How Central Office Administrators Organize their Work in Support of Marginalized Student Populations: Collaboration in a Turnaround District

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Lynch School of Education

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HOW CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS ORGANIZE THEIR WORK IN SUPPORT
OF MARGINALIZED STUDENT POPULATIONS: COLLABORATION IN A
TURNAROUND DISTRICT

Dissertation in Practice by

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How Central Office Administrators Organize their Work in Support of Marginalized Student Populations: Collaboration in a Turnaround District

by Kathleen M. Smith

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Abstract

Leading discussions in education today center on closing academic achievement gaps and it is widely believed that school districts are responsible for creating the conditions for all students to be successful in school. Recent state and federal policies place demands on central office administrators to help schools improve, which has resulted in a shift in the work of central office administrators. As central office administrators shift work practices to help schools develop their capacity for improving teaching and learning, they need to collaborate to build new and collective knowledge.

This qualitative case study describes the collaboration of one central office administrator team when working to support historically marginalized populations. It is one section of a larger research project on how central office administrators organize their work in support of historically marginalized populations. Two research questions guided this study: (1) How do communities of practice emerge within the central office when working to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students? (2) What conditions foster or hinder administrator collaboration? Interviews, a document review, and an observation were used to answer the research questions.

Findings suggest that structures in the district existed that both support and hinder collaboration of central office administrators. Time to collaborate and tools used provided structural support for collaboration. The organizational structure of the central office and limited

authority to make decisions hindered efforts at collaboration. To better understand how communities of practice emerge, I focused on two specific elements, joint enterprise and learning in practice. The joint enterprise of central office administrators related broadly to improving outcomes for all students, however there were limitations to the extent that joint enterprise existed in the district. Further, there were instances in which learning in practice seemed to occur in the district, however an implementation orientation and overreliance on prior knowledge limited adult learning, at least at the central office level.

Collaboration is held up as an improvement strategy for schools and districts, yet there is limited research on central office administrator collaboration. This study contributes to the body of research on central office administrator collaboration, specifically those working in support of historically marginalized populations.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement and Research Question

School districts are responsible for creating the conditions for *all* students to be successful in school. As a result, educational leaders must consider the needs of *all* students when making leadership decisions. Of particular importance is the impact that these decisions have on historically marginalized populations, to assure that long lasting achievement and equity gaps do not persist. For the purpose of this study we include students of color, students with disabilities, low income students, and culturally and linguistically diverse students in our definition of traditionally marginalized populations, but it is important to note that there are many other populations that would be considered traditionally marginalized in U.S. public schools, including those who have been discriminated against based on sexual orientation or religion. Traditionally marginalized students have historically been underserved in American schools, and, as a result, are more likely to struggle academically and have an increased chance of dropping out of school (Gleason, 2010; Ryan, 2015). Given the increasingly diverse United States population (U.S Census, 2013), and school achievement as a predictor of engaged citizenship, wages earned, and later quality of life (Ferguson, 2014; Rodriguez, Jones, Tittmann, & Wagman, 2015), it is critical that educational leaders improve student outcomes by prioritizing the needs of traditionally marginalized students (Ferguson, 2014; Theoharis, 2007).

In recent years, numerous educational policies and reform efforts have aimed to support marginalized populations and narrow long-standing achievement and equity gaps in American schools (Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). Some of the most influential and recent changes have emphasized educational accountability in an effort to ensure both equity and achievement

(Capper & Young, 2015). One such policy that significantly impacted schools is No Child Left

Behind (NCLB). Authorized in January 2002, NCLB reflected the federal government's effort

to improve performance and diminish achievement gaps of historically marginalized

populations. The broad goal was to raise the achievement of all students, with a particular

emphasis on underperforming subgroups (Brown, 2010), and to mandate districts to improve

schools' performance. Under NCLB, improvement was measured based on the results of yearly,

standardized assessments. While there are numerous ways for students to show what they know

and are able to do, and the results of standardized assessments is only one measurement, the

mandate to demonstrate improvement on high-stakes tests challenged superintendents to figure

out how to improve scores. This represented a shift in the work practices and capacity of central

office administrators who had previously focused largely on business and compliance

functions. In order to thrive, organizations must learn and adapt (Edmondson, 2012); as school

districts are no exception, they faced increased pressure to improve student achievement (Honig,

2014).

As public schools in the United States continue to serve a more diverse population and

districts face pressure to improve their performance, district leaders must think strategically

about how to organize their work to support historically marginalized populations, and in some

cases, modify their work practices. Researchers have identified some ways that educational

leaders and teachers organize their work to support marginalized students (Honig & Hatch, 2004;

Honig, 2006; Trujillo & Wolfin, 2014), but much of the existing research describes the role of

building level leaders, such as principals and teacher leaders, and classroom teachers. Limited

research focuses on the specific practices of central office administrators that work to support

historically marginalized students, and little attention has been given to district level activities

that promote effective schools and lead to improved student outcomes (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988). The overarching aim of this study was to narrow this research gap by describing central office administrators' leadership actions and practices as a school district works to educate and improve outcomes for historically marginalized populations. Specifically, we answered the following research question: *How do central office administrators organize their work in support of traditionally marginalized student populations?*

While many factors influence student outcomes, we identified four practices we predicted central office administrators would use as they work to improve outcomes for marginalized students. First, we investigated how central office administrators collaborated with one another to expand knowledge and build individuals' capacities. Second, we focused on communication and the ways central office administrators used language about historically marginalized populations. Third, we investigated how central office administrators interpreted and implemented policy mandates that are largely intended to improve educational outcomes for traditionally marginalized students. Fourth, we explored central office administrators' social network ties and to whom they turned for advice.

While superintendents must be chief executive officers of school districts, to improve student outcomes at scale they must also rely on the collective knowledge and judgment of central office colleagues (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988). For the purpose of this study, we defined outcomes broadly, borrowing from research on student learning outcomes at the university level. These outcomes included what students have learned, the knowledge and skill levels achieved, and a student's potential for future learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). The four practices outlined enabled us to examine the ways central office administrators learned together and organized their work to improve outcomes across a school district. This study adds to the

research on school improvement and provides insight for researchers and practitioners alike on

the role of central office administrators in district-wide improvement, with a particular emphasis

on improving outcomes for historically marginalized populations. Describing how four specific

practices are utilized in one district is useful, as it offers practitioners approaches they can apply

and integrate into daily practice as they work to improve learning outcomes for historically

marginalized students. Additionally, researchers may find it a valuable contribution to the

research discussion on effective practices for district leaders who are educating an increasingly

diverse student population and working to reduce achievement gaps.

In this study, each author presented a chapter that addressed a complementary research

question, literature review, methods, findings, and discussion. Table 1 outlines each author's

individual chapter and corresponding conceptual frameworks used to analyze the study.

Table 1

Individual Research Topics

Conceptual Framework	Investigator	Research Question
Communities of Practice	Kathleen Smith	How do communities of practice emerge within the central office when working to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students? What conditions foster or hinder administrator collaboration?
Social Justice Leadership-Language Awareness	Christina Palmer	What language do leaders use to talk about their work with marginalized populations? How does this language influence practice?
Co-construction	Hugh Galligan	In what ways are central office administrators working together to implement policy in support of traditionally marginalized students? How do central office administrators balance external policy demands with internal goals when implementing policy in support of traditionally marginalized students?
Social Network Theory	Julie Kukenberger	How do social networks between and among district leaders relate to turnaround efforts designed to support marginalized populations?

Literature Review

This literature review addresses three main themes: (1) traditionally marginalized student populations; (2) educational reform related to historically marginalized students; and (3) the role of central office administrators. Each major theme also includes sub-themes that have emerged in the literature.

