations impact teachers’ capacity and practice in other areas, such as sharing pedagogical strategies or theorizing practice, remains unexplored.

**Professional Learning Communities**

There are many ways to describe, discuss, and evaluate communities in which teachers learn about their practice and develop their skills, and these can go by several monikers: communities of practice (Akerson, Cullen, & Hanson, 2009; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Wood, 2007), professional learning communities (DuFour, 2005; DuFour et al., 2005; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Sisk-Hilton, 2009; Talbert, 2010), and inquiry communities
While each bear some distinct features (and this is not intended to be an exhaustive list), generally these types of learning communities of teachers tend to have similar traits. Namely, these communities tend to be focused on student learning, collaborative, and results oriented, all of which is underscored by “hard work and commitment” (DuFour, 2005, p. 42). If these communities are to succeed, that success “requires the school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement” (DuFour, 2005, p. 42). More concisely, these communities are “teachers working collaboratively in...groups to examine student and school data in order to take collective responsibility for students learning” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; p. 49).

In reviewing literature for this study, three pertinent areas surfaced from the literature. First, the literature provides more detailed characteristics of professional learning communities. Next, I examine the literature drawing strong connections between successful professional learning communities and building teachers’ capacity, particularly when these groups directly connect with teachers’ practice and include participants with a variety of teaching experience. Lastly, I review the literature that suggests PLCs are not, in of themselves, a panacea for schools looking to implement new professional development structures and improve teachers’ practice and student outcomes.

**Characteristics of Effective Professional Learning Communities**
Expanding on DuFour’s (2005) basic structure for professional learning communities, the literature expands on this structure to discuss four additional characteristics of effective PLCs: 1) common purposes for the community; 2) thoughtful participation from all community members; 3) openness to problems of practice; and 4) respect for local knowledge, experience and expertise.

**Common Purposes for the Community.** While many descriptions of professional learning communities situate these communities within specific school contexts, this is not the only way groups cohere. In addition to shared contexts, these learning communities also form across schools and districts, bringing together teachers from multiple schools with “with an emphasis on the extended expertise [of teachers]” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 26; see also Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Compton-Lilly, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2002; Waff, 2009). The unifying element in these communities is not teachers’ shared school community, but rather, their shared instructional approach, subject matter, or desire to find an inquiry community outside of their school-based contexts (Akerson et al., 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). These communities often provide spaces which foster innovation and allow teachers to explore aspects of their practice they wish to trouble (Grossman et al., 2001; Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2008; Martin-Kniep, 2008; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Schmoker, 2005; Wenzlaff & Wieseman, 2004; Wood, 2007).

**Thoughtful Participation from All Community Members.** Another shared characteristic of these learning communities is an emphasis on the importance of
thoughtful participation from all community members, noting that “the mere development of a [community of practice is] not sufficient for changing the practice of all teachers” (Akerson et al., 2009, p. 1110). For teachers to improve their practice and engage in a cycle of inquiry that moves instruction forward, professional development communities must “understand that learning rather than being solely individual...is actually also social” (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008, p. 227, original emphasis; see also Pryor & O’Donnell, 2009). As such, teachers “need to work in collegial communities that encourage sharing expertise and problem solving; building collective knowledge and exploring relevant outside knowledge; providing critique on existing practices; and inventing, enacting, and analyzing needed innovation” (Whitford & Wood, 2010, p. 1). This becomes a particularly powerful opportunity when teachers begin to “build a shared responsibility for developing knowledge with each other about teaching and learning,” when teachers become “accountable to each other for what [is] happening in their own classrooms” (Whitford & Wood, 2010, p. 17, original emphasis).

**Openness to Problems of Practice.** These communities offer an unique opportunity to trouble issues of practice openly, seeking to work through these problems in consultation with multiple perspectives, to have one’s work “opened up to the scrutiny of others” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42). When teachers and staff bring the problems of their practice to a community eager to learn with and from one another, the acknowledgment of those “teaching problems and work challenges can serve as a foundation for collaborative learning” (Lieberman &
A sense of “communal responsibility for individual learning” emerges within the professional development space, a critical component to sustaining professional communities long term (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010, p. 51).

**Respect for Local Knowledge, Experience, and Expertise.** Professional learning communities embrace the knowledge and expertise already present within teachers and staff by building communities around questions about practice. PLCs particularly benefit from the experience of teachers across the career spectrum, flourishing when perspectives are diverse and the community contains a mix of teachers of all levels and areas of expertise (Bradley, 2004; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Domitrovich et al., 2009). Approached in this way, all of the participants in PLCs are “regarded as knowers, learners, and researchers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42), a stance which moves teachers’ agency regarding practice into classrooms and schools.

Several studies highlighted the importance of having mixed-experience groupings within the professional learning communities (Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Liu, 2001; Moir, 2009). In these studies, PLCs yielded positive benefits to teachers across experience levels – novice through veteran – because of the opportunity to interact as equals within the community (Kardos et al., 2001; Moir, 2009). When novice teachers were provided the opportunity to work with more experienced teachers as peers, those novice teachers describe the chance to reflect more deeply and more critically on their practice, as well as feeling more confident...
about their pedagogical knowledge and skills (Blanton et al., 2001). While new teachers can often be grouped in isolation from one another, mixed-experience PLCs provide a rich opportunity for novice teachers to leverage expertise within their schools, rather than feeling isolated by their lack of experience (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Grossman et al., 2001; Putnam & Borko, 2000).

**Professional Learning Communities, Capacity, and Connections to Practice**

The literature bears out the benefits of professional learning communities on teachers’ practice and their students’ outcomes when PLCs are deeply connected to teachers’ practice (Akerson et al., 2009; Bryk, 2009; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Lytle et al., 1994; Meyers, 2012; Perkins, & Cooter, 2013; Pradl, 2002; Sykes, 1999). There is broad consensus that practice-based professional development situated in professional learning communities directly benefits student learning and the school community (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Bryk, 2009; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Meyers, 2012; Pradl, 2002; Sykes, 1999; Ziechner, 2003). For PLCs to effectively connect to teachers’ practice, the communities must be grounded in the work of teachers, fostering reflection, and providing a space for teachers to make connections between the activities of the PLC and teachers’ classroom, connections that can help develop teachers’ capacity (Ball, 2000). Additionally, these communities provide “long-term collaboration focused on instructional practices [that] can change the ways teachers see themselves, perhaps even altering how they see themselves as learners” (Floden et al., 1995, p. 20). For PLCs to effectively build teachers’ capacity, teachers must have “productive
participation in... [the] processes of building, collectively, school cultures and ‘communities of practice” (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008, p. 145).

Furthermore, by grounding professional learning communities in teachers’ daily practice, educators have an opportunity to fulfill a “deep need to be self-directed learners,” where they are “meaningfully engaged in studying, creating, and evaluating their professional work” (Valli & Hawley, 2002, p. 94). The self-direction afforded by professional learning communities ensures that the work of the community is focused on the needs of the community and teachers, and not simply “the sit-and-get, one-size-fits-all, quick-fix model – a model that has failed to respect teachers’ knowledge, contribute to school improvement, or advance student learning” (Valli & Hawley, 2002, p. 86). When professional development content is “decontextualized” from teachers’ practice, the “modularized course content and delivery [are] barriers” for teachers’ development of content knowledge and pedagogical practice (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005, p. 30). Rather than relying on outside experts, PLCs leverage the knowledge and expertise in the community of teachers, making explicit the connection between the activities of the PLC and teachers’ classrooms. These learning communities “situate teachers’ learning in their own writing and classroom practices, rather than developing extensive curricular materials for...teachers” (Borko, 2004, p. 10). These communities provide opportunities for teachers to meaningfully engage with a community devoted to practice, and as such, that community can dramatically shape how teachers engage with their content and their students.
When professional learning communities are grounded in teachers’ practice, teachers have the space to collaboratively engage with peers around pedagogical concerns and questions. If PLCs are to bear out the promised benefits of the literature, “teachers’ learning should be grounded in some aspect of their teaching practice” and engage with teachers’ knowledge and beliefs (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 12; see also Ball & Cohen, 1999; Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2009; Mullen, 2009; Talbert, 2010; Valli & Hawley, 2002; Wenzlaff & Wieseman, 2004). In doing so, learning communities of teachers engage directly with the vulnerable work of teaching such that teaching becomes “the object of continuing, thoughtful inquiry” and a “source for constructive professional development” (Ball & Cohen, 1999, p. 6). This ongoing, “thoughtful inquiry” contributes toward developing teachers’ capacity and fostering the work of the PLCs, which require the thoughtful participation of all teachers.

When professional learning communities are grounded in teachers’ practice and provide space for reflection and collaboration, the literature has found that these communities can provide support toward building teachers’ capacity (Kardos et al., 2001; McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2005). When teachers are engaged in collaboration and thoughtful inquiry within a PLC, they are able to “craft knowledge about pedagogical practices, their own students, and the cultural and instructional contexts of their classrooms” (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 9; see also Borko, 2004; Johnson, 2012; Perkins & Cooter, 2013). PLCs have to balance both “professional development geared to learning new pedagogical practices and that devoted to
deepening teachers’ subject matter knowledge,” knowing that both of these “must be respected in any successful attempt to create and sustain intellectual community in the workplace” (Grossman et al., 2001, p. 942; see also Kardos, et al., 2001). This development of reflective practice fosters a reciprocal relationship between the PLC and teachers’ capacity-building. The PLC provides space for reflection, and as teachers develop their reflective practice over time, that capacity helps contribute back to the collaborative, reflective spaces necessary in a successful, productive PLC. This relationship is described in greater detail at the end of this chapter.

**Professional Learning Communities, not Panacea**

Professional learning communities in of themselves, like any education reform, will not necessarily improve students’ academic performance or foster reflective practice from teachers and administrators. Particularly when they are mandated, teachers can struggle against and resist not only the formation of the community, but of all the opportunities the community presents to teachers (Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, & Beckingham, 2004; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Talbert, 2010; Wood, 2007). It is not enough for these communities to merely exist in school as another iteration of disconnected, mandated professional development; indeed, mandated PLCs are antithetical to the very definitions the literature puts forth. These communities have the potential to “transform how teachers understand and conduct their work,” but this transformative potential may not be realized when the learning community is mandated or implemented without proper support (Wood, 2007, p. 737). Particularly, “effective PLCs do not develop and thrive when they are
perceived as a mandate for collaboration, as increased pressure to meet benchmarks for student achievement, as unsupportive of their learning needs and improvement efforts, and as creating more paperwork and teacher-evaluation criteria” (Talbert, 2010, p. 563). Talbert’s (2010) warns against this approach to mandated PLCs (an approach called “bureaucratic”), concluding that teachers are “more receptive to...PLC development that uses a professional (as against a bureaucratic) frame” (p. 565). This professional frame places teachers as the leaders and allows for the self-reflective direction and inquiry that is the hallmark of professional learning communities, allowing for multiple measures of student learning and multiple avenues for teacher participation (Talbert, 2010). For PLCs to be a successful professional development structure, they must adhere to the guidelines established by the literature.

**Curricular Interventions and the Practice of Teaching**

Curricular interventions in schools have become ubiquitous in the current high-stakes accountability era of school reform (e.g. Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Gersten & Dimino, 2006). These interventions often promise improved student performance under the condition that the programs are implemented with fidelity, a concept researchers have struggled to conceptualize clearly (Century, Rudnick, & Freeman, 2010; O’Donnell, 2008). Even in the most controlled experiments or with the most scripted programs, adaptations of the curricula occur in every teacher’s classroom, and curriculum implementation evaluations often take this into account, (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Bailey, 2000;
Boote, 2006; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Maniates & Mahiri, 2011; May et al., 2013; May, Sirinides, Gray, & Goldsworthy, 2016; Randi & Corno, 1997; Songer, Lee, & McDonald, 2002). Thus, examining curriculum implementation is less about whether teachers operate in a lock-step pattern within a specific curriculum and more about how teachers navigate these various curricula and “[make] adaptations of one type or another” (Datnow & Castellano, 2000, p. 791; see also Bailey, 2000; Boote, 2006; Maniates & Mahiri, 2011; Randi & Corno, 1997; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008; Songer et al, 2002).

The overwhelming consensus is that measuring fidelity with strict scrutiny to program mandates is both unrealistic and an inaccurate evaluation of classroom and school results (Century et al., 2010; May et al., 2014; O’Donnell, 2008). Additionally, to take the perspective of measuring only curricular fidelity erases the local contexts and expertise that inform curricular implementation (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Maniates & Mahiri, 2011; Songer et al., 2002). Songer and colleagues (2002) particularly warn that curricular interventions “cannot be scaled in the sense of providing cookie-cutter curriculum for implementation in one particular way in a wide variety of school settings” and that teachers need to “adapt to their local classroom, level of technology and student population” for the best student learning (Songer et al., 2002, p. 514). Implementation research, therefore, must account not only for the degree of adherence to the curricular intervention, but also how teachers are adapting those curricula to meet their students’ myriad needs.
Knowing that teachers are always adapting their curricula, within the research there tends to be two related (and not mutually-exclusive) perspectives. First, some researchers frame implementation fidelity and flexibility as a component of teachers’ investment, enthusiasm, or buy-in to the curricular intervention itself. The second research perspective views teachers’ divergence from curriculum mandates as innovations designed to better meet students’ needs, an outcropping of teachers’ expertise informing implementation. Each of these perspectives position teachers and their relationship to curricular interventions in different ways, allowing for different analytic perspectives. Additionally, there is significant literature exploring how to best support implementation of interventions, particularly ones aimed at academically struggling students.

**Teacher Investment and Implementation**

The first research perspective posits that how invested teachers are in the incoming program directly relates to how faithfully they will implement the instructional intervention (Bailey, 2000; Lieber et al., 2009; Randi & Corno, 1997). This hinges, in part, on how a curricular intervention is brought into a school setting, which profoundly impacts teachers’ fidelity in implementing the new curriculum, particularly when these new curricula are “developed by an external group” (Datnow & Castellano, 2000, p. 792; see also Bailey, 2000; Lieber et al., 2009; Randi & Corno, 1997). In evaluations of successful curricular implementation,
research stresses the need to include educators in decision-making processes regarding how the intervention fits with current classroom practices; through professional development and professional learning communities, teachers' inclusion in the process can help educators feel bought-in to a reform from which they might otherwise feel excluded (Bailey, 2000; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Lieber et al., 2009; Maniates & Mahiri, 2011). This is particularly true with new teachers, who may rely more heavily on scripted materials to inform their practice (Maniates & Mahiri, 2011). These studies conclude generally that teachers who are faithful (or high) implementers of curricular interventions are teachers more “eager to learn new strategies” and “seek additional training opportunities” (Lieber et al., 2009, p. 474; see also Bailey, 2000). Consequently, teachers who modified the curriculum – the low implementers – were described as being skeptical of the intervention and more resistant to having their professional discretion replaced by a curriculum (Bailey, 2000; Lieber et al., 2009; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008).

When teachers are not participants in the process of selecting and implementing instructional reforms, they can resist implementation as a way of pushing back against the deprofessionalization of mandated interventions and programs (Bailey, 2000; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Lieber et al, 2009; Randi & Corno, 1997; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008). This resistance is not about objecting to any particular curriculum or reform, necessarily, “so much as [resistance against] the decontextualized top-down ‘being told what to do’” (Bailey, 2000, p. 113; see also Lieber et al., 2009; Pease-Alvarez &
Oftentimes, mandated changes leave teachers feeling marginalized “because such changes are not rooted in teachers’ realities and expertise” (Bailey, 2000, p. 123; see also Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008). This resistance to an outside curriculum, particularly a heavily scripted one, yields “low implementation” because teachers who did not buy into the program saw the new curriculum as “antithetical to the ways in which they had been trained or to their own personal philosophies of child learning and development” (Lieber et al., 2009, p. 475). Teachers’ exclusion from classroom-based decision-making can foster a limited sense of buy-in for the intervention, which, in turn, causes teachers to be “low implementers” of a curriculum they feel inadequately meets the needs of their students (Lieber et al., 2009; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008). When teachers do not see themselves as partners in curricular interventions, implementation of those interventions often fails to yield the curriculum’s promised student results (Lieber et al., 2009; May et al., 2014).

**Teacher Innovation and Implementation**

A different research perspective examines curricular intervention implementation in terms of innovation, rather than buy-in. This perspective sees these local adaptations as site-based variation within the intervention’s framework (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Boote, 2006; Maniates & Mahiri, 2011; Randi & Corno, 1997; Songer et al., 2002). Taken this way, the benefits of curricular interventions “[lie] in their dynamic and generative implementation by skilled teachers who approach the program as a set of guidelines rather than a complete...curriculum”
(Maniates & Mahiri, 2011). Here, these adaptations are not taken as breaches of fidelity, but as innovation in response to students’ particular needs. Randi and Corno (1997) explain further:

And yet, long before reformers called for fresh practices, long before researchers discovered teachers’ practical knowledge, and long before teachers were recognized as innovators, creative teachers were listening to their students, discovering how best to teach them, and inventing fresh practice. Through the lens of implementation, teachers’ adaptations are variants from ideal, prescribed practices. Through the lens of *innovation*, teachers’ adaptations are responses to the unique and varied contexts of teaching. (p. 1213, original emphasis)

Knowing that examining fidelity to an instructional intervention is insufficient to tell the whole story, when adaptations are viewed as innovations, the literature then places an emphasis on local expertise and how that informs implementation, rather than viewing program adaptations as a lack of teacher buy-in to the curriculum itself. This perspective allows researchers and teachers to shift agency back into local contexts and classrooms and how the curricula are implemented, rather than focusing merely on the program details themselves (Songer et al., 2002). This perspective allows implementation to be dynamic within school contexts, allowing for the (productive) tension between flexibility and fidelity to more readily come to the forefront of the research.

**Supporting Curricular Intervention**

Regardless of the research perspective, the literature overwhelmingly concludes that the best way to support any curriculum intervention implementation is through ongoing, practice-based professional development, structured as a professional learning community (Akerson et al., 2009; Bergstrom, 2008; Boote,
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2006; Danielson, Doolittle, & Bradley, 2007; Fishman et al., 2013; Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010; Harris, Graham, & Adkins, 2015; Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements, & Ball, 2007; Lieber et al., 2009; Martin-Kniep, 2008; Pease-Alvarez, Samway, & Cifka-Herrera, 2010; Songer et al, 2002). This approach to professional development provides educators not only with spaces to explore curriculum mandates and students’ needs, but they also break down the structures that “minimize collaboration and innovation, the very elements that support meeting [the curriculum’s] demands” (Martin-Kniep, 2008, p. 3; see also Akerson et al., 2009; Danielson et al., 2007; Fishman et al., 2013). Ongoing practice- and context-based professional development within PLCs provide incubation for teachers’ ideas and spaces to circumvent troubles with implementation of curriculum interventions (Greenfield et al., 2010). Particularly, “teachers need access to professional development venues and workplace environments where they can work in collaboration with colleagues, students, parents, and other educational stakeholders as they enact and construct policies responsive to the needs and interest” of their students (Pease-Alvarez et al., 2010, p. 330).