Theme 1: Traditionally Marginalized Student Populations

Throughout the history of the United States, specific student populations have been marginalized and underserved within the public school system, and for decades there have been efforts to address discrimination and inequity on their behalf. Brown v. Board of Education (1954), a landmark case, began to dismantle the dual system of public education for students that segregated white students from black students. It was also a touchstone for the ideal of public education as a great equalizer, a concept Lyndon B. Johnson (1965) described while signing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) by stating: "As the son of a tenant farmer, I know that education is the only valid passport from poverty." This ideal is unraveling, however, as the percentage of high poverty, majority black, and Hispanic families rises (Government Accountability Office Report, 2016), and achievement and equity gaps persist.

In the United States today, we know that factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, and sexual orientation influence student outcomes (Massey, 2007). Educational disparities emerge for traditionally marginalized students in early childhood and continue throughout elementary and secondary school (American Psychological Association, 2012). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), by age seventeen, the average white student scores approximately three years ahead of the average black or Hispanic student.

When studying how central office administrators, work to support traditionally marginalized student populations, one must first understand the historical experiences of traditionally marginalized student populations in U.S. schools, as these experiences have resulted in the disparities that continue today. These disparities are explained and organized into the following subthemes: (a) access to equitable education; (b) achievement gaps; and (c) school discipline.

Access to equitable education. Skiba et al., (2008) define disproportionality "as the representation of a group in a category that exceeds our expectations for that group, or differs substantially from the representation of others in that category" (p.266). Disproportionality pervades U.S. public school systems. In Massachusetts, school districts serving low-income populations have fewer resources and academic support than wealthier counterparts, impacting low-income students and, because there is a significant correlation between socioeconomic status and race, students of color. It is here that we begin to examine achievement gaps as they relate to students living in poverty and children of color, and schools with a high percentage of low-income families (McGee, 2004). Predominantly low-income districts serve approximately 25% of all students in Massachusetts, including a large percentage of black and Latino students (Rodriguez, Jones, Tittmann, & Wagman, 2015). Traditionally, demographic shifts have impacted urban areas as immigrant families settle in urban centers. These shifts can be magnified by "white flight," a term coined to describe the large percentage of middle class white families who moved to the suburbs during the desegregation movement in urban schools in the 1960s and 1970s. Researchers describe a modern version of "white flight" as white families capitalize on the availability of charter schools and school choice (Renzulli & Evans, 2014). While immigrant families historically settled in urban areas, some are now establishing

roots in suburban and rural areas, causing more districts to see a shift in demographics and highlighting the importance of focusing on equity and achievement.

The opportunity for every student to attain academic success is considered a cornerstone of the U.S. educational system. With these opportunities proving to be less abundant in under-resourced schools, however, this cornerstone is fantasy rather than reality. Less affluent communities face more challenges raising revenue through local property taxes (Rodriguez, Jones, Tittmann, & Wagman, 2015). Although these communities receive more state aid, they have less overall funding to invest in schools than affluent communities, because property taxes are lower and therefore available funds are less; therefore, lower SES communities often have larger class sizes, fewer electives, and less common planning time for educators. Each of these factors limits students' opportunities and subsequent performance.

To meet students' needs and provide educational support, schools often create processes that lead to over-identifying traditionally marginalized students as students with disabilities. Minority students are disproportionately represented in special education (Skiba, et al., 2008). Consistent patterns have shown that black students, and in particular males, are overrepresented in overall special education services, and are often categorized as having emotional disabilities (Skiba et al., 2008). Black students are also overrepresented in more restrictive environments and underrepresented in less restrictive settings. The under-representation in less restrictive settings may have a stronger impact given the importance of including students in classes with engaging and challenging academic content (Wenglinsky, 2004).

Skiba and colleagues (2008) suggest that educators who mistake cultural differences for cognitive or behavioral disabilities account for the disproportionate representation of some

minority groups in disability categories. This also explains why students whose first language is not English are also often misclassified as needing special education services. Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students are often referred to as English language learners (ELLs) in public education. By the year 2050, this population is anticipated to double (Meskill, 2005), making it even more important that educators discern between language differences and specific learning disabilities. When examining the role of white racial identity in preparing novice English language teachers (ELTs), Liggett (2010) identified structural obstacles of physical and social marginalization that limited the academic success of ELLs.

  Achievement gaps. According to Ladson-Billings (2006), "the achievement gap is a matter of race and class; and a gap persists in academic achievement between minority and disadvantaged students and their white counterparts" (p. 3). Across the United States, achievement gaps persist for historically marginalized subgroups, despite policies aimed to close gaps and mandate improvement, and despite practitioners' increasing focus on improving outcomes for underserved populations. The importance of closing achievement gaps cannot be overstated. Failing to raise the achievement level of students across the entire population means that academic skill levels will continue to slide backward, resulting in a less competitive U.S. nation (Ferguson, 2014).

  Raising achievement levels is a daunting task that requires basic components, such as time, appropriate processes (methods and goals), content (relevant and rigorous), supportive context (district administrators and policies) and persistence (Gleason, 2010). According to Wenglinsky (2004), school systems can help close achievement gaps by accomplishing the following: a) reducing the disproportionate number of minorities in special education; b) exposing minority students who are achieving near grade level to more advanced and

challenging content; c) providing teachers with professional development on addressing the needs of an ethnically diverse population; d) improving teacher education to increase the responsiveness of prospective teachers to minority students; and e) addressing the achievement gap as part of the accountability system.

While Massachusetts leads the nation on many measures of school performance, gaps among racial lines are prevalent. In 2015, 40% of all black third graders in Massachusetts were proficient or advanced in reading, as measured by the state accountability assessment. This represents an increase of 4% from 2007. Improvement for black students can also be observed in math with 36% of eighth grade students scoring at least proficient in 2015, a 17% increase since 2007. Yet, despite these improvements and the fact that black students are outperforming peers in other states, black students in Massachusetts scored 12% lower than white students on the eighth-grade math assessment. Similarly, Hispanic and Latino students scored 11% lower than white students, and low-income students performed 10% lower than their more affluent peers. Across Massachusetts, Rodriguez, Jones, Tittmann, and Wagman (2015) claim the proficiency rates in math and English are lower in schools in which at least 60% of students are low-income compared to schools whose percentage of low-income students is below that threshold.

School discipline. Students of color are more likely than white students to receive school punishments (Kupchik, 2007). For decades, national, state, and district level data show that students of color have been disproportionately suspended and expelled from school at a rate two to three times higher than white students (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Being excluded from school negatively impacts student achievement, in part because access to education is withheld. Disproportionate disciplinary action and identification for special

education indicate a failure to meet the mandate of equitable opportunities and outcomes for all (Zion, et al., 2015).

Black and Latino students, particularly males, perceive school safety practices as unfair, poorly communicated, and unevenly applied when compared to their white counterparts. Devine (1996) argues school security measures are implemented more often in schools serving a majority population of students of color, who are more likely than white students to be subjected to school discipline such as expulsion or suspension (Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Ferguson, 2000; Kupchik, 2007; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2000). Schools rely on three security-based strategies: surveillance, school resource officers (SRO), and punishments, including zero tolerance policies. These strategies offer a response when students are in danger, but may be applied and enforced in racially unequal ways (Kupchik, 2007). Additionally, since school decision makers are predisposed to view students of color as having worse demeanors and more negative attitudes than white students, school punishments are frequently unequal (Ferguson, 2000; Skiba et al., 2000).

The overuse of exclusionary discipline with students of color has led to what is known as the "school to prison pipeline." In a pattern of discipline that can be traced back to the K-12 school environment, people of color, particularly black males, are increasingly overrepresented in the United States prison system (Dancy, 2014). Wilson (2014) studied the school to prison pipeline and identified four ways to avoid it for students of color: eliminating zero tolerance policies, personal efficacy and systemic change, community support, and youth engagement. An awareness of the range of dangerous outcomes that can be traced back to the use of exclusionary discipline may benefit district and school administrators and help in the process of replacing

traditional exclusionary discipline with alternative, yet effective, disciplinary measures (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014).