Supporting Response to Intervention (RTI) Implementation. While the benefits of collaboration and professional learning communities were threaded throughout the literature, PLCs as a structure in support of implementation were particularly prevalent in studies focusing on schools implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) curriculum and programs (Akerson et al., 2009; Bergstrom, 2008; Greenfield et al., 2010; Harris et al., 2015; Kratochwill et al., 2007). Because
these curricular interventions are targeted for students identified as needing greater academic support, researchers found that teachers’ felt more competent in meeting both programmatic demands and students’ needs when RTI programs were initiated in conjunction with practice-based professional development within a PLC (Bergstrom, 2008; Danielson et al., 2007; Fishman et al., 2013; Greenfield et al., 2010; Harris et al., 2015; Kratochwill et al., 2007).

For professional learning communities to work within RTI settings, they must build capacity for RTI teachers in implementing the intervention (Danielson et al., 2007; Kratochwill et al., 2007). Danielson and colleagues (2007) particularly call for PLCs that foster collaborative structures among teachers and administrators regarding implementation of a new curricular intervention. Researchers argue that these PLCs are particularly necessary in RTI settings, when teachers must think deeply about how best to address students in the most need of additional assistance (Bergstrom, 2008; Danielson et al., 2007; Greenfield et al., 2010; Harris et al., 2015; Kratochwill et al., 2007). PLCs provide the space for educators to innovate and troubleshoot around issues of implementation in both classroom and individual settings, a space that is both collaborative and provides ongoing supportive structures. With these supports in place, the goal is that these interventions are not flash-in-the-pan solutions transitioned out of schools the following year, but, rather, sustained interventions that provide students with the additional support they need to meet academic demands (Bergstrom, 2008; Danielson et al., 2007; Greenfield et al., 2010; Harris et al., 2015; Kratochwill et al., 2007). From this perspective, PLCs
become central to successful curricular intervention implementation, specifically within RTI frameworks.

**Overlaps and Gaps within the Literature**

The bodies of literature presented here do not fit neatly with another. On the surface, they have little to do with one another, excepting the consensus around the potential of professional learning communities as a professional development tool. However, these bodies of literature do inform and supplement one another in ways helpful for this study's context (Figure 2). Rather than the multiple intersections of a Venn diagram, these literatures operate differently in relationship to one another. First, the importance of PLCs in supporting the work within capacity and instructional interventions cannot be understated. As is evidenced from the literature reviewed above, PLCs play a critical role to successful capacity development in teachers and in implementation of curricular interventions. While PLCs serve as a support to implementation, they do operate in reciprocity with capacity and capacity-building, as noted above. Because capacity has been defined here as the ongoing development of reflective practice in response to students’ needs and changing educational policy, this fostering of reflection contributes to the thoughtful community necessary for a successful PLC, which, in turn, continues to help teachers develop the thoughtful inquiry necessary in developing their capacity. This reciprocal relationship is represented by the cyclical arrows within the figure.
A similar reciprocal relationship exists between the literatures of capacity and implementation. Once again, teachers must develop an evolving skill-set in order to meet the demands of the curricular intervention and the needs of their students, a skill-set which supports implementation. Implementation supports capacity and capacity-building through professional development targeted at developing teachers’ skills, such that they can implement the intervention successfully, improve student outcomes, and become participants in innovating within the intervention to better meet students’ needs.

While researchers within these literatures do not overlap, the findings within those studies to point to how these bodies of literature support and inform one another.

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1 Special thanks to Andrew J. Schiera for his thoughtful collaboration around this figure.
Gaps within the Literature

There is certainly no dearth of research examining the benefits to teachers’ practice when they participate in communities exploring issues within the classroom. However, little research exists about how those communities shape teachers’ attitudes toward their subject and their students as a result of their interaction with the community, particularly when that community is formed in response to a curriculum intervention or mandate. Talbert (2010) deftly maps how teachers’ attitudes toward the community shifts with time, but this and the other literature does not capture the nuance of changing attitudes of teachers toward their work and their students as a response to those communities. How do these communities shape teachers’ attitudes within the (sometimes narrow) framework of curricular interventions? How do these communities affect teachers’ beliefs about their students and their own capacity to meet their students’ needs?

Particularly within the contexts of Response to Intervention and other curricular interventions, the literature under-theorizes how the community of educators in a professional learning community deeply influence the attitudes and practices of the participating educators. The literature indicates that PLCs can positively impact implementation and students’ results, but how these PLCs shift the teachers themselves remains under-researched. Harris and colleagues (2015) call for this research explicitly, noting that how these communities not only interact with policies in RTI settings specifically, but also how these communities support practice-based professional development for teachers. In considering the supports
to implementation, little has been done examining how these communities can impact teachers’ attitudes and practices. How do PLCs, particularly within RTI frameworks, impact teachers’ perceptions of their own abilities to meet students’ needs in the classroom? How do these communities influence educators’ understanding of curriculum mandates and how innovations around those mandates may manifest themselves in collaboration with peers?

In addition to this, examining the roles peer observation of teaching and informal collaboration have on teachers’ capacity and capacity-building in a K12 setting is a missing component in understanding how teachers might be developing that capacity. Research in both of these areas may prove fruitful in better understanding capacity and the myriad ways in which teachers develop it.

This study aims to address some of these gaps and provide insight in how these different bodies of literature relate to one another within this research context.
CHAPTER 3:
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

My research traditions most closely align with critical feminist scholars, particularly in how these scholars value their own epistemologies while engaging in collective meaning-making processes with their research communities while also troubling notions of truth, power and privilege in broader contexts (Kamler, 2001; Lather, 1993; Olesen, 2005; Phillips, 2006; Richardson, 1993; Sheared, 1994/2006). Unlike more traditional research stances that seek to remove bias from the research process, feminist and womanist scholarship acknowledge the inherently personal nature of research, fully acknowledging how researchers’ perspectives and traditions can inform a study’s findings (Kamler, 2001; Lather, 1993; Olesen, 2005; Sheared, 1994/2006). By acknowledging one’s intellectual legacy and stances, the research becomes more accurately situated, providing for a validity that extends beyond mere replication of findings or a “telling [that claims] authoritative truth” (Richardson, 1993, p. 706).

These critical feminist roots inform the conceptual framework of this study, in that I take an inquiry stance toward my research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). This stance afforded me the opportunity to have my data continually recast by theory” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p. 103). As such, three bodies of literature provided helpful insights into the data. First, I look at how knowledge and practice are positioned and connected within the data, particularly in how knowledge is generated and who benefits from that knowledge. Secondly, I examine the structures and roles within the professional learning community, particularly as
regards to how teachers’ expertise is acknowledged within the PLC space. Lastly, I apply a resource-orientation framework in examining how the data – both teachers’ interviews and program data – position students and students’ abilities and needs, attending to how strengths and deficits are surfaced within the data.

**Understanding Knowledge and Practice**

One of the central issues embedded within the research questions of this study requires an examination of the relationship between knowledge and practice within the professional learning communities of this study’s context. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999; 2009) provide a helpful analytic frame for examining how teachers engage in such communities, specifically, how teachers talk about data, learn from data, and develop community and collaborative spaces, troubling how teacher knowledge is developed, honored, and used in learning communities. This framework affords me the opportunity to examine some of the assumptions which underlie “the particular strategies of teacher education programs, the particular arrangements of professional or curriculum development projects, or the specific content of assessment tools” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 251). Building on the work of other researchers, I use this framework as it affords me the structure to interrogate how knowledge and practice are positioned within this research context in a way that highlights the tensions and connections between the professional learning community and teachers’ school-based classroom practice (Jacobs, 2014; Loughlan, 2002’ McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Nieto, 2003; Varghese et al., 2005).
Within this framework, the relationships between knowledge and practice are situated in three ways:

1) **knowledge-for-practice**, which assumes that “university-based researchers generate what is commonly referred to as formal knowledge and theory (including codifications of the so-called wisdom of practice) *for teachers to use;*”

2) **knowledge-in-practice**, which assumes that “knowledge [is] embedded *in the work of expert teachers and/or to deepen their own knowledge and expertise;*”

3) **knowledge-of-practice**, which assumes that “the knowledge that teachers need to teach well is generated when teachers treat their own classrooms and schools as sites for intention investigation” in which the “theory produced by others... [is open] for interrogation and interpretation” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 250, original emphasis).

Each of the relationships described here positions teachers in relation to knowledge and theory differently: as consumers of knowledge (knowledge-for-practice), as collaborations around knowledge (knowledge-in-practice), and as contributors to knowledge (knowledge-of-practice). This provides a helpful framework for understanding both the program theory and teachers’ perspectives within this interview context, particularly given the importance of teacher participation in instructional interventions (Bailey, 2000; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Lieber et al., 2009; Randi & Corno, 1997).

**The Role of the Professional Learning Community**

In considering how to explore the learning communities within this research context, I use DuFour’s (2005) outline of the elements learning communities need in order to support teachers’ practice: a) a focus on student-learning; b) an expectation of collaboration among community members; c) a focus
on student results, broadly defined; and d) an ethic of hard work and commitment. According to DuFour (2005), these components are at the heart of successful PLCs, and, in considering the training spaces of this research context, seem particularly fitting when examining how these spaces may influence teachers’ sense of their own capacity-building. Additionally, I turn to supplemental literature to further my analysis, particularly examining the development of community and collaborative spaces, how teachers’ knowledge and experiences are respected within the PLC, and how problems of practice are taken up by the community (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Bryk, 2009; Floden et al., 1995; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Sykes, 1999; Ziechner, 2003).

In examining how the PLCs of this context position teachers, their expertise, and the goals of the PLC, I draw on Talbert’s (2010) demarcation of a “professional approach” to PLCs, particularly noting how these communities examine student work, establish goals for the community, and “create an environment of trust and risk-taking” (p. 567). This professional approach supplements the characteristics of PLCs laid out in the literature, characteristics that serve as an analytic framework here, especially in how “knowledge of effective professional practice” is shared among PLC members (Talbert, 2010, p. 565). These frameworks provide a helpful supplement to Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999) relationships between knowledge and practice, particularly in this research context, where issues knowledge and practice are mediated within a PLC.

Lastly, I use Gosling’s (2002) models of peer observation to make sense of how the peer observation in this study’s context is situated within the professional
learning community. This model outlines three distinct types of peer observation within communities (Table 1). While I include all of the characteristics Gosling (2002) outlines, considering the research questions posed by this study, I attended to several in particular: purpose, outcome, relationship of observer to observed, judgment, and benefits. These characteristics align with both the research questions posed here and the analytic framework used to explore issues of knowledge and practice and PLCs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Evaluation Model</th>
<th>Development Model</th>
<th>Peer Review Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who observes whom</td>
<td>Senior staff observe other staff</td>
<td>Educational developers observe practitioners; or expert teachers observe others in department</td>
<td>Teachers observe each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Identify under-performing, confirm probation, appraisal, promotion, quality assurance, assessment</td>
<td>Demonstrate competency/ improve teaching competencies; assessment</td>
<td>Engagement in discussion about teaching; self and mutual reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>Report/ Judgment plan</td>
<td>Report/ action plan; pass/ fail</td>
<td>Analysis, discussion, wider experience of teaching methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status of evidence</td>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Expert diagnosis</td>
<td>Peer shared perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship of observer to observed</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td>Equality/ Mutuality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Confidentiality | Between manager, observer and staff observed | Between observer and the observed, examiner | Between observer and the observed – shared within a learning set

Inclusion | Selected staff | Selected/ sample | All

Judgment | Pass/ fail, score, quality assessment, worthy/ unworthy | How to improve; pass/ fail | Non-judgmental, constructive feedback

What is observed? | Teaching performance | Teaching performance, class, learning materials | Teaching performance, class, learning materials

Who benefits? | Institution | The observed | Mutual between peers

Conditions for success | Embedded management process | Effective central unit | Teaching is valued, discussed

Risks | Alienation, lack of cooperation, opposition | No shared ownership, lack of impact | Complacency, conservatism, unfocused

Table 1: Models of peer observation (Gosling, 2002, p. 5)

**Students’ Literacy Resources and Needs**

In considering how to approach my investigation about teachers’ perceptions of students’ abilities and needs, I have turned to research traditions that situate students as a resource that informs instruction rather than as passive recipients of instruction. With his “ideological model,” for example, Street (1984/2007) claims that students’ abilities to comprehend the world around them can be used in support of traditional, academic literacy. Others such as Campano (2007), Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), and Nieto (1999) engage with this view of literacy by encouraging teachers to engage students, families, and communities in
creating classroom spaces that build upon students’ existing knowledge and skills. Within the context of this study (described in the following chapter), intervention teachers use knowledge of students’ lives to engage in “participatory pedagogy” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 139) throughout the one-to-one lessons—a design feature of the intervention that requires students’ knowledge and interests shape teachers’ instructional approach. Additional aspects of this study’s context suggests that a resource-orientation toward students is an important, if understated, aspect of the instructional intervention’s program theory. As such, examining how teachers talk about students is a research area I felt compelled to pursue.

I draw on the literature of resource orientations and “funds of knowledge” to understand how teachers describe their students’ needs and how teachers can meet those needs. This resource orientation toward student learning, particularly when considering students identified as struggling readers, can yield powerful results for students, as teachers “seek to value student strengths, learn from their knowledge, and also understand their literacies” (Campano, Jacobs, & Ngo, 2015, p. 100). Particularly with students identified as needing additional support due to ability or language status, a resource orientation has proven helpful not only in building a sense of community but in yielding student results (Campano, 2007; Moll et al., 1992).

Here, I extend the notion of resource orientation to also include how students’ abilities and disabilities are conceptualized. While the empirical literature details the gaps between students’ abilities as measured on standardized
assessments, McDermott and Varenne (1995) offer a more helpful theoretical perspective when considering ability/disability in education. The authors frame disability as a cultural construction, both in how ability is often measured by middle-class (white) standards and, when students do not meet that middle-class (white) measure, how their culture is partly to blame and must be remediated (a framing later expanded upon and confirmed by Willis, 2008). While no one is denying that students learn at different paces and in different ways from one another, as McDermott (1993) explains, it’s what is then done with that label that makes the difference.

Notice that the claim here is not that we have no children who for whatever reason learn much slower or in different ways than others. It is only that without social arrangements for making something of differential rates of learning, there is no such thing as LD. (p. 272)

By taking this perspective, notions of ability/disability have more to do with one’s cultural background than with one’s cognitive abilities, which creates a serious pitfall for educators whose students’ cultures do not match the mainstream culture (Collins, 2003; McDermott & Varenne, 1995). This stance toward ability/disability studies has proven quite fruitful in the literature, particularly as issues of ability/disability often intersect with other lines of difference, particularly with regard to race and language status (Collins, 2003; Klingner et al., 2005, Willis, 2008). I introduce this framework as a way of better understanding how teachers discuss their students, particularly as the students with whom they work are often identified as struggling academically.
These frameworks afford me the opportunity to examine teachers’ conversations about students, as well as an analytic tool for examining the other data sources informing this research.
CHAPTER 4:  
STUDY CONTEXT

Broad Study Context: The i3 Evaluation of Reading Recovery

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education launched the Investment in Innovation (i3) grant, in which recipients scaled up and existing education initiatives. As part of the requirements of the award, each grant recipient was required to have an external evaluator of the program's scale-up. The Ohio State University (OSU) was awarded one of these grants in order to scale-up Reading Recovery, a first-grade reading intervention, and OSU contracted with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania to conduct a large-scale, mixed-methods evaluation; what evolved from this was the largest random-control trial ever conducted in education research, in concert with an in-depth qualitative analysis of program implementation (May et al., 2013; May et al., 2014; May et al., 2016). The research team consisted of full-time, part-time, and contracted researchers, as well as a fluctuating team of research assistants (largely doctoral students from the Graduate School of Education) who helped with both qualitative and quantitative research pursuits. I became a member of the research team in the fall of 2013, as a graduate assistant assigned to the qualitative team.

Spanning four years, the evaluation’s goal was to investigate implementation fidelity and student growth as a result of the intervention. While the evaluation of students' growth was exclusively the job of the quantitative team, investigating implementation fidelity fell into the purview of both teams, with the quantitative
team supplying survey data and the qualitative team conducting interviews, focus
groups, and observations at schools benefiting from the i3 grant (for more details
about quantitative methodology and findings, please see May et al., 2013; May et al.,
2014; May et al., 2016). Over the course of four years and in four different batches,
the CPRE qualitative team collected 334 interviews from Reading Recovery trained
teachers, teacher trainers, principals, classroom teachers, site coordinators,
university trainers, and i3 directors at OSU. Sampling was conducted in a variety of
way over the course of the CPRE evaluation, including random sampling,
convenience sampling, criterion sampling, and theory-guided sampling, all drawn
from the OSU maintained database of i3 funded sites. Individuals were contacted by
e-mail or phone by the interviewers with the request to participate in the study; all
interviews were conducted over the phone, and, on occasion, participants were
compensated for their time (either an Amazon.com gift card or as part of a raffle for
an iPad Mini).

Protocols for these interviews were developed collaboratively by the
qualitative research team, informed annually by the previous year’s qualitative and
quantitative findings. As patterns would emerge from the interviews, the
quantitative team would design and administer surveys to confirm these patterns,
and the qualitative team would take up the survey results to further drive the
evaluation. This dialogic relationship between the qualitative and quantitative
research teams was a key feature of the study’s design and execution.
In pursuit of more fully understanding implementation, the research team drew on several additional data sources:

2. Role specific implementation guides
3. Case studies at i3 funded sites
4. Focus groups of teachers and teacher leaders
5. Research and writings of Marie Clay aligned directly to teachers’ work:
   d. *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (2005c)
6. Fieldnotes and conference materials from the 2014 National Reading Recovery and K-6 Literacy Conference

These data sources served to inform the research team about the specifics of site-level implementation, as well as lesson-level instruction to students. For more details regarding the data sources and the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative research pursuits, please see the CPRE evaluation reports (May et al., 2013; May et al., 2014; May et al., 2016).

Qualitative coding and analysis were done collaboratively among the research team members, a new experience for me as a researcher. By approaching
the analysis in this way, the team sought to draw on every member’s individual strengths and intellectual traditions. With a diverse team, the ongoing collaboration provided a “critical tool...in developing [a] shared conception” of emerging findings, a series of conversations that “enhanced the evolution of [the team’s] understanding of the phenomenon” (Weston et al., 2001, p. 398). The diversity of research traditions on the team provided strong inter-rater reliability within the findings and allowed for a plurality of perspectives in analyzing the data (for more details about the methodology of the study see May et al., 2016).

The study found positive results for both student academic outcomes, as well as for implementation fidelity. As measured by the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, students who received the intervention made significant gains in their reading scores as compared to the control group (May et al., 2016; see full report for more specific details on the statistical methodology and analysis). With regard to implementation fidelity, the study found that the majority of schools (80% and greater) adhered closely to the Standards and Guidelines (80% and greater), the governing document for implementation (May et al., 2016). However, despite the high implementation fidelity, there was considerable variation across student outcomes. While all students’ reading scores improved, some students’ scores improved more dramatically than others, a variation that the research team hypothesized was a result of both lesson- and school-level variations in implementation that seem to impact student outcomes (May et al., 2016).

It is from this rich context that my study emerged.
Understanding Reading Recovery Instruction and Training

Reading Recovery is a first grade reading intervention targeting students who appear to be the most struggling readers from among their peers (Clay, 1993; Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012). Reading Recovery has at its core two central beliefs. First, that early, strategic, intensive intervention can improve the reading skills of struggling students, developing their reading abilities such that they are equivalent with their peers, an accomplishment that then sets them up for ongoing success in later grades (Clay, 1993). Second, this intervention must be conducted by a specially trained teacher, one receiving ongoing support for his/her practice from a community of like-minded, similarly trained teachers (Clay, 1993; Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012). These two beliefs are the heart of this instructional intervention; of particular importance are the ways in which the Reading Recovery community of teachers supports and influences one another’s practice.

Instructional Intervention Lesson Structure

According to the program model, the Reading Recovery teacher tests all first-grade students using the Observation Survey (OS) within the first two weeks of school and determines which students are most likely to benefit from the intervention (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012). Based on the results of this initial testing, the four students who scored the lowest on the OS receive the first round of intervention, ideally “not excluding any child in the classroom” from the selection process, as the “lowest-achievers...are the children
who will learn to read and write only if they get individual attention” (Clay, 2005a, p. 22, original emphasis).

Selected students participate in a twenty-week series of daily, 30-minute, one-to-one lessons, which strategically leverage students’ strengths to build their reading skills (Clay, 1993). The intent behind the lessons is that teachers and students “do not practice items, or even strategic activities, in isolation,” but, rather, “learn not only how to perform strategic activities and use mental strategies but learn when and why they should use them” (Horner & O’Connor, 2007, p. 99).

According to the program model and the writings of Clay (1993; 2005a; 2005b), if teachers successfully use this lesson structure while flexibly adapting to students’ changing needs, all students enrolled in the intervention should experience dramatic improvement in their reading scores (as measured by the Observation Survey) regardless of their diagnostic score. By the end of the intervention, students are ideally reading at their peers’ average reading level. If students do not successfully exit out of the program, oftentimes, they are then referred for additional interventions, particularly those available through special education services (May et al., 2013; May et al., 2014).

**Professional Learning Communities Supporting the Instructional Intervention**

While the one-to-one lessons are one central aspect of Reading Recovery as an intervention, the central lever for success of the program lies in teachers’ training as observers of students’ reading behaviors and interventionists (Clay, 1993; May et al., 2013; Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012). In order for a school to
begin using Reading Recovery as an intervention, a teacher must continue his/her work in schools and simultaneously attend a year-long, university-based, credit-bearing training course as part of a Reading Recovery training group. In addition to individual, school-based observations by a Reading Recovery teacher leader (trainer), teachers participate in theory-focused professional learning community meetings, and teaching "behind the glass" several times in the course of the school year, a process described in greater detail below (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012). These PLCs use a cohort structure, where first year intervention teachers are part of a weekly PLC, while more experienced intervention teachers share a separate PLC, meeting once a month.

Additionally, teachers are encouraged to attend one of the sponsored conferences each year, where sessions focus on Clay's theory as well as the technical components of teaching Reading Recovery students (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012). While the conferences provide important development for teachers, the ongoing PLCs, in which teachers continue to teach behind-the-glass regardless of their years of experience, are the primary source of teachers’ continued growth, growth that ideally “shows up as changes in the classroom teaching repertoire” (Hoffman & Pearson, 2000, p. 35).

These professional learning communities are important sites for understanding how teachers and teacher leaders make sense of both the “how” of the Reading Recovery program, and also the “why” of its approach to literacy. It is in these communities that teachers become most familiar with the work of Clay (1993;
2005a; 2005b), and how literacy is both theorized and enacted within the program. In these training sessions, teachers and teacher leaders engage not only in discussions of practice, but in how students’ abilities and potential become manifest in the lessons themselves.

**Peer Observation within the Professional Learning Community.** Teaching “behind the glass” is a central component of the professional learning communities supporting Reading Recovery teachers. This feature to the PLC requires teachers to bring a student and conduct a Reading Recovery lesson on one side of a one-way mirror, while the other teachers in the training cohort observe, make notes, and then debrief with the presenting teacher on what was observed within the lesson. These sessions provide a “type of reflective but focused critique” that helps “ensure the high levels of fidelity to the program elements and philosophy that are demanded [of Reading Recovery teachers]” (Hoffman & Pearson, 2000, p. 35; see also, Compton-Lilly, 2011). This structure closely mirrors that of peer observation, with a particular focus on building all teachers’ capacity, and providing an opportunity for teachers to discuss teaching and engage in “self and mutual reflection” with the goal of having a “wider experience of teaching methods” (Gosling, 2002, p. 5). This is particularly true with peer observation here, as the observed teacher provides a desired area of feedback (i.e. use of prompts, Word Work) for the teachers observing the lesson, providing a moment of reflection for all participants within the PLC.
The peer observations described in this study differ from traditional observations. Rather than an instructor/observer dyad in a traditional classroom context (Martin & Double, 1998). Instead, this lesson observation is situated in the learning community space (Figure 3). Intervention teachers refer to this observation as “going Behind the Glass,” a reference to the one-way mirror used for the observation. Through the use of a one-way mirror, the learning community observes one intervention teacher giving a lesson with one of the teacher’s students. This is not intended to be a well-polished, well-planned lesson; rather, intervention teachers are instructed to demonstrate whatever lesson was next for the student in the normal sequence of lessons. This way, observing teachers can have a sense of the authentic practice of the teacher, particularly in noting the strategies he/she uses with students. When the lesson concludes, the student leaves, and the teacher rejoins the group to debrief the experience and hear the feedback of his/her peers, thus enabling participants to “share results and issues in a collaborative way” (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008, p. 478).
Figure 3: Peer observation cycle within the professional learning community structure.

These observations and debrief conversations occur at every meeting of the learning community, excepting the first few weeks of the training class. Teachers are expected to teach an observed lesson at least three times in their training year, and at least four times in subsequent years (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012). The regularity of this structure, as well as the nature of the conversations following the observations, make this an ideal opportunity to explore how teachers’ capacity is shaped by the observations and debrief/feedback conversations that occur in these spaces.
CHAPTER 5
METHODOLOGY, VALIDITY, AND DATA SELECTION

Overview of Methodology

In considering data analysis, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) provide this important reminder of the fluid relationship between the data, analysis, and theory development:

In other words, there should be movement back and forth between ideas and data. So, analysis is not just a matter of managing and manipulating data. We must be prepared to go beyond the data to develop ideas that will illuminate them, and this will allow us to link our ideas with those of others; and we must then bring those ideas back to test their fit with further data, and so on. (p. 159)

This type of illumination takes time and a recursive approach to the data, including multiple rounds of coding and theme development, so as to allow themes to arise from the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2009).

This study embraced an “integrative approach to qualitative data analysis” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 223), using both thematic analysis (Aronson, 1995; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ezzy, 2002) and discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005; Singer & Hunter, 1999). The integrative approach stemmed from my feminist stance, a stance that embraces the dialogic and shifting relationship of qualitative research (Olesen, 2005). Due to the boundaries of this study, the analytic dialogue I would usually seek out from participants was missing; instead, I took this dialogic stance toward the data analysis.

This flexible approach “iteratively [integrated] within and across design, data collection, data analysis, and theoretical framework building,” which afforded me
the opportunity to engage in a “data analysis process [that was] intentional and systematic as well as creative and emergent” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 223). This integrative approach allowed me to use the boundaries of this study – the existing corpus of data from the i3 evaluation – to inform the study’s design. Additionally, this integrative approach afforded me the opportunity not only to account for varying theoretical approaches in beginning analysis, but also provided space for analytic triangulation, in which the literatures and theories that have shaped my inquiry thus far inform my interpretation of the data throughout analysis.

**Theoretical Thematic Analysis**

In pursuit of my research questions and in using this integrative approach, I drew most heavily on thematic analysis (Aronson, 1995; Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ezzy, 2002; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Ritchie, 2012; Singer & Hunter, 1999). Thematic analysis is an analysis method used for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Because thematic analysis methods are “essentially independent of theory and epistemology, and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches,” this method “provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78, original emphasis). This approach was particularly helpful given that the data for this study was drawn from the existing corpus of the i3 evaluation (Ezzy, 2002). Boyatzis (1998) defines a theme as “a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum
interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (p. vii), and these patterns may vary in size. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that for a pattern to become a theme, the number of occurrences, while important, are not the only measure of a significant pattern; depth of the pattern within the data (i.e. how long a person discussed a topic in an interview in relation to the whole interview) and frequency of the pattern (i.e. how many interviewees mentioned this topic) should both be considered in determining which themes can be counted as a pattern within the data set, a recommendation I followed in this study. I would add that even small groups of participants – pockets, really – voicing a counter-narrative to dominant themes provided a rich opportunity for analysis, particularly in light of my questions. Because I am interested in how teachers' experiences within learning communities affect their perceptions of their own and their students' capacities, I actively sought out both patterns that arise as dominant (greater than 50% of respondents), as well as minority voices, which provided nuance in understanding the larger themes or disconfirming evidence for the findings, an approach encouraged in much of the methodological literature (Blommaert, 2005; Lather, 1993; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Richardson, 1993; Saldaña, 2009).

In pursuit of my questions, I employed theoretical thematic analysis, which affords the ability to “provide a rich description of the data overall, and a more detailed analysis of some aspect of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). In keeping with my theoretical frameworks, this methodology allowed me to use existing literature and my own knowledge of the research context to drive my
analysis, particularly in early rounds of coding (in which I am attempting to surface patterns), as well as throughout the analysis (in which bodies of literature inform my evolving understanding of the themes).

Using theoretical thematic analysis, I also examined what Braun and Clarke (2006) call the “latent level” of analysis, which “goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (p. 84, original emphasis; see also Boyatzis, 1998). In pursuit of my research questions, I paid particular attention to how race, class, and gender are discussed by teachers in relation to their students. Throughout the analysis, I looked to see whether the data enabled me “to theorise the socio-cultural contexts, and structural conditions,” that may influence participants’ responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). While I aimed to “be faithful to the phenomena evoked [by participants],” I also sought to situate these phenomena within broader discourses (Singer & Hunter, 1999, p. 66).

**Discourse Analysis**

In addition to theoretical thematic analysis, I employed discourse analysis methods to better interpret my data. Drawing on Blommaert’s (2005) definition, discourse analysis is the critical examination of the language individuals use within a particular socio-cultural context; within discourse analysis, “meaning-construction does not develop in vacuo” and, instead, is developed under “strict conditions that are both linguistic...and sociocultural” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 4; see also Dinkins,
2009). When I say “discourse,” I draw upon Gee’s (1991) construction of “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a... group” (p. 3). In this case, the discourse group was the professional learning community of intervention teachers. Intervention teachers frequently described how their instructional approach to struggling students has changed as a result of their training, an important analytic opportunity in pursuit of my research questions and one unable to be addressed by the larger i3 evaluation studies (May et al., 2013). By using discourse analysis, I sought to surface the discourses present within the reading intervention’s training, as well as situate those discourses into broader phenomena identified within the literature, particularly concerning teachers’ perceptions of students’ abilities and needs.

In my use of discourse analysis methods, I analyzed the data from an anthropological stance, focusing on the description of what was occurring within the data and avoiding the “tendency to assume the a priori relevance of aspects of a context” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 32). The analytical approach was descriptive, though critiques of what those descriptions reveal are included in the analysis, and situated within existing literature. While taking a strict critical discourse analysis approach could be problematic both practically for this study and conceptually, my hope was that my analytic lens would help me attend to moments where – linguistically – power and privilege came to the foreground, such that I would “avoid looking at symptoms and...expose causes” within this study’s context (Blommaert, 2005, p. 37).
By taking a critical stance toward the data, the hope was to dodge the pitfall of seeing themes that may not exist within the data.

My use of discourse analysis came later in the study, once themes were developed. Thus, I drew on existing literature as both a source for understanding the themes within the data, as well as a way of building validity into the study by putting the literature and my findings in dialogue with one another (Aronson, 1995). Situating my themes within the literature provided a necessary point of triangulation for my findings, where the themes and findings that arose from the data were confirmed by existing literature, as well as showing how those findings may have added a layer of nuance, a different perspective, or contradictory evidence to existing phenomena as described in the literature.

**Validity, Reliability, and Representation**

Validity and reliability in qualitative research is a slippery construct, and qualitative methodologists have found rigorous tools that can help researchers throughout the research process maintain both validity and reliability (Creswell, 2007; Long & Johnson, 2000; Maxwell, 2009; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I have employed several methods, both in the data analysis and in the writing, which have helped me understand the phenomena present within my data and check my conclusions throughout analysis. The key methods I used in aiding my analysis were triangulation of data, use of discrepant evidence, use of *emic* language when possible, and use of reflexive memos.
Considerations regarding representation of the data were also central to checking my own biases and presenting my findings. Drawing on post-structuralist theorists, I describe below how I wrote about teachers’ experiences, as well as the other data sources, and in wrestling with the findings drawn from them.

Validity and Reliability

Triangulation of Data. Each of the data sources used in this study provided an important perspective on both the early conclusions I developed and in the findings presented here. While the interviews, drawn from participants across the country, provided the original working theories, intervention texts and additional data sources (described below) helped refine those theories and provided additional possible explanations. This triangulation allowed me to better understand the context for participants’ remarks, as well as better pinpoint themes and findings emerging from all my data sources. Likewise, the interviews provided a more textured understanding of program materials, giving voice to theory and providing concrete examples for recommended teaching techniques presented in the texts.

Use of Discrepant Evidence. As stated in my methodology, I identified themes which arose across broad sets of participants, but I also bracketed teachers’ experiences that seemed at odds with the broader conclusions. These minority voices provided the necessary reminder that, while teachers theoretically have similar experiences within the professional learning community, this was not universally true. This discrepant evidence generally arose in the interviews, though
the Standards and Guidelines occasionally stood in conflict with other data sources. Through my use of these moments of dissonance, I hoped to surface additional theories which may explain aspects of my findings, but theories that could not be pursued within the boundaries of this study (for more, please see Chapter 7). 

**Use of Emic Language.** In hopes of staying close to participants’ description of their experiences of capacity-building, I have used *emic* language to describe participants’ experiences as often as possible. Particularly in presenting the data, I have used participants’ voices frequently, some of which has carried into the analysis of the data. Of course, this use of *emic* language is supplemented by the language and theory of existing literature, but my intention has been to situate teachers’ experiences within the formal discourse of research while also bringing the language of the data (particularly teachers’ voices) directly into the analysis.

**Use of Reflexive Memos.** Researchers get their perspective tangled up in their analysis, particularly in qualitative research. As someone who, previous to this study, largely conducted participatory-action research, I understood the need to continually check my own perspectives. My research traditions have previously embraced a close connection with the community in which research is occurring, a stance unavailable in this research context. In order to monitor my own perspectives, I engaged in reflexive memo writing, bringing in literature as necessary to understand my own initial interpretations but also introducing literature traditions with which I was less familiar as a means of checking my conclusions. Memoing became a central aspect of my ongoing analysis, a
methodology that not only helped clarify my understanding and check my assumptions, but allowed me to use writing as a way of knowing, as praxis (Yagelski, 2012). By including frequent memoing in my analytic methods, I sought to “facilitate reflection and analytic insight” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 12). Through these memos, I brought in theories that informed my questions, illuminated the results, and invited in other theories previously dismissed as unrelated, but later proved relevant as analysis continued. This process forced me to not only recognize my own biases and attempt to curb them, but also to better refine my working theories, as both my research traditions and the new literature provided complimentary perspectives on the data.

Representation

Every story has its tensions, its dissonances. Throughout this research process, I sought to embrace an inquiry stance, in which I am continually questioning my assumptions, exploring additional possibilities, and leaning into the tensions which have arisen throughout this research project (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Research is inherently personal, and I fully acknowledge how my perspectives and traditions have informed study's findings (Kamler, 2001; Lather, 1993; Olesen, 2005; Sheared, 1994/2006). As such, I do not present these findings as “authoritative truth” (Richardson, 1993, p. 706). Rather, I have sought to both surface themes prevalent in the data and present dissonant perspectives. In doing so, my intention has been to illustrate the variety of teachers’ experiences, even in a research context as seemingly uniform as this one. This is how I have sought to
represent this research - with an understanding of the value of plurality while also attending to the individual stories and contexts which comprise my data.

As a single author, I also realize that my perspective on this data is limited. While I have run theories and findings by one of my colleagues (another research assistant on the i3 evaluation study), these findings are my own, and represent my interpretation of the data. While I have sought to check my findings and perspective in myriad ways, these findings should be seen as a perspective on this data, not necessarily the perspective. That said, I am confident that the findings presented here speak to larger bodies of literature and provide a perspective on professional learning communities that may prove helpful in furthering teachers’ capacity to meet their students’ needs.

**Participant and Data Selection**

This study drew on data surrounding the ongoing professional development communities that support teachers’ instruction and implementation of the intervention (May et al., 2013). With training communities and ongoing professional learning communities as a centerpiece of this reading intervention’s program, the existing data were ideal for exploring the research questions posed by this study and provide a relatively consistent context (as evidenced by the evaluation) within which to explore these questions. May and colleagues (2013; 2014; 2016) found that the program was implemented with fidelity on both training and instructional measures; as such, when teachers talk about their experiences in training, they each are – for the most part – receiving similar training to their colleagues across the
country. With this consistent implementation, broad conclusions can be drawn about how these learning communities impact teachers’ sense of their own capacity and development.