Summary of traditionally marginalized student populations. The historical experience of traditionally marginalized students in the United States is illustrated by persistent achievement and equity gaps. These gaps exist for students of color, students for whom English is not a first language, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty, and are manifested in academic achievement, special education referrals, inaccessibility to quality education, and overuse of school discipline. Because the organization of schooling has led to these issues, change at the district level is imperative to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students. In the following section, we discuss the role of education reform in closing these gaps.

Theme 2: Educational Reform Related to Historically Marginalized Students

To address educational disparities, the United States educational system has implemented many reform initiatives. When studying how central office administrators organize their work to support traditionally marginalized student populations, it is necessary to understand the shifts that have occurred in reform efforts and how the accountability movement began. Reform efforts are organized into the following subthemes: (a) national reform efforts; (b) reform efforts in Massachusetts; and (c) turnaround schools.

National reform efforts. From the beginning, local school districts oversaw schooling in the United States, with states playing an important but secondary role. States, not the federal government, have the constitutional responsibility for providing public education in the United States and all states except Hawaii delegate this responsibility to local school districts (McDermott, 2006). The creation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in

1965, established federal government involvement in schooling and created federal funding for education (Mehta, 2013). States were provided with supplemental federal dollars for high-poverty schools with "the hope of equalizing educational opportunity for poor and minority students" (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009, p. 17). Through the 1990s the federal government continued to play a role in education, yet its reach was insignificant and decisions were left to states and districts (Mehta, 2013), with few stipulations and little accountability for student achievement (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009).

A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), often cited as a critical document in education reform (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Mehta, 2013), marked the beginning of the movement toward standardization and accountability (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). This report, which identified the United States as caught in a "rising tide of mediocrity," called for a new focus on excellence for all (Mehta, 2013) and highlighted increasing concern about student achievement and its impact on economic development (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009). It made recommendations for improving education, which included a longer school day and year, additional required high school courses in "the New Basics," and increased testing for students as indicators of proficiency (Mehta, 2013). *A Nation at Risk* launched a national school reform movement, and over the last several decades, standards and test-based accountability has become central to education policy (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Mehta, 2013). Today the federal government has more control over public education than at any other point in history (Mehta, 2013).

The standards-based movement that occurred at the state level in the 1990s paved the way for the federal move towards standards-based reform and ultimately led to NCLB. Standards-based reform set standards for what students should be expected to do,

established assessments to measure progress, and held schools accountable for progress toward goals. The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 supported these measures, which became a federal requirement under NCLB (Mehta, 2013).

While expanding the role of the federal government, NCLB built upon the 1994 reforms to mandate that schools and districts dramatically improve performance. While deferring to states in the context of standards and measures of success, annual testing was required in grades 3 - 8 and sanctions were imposed on schools that did not improve. Adequate yearly progress (AYP) needed to be demonstrated on state tests of basic skills. The expectation was that the average student body score would improve year to year and scores of various subgroups within a school or district would also improve. These subgroups included black and Latino students in addition to students with disabilities and low-income students. The ultimate aim was to eliminate the achievement gap between white middle class students and ethnic minority students (Valenzuela, Prieto, & Hamilton, 2007). Although it is generally understood that the accountability movement, and specifically NCLB, have substantially impacted schools (Au, 2007; Booher-Jennings, 2006; Lowenhaupt, Spillane, & Hallet, 2016), conflicting narratives endure about the nature and degree of this impact. Some say NCLB ensured a focus on equity (Braun, 2004; Williamson, Bondy, Langley, & Mayne, 2005), while others say it led to greater inequities (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Au, 2007).

Massachusetts reform efforts. Since the 1980s, a number of reforms have occurred at the state level regarding charter schools, public school choice, and vouchers, as well as standards-based reforms (Mehta, 2013). Intended to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students by improving instruction and increasing access to high-quality instruction, these reforms have challenged public schools. The standards-based reform movement of the

1990s started as a state-level reform and became the template for federal policy, and similar to

the nation-wide movement, reform in Massachusetts started with concern about the performance

of public schools that grew throughout the 1980s (McDermott, 2006).

Massachusetts was one of the first states to enact standards-based reforms. The

Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) of 1993 addressed education reform while

involved in a state financial crisis that resulted in students in poor communities launching a

lawsuit against the state. MERA doubled state aid to local districts and required state authorities

to hold districts, schools, and even students themselves accountable for performance on

standardized tests (McDermott, 2006). MERA directed the Board of Education to "establish a

set of statewide educational goals" formulated to set high expectations for student performance

(Massachusetts General Laws, Ch. 69, sec. 1D). The law further required a criterion-referenced

assessment and gave the Board of Education power to identify underperforming schools and

districts based on student assessment results. Sanctions included replacing the principal of

underperforming schools, giving all teachers pink slips, and placing underperforming districts

under state receivership.

Mirroring national debate, there are conflicting narratives about the impact of state

reforms in Massachusetts. While advocates of standards-based reform highlight MERA as a

national model and point to the rigorous standards in Massachusetts and high, standardized test

scores, others emphasize that MERA has not resulted in academic proficiency for *all* students

(McDermott, 2006).

Turnaround schools. School turnaround has become central to both policy and practice

since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTTT), which

designates low performing schools as "in need of improvement." Once labeled, schools face a

series of sanctions including "school improvement," "corrective action," and finally, "restructuring" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Massachusetts publishes an annual Accountability Report that classifies all districts into one of five accountability and assistance levels. Generally, districts are classified into the level of its lowest performing school. The highest performing districts are designated Level 1 and the lowest performing are designated Level 5 (Accountability, Partnerships and Targeted Assistance, 2017). In Massachusetts, Level 5 is the most serious category and these districts must enter into receivership. Once a district enters receivership, the Commissioner names a new district leader called the receiver. The receiver has the powers of the superintendent and school committee and reports directly to the Commissioner. The receiver is held accountable for improving education across the district. Additionally, the DESE commits resources for developing research-based tools designed to support continuous school improvement. The district then develops a three-year turnaround plan with recommendations from a Local Stakeholders Group (e.g. teachers, parents, workforce, early education, or higher education) and the Commissioner of Education.

Similar to the research on federal and state reform efforts, early reports on the success of turnaround efforts are mixed (Finnigan, Daly & Stewart, 2012; Mette & Scribner, 2014) and no single strategy has proven to be effective (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). In order for accountability systems to work, they need to appeal to high-performing teachers and administrators. Intensifying pressure and sanctions, central to turnaround efforts, creates defensiveness and deprofessionalizes teachers, administrators, and staff (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2006; Friedman, Galligan, Albano, & O'Connor, 2009). Tremendous pressure and short timelines to reach goals correlate with limited school improvement. These features limit and

even restrict exploration and learning, which result in action plans that are unlikely to have a large impact (Finnigan, Daly & Stewart, 2012).

Mette and Scribner (2014) describe a turnaround case study in which the school principal used data to effectively identify problems and cull out ineffective teachers, but was ultimately unable to motivate existing teachers. Despite gains in student assessment scores, the intensive focus on assessment burdened teachers, overwhelmed students, and left the principal feeling that the turnaround process damaged the school's culture.

Since relationships and social ties may facilitate or constrain improvement efforts, district leadership for student achievement under receivership warrants more attention to both internal and external leadership relationship networks as they undergo intensive reform efforts (Collins & Clark, 2003; Honig 2006; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Copland & Knapp, 2006) and develop sustainable transformation (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). These networks play a critical role in identifying strategies and practices that will enable district leaders to better support marginalized student populations and strive toward eliminating achievement gaps (Massachusetts' System for Differentiated Recognition, Accountability, & Support, 2015).