This research site aided the investigation of this study’s questions in two ways. First, in considering curricular interventions and implementation, Reading Recovery is widely considered to be a successful intervention for struggling first-grade readers (Institute of Education Sciences, 2013; May et al., 2014; May et al., 2016). More specifically, this curricular intervention provides ongoing practice-based professional development situated within a professional learning community (described in the previous chapter). The second reason in choosing this research site stemmed from my membership on the i3 evaluation research team; through my work on the team, I participated in planning and execution of data collection and analysis activities within the larger evaluation study. My familiarity with the research context and methodology, and my ongoing access to the previously collected data, made this a helpful context in pursuing my research questions. This site provided an opportunity to thoroughly explore questions about how teachers self-describe capacity-building and shifts in practice in response to a PLC.

In pursuit of my research questions, I examined 103 of the existing interviews with intervention teachers, both those in training and those who have completed the training (see Table 2 for teachers’ experience).
I excluded the teacher leaders and trainers from this study for several reasons. First, in exploring questions of building teachers’ capacity, teacher leaders and trainers, by the very nature of their leadership position, have already developed their capacity to some degree. Teacher leaders and trainers are almost exclusively selected from skilled intervention teachers, who must also possess an advanced degree and “show evidence of successful teaching experience” (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012, p. 15). Additionally, in knowing the broader context and in having reviewed and coded the vast majority of the i3 evaluation interviews, teacher trainers and leaders were positioned and spoken about as individuals with advanced expertise, having already built their capacity. Beyond these interviews,
teacher leaders and trainers are positioned within program materials as possessing expertise. For example, at the 2014 National Reading Recovery and K-6 Classroom Literacy Conference, teacher leaders and trainers facilitated the lion's share of intervention-focused conference sessions; of the 25 Reading Recovery concurrent sessions at the conference, 24 were facilitated by teacher leaders and/or trainers. While capacity has been defined in this study's context as an ongoing process, the focus of the research questions presented here is about early development of capacity among novice intervention teachers. As such, teacher leaders and trainers were excluded from the data set.²

Beyond the intervention teacher interviews, I drew upon additional data sources, both to provide necessary context around instruction and also to better understand teachers’ perspectives. These additional data sources were used to provide additional context and to better understand the experiences and theories embedded in teachers’ learning and work. These artifacts included:


2. Role specific implementation guides

3. Research and writings of Marie Clay aligned directly to teachers’ work:


² There is one exception within the data: a teacher who was simultaneously training as both an intervention teacher and as a teacher leader. This teacher has been included in the 103 interviews analyzed in this study.


4. Fieldnotes and conference materials from the 2014 National Reading Recovery and K-6 Literacy Conference

By drawing my data set from an existing corpus of data, I recognized that certain limitations affected my analysis of the data. The first limitation was the absence of on-the-ground observations and fieldnotes from teachers’ professional learning communities. Because of this, I did not have a sense of the complexities within each teacher’s instructional or PLC context. Additionally, while I conducted several phone interviews of participants in the evaluation study, I did not conduct all of the teacher interviews, and because interviewers remained faithful to the interview protocols for the most part, there are moments where follow-up questions would have provided additional information in pursuing this study’s questions. Transcription of these interviews was outsourced, and, as such, I have reviewed the audio files alongside the transcripts for accuracy, though there are moments in several interviews were the participants’ response was garbled due to poor phone connectivity.

**Data Management.** Data was stored and analyzed in a password-protected, encrypted cloud-based qualitative analysis program (Dedoose). This program allowed me to streamline coding and analysis of the interviews, as well as organize the data into meaningful sections in throughout the writing process.
Additionally, all interviews were assigned a random two-letter designation unassociated with the teacher's name, school, geographic location, or other identifying characteristics in order to protect participants' privacy.

**Data Analysis**

For qualitative researchers, coding is not part of the data collection process, nor does it operate as a forerunner to analysis. Rather, organization and coding come “to constitute an important first part of the analysis,” often existing in a “reciprocal relationship between the development of the coding system and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon” (Weston et al., 2001, p. 397). Due to this study’s context, codes were neither exclusively derived from the literature nor emergent from the data. The integrative analytic approach I used in this study provided this flexibility. As a way of making my thinking more transparent, I have included tables and concept maps of the codes, how they relate to the research questions, and how those codes and themes developed over time (Figure 4, Table 3, Appendix). By doing so, I provide the opportunity to “audit the decision trail,” so that I can demonstrate “the degree to which [I have] remained true to the data and the boundaries of the sample” (Long & Johnson, 2000, p. 35).

In reviewing the interview data, three moments within the interviews arose as most fruitful in answering the questions posed by this study: 1) Relationship with fellow teachers, 2) Behind the Glass, and 3) Training Class. Throughout this organizational pass through the data, I noticed the numerous and rich ways in which teachers described their developing capacity, moments that coincided with
descriptions of the ways in which the professional learning community – both the structure and their colleagues within it – directly supported their instruction of students. These moments highlighted clearly the intersections of the bodies of literature relevant for this study (Figure 4). This figure highlights the complexities of this study’s context and data in relationship to the bodies of literature informing this study’s questions and frameworks.

Figure 4: Organizational map of interview data

For example, the moments in which teachers described observing “Behind the Glass” refers to an element of the teachers’ training in which they teach a student in front of their entire learning community as an opportunity to receive immediate feedback on their instruction. This PLC structure, highlighted within the program description and described in detail within the interviews, was a central component to teachers’ training and mandated by the Standards and Guidelines;
however, my knowledge of the broad research context, the pertinent bodies of literature, and my theoretical framework all indicated that this moment in teachers’ training was one where my research questions may coalesce. Teaching in front of one’s peers, particularly in a training setting, can be a vulnerable moment, and how teachers described the community surrounding this activity as well as the lessons they learned from it, directly addressed the heart of my research questions. This training moment supplied a possible source of information for all three of my research questions, in that these moments served as spaces that could build teachers’ capacity with the benefit of immediate feedback from the professional learning community and situated within the intervention’s implementation.

Considering the strictly defined nature of this reading intervention and the existing corpus of data, context informed my coding throughout the process, to a degree. In using the implementation and lesson guides, “categories [were] derived from a set of goals or objectives stated in program descriptions,” as well as “emerging from the personal interests, views, or intellectual constructions of the researcher for the analysis” (Constas, 1992, p. 257). In examining both the interviews and program materials, intersections emerged between capacity, professional learning communities, and curricular interventions, and from these rich moments within the data, the following themes emerged: 1) professional development as tied to practice; 2) peer observation as building capacity; and 3) collaboration as contributing to capacity-building.
From these three themes, subthemes began emerging upon further examination, surfacing in the third and fourth reading of the excerpts (Table 3). While these subthemes provided more description of the larger themes, I used these to review previously discarded codes from Round 1 to explore for confirming and disconfirming evidence. Through this re-entry into the original codes, I introduced two additional codes into the analysis: “Other” and “Relationship with teacher leader/trainer.” These codes provided helpful additional information, particularly when co-coded with “Training class” and “Relationship with fellow teachers.”

Additionally, I began the analysis of program materials and texts to better contextualize teachers’ interview responses. The three emergent themes (professional development as tied to practice, peer observation, and collaboration as capacity-building) served as the initial codes for these texts. These themes provided a foothold into analysis, with some emergent codes surfacing through the reading. In examining the Standards and Guidelines, I noted when the texts provided direction for the training of new intervention teachers and the professional development and support of trained teachers. For the Literacy Lessons texts and the Reading Recovery guidebook, I coded for the themes, but also noted specific sections within the texts that participants referenced within the interviews. For example, one participant described using the text to defend an instructional strategy to her principal; the section she referenced (by page number, even) was coded and included in data analysis.
It is worth noting that the majority of participants whose responses fell within these themes were from Group 1 (2011-2012) and Group 3 (2012-2013, Spring). In reviewing the protocols, these groups were both asked explicitly about their experiences within the professional learning community, whereas Group 2 (2012-2013, Fall) and Group 4 (2012-2014) were not asked explicitly. While participants from all groups are represented within each of the themes, the majority of participants represented in these themes were from Groups 1 and 3.
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional development as tied to practice</td>
<td>Theory aligned to practice</td>
<td>Description or statement of theory as informing practice</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual student focus</td>
<td>Collaboration as focused on individual students or individuality of lessons generally</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional focus</td>
<td>Institutional focus on school-wide policies and procedures</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Community focus</td>
<td>Community focus on local and national educational issues</td>
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<td>Collaboration and capacity on lesson planning and delivery</td>
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<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive collaboration and capacity on lesson planning and delivery</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative collaboration and capacity on lesson planning and delivery</td>
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Table 3: Thematic Code Applications
CHAPTER 6:  
“IT’S CHALLENGING. IT’S LIKE AN ART ALMOST:” FINDINGS

As mentioned previously, the professional learning communities in this study’s context are required for teachers to become and continue as intervention teachers, a requirement consistent with implementation literature’s description of PLCs as a best practice for facilitating implementation (Bergstrom, 2008; Danielson et al., 2007; Kratochwill et al., 2007; Pradl, 2002; Talbert, 2010; Wood, 2007). Despite mandated participation from teachers, these communities bear many of the characteristics of a PLC outlined in the literature, specifically a shared purpose for the community (training and support of intervention teachers), a focus on student outcomes (through data analysis and Behind the Glass teaching), collaboration among participants, and an openness to problems of practice (this includes both instructional and pedagogical questions).

From these data, three central findings emerged. First, the professional learning communities of this intervention were directly aligned to teachers’ daily practice, connecting literacy theory with day-to-day practices in tangible ways, ways that teachers described as having immediate classroom application and improvement on teachers’ practice. Second, the data suggested that teachers’ capacity improved when teachers had the opportunity to observe one another’s practice and debrief those observations in non-judgmental, supportive conversations within the structure of the PLC. Lastly, the data indicated that when teachers were able to informally collaborate with their peers around issues of instruction and implementation, teachers reported an improved capacity to meet
their students’ needs and build a sustaining implementation and practice. Each of these findings suggested that supporting teachers’ developing capacity requires multiple supports, situated within and outside of professional learning communities.

“This will change my teaching forever:” Connecting Professional Learning Communities Directly to Practice

In reviewing the interviews, 33 of 103 participants (32.0%) discussed the ways in which their capacity was developed or improved through the intense, practice-based activities (reading, discussions, etc.) of the professional learning community. The majority of teachers (66.7%) describing the benefits of the PLC were in their first year, training in the intervention. Additionally, two-thirds of teachers connecting the activities of the PLC to their practice had fewer than 10 years of education experience.

Throughout the interviews within this study, teachers frequently described the ways in which the professional learning community shaped their understanding of the program theory and the technical aspects of teaching. More specifically, teachers stated that the PLC affected their teaching “as directly as it could,” and without it, they “obviously wouldn’t know what [they’re] doing” (Interview BG). Teachers reported ways in which the lessons of the PLC could then be “[applied]...to the lessons that we teach every day” (Interview AM). Teachers discussed their experiences within this PLC as making them “a different person as a teacher”
(Interview CT), and changing how they “perceive struggling readers and how [they] can help them” (Interview AK).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Years in RR</th>
<th>Years Teaching and/or in Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Training Year (&lt;1)</td>
<td>2 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1 (2011-2012)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2 (2012-2013, Fall)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3 (2012-2013, Spring)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4 (2013-2014)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: Teaching experiences among participants discussing alignment of the professional learning community to practice.*

Teachers connected these shifts to their work within the professional learning community in three particular ways. First, they described how the theory of the intervention directly informs teachers’ instructional practices, theory that is better understood when mediated through the PLC. Secondly, the PLC helped teachers become better observers of students’ reading behaviors, allowing teachers to modify their instruction accordingly. Lastly, teachers explained how the PLC instilled a deep sense of personal responsibility for students’ progress. These three themes intersected and cohered together frequently, overlapping in such a way that
separating them was challenging, even for members within this research context. Indeed, even at the 2014 National Reading Recovery & K-6 Classroom Literacy Conference, the 25 intervention-facing sessions all combined two or more of these themes within a session.

**Theory Embedded within the Learning Community**

The centrality of theory within the professional learning community afforded teachers the opportunity to connect their practice to literacy theory in ways that drove teachers’ capacity-building. In describing connections to their practice, teachers referenced how the PLCs’ use of Clay’s (1999; 2005a; 2005b) theory helped them understand their practice because they were “not just pulling something out of the top of your head,” instead, “really looking at the research” behind instructional and programmatic decisions (Interview BX). Additionally, 20 of 33 participants discussed how theory was used within the PLC to inform teachers’ instruction and build their capacity. This capacity was built largely through close examination of one aspect of the intervention’s program theory or a set of teaching strategies used in teachers’ one-to-one instruction with students:

> Weekly, we bring in, you know, we kind of microscopically look at one section of the [intervention] program and really look at it in depth and then we think about how we’re doing it or how we could change our practice, you know. I think, for me, it’s like, I want to be better at it, you know, yesterday...I have never been in a training of, this is with a program, you know, I’ve never been in anything as extensive or practical [as this training]. (Interview CZ)

By looking “microscopically” at the theory within the professional learning community, teachers described an improved understanding of both literacy theory
(as conceived of by Clay) and how that theory translated into teachers’ everyday practice with their students:

CS: There isn’t just one right way. It’s just, there’s so many, there’s so much information in a lot of her [Marie Clay’s] work that just talks about reading behavior. So I guess, almost what I’m learning, what I’ve learned to do is to use specifically her purple book. It’s like the, I don’t know, we call it ‘LL 2’ ...
Q: The Literacy Lessons?
CS: Yeah, the Part Two one. But I guess I have learned to use that book and to, you know, to see a particular reading behavior in a students and then to, by then a certain section in that book, and then, ‘OK, this what I can do, then, as their next step.’
Q: Oh, wow, that’s interesting.
CS: It’s just, it’s helped me be more responsive, and it’s just like this big toolbox of, of things to use, depending on their point of need at that moment. And then, you know, and then that changes every day, so just being able to, to be really flexible and have a lot of things to draw on, a lot of knowledge.”

(Interview CS)

In these interviews, teachers viewed theory as as prescriptive of both their instruction and program implementation, as well as deepening teachers’ own understanding of literacy theory. This was particularly true for Clay’s (2005a; 2005b) theories connecting reading and writing in children’s literacy development, and in teachers’ use of lesson records to drive instruction within the intervention. These theories in particular seemed to inform teachers’ work, both in the technicalities of lesson execution and in understanding how larger literacy theory connects to practice, particularly when introduced in the PLC and mediated by discussions within it:

Also [in addition to fluency], the writing component, of really getting students to think about the way that the sounds of it and the way that the words work. That was something I’d always done before, but now I have a better, I guess, building on my knowledge of the process, of going from learning about syllables to then just pushing the sounds, and then to letters
to make it look right. That process I understand a little bit more. That’s helped me. (Interview CN)

Now we’re getting into starting to talk more about using our lesson records to inform our teaching, and, you know, we weren’t told to keep them but they sort of left it up to us to kind of develop our own system of what to write. But now we’ve done that and so now we’re looking more carefully at how to use them to inform our teaching. (Interview AI)

Theory learned within the professional learning community also seemed to come to bear with issues of implementation. One teacher was approached by her principal about a particular aspect of the intervention:

AP: It was about the journal writing – how come it [the journal pages] didn’t have lines, if we worked on letter formation because the lines, with a ‘p’, it should drop below the line, things like that. And ‘Gee,’ I said. ‘I’m sure there’s a reason.’ I said, ‘I just can’t tell you the reason.’ Cause I knew there had to be a reason. And so, I did bring that up in my class Tuesday…And we found the research base in the book because one of the students had said, ‘I thought about that myself, you know.’ So that was a good discussion because, you know, two of the other students had thought about it, we just didn’t know. Again, so we do this, but we didn’t know why, so we found it in the book, the Marie Clay book, Lesson Part Two, page twenty.

Q: And just out of curiosity, what was the reason?

AP: Well, we are working actually on the formation of the letters and the motion of. We’re not worried about neatness right now. Just so they have the motion and the directional movement of the letters that are correct.

(Interview AP)

While I am unsure if she had the Literacy Lessons, Part Two text with her at the time of the interview, the teacher in this excerpt named both the theory and the page number correctly in her retelling of this incident, directly referencing Clay’s (2005b) research finding that “lined paper [was not] supportive of early writing for the child who is finding space and direction a problem” (p. 20). The theory and reasoning presented by Clay was mediated by the “good discussion” among teachers
within the PLC, both of which support this teacher’s practice and implementation of the intervention.

**Student-Focus within the Professional Learning Community**

As noted previously, Reading Recovery is a one-to-one intervention with first-grade students, and as such, the theory driving instruction within the intervention is highly focused on individualized instruction. In this data, there was an emphasis both within the theory and the professional learning communities about using students’ pre-existing knowledge and skills in reading as the guide for teachers’ instruction. According to program theory, teachers’ observations should translate into specific teaching decisions, where “the early intervention teacher must know of many ways to foster literacy skills, must vary her teaching sequences, and ... be able to pick and choose among teaching techniques and learning activities, and pull the right one into her lesson at the crucial moment” (Clay, 2005b, p. 26). Teachers described this concluding statement as the goal for their training within Reading Recovery, the purpose of their participation within the professional learning community. The PLC supported teachers’ developing capacity to meet students’ needs in ways that directly connected literacy theory with teachers’ focused practice with individual students. Teachers discussed the ways in which the individual student focus of the PLC afforded them a better understanding of both implementation of Reading Recovery and of reading theory and practice more broadly.
Due to this intense student focus, teachers articulated how the professional learning community afforded them the opportunity “to be able to just focus on reading and with just one kid,” allowing teachers to “feel like [they’re] learning at the speed of light” (Interview AI). Fifteen participants reported how the focused attention on the progress of individual students was key factor in how the PLC supported teachers’ capacity-building. Within the PLC, teachers described learning “how to observe kids” in such a way that they knew “what to teach next” (Interview CF). Teachers explained that they become “more observant in pinpointing what...students’ needs are” so that they can provide “more well-rounded instruction” for students (Interview AM). Here, teachers discussed that the PLC provided the space, tools, and techniques necessary to meet their students’ needs, particularly through individualized attention to students.

“I know that I still have a lot to learn, but you know, the training is, is so critical at this point because, like I said, I still go to class every single week and come back with something to implement into my lesson. So, it’s very beneficial in the sense that it’s usable and it’s relevant...I feel like I’m able to accomplish so much more, even though I’m only with them [the students] for about thirty minutes throughout the course of our daily lesson. I still feel like, in that thirty minutes, it can be so much more personalized and so much more focused because I don’t have, you know, twenty other kids who are also begging for my attention.” (Interview CY)

[The training has] made me more, more aware you know very sensitive to the, to how the child is processing, what they’re doing and, and if they’re leaning too far one way or the other and how that changes from day to day with them. And how it changes when they go from one level to another of how they’re, they’re, they might fall back on those patterns that they did before, when things get difficult. (Interview CU)

This teacher directly connected the “usable” and “relevant” instructional theories and techniques learned within the professional learning community with
her ability to make her lessons “so much more personalized” and “focused.” While she attributed some of this to the one-on-one time with students, the PLC played an important role in helping this teacher understand how to best meet her students’ individual needs, a connection other teachers echoed in their interviews.

I guess my mindset is that reading and writing are comparative, they go together. The way we are trained is explicitly, but also in the realm of you have to work around what the kids already know and [I] feel like so many teaching materials just start where the teacher is, or start where the material is, and it doesn’t necessarily start where the child is. So, [the intervention] has helped me analyze and observe data and pull put what the child already knows and teach from what they know, and in turn, they learn more that way. (Interview CV)

AO: I have been a special education teacher and I’ve been teaching reading since 1989 and this is such a complete shift in my thinking. Q: How so? AO: Just having things be more student led instead of the teacher blah, blah, blahing and talking too much. For instance, going from the child known, what the child knows and extending off that. It’s just been seriously life changing, watching how kids can learn so much more quickly and understand, and it’s just amazing. So, when you asked how effective the training was, well, I thought the training was really good. (Interview AO)

With the professional learning community helping teachers “hear things more, see more,” teachers claimed to feel better prepared to “individualize instruction” (Interview CB). Teachers connected how the theory learned within the PLC helped build an understanding not only the technical aspects of teaching intervention lessons, but also how that theory may inform classroom-based reading instruction. Additionally, this student-focused instruction appeared to emphasize explicitly the teacher’s role in forwarding students’ progress, using the students’ strengths as a starting place for the intervention. Within Clay’s texts, careful observation of students’ reading habits is directly tied with teachers’ responsibility
to act on those observations in order to appropriately shepherd students to the next necessary skill students must master in order to make the best progress possible.

This responsibility is described in greater detail next.

**Professional Learning Community as Fostering Personal Responsibility**

Throughout the above interviews and traced in the writings of Clay (1993; 2005a; 2005b), teachers seemed positioned as bearing the entirety of the responsibility for students’ learning and progress. As early as the first page of *Literacy Lessons, Part One*, teachers are told that they “need special training to make superbly sensitive decisions about how to interact with the responses of the hard-to-teach child” (Clay, 2005a, p. i). Similar to the connection of observation-as-driving-instruction described above, program theory appeared to place the lion’s share of the responsibility for students’ progress on teachers (Clay, 2005a).

According to Clay (2005a), teachers must “know of many ways to foster literacy skills” (p. 26) in order to “help her students to gain the same competencies as the successful children in the school” (Clay, 2005a, p. 29).

For example, three teachers from within this sub-set of data made direct connections between their learning in the professional learning community and their responsibility for their students’ progress.

“If I’m working with these kids and I see their Dibels and MAP scores, even though that’s not my goal, but I want them to improve, and they don’t do well, I’m just like, ‘Aw dang, that is me.’ And I think sometimes people don’t, when kids are not being successful or accelerating, they don’t look at, they look at the kid. ‘Oh, but this’ and ‘But that’ instead of looking at themselves. ‘I’m doing something wrong.’ It’s not that they’re not learning, I may not be teaching in the right way. I think that’s more it.” (Interview CQ)
Two others connected this sense of personal responsibility for student learning directly to their training on observing students and making instructional decisions based on those observations. These teachers discussed the need to “closely observe and take notes” on students’ progress, “and then decide, OK, what can I do specifically to take that child from what they know, they know, and help remediate that specific thing” such that they can “really [hone] in on exactly where the confusion is” (Interview AY).

It just really makes you study, not only look at your kid you’re working with but it really gets you to reflect on what it is you can do as you learn that students, and as you feel what their needs are, how you can look at yourself as a teacher and, you know, ‘OK, what’s the best, the most powerful thing I can do for this kid in order to help them progress?’ And I guess, in terms of taking it, you just look at everything you do a little bit differently with, whether it’s an [intervention] student or a student in your classroom because, you know, they all, they’re all learning to read, and they’re all, they all need different levels of support and so just looking at, ‘Oh, OK. How much support do they need and when can I scaffold that up and back off a little bit, and let them?’ Then they take it on and you see them take it own. It’s pretty incredible...It just, it makes me really think. It just kind of changes your thinking about how kids learn and how the best way to get them. And they’re not in a box, you know what I mean? You don’t approach them all the same way. (Interview CM)

While three teachers in relation to this study may not seem like an overwhelming number, the manner in which personal responsibility is woven throughout the interviews presented above, as well as the way in which Clay frames teachers’ responsibility for students’ progress in the guiding texts of the intervention, make it seem relevant to this discussion of theory’s connection to practice that characterizes the PLCs of this intervention.

**Professional Learning Community as Mediator**
Each of these findings – the direct connection between theory and practice, the intense focus on individual students, and a sense of personal responsibility for student progress – were each mediated through discussion and collaboration within the professional learning community. The data presented here suggest that these aspects of the PLC contribute not only to teachers’ improved capacity, but also serve to support implementation of the instructional intervention. The ways in which these findings connect to and build upon existing bodies of literature is the focus of Chapter 7.

“*That’s the most important part:*” **The Role of Peer Observation in Collaborative Capacity-Building**

Reading Recovery’s program intends for teachers to learn about implementing the intervention and strategically using the techniques learned in the professional learning community while in the midst of teaching students identified as needing the intervention. Teachers are learning on the job, in a very literal way. Due to this, their training and teaching experience seemed to weave in intimate ways throughout the data, connecting teachers’ knowledge with their practice concretely and immediately within the context of a PLC. While teachers did not understate the value of this collaborative learning community generally (particularly the ability to troubleshoot ideas in a largely judgment-free space), peer observation and feedback/debrief conversations\(^3\) appeared to prove particularly

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\(^3\) Here, “feedback” and “debrief” are not considered synonyms. A term taken from participants’ interviews, “feedback” is used when teachers describe conversations in
helpful in developing teachers’ ability to teach students within this intervention’s framework. Previous research has found that cycles of peer observation, as part of larger professional learning communities, fostered reflective practice, encouraging teachers to “[open] their practice up to scrutiny by a colleague” (Parise & Spillane, 2010, p. 327; see also Bryk et al., 1999). With the opportunity to learn about their peer’s practice and their own, many teachers described these benefits not just in general terms, but in the specific aspects of instruction that become improved with observation of peers and their collaborative conversations after the lesson.

In examining peer observation, I drew primarily from two of the four groups of interviews included in this study. Both Group 1 (2011-2012) and Group 3 (2012-2013, Spring) contained questions within the interview protocol honing in on the professional learning community of intervention teachers, including optional follow-up questions about teachers’ experiences teaching Behind the Glass. Also included in this sample is one interview from Group 4 (2013-2014), chosen specifically because she was still in training and mentioned the professional development space and peer observation specifically in her interview.

From Groups 1 and 3, there were 65 interviews in total; of those 65, 26 participants described the observation and debrief conversations in detail (i.e. more than simply naming the structure; see Appendix for more details in the Codebook).

which they were the teacher being observed Behind the Glass. I use “debrief” when teachers refer to discussions in which they participated as observers. I will use “discussion” and “conversation” interchangeably, as participants used these synonymously in the interviews.
While still fairly novice intervention teachers (all of the 26 teachers were in their first of second year), the overall teaching experience of these teachers spanned a wide spectrum (see Table 5). The majority of teachers in this sample (53.8%) have between six and twenty years teaching experience, in addition to their experiences as intervention teachers.

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*Table 5: Teaching experience among participants discussing peer observation*

Teachers’ talk about their experiences observing and being observed seemed overwhelmingly positive: 70.3% were universally positive, 22.2% were positive with some qualification, and 7.4% described positive benefits but critiqued aspects of the experience. These interviews all underscored a focus on what works for student learning, where observation and feedback were directly tied to students’ actions, abilities, and needs, and what teachers needed to do in order to push students forward, a feature consistent with this professional learning community.
and with PLCs generally. After situating peer observation within the professional learning community, I present how teachers described their experiences with peer observation within the PLC, focusing on the ways in which teachers characterized their experiences with peer observation within the PLC, noting particularly how feedback conversations appeared to develop teachers’ capacity in dynamic ways.

**Situating Peer Observation with the Learning Community**

An essential component of professional learning communities generally, and this intervention’s communities specifically, is a focus on results-driven reflective practice (May et al., 2016). Critical to this development is the role peer observation plays within the learning community. For both training teachers and those who are trained, the *Standards and Guidelines* provided specific direction on how often teachers are to teach a lesson in front of their peers (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012). By going “Behind the Glass,” a reference to the one-way mirror used for observing the lesson, teachers have the opportunity to hear immediate feedback on their teaching practice from their peers (see Figure 3; also “Peer Observation within the Professional Learning Community” in Chapter 4). The regularity of this structure and the emphasis on collaborative conversations following the observations, made this an ideal opportunity to explore the ways in which teachers’ capacity is shaped by the observations and debrief/feedback conversations that occur in these spaces.
Peer Observation, Collaboration, and Capacity-Building

Participants claimed that the professional learning community directly connected theory to practice while creating a reflective, collaborative space. These spaces seemed to be largely judgment-free, providing teachers the opportunity to not have “to be perfect” (Interview BA), such that they could try new strategies and techniques with their students in front of their peers. Through the experience of both watching and participating in “Behind the Glass” sessions, teachers described the powerful role peer observation had on their developing practice as intervention teachers. Participant remarks fell into three broad categories: 1) capacity-building
based on observation; 2) capacity-building through collaborative feedback/debrief conversations; and 3) conflict within the community.

**Capacity-Building Based on Observation.** Consistent with existing literature, intervention teachers discussed the benefits of observation in general terms; however, intervention teachers in this study more carefully situated these benefits in the technicalities of lesson execution within the intervention. Respondents generally highlighted how the observation of lessons was “tremendously helpful” (Interview AJ) in understanding both the basics of instruction within the intervention and the more nuanced teaching moves executed by teachers. Teachers recounted non-specific changes in their practice as a result of observation, citing that “so many things come up [in the Behind the Glass lesson] that you weren’t prepared for or that you see it firsthand, and it’s a strategy you might want to try. That you’ve learned something by watching others” (Interview BI). These experiences were described as fostering professional growth where “you’re always on top of things, learning new things” (Interview AX). Another teacher expressed the immediate applicability of the observations to his/her classroom:

BA: One thing I really enjoy is watching teachers Behind the Glass.
Q: And what was nice about watching teachers from Behind the Glass?
BA: You know, sometimes you do your [intervention] lesson, you always assume you have to be perfect. So, when you watch someone doing it, you’re kind of, like, “Oh, I will try this! Oh, what they are trying is great! So, I should try that in my next lesson.’ (Interview BA)

These “insightful” observation experiences “prepared [teachers] for a lot of different things,” (Interview BZ), particularly as participants reported that these
moments not only provided them with new ideas but were also confirming evidence of strong existing teaching practices:

I like that because it confirms, ‘Yes, that what I do. So, OK, what I’m doing is right.’ (Interview CA)

For teachers with fewer than ten years of teaching experience, positive remarks regarding peer observation were especially high. Of the 19 participants reporting general benefits from peer observation, 12 participants have fewer than ten years of teaching experience. One teacher in her training year expressed the powerful influence the observation session had on her own sense of her capacity to implement the intervention:

It was very hard for me until I saw people teaching Behind the Glass, which obviously didn’t start right away. When I saw that, then it all pulled together. I was like, “Oh. OK. I get it now.” But I never had that model. To see what a full lesson would have looked like, and it’s different – reading it in a book versus really seeing that kind of interaction. (Interview AF)

So, actually, the first Behind the Glass lesson, I started writing down notes, and I’m like “I shouldn’t be doing this. I shouldn’t be doing this, I shouldn’t be doing this, I should be doing this.” So, I had like five things that I already wanted to work on just by watching the first Behind the Glass lesson and being able to just talk to people. (Interview CR)

While the teacher did not elaborate on the specifics of “this,” this excerpt highlights (non-specifically) the powerful nature of observation in building intervention teachers’ capacities. “Just by watching,” this teacher was able to identify areas of practice that needed improvement, a development of capacity echoed throughout the positive interviews. Teachers alluded to specific teaching practices in several interviews, but, frequently, the instructors referenced a broad spectrum of skills acquired by observing other teachers or in feedback from others’
observations of their teaching. By “being able to just talk to people,” teachers described a greater sense of capacity to meet students’ needs, highlighting the benefits of discussion and collective feedback in building teachers’ capacity and teaching skill, which are discussed in greater detail below.

**Capacity-Building Based on Collaborative Feedback Conversations.**

Within the largely positive responses to peer observation, the data indicated that not only did the act of observing matter in building teachers’ capacity, but also the post-observation discussion drove teachers’ learning and their ability meet students’ needs. More than half of teachers’ positive descriptions of Behind the Glass stressed the importance of the conversations about the lesson, both in the moment and after the lesson’s conclusion. These respondents emphasized the benefits of these conversations with peers not only in reference to receiving feedback on their own lessons, but also in contributing to the debriefing conversations of other teachers. Teachers frequently described the dialogic nature of these conversations, where participants took a learning stance, and discussion was often couched by first noting positives within the. For these teachers, the observation was important, but the conversations “have been really powerful, really changed [teachers’] teaching” (Interview BH).

There’s so much genuine observation of your teaching and of others’ teaching. That it’s not when you’re observed, it’s not, like, kind of a contrived, really perfect lesson, but it’s actually what you do every day, and you’re getting really honest feedback on the things that others see that are working well for the student you’re working with. And there are things you may want to try to continue to accelerate their progress. But they’re really positive experiences. And I think those conversations that we had as colleagues, just,
were very in depth in regards to what the students have, as far as skills and what they need to accomplish. So I appreciated it very much. (Interview AK)

For several teachers, these discussions played a key part in building an understanding of the intervention, where “doing Behind the Glass for that feedback...has been the best experience for really being able to internalize what [this intervention] is all about” (Interview AE). The conversations during and after the Behind the Glass observation provided intervention teachers with an opportunity to “[check in] with them [other teachers] at all times saying ‘What am I doing right? What am I doing wrong?’ And... getting to talk back and forth with the other teachers about what’s working and what’s not” (Interview AW).

As positive as teachers reported the Behind the Glass experience and discussion to be, two teachers highlighted the intensity of these sessions, the vulnerability of having your teaching watched by a classroom full of your peers, and the constant, albeit beneficial, process of self-reflection and feedback:

Q: How did it [the observation] go?
CH: That was great. I mean, it’s, it’s awful to be the person Behind the Glass but the, all the other trainees and the [trainer] had really valuable feedback afterwards.
Q: Okay. That’s kind of cool. And, like, can you share some of that feedback you had gotten?
CH: Yeah, so, you know that’s obviously a lot, I mean, of course, a lot of positives, you know. ‘You can tell you have a good relationship. You really know your students. You prepared it well for this.’ But the novel part is, ahead of time, I shared my concerns with, about this particular student who’s not reading past the first letter. He’s very, he’s not using anything past the first letter to help him solve words. And then afterwards, you know, somebody has feedback. ‘Well, I know that’s a concern of yours. At this point I would have asked more questions about what’s the first letter this word would go out? What are the words?’ You know what I mean? So that kind of really technical, technical tips, I guess. (Interview CH)
AL: Cause there was always, you know, that was always like the highlight [Behind the Glass] and we would, we were talking about [the intervention] and ‘What process were [you] working on as you’re unfolding as a teacher?’ So basically, it’s kind of like an ongoing work of art in a way. In that, where we have immediate feedback from our kids, which we, in turn, you know, have conversations and say ‘Well, maybe you can try this or that?’ So the communication has really broadened as far as what works.

Q: I love that. It’s an ongoing work of art.

AL: Ha ha! It’s definitely, well, teaching, I think, in general is. But this is like, in-your-face because it’s a daily thing you’re always thinking about.

(Interview AL)

While both of these teachers noted that the experience can be “awful” or “in-your-face,” they both claimed that the feedback conversations following their lessons affirmed positives within their practice and then pushed their practice forward, all while grounded in students’ abilities and needs. The PLC discussions described by all of these interviews underscore a focus on “what works” for student learning, and what teaching tools teachers can utilize in order to best make progress for that student, a finding echoed in May and colleagues’ (2016) analysis of successful lesson-level implementation.

These conversations were not exclusively beneficial to those who taught the lesson; several teachers reported benefits to simply participating in the discussions and having the opportunity to collectively provide feedback for other teachers, “discussions [that] really adds to” teachers’ learning and “that’s the most important part” (Interview AF). Teachers commented that “having so much time to reflect [on] what a good teacher does and what a good teacher looks like” (Interview CS) provided a “powerful” opportunity for learning and building capacity. “Just having a lot of discussion about what the teacher is doing and why” (Interview CS) drove
other teachers’ practice forward, generating ideas and deepening understanding of theoretical concepts of the intervention:

Most of the whole class is spent watching those videos of each other teaching [an alternative to Behind the Glass for rural sites] and noting the prompts that we’re using or the prompts that we’re not using. And giving each other feedback, so I’ve really become familiar with that through the literature that we’re using to guide us and also my colleagues and what they’re doing. My next idea, and ‘I haven’t done this yet...’ (Interview DC)

These debrief conversations provided both immediate instructional feedback for observed teachers, and important theoretical and technical clarification for observing teachers. By building both theoretical knowledge and skillful execution, teachers in these communities, through these conversations, developed their understanding of “core concepts – ‘knowledge,’ ‘content,’ ‘knowing,’ ‘teaching,’ ‘learning,’ and so on – through [their] interactions with others and [their] environment” (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008, p. 144). The conversations surrounding the observation, then, fostered teachers’ sense of their own capacity, not just the observation itself.