Summary of educational reform related to historically marginalized students. For much of this history of the United States, local school districts controlled public education. However, shifts since the 1960s led to increased state and federal oversight in education, including a focus on accountability and standards. Today, the federal government has greater control than at any other point in history, and standards- and assessment-based accountability have become central to education policy. In Massachusetts and across the country, schools and districts that continually fail to meet improvement targets are labeled turnaround schools and districts. While turnaround schools incorporate measures intended to

narrow persistent achievement gaps more quickly, early reports on the success of turnaround schools and districts are mixed.

Theme 3: The Role of Central Office Administrators

While the constitution grants states control over school policy, school districts have almost total control over policy implementation (Saiger, 2005). Thus, it is necessary to analyze the roles central office administrators play in improving traditionally marginalized student achievement. The empirical literature surrounding this topic is organized into the following sub-themes: (a) the history of superintendents and central office administrators; and (b) the role of central office administrators in school improvement.

History of superintendents and central office administrators. The position of superintendent of schools was first introduced at the state level in 1812 in New York (Butts & Cremin, 1953). Local superintendents became more common shortly before the turn of the century, with most major cities employing a superintendent of schools by 1890 (Knezevich, 1984). The superintendent of schools, and more broadly school district central offices, were originally established "not to address teaching and learning, but mainly to bring administrative order to schooling" (Honig, 2013, p. 2). School district central offices were tasked with carrying out a range of regulatory and business functions, including managing student enrollment and tax revenue. For much of the 20th century, school district central offices continued to pay little attention to improving teaching and learning and remained focused on a set of business, regulatory, and fiscal functions (Honig, 2013).

Honig (2013) summarizes the evolution of the roles and responsibilities of central office administrators from their establishment to current day practices. She identifies three core elements that characterize the current expectation of central office administrators to make student

learning their top priority: intensive partnerships between central offices and principals; relevant, high-quality, and differentiated central office services; and leadership in teaching and learning. This represents a significant change and a new set of work practices and responsibilities for central office administrators.

Johnson (1996) writes specifically about the change in the role of superintendent, who is now expected to accurately identify problems in a school district and develop and execute effective improvement plans to solve these problems. Simultaneously, the superintendent has lost power in local curriculum policy, as state and federal governments have focused more on the issue of achievement (McNeil, 1996). This has led to the current perception that the role of the superintendent and other central office administrators is to facilitate educational reform by turning policy into actions that improve school practices and support principal leadership (Bottoms & Fry, 2009).

Bjork, Browne-Ferringo, and Kowalski (2014) also note the changing role of the superintendent since the mid-1990s and highlight the recent focus on carrying out district-level educational reform. Federal and state policies, such as NCLB, place demands on central offices to help schools improve and reduce achievement gaps. In an effort to motivate states and districts to generate innovative ideas and reforms that would accelerate improvement and close persistent achievement gaps, the Federal government created RTTT, a competitive grant, in 2009. RTTT was a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and funded by the ED Recovery Act. The competitive grants offered incentives to districts based on points earned for successfully meeting certain educational policies such as adopting common standards through the Common Core and implementing an educator evaluation system that rated teachers and principals using multiple measures of educator effectiveness. However, such policies do not

fully account for the mismatch between traditional central office work and new performance demands (Honig, 2013). To carry out these new performance demands effectively, the superintendent must assume five roles: teacher-scholar to lead instructional change; manager to handle finances, accountability, and policy implementation; political-democratic leader to balance the demands and needs of all stakeholders; applied social scientist to use research and tacit knowledge to inform decisions; and communicator to work collaboratively in an information-based society (Bjork et al., 2014).

The shift in the role of superintendent, and more broadly all central office administrators, from managers to instructional leaders, has impacted district leaders' responsibilities. Concurrently, the organization and size of central offices has changed to reflect the focus on instructional leadership. As the roles of central office administrators have evolved to meet the increasing challenges they face, these district leaders are better positioned to approach instructional leadership using a distributive leadership style and approach. The distributed nature of this work becomes an important aspect of educational reform and school improvement. The next section explains the influence that education reform and the focus on school improvement have had on the roles and responsibilities of central office administrators.

The role of central office administrators in school improvement. Research suggests that without effective central office leadership, reform efforts will likely fail at both school and district levels (Honig, 2013; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Since the superintendent and other central office administrators are responsible for creating and implementing the district's goals and vision, there is a strong correlation between effective central office leadership and school improvement. As previously mentioned, the changing role of a central office administrator and the organizational structure of the central office staff, encourage and position district leaders to

take a distributed approach to their work. As a result, interactions between central office administrators increase. In fact, researchers have identified these interactions as a key aspect of the educational improvement process. Specifically, the superintendent's interactions and practices can support a district-wide approach to school improvement (Horton & Martin, 2012).

Among central office administrators, strong relationships and increased collaboration may increase output and foster school improvement. Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, and Wang (2013) identified a significant connection between a superintendent's authenticity and the application of high quality school improvement practices across the district. This authenticity is critical to create strong relationships among educational leaders in the district. Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) add that relational and ideological linkages are "essential for enhancing commitment and professional accountability and for ensuring a coherent instructional focus and organizational learning" (p. 738). This contrasts with a more traditional approach, in which districts focus on structural linkages to enforce reform efforts, by promoting a team approach that relies on relationships and interactions.

When implementing policy and educational reforms designed to support traditionally marginalized populations, a collective approach among central office administrators is beneficial (Datnow & Park, 2009). As central office administrators interpret and implement policy, they must mediate external policy demands with internal goals and priorities (Honig, 2004; Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 1998). Honig and Hatch (2004) describe this mediation through a process known as policy coherence. During this process of policy implementation, schools and school districts set internal goals and decide whether to bridge (attach) or buffer (isolate) themselves from external policy demands. In this process, it is imperative that central office administrators work with each other and with building level administrators to ensure quality policy

implementation. Policy coherence is a dynamic process that involves more than simply

interpreting and implementing policy; it recognizes the balancing act that administrators must

perform when interpreting educational reform, some of which is meant to support traditionally

marginalized students. Mediating educational policy demands is especially important in an era in

which federal and state policies heavily influence district practices. Andero (2000) investigated

the ways in which the superintendent's role has changed to influence curriculum policy at the

local level, finding that curricular policy decisions are most productive when all constituents,

including the principal, superintendent, and local school board, are actively involved. A

collective approach to policy implementation has implications for policies related to all areas of

school improvement focused on supporting traditionally marginalized populations.

Furthermore, there is an increasing policy demand for central office administrators to use

evidence in their decision-making processes, and how districts are organized influences how they

gather, interpret, and incorporate data into this process (Honig and Coburn, 2008). The number

of employees, the scope of an employee's job, poor connections with other departments, and time

constraints can significantly limit a central office administrator's ability to effectively use

evidence, but high levels of social capital, which allow for effective communication and social

ties, can mitigate this. Honig and Venkateswaran (2012) suggest that "both central office and

school staff members participate in the flow of information into evidence-use processes at either

level," (p. 206) and that both parties are essential partners in the sense-making process. This

information flow supports evidence use when it is selective and occurs in the context of close

social ties, but central office administrators may limit evidence use in schools when they set and

communicate formal expectations. As a result, it is more important to create a culture that values

using evidence when making collaborative decisions than to outright demand evidence use.

As central office administrators evolve into instructional leaders, they are expected to interact with and build the instructional leadership capacity of school-based administrators (Honig, 2012). Educational research has demonstrated that principals' instructional leadership is an important contributing factor to improving teaching and is linked to gains in student achievement (Hallinger, 2005; Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2004; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988). As a result, a primary role of a central office leader, especially when supporting marginalized populations, is to support principals' instructional leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Wells, Maxfield, Kiocko, & Feun, 2010). Honig (2012) identifies five ways that central office administrators support the development of principals to become effective instructional leaders at the school level: focusing on joint work; modeling; developing and using tools (e.g. protocol, checklist); brokering; and creating and sustaining social engagement. This reflects a direct need for a design-based research approach by both central office and building level administrators to significantly increase leadership practice in support of improved student achievement for all students, including those from traditionally marginalized populations (Honig, 2013).