**Conflict within the Community.** While the overwhelming responses from participants have been positive, not all teachers reported beneficial experiences with their peer observation and feedback conversations, and there are two instances I want to raise that counter this largely positive narrative. Two teachers, from two different interview groups, each with vastly different years of experience (8 years and 33 years), mentioned a tension within these observation sessions to get the “right” answer, a tension they claimed was to the detriment of the group’s growth.
The first teacher was an observer of this group dynamic; this teacher was in her training year, indicating that all of the teachers in the learning community are still learning how to best implement the intervention, both from theoretical and technical perspectives:

I think at this point in the year (March), our Behind the Glass sessions. They are good, but I kind of hear people jumping to conclusions a little bit. Now that we are Behind the Glass, people are starting to think like, they really, like, ‘I really know what I’m doing now.’ And they’ll watching somebody for the sixty minutes, and they’ll kind of jump to conclusions. And that’s the only thing that’s kind of bothered me about class. A couple of us have talked about it, and we talked about it with our [trainer], too. So, I think that’s something that we all just need to be extra careful about and understanding that we’re never done with the process. We’re always stretching, learning, and growing as [intervention] teachers. And the kids are all different. (Interview BD)

In noting that community members are “jumping to conclusions,” this teacher recounted a situation within her community in which she saw that the learning stance was lost. By “jumping to conclusions,” teachers stepped out of a peer review model, in which teachers engaged in “self and mutual reflection” (Gosling, 2002, p. 5), and instead became evaluators, identifying perceived underperformance and speaking with a sense of authority (Gosling, 2002). This shift toward evaluation could be seen as a break from the established community expectation regarding the peer review model discussed earlier. The teacher’s desire to return the community to a learning stance, where teachers are “never done with this process,” echoed findings in the literature, which noted that “genuine peer-observation...[equalizes] the power relationship between the observer and the person observed” (McMahon et al., 2007, p. 511).
The second teacher raised a similar concern. A 33-year veteran in her second year as an intervention teacher, this participant spoke of her own Behind the Glass experience in her training year, in which her peers also failed to take a learning or listening stance:

CQ: I know last year I had a really bad behind-the-glass experience and told her what I felt like and so [the trainer], actually this year we changed a little bit how it looks and what it looks like, so that was kind of nice.
Q: Can you elaborate on the experience that you had and why you felt it was negative?
CQ: I just felt like, well, I don’t know the correct word, I felt like attacked at the end. Like, ‘You need to do this, this and this.’ And I was like, ‘What did I do right? Tell me something I did right.’ I was a mess. I think she [the trainer] knew how I felt, and I happened to be sharing that experience with someone else and [the trainer] came in and she said ‘How, you know, what can we do to make this better?’
Q: And how did she, you said that you changed it a little bit. What was the adaptation?
CQ: She changed it up this year by two people do Behind the Glass, so she doesn’t lead Behind the Glass. We lead each other’s’ Behind the Glass. So whoever my partner was for the day, I was Behind the Glass, she led mine and I led hers. We changed it more to focus on students, really, instead of the teacher, you know. ‘What does the student know and what did he work on?’ It more was ‘How can we help the student?’ instead of what we were doing wrong or right. (Interview CQ)

As troubling as this teacher’s experience of being “attacked” by her peers was, the story highlighted an important feature of the community’s growth – a refocus on students’ learning and an ownership of the learning community. By refocusing the community’s focus on student learning, these teachers were able to shift the tone of the group back to one of learning, rather than “jumping to conclusions” or “attacking” individual teachers for their teaching practices. This community ownership, present in both of these otherwise negative examples, provided confirmation of collaborative nature of these learning conversations.
It is worth noting the role the teacher leader played in each of these interactions. While intervention teachers actively brought their concerns as participants within the community, the teacher leaders in both instances took these concerns seriously and took action accordingly, involving participants in those actions. This would seem to indicate the value teacher leaders place in fostering a safe, collaborative professional learning community in which teachers can openly discuss their teaching practice.

**Using Peer Observation to Support Capacity-Building and Community**

The structure within which peer observations are conducted in the Reading Recovery professional learning community provided an important window into how schools and districts may begin embarking on enacting such a structure. This data highlighted the importance of collaborative learning conversations about peer observation experiences, particularly when situated within a professional learning community. These data suggested that the observation and, particularly, the discussions that followed built teachers’ capacity, supported the professional learning community, and supported implementation of the intervention. How peer observation and the debrief/feedback conversations fit as part of the professional learning community supporting capacity and implementation is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7.
"We're a whole team working together:” Extending Collaboration Beyond Professional Learning Communities

Intervention teachers spoke powerfully of how collaboration with their peers dramatically improved their capacity to meet students' needs. While collaboration is widely heralded as essential to teachers’ development, how teachers within the intervention spoke of that collaboration highlighted some currently under-theorized aspects of collaboration, namely the role that informal collaboration can have on capacity-building. The positive, safe spaces of Reading Recovery’s professional learning community appeared to help foster informal collaboration, which teachers describe as instrumental in the development of their teaching practice.

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Table 6: Teaching experience among participants discussing collaboration
In the interview data, 46 of 103 participants (44.7%) mentioned how collaboration with fellow intervention teachers impacted capacity (Table 6). Of those 46 participants, 30 spoke about how these communities grew beyond the confines of the professional learning community space and into informal collaboration, within and across buildings. The safe spaces described by participants not only foster collaboration within the PLC space but also impacts how teachers engage with one another outside the PLC in more informal settings.

When teachers discussed collaboration, several themes emerged. First, teachers described the need for a safe, non-judgmental space in which to air problems of practice, a space teachers usually situate within the professional learning community but one that extends beyond those boundaries. Second, teachers noted the importance of informal collaboration on their developing practice, which they reported as occurring in a variety of ways and as taking a variety of shapes. Lastly, there was a sub-set of the interviews in which teachers expressed a sense of isolation, lack of community, and an absence of collaborative opportunities. These interviews frequently juxtaposed ways in which their peers in other areas are better able to collaborate, while they themselves felt isolated and alone. These themes point to a developing theory of informal collaboration.

**Situating Collaboration within and next to a Learning Community**

In keeping with the key features of professional learning communities, teachers discussed how the similar problems of practice brought by teachers created a safe space for collaboration instead of competition. Within these
communities, teachers had the opportunity to “share [their] anxieties” (Interview AC) about meeting students’ needs without judgment. In particular, teachers in their training year mentioned that the novice status among all the teachers served as an equalizing factor in the group; while they had a diversity of teaching experiences previous to their training, each teacher was new to this intervention:

And the thing that I see all of us, I don’t feel like I’m so far behind everybody else in my class, you know what I mean? I don’t have that feeling like, ‘Oh my God, I’m so lost and they’re so amazing.’ I don’t have that. I feel like we’re all, sort of, you know, growing together. (Interview DY)

“I love the collaborativeness of like when we go to the [professional learning communities] and our teacher leader is really, I don’t feel so much like it’s a teacher-student, where you’re going to get punished if you don’t do something right. I feel like we’re a whole team working together to lift kids up as high as we can get them.” (Interview AO)

This sense of “growing together” and “working together” set the stage for teachers to collaborate and engage in thoughtful inquiry into their own practice. Without this safety within the PLC, teachers could adopt more competitive attitudes, as is noted previously. The positive community space described by teachers in this data allowed them to “lift kids up,” maintaining the focus on student outcome and not a pedagogical competition.

**Informal Collaboration as Driving Capacity**

Of the 46 participants describing collaboration, 30 spoke about how these communities grew beyond the confines of the PLC space and into informal collaboration, within and across school buildings. The benefits of informal collaboration were described in particular detail by novice teachers. Of the teachers
mentioning the benefits of informal collaboration, 60% were in their first year as intervention teachers. Additionally, of the 30 teachers describing informal collaboration, 80% had 10 or fewer years of teaching experience. This is not to suggest that informal collaboration did not benefit teachers across their careers; rather, teachers who had less professional experience stated explicitly that they directly benefited from collaboration with their colleagues in informal settings.

As teachers described it, informal collaboration involved impromptu moments with colleagues outside of the PLC space in which they shared instructional strategies, problem-solved around student issues, and helped develop their capacity. These moments of informal collaboration, as well as the relationships they appeared to foster, provided support for teachers both instructionally and with curricular implementation. While teachers spoke about the significant benefits of having another intervention teacher within the building, that was not a necessary prerequisite for informal collaboration to occur. Teachers mentioned the use of technology (phone, text, e-mail) connect with fellow intervention teachers, to both have questions answered and to troubleshoot problems of practice between meetings of the PLC. The safe space created within the professional learning community appeared to foster collaboration outside of that space. Teachers reported building relationships with one another within the PLC and those relationships seemed to build teachers’ capacity outside of the PLC.

My first year out of training, coming together with the other teachers in my district. Not only do we have the [ongoing PLCs] with our trainer, the other [intervention] teachers in my district, we get together once a month on our own. And the first half hour of the meeting is devoted completely to [the
intervention]. And we talk about what challenges are we facing, what’s going on, what are we doing? We always share ideas. So there’s a lot of, I found a lot of support and then if I ever needed, you know, if for any reason, if I couldn’t, for – Let’s say that my teacher leader was not available for whatever reason, which has never happened, but I can always call a colleague. There’s eleven other teachers in my position, in my district. I could, yeah, so I can always call them. Some of them have been doing this for, like, thirty years. I can call them and go, you know, ‘Hey, can you come out and take a look at a student?’
(Interview CJ)

Q: Are there any other supports that you’ve experienced that have helped you kind of navigate that issue you just raised [learning something new outside a person’s comfort zone]?
CW: Well, like, the other [intervention] teachers in our district. Yeah, I go to them a lot. You know, and say, ‘Does this sound right? Do I need to do this different?’ You know, so I have some support that I can go to.
Q: Right, no. It sounds like I hear [intervention] teachers say so often that training class community something that really sticks with you all.
CW: Yes, it really does. It really helps, it’s almost like you’re in a group. You’re bonded for life after you start that. But people call it a cult, but it’s not.
(Interview CW)

Convenience undoubtedly played a role in the development of some informal collaboration; however, the presence of another intervention teacher was insufficient for these collaborations to blossom. Thus, the space of the professional learning community, in part, seemed to play a role in fostering the informal collaborations that drove the building of teachers’ capacity.

Teachers described these informal collaborations as occurring in a variety of settings – between classes, during car rides, over e-mail or the phone, and during district professional development sessions, to name a few. Intervention teachers mentioned seizing every moment they could to collaborate with other intervention teachers. Teachers frequently explained how these informal conversations, generally about students’ progress and pedagogical strategies, helped drive
teachers’ understanding of the knowledge and skills needed to best forward their
students’ progress:

I befriended somebody who’s at another school within my district, and she
doesn’t have anybody in her building and we drive. We actually meet and
drive together to our Tuesday night classes every week, so it’s nice to have
her to bounce ideas off of, to see she’s going through what I’m going through.
So we kind of, if we have a questions “This is what I’m doing. Well what are
you doing and is that working or is that not working?” I like that I have, even
though I don’t have anybody in the building. I like that I have people I can go
to within, not just my team leader, but other people that are taking the class
with me. (Interview CR)

And we [the other intervention teacher and the participant] have asked to be
in the same room so that we can bounce ideas off of each other, talk to each
other. If we have a kid that may be struggling, we can talk to each other about
it. And it’s amazing how we see different perspectives and can help each
other through it. (Interview CF)

While the professional learning community provided some knowledge and
skills, these small, catch-as-catch-can conversations seemed to provide teachers
with the “different perspectives” that helped them better guide their students. In
other words, moments of informal collaboration appeared to build teachers’
capacity to meet their students’ needs. By collaborating outside the confines of the
PLC space, teachers stated that they had greater access to pedagogical skills due to
the breadth of experienced teachers outside of their PLC. One participant talked
about getting support with teaching techniques, and when asked for clarification,
she stated that they were “a little bit more practical is what [she] got from [her]
colleagues” (Interview BR). She continued:

I would ask them, ‘Well this student needs work with this or that, like, maybe
a letter. What can I do?’ And they had some ideas that they learned in their
training that hadn’t come up in my training. So we were able to share in that
way...There were lots of questions that came up. So there, of course, were
things we didn’t get to talk about in the training sessions, so they [the other intervention teachers] were able to fill those gaps. (Interview BR)

By leveraging the additional experience of other intervention teachers, teachers expressed that having “somebody to talk with” can provide the necessary additional support, techniques, and strategies to better meet that students’ needs. In addition to teachers’ growing pedagogical capacity, teachers commented how the presence of another intervention teacher within the same school was beneficial in building capacity through the ease of informal collaboration.

**In-Building Informal Collaboration.** Of the 30 teachers describing how informal collaboration helped foster capacity, 12 participants (38.7%) talked about how in-building support was extremely helpful, particularly in that collaboration could happen much more quickly – in the hallways, after school, between classes. Teachers reported that these casual meetings, precipitated by teachers’ need for clarification on a teaching strategy or to share ideas, dramatically improved their capacity to meet students’ needs.

We [the other intervention teacher and the participant] don’t have a set time that we talk, but we bounce ideas off of each other. If we have a child that we’re struggling with, we’ll sit down and talk through some of the lessons and talk through where we might need to be going with that child. Get some feedback. (Interview AB)

One teacher noted that sharing a room with an intervention teacher (a goal mentioned by another teacher above) was particularly helpful, as she had easy access to discuss students or troubleshoot problems of practice.

“I was going to say the best part is the other, we have another [intervention] teacher at the same school, and the best part is having her in the same room and being able to ask her questions. I mean, and she’s, she’s done this three
years, so. So, it’s nice having somebody else there cause if I was one of, like, some people in my class are at a school by themselves, I don’t know how I’d, I don’t, that’d drive me insane. So that’s the smoothest part – having somebody else help.” (Interview CK)

“I actually have another [intervention] teacher here at the school where I’m at, so it has been helpful, I would, I would say that probably is, for teachers who are doing the [intervention], especially the first year, it is very helpful that there is another [intervention] teacher in the building. Because it’s somebody else that you could talk with, somebody else that you could bounce ideas off of and try to form your own theories with their help. But these, I mean, I felt that I’ve been at an advantage because I’ve had that [another intervention teacher at her school]. And I have some friends in my class who do not have that, and I think they would benefit from it.” (Interview CD)

Here, we see how isolation is juxtaposed with collaboration, framed in such a way that this teacher (and others, as will become apparent below) see collaboration as directly connected to her improved skill set, while isolation slows teachers’ growth, something that would “drive [this teacher] insane.” Teachers with collaborative partners close at hand spoke about benefits they experienced that their isolated colleagues lacked. This ability to “bounce ideas off” of another colleague, to “try and form your own theories” about practice appeared to be a tremendous benefit to building teachers’ capacity, as teachers described it here.

**Isolation and Limited Capacity**

As enthusiastic as teachers were in describing the benefits of peer observation, there was a group of teachers who discussed in equally powerful terms the isolation and lack of collaboration they felt in their work. Of the 46 participants discussing collaboration, 10 described a sense of isolation for myriad reasons, an isolation which they connected to a slowed development in their capacity. Teachers
who did not have colleagues they could connect with informally mentioned how their isolation impacted their ability to meet their students’ needs. In contrast to teachers who communicated via e-mail or phone, the teachers discussing their isolation “wished there’s maybe one other person to bounce ideas off [of]” (Interview CT) in a school or community. As one teacher stated, “It’s hard being the only one here [at her school]” (Interview DG).

Even with other intervention teachers in the same building, the physical presence of these teachers did not guarantee opportunities to collaborate. With scheduling conflicts, these teachers did not have time during their days to collaborate about students’ needs:

And then, with our schedules the way they are, I end up spending my lunches and everything, anytime I would normally be able to socialize with those other people and reach out to them and talk about [the intervention] or anything, I’m just kind of stuck in my, my own little desk area, working on paperwork or, you know, just trying to catch up with, with work. So it does feel a little bit isolated. (Interview CS)

The two [teachers] at the other elementary [school] collaborate and work really well together so they can help each other when they’re struggling with a particular student, having a particular problem. They’re able to talk to each other and give each other ideas. I don’t have that here. While there is someone else, we work very separately. It’s very isolated and I can contact the others at the other school, it’s just not the same. It’s much harder to do it alone than it is to have someone to work with. (Interview BR)

These interviews highlight that the presence of another intervention teacher was insufficient to develop a collaborative, informal relationships, ones that share pedagogical strategies and yield a growing capacity. It is worth noting, particularly in Interview BR, that intervention teachers experiencing isolation knew that other teachers were collaborating, particularly with students with whom they might be
“having a particular problem.” By mentioning struggling students, this teacher highlighted how these informal collaborations around student learning could impact teachers’ capacity to meet their students’ needs. Teachers without the opportunity to informally collaborate recognized that they were missing a potentially helpful component of their training and capacity-building.

Geographic isolation was also a factor some teachers described as contributing to their isolation. Reading Recovery’s expansion during the i3 grant had a particular focus on rural schools; of the schools participating in the i3 scale-up, 27.2%, more than one-quarter, were classified as Rural, using the classification established by the National Center for Education statistics (May et al., 2016, p. 12). As a result, teachers occasionally found themselves not only alone in their building, but also alone regionally, expressing that “you just feel like you’re all by yourself” (Interview BT) and that “it’s hard being the only one here [in her region]” (Interview DG). Teachers described this isolation as particularly impacting their capacity because they did not have “an immediate colleague to bounce off ideas” (Interview AK). Even with the collaborative potential of e-mail and phone calls, teachers felt that they were less well-equipped to meet their students’ needs without the benefit of immediate, informal collaboration for colleagues in the same school or region.

Of the ten teachers expressing a sense of isolation and a lack of collaborative community outside the PLC space, seven of these teachers were in their second year of implementing the intervention (the other three were in their first year). According to the Standards and Guidelines, teachers beyond their training year (their
first year) were required to “participate in a minimum of six professional
development sessions each year” (Reading Recovery Council of North America,
2012, p. 12). This requirement was a dramatic decrease from teachers’ first year, in
which their professional learning communities meet weekly. Teachers described
this decrease in the number of classes as a difficult transition:

I think not going to class every week and being able to, to talk with your
colleagues and with your teacher leader, like every single week, I think that’s
sort of been hard because, you know, [you’re] worrying that maybe [they’re]
not doing the right things or doing the best thing [to help students].
(Interview CC)

This lack of immediate collaboration within the weekly PLCs was, in part, a
source for some of the isolation described by teachers here. Additionally, no
conclusions can or should be drawn regarding the quality of the professional
learning communities from these descriptions of isolation. While the nature of the
community can impact if and how teachers collaborate with one another, having a
strong sense of community within the PLC may be insufficient for teachers to
continue the collaboration outside the PLC space for many reasons, include those
detailed here.

**Collaboration from the Bottom Up**

In considering teachers’ informal collaboration, it is worth noting that the
intervention program materials made no mention of if or how collaboration –
informal or otherwise – should occur among teachers. The only program document
referencing how teachers interact with one another was the *Standards and
Guidelines*, which state that teachers in training must “participate in training class
discussions” (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012, p. 10). There were no qualitative descriptions as to the nature of these discussions, and discussion itself, while certainly a prerequisite, does not guarantee collaboration. None of the texts used within the professional learning community discussed if or how teachers should collaborate with one another on instructional issues, particularly with problem students.

This is not to say that the professional learning community spaces were not foundational in fostering informal collaboration; as stated previously, the PLCs appeared play a role in developing the relationships among teachers yielded productive informal collaboration. This lack of codification was not necessarily a deficit of the program; rather, teachers’ engagement in informal collaboration appeared to show how this collaboration is facilitated from the bottom-up, where teachers actively sought out the tools, resources, and individuals they needed in order to better develop their capacity.

**Connecting Community, Collaboration, and Capacity**

The data presented here suggest ways in which teachers’ informal collaboration can directly impact their capacity, particularly with regard to instructional strategies and troubleshooting problems of practice. Two of the hallmark features of professional learning communities are collaboration and a focus on student results (DuFour, 2005). These two features help to create a space in which teachers are allowed to openly trouble problems of practice, and has direct benefits for building teachers’ capacity, particularly with students who are
identified as struggling (Bergstrom 2008; Danielson et al., 2007, Harris et al., 2015; Kratochwill et al., 2007). In considering how the PLC of this research context may have influenced collaboration, teachers indicated that without that safe collaborative space within the PLC, collaboration outside of that space would be much more difficult. The ways in which this informal collaboration informed the capacity-development of teachers in and outside of the PLC, as well as future research directions, is discussed in Chapter 7.
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study sought to provide insight into teachers’ self-described experiences within an intervention-supporting professional learning community:

1. How does participation in a professional learning community inform the perspectives and practices of teachers?
2. What is the relationship between teachers’ experience and their perception of:
   a. students’ needs, and
   b. teachers’ own capacity to meet those needs?

The answers to these questions are neither easy nor complete. There is much to be said about teachers’ experiences within these professional learning communities and how teachers describe the building of their capacity and the experiences that shaped their instructional approaches with their students. Making a presentation of a cohesive argument based on these data and findings can feel a “little like putting an octopus to bed” (Lamott, 1993, p. 93). How the different perspectives connect within this context appears a bit difficult. On the surface, the pieces presented here – the professional learning community supporting a curricular intervention through collaboration and peer observation – do not tell a coherent story, particularly outside of this specific research context. That is, until a participant shows how deeply connected each of the findings can be to one another:

DC: Well it’s [the intervention is] truly individualized, but we do have in our books, our Training Class we have our Marie Clay books and in the second book they have a whole list of prompts that they can use.
Q: Um-hm.
DC: So we’ve been reading over those and practicing using different prompts and as part of our training which you’re well aware; we video tape ourselves teaching and then we take those to class. Most of the whole class is
spent watching those videos of each other Teaching and noting the prompts that we’re using or the prompts that we’re not using.

Q: Uh-huh.

DC: And giving each other feedback, so I’ve really become familiar with that through the literature that we’re using, the books that we’re using to guide us and also my colleagues and what they’re doing. My next idea and, I haven’t done this yet because I haven’t had the time, is actually copy the prompts and put them right up on my desk so that I can remember to use different prompts. Because some of them, as a new teacher, I find myself using some of the same prompts over and over again.

Q: Uh-huh.

DC: So at class last week we talked about that; if we see that we’re doing that you know or what else could you have said to that student to really get them to do what you want them to do?

Q: Yeah.

DC: And so that’s what I’m learning about: what prompts to say. But it’s really specific on what the child is showing you at that moment when they’re reading. That’s what I like about Reading Recovery. You go in with an idea of what you want to do but then the kid might take you somewhere else, you know?

Q: Yeah.

DC: So we’re always just focused on okay, what are they doing at this moment, what do they need right now? When is the most efficient, effective thing I could say right now? The quickest thing I could say that would get that student where I want them to be or noticing where I want them to notice about the text? So it’s challenging. It’s like an art almost. (Interview DC)

Here, we see how this study’s context, themes, and conclusions come together to illustrate the capacity-building nature of the professional learning communities within this intervention. While the texts and program theories provide a critical foundation that guides teachers’ work, the feedback from one’s peers moves teachers to their “next idea,” the “most efficient, effective thing” teachers “could say that would get that student” on the path to independent, grade-level reading. Undergirding all the guiding program theory and practical advice from peers is a refrain of teacher responsibility for student progress and the resource-oriented idea that the student can lead instruction, that the student “might take [the
These pieces—theoretical texts, a resource-orientation toward students, personal responsibility for students’ progress, multiple opportunities for teacher collaboration, and the opportunity for non-judgmental peer observation and feedback—all drive toward building teachers’ capacity within the context of a PLC. I will explore how these findings fit together in a moment.

Additionally, these data point toward conclusions regarding the ways in which teachers’ knowledge and practice are framed and leveraged in order to build teachers’ capacity and support implementation. First, the relationship between knowledge and practice within this PLC is inconsistent, in that, depending on the PLC activity, teachers are either positioned as consumers of theory (knowledge-for-practice), or they contribute to and collaborate around specific instructional practices (knowledge-in-practice) (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). These relationships between knowledge and practice are complicated, particularly given this study’s context. Secondly, teachers describe the shifts in their practices in response to their students’ abilities and needs, a shift away from teacher directed instruction and toward student directed instruction. Lastly, teachers explicitly connect their growing capacity with program theory and collaboration with their peers, a result of the PLC’s development of a safe, collaborative community and its focus on the specific teaching practices instructors need to meet their students’ needs. I explore each of these findings in greater detail below.

Finally, I will address the multiple opportunities for future research, both within this intervention’s context and with PLCs broadly, including the role that
disagreement plays within the community, the potential peer observation holds for supporting teachers’ practice, and the need for teacher-led ethnographic or participatory action research of PLCs to clarify conclusions presented here.

A Framework for Fostering Capacity-Building within a Professional Learning Community

There are many ways in which the different elements of professional learning communities operate in relation to one another; the model presented here is not intended to revolutionize or replace existing theories. Rather, the model I present here seeks to illustrate the elements teachers in this research context described as most helpful in developing their capacity, both instructionally and in program implementation (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Professional learning community framework for building teachers’ capacity and supporting implementation of an instructional intervention.
The different findings within this research suggest that several aspects of the professional learning community work in concert with one another to improve teachers’ capacity. This model draws on teachers’ own knowledge in practice to drive their PLC, learning that is supplemented with formal knowledge and research grounded in the practice of teaching. Additionally, this model foregrounds aspects of teachers’ reflection and collaboration occasionally relegated to under-theorized footnotes in existing research, gaps this study has sought to address. While not designed to be a mandated professional development structure, this research points toward a model that could serve as a template for professional development of teaching staff that develops teachers’ capacity and supports implementation of a curricular intervention.

One important note regarding this model. This research supports and supplements the wealth of existing literature concluding that professional development, when implemented within proven structures, can dramatically improve teachers’ capacity and support implementation of instructional interventions (Akerson et al., 2009; Bryk, 2009; Pradl, 2002; Stoll et al., 2006; Zeichner, 2003). This is particularly true when the PLC works to support effective, research-based instructional interventions around which teachers can collaborate. The professional development used in support of an instructional intervention is best provided within the context of a thoughtful PLC (large circle of Figure 5), a conclusion supported by the data presented in this study and echoed throughout the existing literature (Bergstrom, 2008; Danielson, Doolittle, & Bradley, 2007; Harris,
Graham, & Adkins, 2015; Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements, & Ball, 2007; Lieber et al., 2009; Martin-Kniep, 2008; Pease-Alvarez, Samway, & Gifka-Herrera, 2010; Songer et al., 2002). The PLCs described by teachers in this study reflected existing literature discussing the need to break down structures that “minimize collaboration and innovation” (Martin-Kniep, 2008, p.3). Teachers’ interviews suggested that these PLCs provide practice-based solutions, where teachers expressed never having been a part of a PLC that was “this extensive or practical” (Interview CZ). Therefore, it should be understood that each of the following elements operates within such a PLC.

**Concrete Connections between Theoretical Texts and Teachers’ Practice**

The first component of this model emphasizes the role that theory played within the professional learning community. While theory can be perceived as existing outside of teachers’ practice, this research foregrounds the transformative possibilities that exist when teachers can connect theory to their daily practice in concrete ways, when that research becomes knowledge-in-practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). The program theory, conference materials, and interviews of this study all emphasized the capacity-building nature the PLCs had because they were directly “grounded in some aspect of their teaching practice” (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 2). The theory-practice connection described in the data here goes beyond a general understanding of how literacy processing theory can improve teachers’ instruction. Rather, throughout the data, teachers described the program theory as providing specific pedagogical strategies that improved their teaching. The
pedagogical guidance provided by the program materials was mediated through conversation and collaboration within the professional learning community. For example, several teachers discussed how the professional learning community helped them learn “how the consistent language [with students] is important” (Interview CI). Use of language was discussed at length within the theoretical texts used in the PLC, emphasizing that a teacher’s goal is to “give a maximum of information to the child using the fewest word,” and “when the child must attend to something or must pull several things together, the prompt should be short, clear and direct” (Clay, 2005b, p. 202). These prompts, which cover over four pages of the Literacy Lessons, Part Two text, were designed to help minimize teachers’ language and maintain consistency of that language. Theory explicitly directed teachers’ practice in this instance, and that direction was better understood within the context of the PLC.

This connection – theory and practice understood in the context of a PLC – provides helpful insights into how teachers learn the practice of teaching within this intervention, suggesting that teacher learning directly connected to practice cannot “occur in college classrooms divorced from practice or in school classrooms divorced from knowledge about how to interpret practice” (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 8).

Taking a Resource-Orientation toward Students

The data presented here suggest that teachers’ capacity within an instructional intervention was also improved by taking a resource-orientation to
students’ learning, the second component of the professional development model presented here. This resource-orientation provided a different perspective on teachers’ capacity than previously described by the literature (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008). Within this intervention, teachers’ practice was shaped by observing in-the-moment by the reading behaviors of students in the lesson. Therefore, teachers’ capacity to meet students’ needs took on a new layer of meaning, where capacity – defined in this study as the dynamic development of knowledge and skills across a teacher’s career – could change moment-to-moment based on students’ responses to instruction. This intervention appeared to reshape capacity in such a way that learning across a career is not enough – teachers must build their capacity to meet each student’s needs, forcing teachers to “concentrate on refining the interactive, inquiry-oriented instructional strategies they favor” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1039).

This close observation of students appears to fundamentally change how teachers “perceive struggling readers” (Interview AK). This shift in perception appeared largely as a shift toward a resource-orientation toward students, where in-the-moment instructional decisions were grounded in students’ abilities rather than their gaps. Teachers no longer viewed their struggling students “in a box” (Interview CM), where one type of instruction could get students up to speed; rather, they took what “the child knows and extend off of that,” a shift that was described as “seriously life changing” (Interview AO). Both the texts of the intervention and teachers’ reports of the professional learning community
continuously discussed the need to build on what students already know and are able to do.

**Fostering Personal Responsibility**

In addition to striking the balance between new instructional practices and deeper knowledge of theory, the professional learning communities appeared to foster a sense of personal responsibility among teachers, one that aligns with existing the literature of instructional intervention (Bailey, 2000; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008; Randi & Corno, 1997). In concert with the theoretical connections to practice, as well as a resource-orientation to students, teachers described pursuing “the most powerful thing [they could] do for this kid in order to help them progress” (Interview CM). This sense of personal responsibility appeared to drive teachers’ capacity-building, as well as fostering an increased sense of buy-in for the intervention (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008). The literature points to the possibility that teachers became invested in the intervention through PLCs, particularly when they allow teachers to “learn new strategies” (Lieber et al., 2009, p. 474). Within this research site, PLCs have a direct link to teachers’ practice, and because teachers were the primary implementers of the intervention, this practice-based PLC specifically tailored for this literacy intervention appeared to help foster teachers’ enthusiasm for the intervention. Additionally, intervention teachers in this context were selected, in part, based on their willingness “to learn, acquire, and apply new skills and knowledge” (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2012, p. 9).
selecting teachers with a willingness to learn, informal collaboration may have been a product of those personal characteristics meeting a highly-specific curricular intervention.

**Informal Collaboration as Supporting Capacity and Implementation**

The professional learning communities described in this study provided teachers with the opportunity to build strong foundation for collaboration, where teachers were able to “build a *shared responsibility* for developing knowledge with each other about teaching and learning” (Whitford & Wood, 2012, p. 17, original emphasis). When that foundation was built, teachers collaborated outside of the PLC, and these informal conversations were described by teachers as providing necessary sounding boards for instructional and implementation issues *outside* the PLC space (as indicated in Figure 5). In supporting teachers’ capacity and implementation of Reading Recovery, informal collaboration appeared to provide an important support to teachers. Teachers’ responses within this study pointed toward a better understanding of how informal collaboration can inform the pedagogy of intervention teachers and foster a greater capacity among those teachers.

The informal collaboration described by teachers here provided a helpful supplement to the training and support of the professional learning community, a finding consistent with previous studies (Jones & Dexter, 2014; Rowland, 2012; Stevenson, 2008). Teachers in this study framed these informal conversations as focused on student learning, a stance prevalent within the PLC literature, and so the
informal collaboration here provided teachers the opportunity to reflect on their students' progress while drawing on the perspectives and knowledge of their peers. This was particularly true when informal collaboration occurs among teachers with diverse experiences. More experienced teachers gave new intervention teachers more practical tools, “ideas that [teachers] learned in their training that hadn't come up in [the participant’s] training” (Interview BR). By using other teachers to “bounce ideas off of” (Interviews AB, CD, CF, CR, CT), intervention teachers opened themselves up to a variety of training and teaching experiences, which then helped grow the capacity of all teachers. Teachers indicated that seeing things from one another’s perspective provided helpful insight into their own students and teaching practices, a theme consistent with the literature (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009b; Feiman-Nemser, 2001)

Without on-the-ground observations of the professional learning communities or of teachers' conversations, conclusions based on these interviews alone cannot be made. Rather, these findings point toward developing a theory for collaboration among intervention teachers, both within and outside of the PLC space. This is particularly true with informal collaboration, which remains a largely under-researched aspect of teachers' development.

**Peer Observation as Collaborative Learning Opportunity**

An important aspect of this model is the situating of peer observation within the professional learning community. By doing so, the “isolation of [teachers] can be removed,” and teachers can participate in discussions about their practice with
colleagues who have observed that practice first-hand (Gosling, 2002, p. 3). Within this study, the nesting of peer observation within the PLC fostered a reciprocal relationship between the two; the PLC provided a safe, welcoming space in which teachers explored issues of practice, and the peer observation provided an authenticity to those conversations, as is suggested by the literature (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Bryk et al., 1999; Parise & Spillane, 2010).

As important as the act of observing another teacher was in developing teachers’ capacity, teachers stressed the greater value in the debriefing conversations that occurred with the learning community after the fact, where the discussion was “the most important part” of the learning community (Interview AF). Teachers described the debrief conversations as “in depth in regards to what the students have, as far as skills and what they need to accomplish” (Interview AK). This in depth, collaborative learning, described by teachers as a difference-maker in developing teachers’ practice has been largely under-theorized within the literature. While the literature of professional learning communities supports that collaborative learning is critical for knowledge development, fostering a reflective practice, and developing capacity, the feedback/debrief conversations described by teachers here provided a different perspective. Teachers would “[share their] concerns...about this particular student” before the observed lesson, a fostering of reflective practice, and then “afterwards, you know, somebody has feedback...really technical, technical tips” (Interview CH). While similar to the Martin and Double (1998) process model of peer observation, the key difference was that by situating
the observation within the PLC, knowledge of practice seems to be generated socially, fostering an understanding “that learning rather than being solely individual...is actually also social” (Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2008, p. 227, original emphasis).

These data provided a much needed window into the collaborative conversations that drove teachers’ capacity-building in this context. As noted above, as important as the act of observing is for teachers, many expressed that the collaborative debriefing conversations about those observations played a larger role in teachers’ learning. The observation process within this community – observation taking place within the PLC space, rather than outside of it – combined the power of observing another teacher with the collaborative, social construction of local knowledge that drove practice, particularly among teachers in a shared context (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Whitford & Wood, 2010). This shared responsibility, built in vulnerable work, fostered a community generating knowledge-in-practice, in which teachers better understand theory because of the collaborative discussions around practice with their peers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009). This type of open critique, absent a rubric, shifted knowledge back onto participants – they were the ones that can provide the answers to troubles of practice. While their responses were still bounded within the texts and structure of the intervention lesson, teachers became the knowledge generators about this type of practice.
Knowledge, Practice, and a Missed Opportunity

This study highlighted the role that theory and practice play within a professional learning community. Specifically, exploring how knowledge and practice were valued and discussed provided opportunities to refine professional development practices and PLCs. This professional learning community – in its activities and in the texts used within the PLC – positioned theory as instructive of teachers’ practice, serving a didactic role in teachers’ professional learning. Theory became “knowledge-for-practice,” in which teachers “knowing more (e.g., more subject matter, more educational theory, more pedagogy, more instructional strategies) leads more or less directly to more effective practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 254). This view of teacher learning as knowledge-for-practice was grounded in the idea that teachers become more skilled when “they acquire [knowledge] from experts outside the classroom” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 255). In this study’s context, knowledge took shape in the form of Clay’s (1993; 2005a; 2005b) theory and program model. Here, Ball and Cohen (1997) would argue that this PLC space operates more directly as “training” than “professional learning,” but that view would be inconsistent with the PLC characteristics manifested in this context.

Particularly regarding the characteristic of thoughtful collaboration, teachers described learning about instruction as development of a reflective practice (capacity-building, as described here). Teachers talk was different when they described knowledge versus when they talk about practice (Table 7). While
program theory appears to operate as knowledge-for-practice, teachers described pedagogy and instructional strategies in terms that more closely align knowledge-in-practice, where teachers collaborated with one another around practice as a way of understanding theory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ Talk about Knowledge</th>
<th>Teachers’ Talk about Practice</th>
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<tr>
<td>“I wouldn’t know what I’m doing.”</td>
<td>“I feel like I can, I can give them, you know, a more well-rounded instructional time when I have them.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>The theory describes “how we could change our practice”</td>
<td>The training class “really gets you to reflect on what it is you can do as you learn that students, and as you feel what their needs are.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You see a particular reading behavior in a student,...and in a certain section in that book [Literacy Lessons Part Two], and then ‘OK, this is what I can do, then, as their next step.’”</td>
<td>“It really helped me become aware of the individual needs of each kid and how I can help them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think [the intervention] has taught me how the consistent language [with students] is important.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Comparison of teachers’ talk about knowledge vs. practice

Teachers learned and applied the theory presented within the PLC and other professional development contexts; however, they did not contribute to the development of the theory or offer critiques of the theory within intervention sanctioned spaces. For example, at the 2014 National Reading Recovery & K-6 Classroom Literacy Conference, only two intervention teachers presented a session, a session discussing technical aspect of supporting students’ reading. Teachers’ capacity arguably is bounded in technical aspects of lesson execution, and not in theory development or refinement.