Further reflecting on the changing role of the central office administrator is an emerging body of research that suggests that superintendents and other central office administrators collectively improve educational outcomes for traditionally marginalized students by improving the cultural proficiency of educators across the district. Cultural proficiency is defined as the honoring of differences among cultures, viewing diversity as a benefit, and interacting knowledgeably and respectfully with a variety of cultural groups (Lindsey et al., 2005). Wright and Harris (2010) determined that the superintendent could impact the achievement gap by modeling cultural proficiency, responding to data, hiring a diverse staff, and developing written policies that focus on cultural proficiency. These practices were magnified when

superintendents acted as change agents, strongly valued cultural proficiency, demonstrated collaborative relationships, and built a culture of success. In an increasingly diverse educational environment, demographic changes require central office administrators to focus on cultural proficiency. However, many districts struggle to do this effectively, collectively failing to recognize simultaneously occurring racial inequalities, further impeding success for already marginalized low income and immigrant populations (Turner, 2015).

Summary of the role of central office administrators. Taken together, this research suggests that when working for educational improvement, a distributed and collaborative approach among central office administrators is not only beneficial, but also necessary. This has implications for central office administrators working to support traditionally marginalized students. Increasing diversity in American schools has led to persistent achievement and equity gaps, mostly affecting traditionally marginalized student populations. For decades, educators have focused on narrowing these long-standing achievement and equity gaps, which also drive much of the current state and federal policy. This has required the central office to shift their focus from operational and fiscal functions to a district-wide focus on instructional leadership meant to benefit all students (Honig, 2013). Accordingly, central office administrators must focus on building relationships and fostering interactions across the district.

With a collective approach to organizing the work of educational improvement, central office administrators are better positioned to perform duties that include making decisions based on evidence, building the capacity of others, improving cultural proficiency, and implementing educational policy and reform aimed at improving student learning. This synthesis of existing literature indicates the importance of central office organization, but only touches on how this organization serves traditionally marginalized populations. This study will examine how one

district's central office administrative team organizes their work for the specific purpose of supporting traditionally marginalized populations.

Conclusion

Across the United States, achievement and equity gaps exist for historically marginalized students, limiting educational opportunities for students of color, students with disabilities, students for whom English is a second language, and students living in poverty. Despite reform efforts to narrow these achievement and equity differences, gaps have persisted. As U.S. schools become increasingly diverse, these gaps affect greater numbers of students. Simultaneously, the work of central office administrators has changed, resulting in a need for central office administrators to make student learning their primary focus. By implementing goals and reforms focused on improving student learning for marginalized populations, central office administrators may be able to play a role in narrowing achievement and equity gaps.

By investigating the ways that central office administrators work to support traditionally marginalized student populations this study adds to the scholarly research described in this chapter. Each co-author's individual inquiry provides a different lens through which to view this dilemma by focusing on the different interactions that occur at the central office level in an effort to narrow long-standing achievement and equity gaps.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

Introduction

This descriptive, qualitative study explored the interactions of central office

administrators working in support of historically marginalized populations. Specifically, we

utilized a case study methodology to conduct an in-depth inquiry of a bounded system (Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016; Creswell, 2012). In this study, the bounded system, or case, (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014), was a school district in Massachusetts designated as a Level 5 district,

and therefore in turnaround status. A case study methodology supported our research by

allowing us to investigate the practices of central office administrators while also allowing our

research team to develop an understanding of important contextual conditions in this district

(Yin, 2014). Specifically, we investigated how central office administrators organize their work

in effort to make structural and cultural modifications that may improve the program of

instruction in order to better serve all students in the district. It is important to understand who

the students served in the district are, what the current reality is, and how these factors, in

addition to others, impact the work of central office administrators. While other types of

qualitative research would have also provided us with data needed to describe the interactions of

central office administrators, they would not have anchored these interactions in the context of

the district. Our aim was to capture the circumstances and conditions (Yin, 2014) of central

office administrator practice in a turnaround district so that we could yield insight into how

districts improve outcomes for historically marginalized students. This study was built on

existing research and answers the following research question: *How do central office*

administrators organize their work in support of traditionally marginalized student

populations?

Context

In 2010, Massachusetts embarked on an ambitious effort to turn around its lowest

performing schools. An *Act Relative to the Achievement Gap* (2010) provided districts with the

authority to change conditions that hindered previous improvement efforts and to take strategic

actions designed to close achievement and opportunity gaps.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) classifies

schools into Levels 1 through 5, based on absolute achievement, student growth, and

improvement trends, as measured by standardized state assessments. Level 1 represents schools

in need of the least support, those that have met their gap-closing goals, while Level 5 represents

the lowest performing schools, those in need of the most support. Schools and districts

designated as Level 5 are placed under state receivership. While ESE's District and School

Assistance Centers and Office of District and School Turnaround provide ongoing targeted

support to Level 3, 4, and 5 districts and schools (Lane, Unger, & Stein, 2016), designation as a

Level 5 districts means substantial resources are allocated to the district for developing and

implementing research-based tools specifically designed to support continuous school

improvement. In addition, a three-year turnaround plan is developed with recommendations

from a local stakeholders group (teachers, parents, the community, healthcare, workforce, early

education, and higher education, as outlined in legislation) and the state's commissioner.

Our case study was conducted within a Level 5, turnaround district that was

implementing a turnaround plan. In accordance with state requirements (Massachusetts

Department Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016), the partnering district's original

turnaround plan (2015) included five priority areas: (1) provide high-quality instruction and

student-specific supports for all students, including students with disabilities and English

language learners; (2) establish focused practices for improving instruction; (3) create a climate

and culture that support students and engages families; (4) develop leadership, shared

responsibility, and professional collaboration; and (5) organize the district for successful

turnaround. In 2016, the Receiver/Superintendent wrote a memo to the Commissioner of ESE

requesting permission to modify three parts of the turnaround plan: (1) simplification of the

priority area titles; (2) change Building Based Support Teams (BBSTs) to Student Support

Teams (SSTs); and (3) change the titles for select staff members. Table 2 outlines the original

and refined titles. The refined titles were created to both simplify the language and make them

more memorable while also using select language to reinforce the district's values.

Table 2

Simplifying the Priority Area Titles

Priority Area #	Priority Area (as of 10/1/16)	Requested Priority Area Name Change
1	Provide high-quality instruction and student-specific supports for all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners.	High Quality Instruction for All
2	Establish focused practices for improving instruction.	Personalized Pathways
3	Create a climate and culture that support students and engage families.	Engaged Students, Family and Community
4	Develop leadership, shared responsibility, and professional collaboration.	An Effective and Thriving Workforce
5	Organize the district for successful turnaround.	A System of Empowered Schools

Conducting our research in a turnaround district allowed us to explore and understand

how central office administrators utilize social network ties to implement policy, collaborate

with internal and external partners, and communicate the needs of students in an effort to better

support marginalized populations. Furthermore, district level leadership is critical in initiating

and sustaining change that leads to measurable improvement (Leithwood, 2013).

Data Collection

Data collection for this qualitative case study took place from October 2017 to November

2017. Our study was designed to be emergent and flexible, a characteristic of qualitative research

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data sources included interviews, observations, and document

review. Data collection began after district and IRB approval were obtained. The initial stages of

research involved review of the district's Level 5 turnaround plan, the District Review Report

conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), and

the district's culture and climate survey data. Prior to collecting data in the field, the researchers

connected with the central office leaders scheduled to be interviewed, ensuring open

communication, confidentiality, and integrity (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Individual interviews of

central office administrators were conducted in person at designated district locations. To

systematically develop and refine the interview protocol (Appendix A), researchers piloted the

interview protocol using a multi-step interview protocol refinement framework (Castillo-

Montoya, 2016). Interviews served as the primary data source, follow up questions and

document requests were communicated via email and through the district's project manager, this

process allowed the research team to respond to changing conditions in the study (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016).