The relationship between knowledge and practice in this study did not appear to be fixed, but shifted as a result of the PLC activity or the type of
collaboration taking place. Teacher learning was done through knowledge-for-practice, where theory spoke directly to teachers’ practice from an outside position (Figure 6). Here, theory informed practice, and without it, teachers “obviously wouldn’t know that [they’re] doing” (Interview BG). This is represented by a unidirectional arrow, where theory acts on teachers and the PLC by dictating the structures and theoretical knowledge of both spaces. However, based on the research conducted in this study, neither teachers nor the PLC spaces (operated by teacher leaders and trainers) have the opportunity respond to, refine, or advance theory.

![Figure 6: Current relationships between program theory, teachers, and the professional learning community](image)

While theory operated as knowledge-for-practice, teachers’ instructional practices and experiences were very much situated as knowledge-in-practice, where teachers used best practices and the advice of more experienced colleagues to inform their own teaching practice. In contrast to the unidirectional relationship theory appeared to have in this context, teachers described how the professional
learning community and their collaboration with colleagues “really gets [teachers] to reflect on what it is [they] can do” to best meet students’ needs (Interview CM). The bidirectional arrow, here, illustrates that the PLC space was reflexive and responsive to teachers’ needs, particularly when teachers actively brought those needs to the fore, as teachers described doing for peer observations and in building collaboration with colleagues.

While this responsive professional learning community built teachers’ practice, theory remained fixed. As noted previously, teachers did not have the opportunity to provide new knowledge in dialogue with existing theory. The knowledge they generated through their practice did not appear to have a space in which they could refine the intervention’s theory to reflect their own classroom practices and experiences. I would argue, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) and others have done, that program theory could become reflexive, supplemented and refined by teachers’ experiences, rather than the unidirectional arrows of program theory acting upon teachers and the professional learning community (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2009; Mullen, 2009; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Talbert, 2010; Valli & Hawley, 2002; Wenzlaff & Wieseman, 2004). This research highlights the rich expertise that teachers bring to their learning communities, expertise that could reshape the program theory in generative ways. While the unilateral nature of program theory was partly a product of implementation, I would argue that there exists room in the program theory, texts, PLCs, and conference for teachers’ thoughtful investigation of their own practices as a way of
informing theory and development of practice. If teachers do have this opportunity, it is not represented within this study’s scope and does provide an avenue for potential future research.

This conclusion is particularly salient for curricular intervention implementation, both from the stance of teacher investment and teacher innovation. This study provides a supplement to existing literature that supporting teachers through the implementation of curriculum, particularly in Response to Intervention (RTI) frameworks, teachers and students have more positive experiences when there is some responsive framework within which they can implement rather than a restrictive curriculum teachers implement in lock-step (Bailey, 2000; Lieber et al., 2009; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008; Randi & Corno, 1997).

Leading from Behind: Shifting from Teacher-Led to Student-Led Instruction

In this study, teachers described how teachers were not the center of the lesson, “blah, blah, blahing,” as one participant stated. Rather, instruction was focused on the students’ strengths and abilities, where teachers “[learned] from [students’] knowledge, and also understand their literacies” (Campano, Jacobs, & Ngo, 2015, p. 100). Throughout the data, both interviews and the program theory, the emphasis was focused on building upon students’ existing strengths and abilities, not implementing a prescriptive intervention. Throughout the study, the focus on students as the drivers of instruction became clear, as teachers described frequently how the “truly individualized” nature of the intervention changed teachers’ plans in-the-moment, such that “the kid might take [the teacher]
somewhere else” altogether (Interview DC). This type of responsiveness valued students’ contributions to the lesson and their learning, rather than measuring students’ deficits. Here, the personal responsibility teachers described, a responsibility emphasized within the program theory, comes to the foreground. While teachers were building on their students’ strengths, teachers maintained the long-term goals and expectations for student progress. Teachers were then leading from behind, in a sense, observing carefully where students were and modifying their own instruction in order to build a logical next step for students.

While the student-centric work of teachers in the context cannot be understated, how these resources were understood across student populations remains unknown. Not every teacher spoke highly of their students’ strengths, particularly when asked about parent and family participation in the intervention or when a student’s language status came up in the interviews. Without specific demographic data, conclusions about these remarks are impossible given the boundaries of this study. However, considering the existing literature connecting students’ backgrounds and special education status, this is an area calling for immediate investigation.

**Building Capacity and Connecting to Practice**

Teachers’ capacity was built in a variety of ways, in a multiplicity of spaces, and, frequently, in collaboration with others, both in this study and in the literature broadly (Floden et al., 1995; Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Liu, 2001; McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2005; Teberg, 1999). In Reading Recovery, when
teachers talked about improving their practice and about building their own capacity, they spoke about lessons they learned in their professional learning communities. It was not just first-year intervention teachers, but also teachers who had more experience implementing this reading intervention who remarked on the powerful, collaborative communities that shaped and informed their practices. These learning communities provided additional support toward teachers’ capacity-building, and because of the “intense, long-term collaboration focused on instructional practice,” these communities also “[changed] the ways teachers [saw] themselves” (Floden et al., 1995, p. 20; see also Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Liu, 2001; McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2005; Teberg, 1999). Additionally, the learning communities fostered by this intervention “[shared] an underlying constructivist view of learning” grounded in a shared base of theory and instructional practices (Floden et al., 1995, p. 21). These components came together, both in this context and in the literature more broadly, to help teachers improve their instructional practice and build capacity.

Capacity, then, is not about exclusively building either a knowledge or skill base, but rather, building both simultaneously through reflective practice (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008; Shulman, 1996). In this way, these communities were seeking to build knowledge and skill collectively around their shared framework, shaping “the conceptual and interpretive frameworks teachers develop to make judgments, theorize practice, and connect their efforts” to the work of their peers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 273). I have found that teachers
within this research context reported these communities as grounded in “[developing] teacher capacity to succeed with every pupil, especially those historically under-served and those with special learning needs” (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008, p. 149). These findings help strengthen the theoretical connection between capacity-building and curricular intervention implementation.

**Future Directions for Research**

**The Role of Consensus and Disagreement**

An aspect of this research that cropped up throughout the data was the role that disagreement played within the community. Teachers extolled the value in collaborative capacity-building throughout this study. However, the question remains about what role disagreement plays and what are the effects on teachers when the emphasis is on consensus building alone. While certainly not a majority, teachers did describe moments of dissonance within the professional learning community for a variety of reasons – opinions different from program theory, posturing competence, and perceived differences in motivation and investment. While one participant emphatically denied that this intervention community was a “cult” (Interview CW), how this community handled conflict and disagreement may counter this statement.

For example, consider the teachers who described experiencing difficult conversations during the peer observation process. While these teachers were less concerned with hanging onto their previous theories and ways of teaching, the teachers in those interviews described how the teachers in their communities
started “jumping to conclusions” (Interview BD) and passing judgment on teachers’
practice such that one teacher felt “attacked” (Interview CQ). In these instances, the
pressure to build community consensus around teaching practices alienated
community members, as these reactions stood in direct opposition to the thoughtful
collaboration PLCs seek to provide. When these communities allowed for the types
of critiques of practice described here, there existed a “normalization of judgment
[that] qualitatively measured the abilities, level, and value of individuals while
enforcing a degree of conformity and drawing a line between incompetent and
competent performance” (Compton-Lilly, 2011, p. 436). While the one teacher
leader took steps to address the concerns within the PLC, questions about the role
disagreement plays in the community remain, particularly when juxtaposed against
ideas of consensus and implementation fidelity.

There is a degree to which this study’s context may have played a role in how
teachers described disagreement and dissonance within the professional learning
community. As much as the intervention learning communities had characteristics
of a PLC, it is worth noting that, particularly in teachers’ first year, this space is
considered a training class, which takes on a different purpose than a PLC. When
described as a training class, the space becomes about correct implementation;
however, curricular implementation literature argues that, even in supporting
implementation, allowing for teacher-driven innovations to the program model
yielded greater enthusiasm from teachers and better learning results from students
(Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Boote, 2006; Maniates & Mahiri, 2011; Randi & Corno, 1997; Songer et al., 2002).

Additionally, the literature argues that without disagreement, “the group’s capacity to learn from [the disagreement], to learn to listen more thoughtfully to different ways of engaging and reading text, depended upon both the intellectual and the social resources of the community as a whole” (Grossman et al., 2001, p. 973). Disagreement, therefore, can be “productive and not something to cover up” (Ball & Cohen, 1999, p. 27). There is strong evidence from the bodies of literature that ground this study that having disparate voices can contribute to teachers’ learning, even in the context of a training class or other instruction-specific PLC (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Compton-Lilly, 2011). This would be an important avenue for further research.

**Bringing Peer Observation into K12 Settings**

Teachers described the power of peer observation in no uncertain terms. By observing their peers, teachers learned different pedagogical approaches, as well as affirming their own practices, benefits heralded throughout the literature on peer observation (Cosh, 1999; Gosling, 2002; Martin & Double, 1998; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Schuck et al., 2008). More important than the observations, however, were the collaborative debriefing conversations, which one participant described as “the most important part” (Interview AF). These conversations allowed for collective meaning-making in ways that teachers describe as accelerating their growth and capacity. These discussions provided teachers with the opportunity to share ideas
and collaborate, offering feedback and taking the practices of others back to their own schools and instruction.

There are two opportunities for further investigation with regards to peer observation. First, much of the literature theorizing the benefits of peer observation is bounded within the field of higher education. As such, the possibilities present within K12 settings are relegated to peer evaluation (which runs counter to taking a learning stance within the observation) or as a checklist guiding what teachers should look for, which, even though it is framed as a learning opportunity, smacks of evaluation (Gosling, 2002). Given the overwhelmingly positive remarks from teachers within this context, further research is needed in non-evaluative, learning-focused peer observation, particularly when situated within a professional learning community.

The second area of investigation lies in the debrief conversations, which remain under-theorized across the literature. While some authors state the need for shared norms for the conversations, how these conversations shape teachers’ practice remains unknown (Cosh, 1999; McMahon et al., 2007; Parise & Spillane, 2010). Given the potential of these conversations, particularly among K12 teachers, this professional development structure would do well to be tried out among teachers willing to open up their practice to public scrutiny, so long as evaluation remained out of the picture. Here’s Gosling’s (2002) models of peer observation provide a helpful starting place in situating and positioning teachers within the peer observation structure. By highlighting the importance of the feedback
conversations, the hope is that teachers, professional development planners, and administrators will build the space and community necessary for this collective meaning-making to occur.

**Methodological Opportunities for Further Investigation**

As described in this study’s context, the data used in this study was drawn from an existing corpus of data from the larger i3 scale-up evaluation. As such, the conclusions here could be refined through ethnographic or case study research methods, including observations of the professional learning communities, transcripts of the collaborative debriefing conversations following peer observation, and semi-structured interviews with teachers based on those observations and transcripts. Additionally, I would argue for having intervention teachers’ active participation as researchers in both the data collection and writing of such a research project, should they be interested. As I mentioned above, teachers’ learning and program theory may benefit if teachers were given a more active role in interpreting and refining program theory. Conducting a research project in direct collaboration with intervention teachers exploring this study’s conclusions could provide an opportunity for refinement of these conclusions, as well as providing teachers the opportunity to have their expertise contribute to theory.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This study’s findings and conclusions highlight the powerful perspectives teachers have on issues of practice, knowledge, and implementation. By focusing on the rich ways teachers describe their capacity-building, this research brings to the
foreground the necessary collaborative and reflective practices of teachers working with early readers. Through carefully structured professional learning communities, teachers and administrators have the opportunity to leverage the knowledge generated from this study around informal collaboration and the benefits of peer observation. Additionally, further research is needed on these topics, both within and beyond Reading Recovery’s context, particularly research that points toward the ways in which teachers can shape theory and implementation, rather than being solely directed by it.
### APPENDIX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Round Number</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Exclusions</th>
<th>Times Coded</th>
<th>Group Breakdown</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As themes develop, which theme does this code inform?</td>
<td>Example</td>
<td>This is an example of how I need to fill this out so I don't forget later</td>
<td>When teachers talked about X or Y</td>
<td>Were comments that contained indicators excluded for any reason?</td>
<td>How many times did this code get applied?</td>
<td>Group 1 (ʼ11-ʼ12); Group 2 (ʼ12-ʼ13a); Group 3 (ʼ12-ʼ13b); Group 4 (ʼ13-ʼ14)</td>
<td>Protocols? Literature? Emergent? Knowledge of Context?</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Behind the Glass</td>
<td>Any detailed mention of the training course structure known as &quot;Behind the Glass,&quot; including preparation for the activity</td>
<td>Mentions of training course structure</td>
<td>When listed as an agenda item for the training class with no description</td>
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<td>Literature; Knowledge of context</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Non-intervention related duties and capacity building</td>
<td>Mention of how training impacts/impacted non-intervention duties</td>
<td>Administrativ e tasks (i.e. testing coordinator duties, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Group 1: 38; Group 2: 3; Group 3: 27; Group 4: 3</td>
<td>Protocols; Knowledge of the context</td>
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<td>Relationship with fellow RRTs</td>
<td>Description of type of relationship (or lack thereof) with fellow intervention teachers</td>
<td>Any mention of RRTs, both within the training course and outside it</td>
<td>None</td>
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<td>74</td>
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<td>Protocols; Knowledge of the context</td>
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<td>Relationship with TL</td>
<td>Discussion of relationship with teacher leader/coach, coaching and mentoring specifically</td>
<td>Any mention of the teacher leader, by name or position</td>
<td>Mentions of number of lessons per week</td>
<td>Group 1: 66; Group 2: 24; Group 3: 55; Group 4: 45</td>
<td>Protocols; Knowledge of the context</td>
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<td>RR Lesson Execution</td>
<td>Discussion of actual teaching of intervention lesson</td>
<td>Any mention of specific instruction</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>Group 1: 47; Group 2: 0; Group 3: 9; Group 4: 39</td>
<td>Protocols; Literature</td>
<td></td>
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<td>RR Theory</td>
<td>Discussion of intervention theory</td>
<td>Mention of Clay’s work or other texts used in training course</td>
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<td>Protocols; Knowledge of the context</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Students</td>
<td>Discussion of students, either as group or individual</td>
<td>Any mention of students, both individual or as a group</td>
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<td>305</td>
<td>Protocols; Literature</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Training Class</td>
<td>Description of training class</td>
<td>Description of training class members or community</td>
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<td>Group 1: 72; Group 2: 16; Group 3: 50; Group 4: 5</td>
<td>Protocols; Knowledge of the context; literature</td>
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<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Peer Observation and Capacity</td>
<td>Learning from Observation</td>
<td>General description of learning by observing</td>
<td>Mention of observation</td>
<td>Mention of specific benefits, details, incidents, or interactions</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Group 2</td>
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<td>Peer Observation and Capacity</td>
<td>Observation/Debrief of Others</td>
<td>Description of observing and debriefing other teachers' lessons</td>
<td>Mention of debrief conversation in conjunction with observation</td>
<td>None</td>
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<td>Observation/Debrief of Others</td>
<td>Description of observing and debriefing other teachers' lessons</td>
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<td>Peer Observation and Capacity</td>
<td>Observation/Debrief of Others</td>
<td>Description of observing and debriefing other teachers' lessons</td>
<td>Mention of debrief conversation in conjunction with observation</td>
<td>None</td>
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<td>Peer Observation and Capacity</td>
<td>Benefit of Need for More Knowing Other</td>
<td>Reference to learning from more experienced teacher(s)</td>
<td>Mention of benefit of or need for learning from/observing more experienced teachers</td>
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<td>Peer Observation and Capacity</td>
<td>Need for Observation</td>
<td>Statement of desire for more/any/additional/different observation opportunities</td>
<td>Mention of lack of observation opportunities or desire for different structure/timing of opportunities</td>
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<td>Role of TL</td>
<td>Description of how TL impacted/influenced observation</td>
<td>Mention of TL in reference to observation</td>
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<td>Peer Observation and Capacity</td>
<td>&quot;Conflict in Community&quot; - Observation</td>
<td>Description of conflict or dissonance within the community surrounding observations/debrief/feedback</td>
<td>Mention of disagreement, conflict, dissonance, etc. within the community concerning observations and subsequent conversations</td>
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<td>Collaboration and Capacity</td>
<td>General - Positive</td>
<td>Non-specific description in positive terms of collaboration with peers</td>
<td>General mention of positive experience with collaboration</td>
<td>Any specificity regarding space, location, or individuals involved in collaboration</td>
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<td>Collaboration and Capacity</td>
<td>Informal Collaboration</td>
<td>Collaboration with intervention teachers outside the PLC space</td>
<td>Mention of collaboration outside PLC space</td>
<td>Mention of collaboration within PLC</td>
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<td>Collaboration and Capacity</td>
<td>Safe Space</td>
<td>Description of PLC space and influence on collaboration</td>
<td>Mention of secure feelings in relation to collaboration</td>
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<td>Collaboration and Capacity</td>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>Collaboration situated in intervention theory</td>
<td>Mention of how theory and collaboration are connected</td>
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<td>Collaboration and Capacity</td>
<td>Lack of community</td>
<td>Description of lack of collaborative community outside PLC space</td>
<td>Mention of isolation or lack of interventionist community outside PLC space</td>
<td>Mention of conflict within the PLC space</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>PD tied to Practice</td>
<td>Theory aligned to practice</td>
<td>Description or statement of theory as informing practice</td>
<td>Mention of Marie Clay's works or other texts in reference to specific teaching moves or otherwise directly impacting/informing teachers' practice</td>
<td>Mention of texts as part of a list of activities or materials used in training classes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Group 1: 8; Group 2: 1; Group 3: 5; Group 4: 2</td>
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<td>PD tied to Practice</td>
<td>Individual Focus - Student</td>
<td>Collaboration as focused on individual students or individuality of lessons generally</td>
<td>Mention of specific student or mention of benefits of individualized lessons</td>
<td>None</td>
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