Interviews

Typical of qualitative studies, targeted interviews directly focused on our case study

research questions (Yin, 2009) were our primary source of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To

better understand how central office administrators interact, communicate, and implement policy when striving to improve outcomes for historically marginalized populations, we interviewed all formal central office administrators or executive cabinet members as referred by the district. Given the relatively small size of the district, we interviewed all nine central office administrators designated as the central office leadership according to the district website and confirmed by the district's project manager.

Included among the nine central office administrators was the receiver/superintendent, who was appointed by the commissioner of education in July 2015 when the district was designated as Level 5 and entered into turnaround status. Since that time the district has undergone significant restructuring and all nine central office administrators had been appointed to their roles since receivership. While one of the central office administrators had worked in the district in various roles for twenty years, all others were also new to the district, and had worked in the district for two years or less at the time of data collection. Also worth noting is two of the central office administrators had worked with the receiver/superintendent in previous settings prior to joining the district.

The interview protocol (Appendix A) was vetted and tested through a four phase interview protocol refinement process: 1) ensure interview questions are aligned with the overall and individual research questions of the overall dissertation in practice (DIP) (Appendix D); 2) DIP role play and protocol practice; 3) pilot interview protocol with central office administrators; and 4) reflection (Appendix E), analysis of feedback, and refinement of protocol. This multi-step protocol refinement process (Castillo-Montoya, 2016) supported the researchers' efforts to have a well-vetted, refined interview protocol; however, as Merriam (2009) states, researchers can

"unhook themselves from the constant reference to the questions and can go with the natural flow of the interview" (p. 103).

Question alignment. Interview data served as the primary data source for both the collaborative Dissertation in Practice (DIP) and each individual study. The interview protocol was designed to collect the data needed to answer the DIP research question and the research questions for each individual study; therefore, phase 1 was critical to ensure that all necessary data were collected while also creating a conversational flow (Merriam, 2009). The interview protocol matrix (Appendix D) maps the interview questions against the research questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016) and was used to verify adequate data collection.

Role play and protocol practice. The research team engaged in a role playing process designed to test out the effectiveness of the interview protocol and allow for clarity and calibration of how each question should be asked to ensure the most efficient and effective data collection process. The training cycle was as follows: one team member used the interview protocol to ask the questions, another team member answered, a third team member listened, and the fourth team member observed. This cycle was repeated so that all four research team members practiced asking the questions. Feedback was collected and a reflection tool (Appendix E) was utilized to collect ideas for refinement. Once the interview protocol was refined it was then tested again.

Interview protocol pilot. Two research team member piloted the interview protocol independently with at least one, central office administrator from a district of their choice (Merriam, 2009). This process allowed researchers to try out the interview protocol in the field and test out the balance between inquiry and conversation (Weiss, 1995; Merriam, 2009;

Rossman & Rallis, 1998). A feedback tool (Appendix E) was utilized after the pilot interview to assess how the participant perceived the questions.

Receiving feedback and reflecting on interview protocol. The data collected from the researcher and field test participants was utilized to improve the interview protocol prior to entering the field in the selected turnaround school district. This process was critical for ensuring that each researcher was able to collect interview data that addressed specific research question(s) for both the collaborative DIP and each individual slice (Appendix D).

Conducting the interviews. Prior to conducting interviews, the researchers reviewed public documents to gain an understanding of the goals in the district and how the district defined marginalized students. At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed of our interest in how central office administrators interact and carry out their work in support of historically marginalized populations in the district (Weiss, 1995; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Participants were also informed that they would remain anonymous, and that their insights may lead to recommendations for the district and the field at large. Most one-on-one interviews were approximately 50 to 60 minutes, one interview lasted 20 minutes, and one interview was taken in two parts due to a technological glitch. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. The interviewer also took notes during the interview on nonverbal behaviors (Creswell, 2012).

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol (Merriam, 2009), which is provided in Appendix A. Our protocol specifically addressed questions about how policy is implemented in the district, what language administrators use to talk about marginalized populations, how administrators work together and collaborate, and the extent to which the district's leadership network facilitates advice seeking related to turnaround goals and efforts. The questions were

written to facilitate a conversation, a method that works well when participants are not hesitant to articulate and comfortable sharing ideas (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Creswell, 2012). We began with background questions to establish a relationship and rapport (Weiss, 1995) with the interviewee (e.g. Please tell me a little about your work and your experiences in the district?). We then asked questions about relational ties and collaborative practices (e.g. Who are the people you turn to for advice related to the district's goals and efforts?) and the work the district is engaged in (e.g. Please describe some of the things you have done to build the capacity of the schools in order to better support marginalized populations?). To close the interview, we asked if there was anything else the interviewee would like to share; this allowed us to gain any additional information related to the topic that the interviewee felt was important and relevant. This also continued the theme of a conversation (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Creswell, 2012). To ensure good data, interview questions were open-ended. If more detail was needed, follow-up questions and probes were prepared for each question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Observations

Researchers conducted one observation of a district leadership team meeting. This observation took place after individual interviews so researchers could study actual behavior of central office administrators (Creswell, 2012). The observation lasted approximately two hours, with one researcher present. The meeting selected by the district for the observation was of the teaching and learning team and pertained to the district turnaround plan, showing group interactions related to supporting marginalized populations. Observing the meeting was intended to provide a first-hand sense of how central office administrators approach their work, and the language used when communicating about historically marginalized populations. An observation protocol was used to record information collected during observations (Appendix B).

During the observation, the researcher recorded initial notes and later expanded them into more descriptive field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). Notes included the date, and contain a running log of the time every three to five minutes to monitor pace. Efforts were made to record participants' quotes or paraphrase statements. The researcher also recorded other details such as actions, mannerisms, and reactions. Completed field notes included a description of the environment, details of what individuals did or said, stories that were shared, and estimates for the amount of time participants actively participated.

Document Review

To enrich the data collected in interviews, we also reviewed public and private records in a document review (Creswell, 2012). While the ESE website and district website were used to find public records, central office administrators in the district were asked to provide private records. The documents reviewed included student data; this was essential to gain an understanding of the historically marginalized populations served in the district. Other documents included were the Level 5 turnaround plan for the district, annual benchmarks, and project plans that related to the areas of this study. These documents existed independent of the research process, and therefore were unaffected by it (Yin, 2009); documents were thus grounded in the real world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and were a good data source for triangulation of interview data.

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Data Analysis

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Managing the Data

Data collection and analysis were done in a simultaneous process. Analysis begin as soon as data was collected. Each researcher kept an independent research journal throughout the data collection process to record details about events, decisions, questions, and wonderings. This

supported the reliability of research findings, as it provided a record of how insights were developed (Yin, 2009). Each interview and observation were followed by a research journal entry. This entry was made within 24 hours of the event. Separate entries were written after each analysis in order to capture the investigators' reflections, tentative themes, hunches, ideas, and additional topics based on what was derived from the data set. We noted questions and emerging findings throughout the data collection process. After all of the interviews were conducted, data sets were compared with the second (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009) in a recursive and dynamic data collection process. Analysis became more intensive as the study progressed and once all data were collected (Merriam, 2009). Each researcher, independently, listened to and coded all nine interviews.

Coding

Text segment coding and labeling was utilized to organize various aspects of our data in order to form descriptions and broad themes (Creswell, 2012). Two or three words were used to create the text segment codes and came directly from participants' responses and routinely repeated ideas. The coding process allowed investigators to make sense of the data, examine for overlap and redundancy, and collapse the data into broad themes by determining what data to use and what to disregard. Coding of the interviews comprised a mix of a priori and emergent codes. Table 4 outlines initial categorical codes named as follows: background information; overarching/general district information; collaboration; policy implementation; communication; and social networks.

Table 3

Initial Categorical Codes

Background Questions	BQ	Policy Implementation	PI
Overarching Questions	OAQ	Communication	C
Collaboration	COL	Social Networks	SN

A four-step process was adapted from McKether, Gluesing, and Riopelle's (2009) five-step process. This process was used to convert narrative interview data into text segments. To convert and analyze the interview data, the following steps were followed: 1) record and transcribe interviews using Rev, and store interviews; 2) clean and prepare data for importing into Google Drive; 3) import and code the interview transcriptions in Google Drive; and 4) create a Google Sheets data extract.

Interview Data Analysis

Interview data was used to explore patterns of interaction and perceptions of administrators in different district level leadership positions. All nine interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using Rev, a mobile application and transcription service. The transcription data was cleaned for accuracy, shared with the research team, and independently coded by each researcher. First analysis began with the thematic areas from our initial categorical codes outlined in Table 4. An inductive analysis was used to allow for other themes to emerge "out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (Patton, 1990, p. 390). Interview data was analyzed using a constant comparative analysis method (Creswell, 2012), as well as checking and rechecking emerging themes (Patton, 1990). To ensure trustworthiness of interpretations, member-checking procedures were utilized

when needed and as emerging themes were developed (Creswell, 2012; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Observation Analysis

Observation data analysis occurred in several phases. The first phase include a preliminary exploratory analysis, which was conducted by the researcher who conducted the observation to obtain a general sense of the data and to generate memo ideas. The researcher then organized the data (Creswell, 2012) and created field notes. The field notes were then coded using codes developed during interview data analysis by individual researchers.

Document Analysis

Collected documents were utilized to triangulate data collected in interviews and observations (Creswell, 2012). This process of corroborating evidence supported the broad themes determined and enhanced the accuracy of the study. The team utilized text segment coding and labeling to form descriptions and these broad themes (Creswell, 2012). For more information on how each author has coded during the document analysis process, please see the individual methodology in chapter three.

Representing Findings

Three key findings from our data analysis are summarized in a narrative discussion along with recommendations for practitioners, limitations, and recommendations for future research. The findings emerged as common themes as a result of a synthesis of the findings in each individual study. The research team then determined possible recommendations for practitioners, limitations, and areas for future research along with a culminating conclusion.

Study Limitations

Qualitative case study is a reliable research design, as it can describe realistic interventions in a realistic context (Yin, 2009). However, there are five noteworthy limitations that accompany our study of how central office administrators organize their work in support of marginalized populations. First, this study primarily relied on qualitative interviews with central office administrators in a mid-size turnaround district in Massachusetts, making the researcher the primary vehicle for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). As a result, each of these data points were self-reported, and therefore results may have been impacted or influenced by the individual researcher's frame of reference and positionality. While our research team, consisting of central office and building level administrators, used collaborative coding to recognize and document potential biases among our research team, it is more difficult to control biases that are present among the research participants. While observation data and document review served as secondary data collection points for triangulating our results, the possibility of bias cannot be overlooked.

Second, since case study research focuses on a single unit of analysis, the scope of our research study was to examine the practices that one district uses to support traditionally marginalized students. The study did not aim to report on multiple districts, common practices, or to evaluate the district or its administrators in their turnaround efforts. Furthermore, the study did not examine the practices of principals or teachers in support of marginalized students, as there is an already existing body of research on that topic. The aim was to collect and report, based on qualitative analysis, practices and interactions among central office administrators in support of marginalized students. A larger study with more resources may be able to study

multiple districts or units of study to report on larger scale best central office administrator practices in support of marginalized students.

A third limitation of this study was time. While we collected as much data as possible, the time frame of this study was limited to less than one year. Similarly, since we partnered with a recently identified turnaround district, many of the central office administrators were new to the district. This impacted the number of interactions that occur between central office administrators, and some policies and practices in support of marginalized students were relatively newly implemented. In turn, many of the leadership actions designed to support marginalized students were in their infancy while others were still in the planning stages. Multiple years of data would be needed to show changes in student performance and support.

A fourth limitation of this study is that, while we examined the organization and interactions between central office administrators in support of marginalized students, this study did not measure changes in student achievement. In other words, this study does not measure causality. However, we have utilized four research-based lenses through which to analyze leadership practices at the central office level, with an overarching focus on interactions, which may serve as a launching point for future researchers to use in determining some measure of causality.

Lastly, since our study primarily relied on semi-structured interviews as a data source, supporting data sources cannot be relied on to provide concrete determinations. For example, observation data from one district leadership team meeting provided a glimpse into how central office administrators work in support of marginalized populations, however, it would be inappropriate to rely on these data to make concrete statements or generalizations about work habits, since the number of observations were limited to one.

CHAPTER THREE

Introduction and Summary of Team Dissertation in Practice

Closing academic achievement gaps is central to education policy and is a national priority for both policy makers and practitioners across the United States. Since the 1960s, shifts in education have led to an increased focus on standards and accountability in an effort to raise the achievement of all students, especially underperforming subgroups (Brown, 2010; Mehta, 2013; Valenzuela, Prieto, & Hamilton, 2007). No Child Left Behind (NCLB), authorized in January 2002, intended to narrow the achievement gaps of historically underserved student populations, and expand the role of the federal government in education. There is general agreement that standards-based reforms, and specifically NCLB, had a significant impact on schools, (Au, 2007; Booher-Jennings, 2006) although conflicting narratives about the nature of this impact exist (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Au, 2007; Braun, Chapman, & Vezzu, 2010). Yet despite efforts to narrow achievement gaps, they have persisted across the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

School districts, which are complex organizations (Edmondson, 2012), are under increased pressure to improve. There are a number of factors that contribute to a district's ability to improve outcomes for all students and researchers have identified some ways that educational leaders organize in support of marginalized students (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). The purpose of our study was to describe four practices of central office administrators as they engage in this work. These practices are (1) collaboration, (2) communication, (3) policy implementation, and (4) use of social network ties. We aimed to contribute to the research on school improvement by providing a description of the leadership actions of central office

administrators in one district as they work to improve outcomes for all students, specifically the historically marginalized populations served in the district.

With the passage of NCLB, school turnaround became significant to both policy and practice. The law required a criterion-referenced assessment and gave the states the power to identify underperforming schools and districts based on student assessment results. Once schools are identified as "in need of improvement," they face sanctions (Finnigan, Daly, & Stewart, 2012) which can include replacing the principal of underperforming schools and placing underperforming districts in state receivership. In Massachusetts' accountability system, Level 5 is the most serious category and represents receivership. Our study was conducted in a Level 5 district. The issue of underperformance that exists in a Level 5 district was of interest to us. The focus of turnaround work is improving outcomes for all students, specifically traditionally marginalized populations, by creating and implementing a turnaround plan ("Office of District and School Turnaround," 2017); our study aimed to describe the practices of central office administrators when working in support of marginalized populations.

As part of this group study I focused on collaboration and how communities of practice emerge in the central office. When practitioners collaborate they work together in a team, with each member mutually accountable for achieving a common goal. Hargreaves (1994) described collaborative cultures as sharing the following characteristics: (1) sustained by the teaching community even if administratively supported; (2) arise from a perceived value among teachers; (3) teacher-established tasks and purposes for working together; (4) scheduled meetings do not dominate the arrangements for working together; and (5) outcomes are uncertain and unpredictable. Collaboration is an important aspect of educator practice and is associated with learning and capacity building (Lane, Unger, & Stein, 2016). Exploring the practice of

collaboration is particularly relevant to this study because if a district is to produce different

outcomes for historically marginalized populations, individuals must share knowledge and learn

new ways of working. Similarly, a community of practice is a group of people who share a

challenge or an interest in a topic, "and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by

interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). Based on

sociocultural learning theory, the concept of a community of practice is the idea that we learn

with and from one another, thus anchoring learning in practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave &

Wenger, 1991; Thompson, 2005).

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Educator collaboration is considered a successful strategy for school improvement

(Lopez Flores, 2014). Because improving schools is related to adult learning and educator

collaboration provides the structure for learning to occur, it is common for school leaders to

establish teaming structures and create a culture that fosters collaboration (Lane et al., 2016).

Previous efforts that focused on understanding school turnaround in Massachusetts revealed that

successful turnaround schools generally implement four key practices, the first of which is

"establishing a community of practice through leadership, shared responsibility, and professional

collaboration" (Stein, Therriault, Kistner, Auchstetter, & Melchior, 2016, p. 2).

Although a large body of research on educator collaboration at the school level exists,

there is limited research on how central office administrators collaborate to move forward issues

that relate to improving instruction for all students. As a result, it is less clear how central office

administrators collaborate and what impact collaboration has on schools as they work to improve

instruction and outcomes for all students. Furthermore, school turnaround was not used as a

widespread approach to improving low performing schools and districts until the passage of

NCLB. As a result, there has been limited research on how to support turnaround strategies, including collaboration.

The purpose of my individual study was to explore the ways central office administrators interact and collaborate to support historically marginalized populations in a turnaround district. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed: (1) How do communities of practice emerge within the central office when working to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students? (2) What conditions foster or hinder administrator collaboration?

Relationship to Team Dissertation in Practice

When examining how central office administrators organize and act in support of historically marginalized populations, collaboration, communication, policy implementation, and use of social network ties, emerge as key practices. I focused on the area of collaboration while each one of the other researchers explored one of the other areas as follows: Christina Palmer focused on communication and language use; Hugh Galligan focused on policy implementation; and Julie Kukenberger focused on social network ties. Together, our individual chapters describe the ways central office administrators interact and work to support historically marginalized populations. Each of these individual dissertation chapters complements the other, with substantial overlap in the ideas presented.

Many current federal, state, and local policies focus on closing achievement gaps for historically marginalized students. How policies are interpreted and enacted within a school district impacts underserved populations (Honig, 2013b). Collaboration is an effective practice for making sense of policy. When working to interpret and implement policy, central office administrators must work collaboratively to ensure a common understanding and shared vision, which are necessary if they are to impact change in the district.

Collaborative teams are characterized by clear boundaries and held together by job requirements and common goals, while communities of practice have less clear boundaries and are held together by passion and commitment. Both are related to adult learning. In education, learning describes the process by which students gain and apply knowledge and skills. Learning is also critical for adults, particularly when districts are facing ambitious demands and goals (Finnigan et al., 2012). Educators, including those working in the central office as administrators, must collaborate "to create, expand, and exchange knowledge, and to develop individual capabilities" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 42).

Central to both collaboration and a community of practice are sustained mutual relationships. A substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of the individuals belonging to a community of practice indicates that a community of practice has formed (Wenger, 1998). These relationships and memberships are likely to be part of one's social network within a district. Social network ties, specifically those at the central office level, are critical for the development and dissemination of complex information and successful implementation of new initiatives. These lateral connections can increase the capacity of the district and lead to successful change (Daly & Finnigan, 2011). In addition, informal social networks receive and pass on information. This sharing of information can improve each individual's knowledge and the knowledge of the team.

Finally, how team members and central office administrators use language in the context of communication not only impacts the work but also the outcomes. Communicating the district's vision of improving outcomes and closing the achievement gap for historically marginalized students by employing strategic approaches can have a positive effect for students. Clear, consistent, and unbiased communication around efforts to improve outcomes that lead to

greater coherence and goal attainment can be realized through working collaboratively. This study describes how central office administrators utilize each of these four practices, policy implementation, collaboration, use of social networks, and communication, and contributes to the research on school improvement with a particular focus on historically marginalized populations.

Review of the Literature

Though school improvement is the intended outcome of accountability policies, it has been argued that American schools are pressured to preserve the status quo. Oaks, Quartz, Ryan, and Lipton (2000) state this is one reason achievement gaps are persistent and pervasive. Improving outcomes in a district requires those leading the improvement to understand the culture and current reality of the system and identify potential change strategies to make it work better, leading to improved results (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). This involves root cause analysis of challenges and implementation of change and reinforces the idea that school districts are complex organizations. Improving outcomes at scale is hard work and cannot be accomplished by educators working in isolation. It requires educators, including central office administrators, to collaborate and build their collective knowledge. In my review of the literature on collaboration, three themes emerged: (1) educator collaboration; (2) administrator collaboration; and (3) turnaround work and collaboration. I will summarize the studies related to these three themes in the following sections.

Theme 1: Educator Collaboration

Throughout the history of education in the United States, educators have worked in isolation even when working in close proximity to one another. Collaboration among teachers was not the norm and colleagues rarely requested professional advice or assistance in efforts to

improve. Asking questions or needing assistance was believed to lead to questions about one's competence and viewed to be embarrassing or stigmatizing (Rosenholtz, 1989). Professional isolation had implications for teacher learning, particularly when it came to novice teachers who were left to rely on their own ability to identify challenges and determine potential solutions.

This is in contrast with the norm today, where teaching is largely viewed as a collective enterprise. Over the past two decades, reform efforts have included an emphasis on increasing collaboration (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996) based on the emerging research that suggests teacher collaboration will produce increased student learning (Hargreaves, 1994; Lee & Smith, 1996; Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). However, until recently, collaboration was frequently advocated for while the effects of collaboration were investigated less frequently (Goddard et al., 2007).

In recent years, a number of studies have linked teacher collaboration and well-connected teacher networks with positive outcomes for teachers. These positive effects include improved efficacy (Moolenaar, Sleegers, & Daly, 2012; Shachar & Shmuelevitz, 1997), more positive attitudes (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997), and higher levels of trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). These benefits to teacher practice are thought to indirectly affect student achievement (Goddard et al., 2007), although there is little research that makes a direct connection between teacher collaboration and student achievement.

Despite a growing body of research that reveals collaboration as essential for school improvement and many school districts having explicit goals around collaboration, Hargreaves (1994) cautions that many efforts at productive collaboration have not produced the desired outcomes. Hargreaves (1994) believes failed efforts are a result of underestimating the micropolitics of schools, which causes collaborative cultures to be incompatible with "school

systems where decisions about curriculum and evaluation are highly centralized" (p. 193). As a result, contrived collegiality emerges, which can be characterized as administratively regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space, and predictable as opposed to spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across space and time, and unpredictable. In other words, contrived collegiality "replaces spontaneous, unpredictable, and difficult-to-control forms of teacher-generated collaboration with forms of collaboration that are captured, contained, and contrived by administrators instead" (p. 196).

By building the capacity of teachers, principals influence student achievement. One way principals accomplish this is by purposely developing communities of practice within their schools (Hitt & Tucker, 2015) and the leadership of the principal directly influences the establishment of professional communities and collaboration. Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, and Valentine (1999) highlight that on the one hand, the principal's ability to build trust is an important factor to facilitate the establishment of professional communities. On the other hand, the principal's actions, such as the misalignment of actual values and norms with stated views and taking a hands-off approach while relinquishing responsibility, impedes the facilitation of professional communities. While the work and actions of principals appear in the research on educator collaboration, there is less research focused on central office administrator collaboration. I now turn to this body of research.

Theme 2: Administrator Collaboration

Just as teachers face new demands in the era of accountability, district administrators now play key roles in efforts to strengthen teaching and learning (Honig, 2008). This represents a shift in the work practices of central office administrators. Historically, central office administrators were tasked with carrying out a range of regulatory and business functions,

including managing student enrollment and tax revenue. For much of the 20th[th]-century, administrators working within central offices continued to pay little attention to improving outcomes for students (Honig, 2013a, 2013b). Various policy initiatives, including NCLB, now call on central office administrators to adjust their work practices to support teaching and learning.

The current research on central office administrator practice is relatively thin and while there is a need for research in this area, there is a growing body of research on the role of school districts (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Some studies have highlighted how districts establish visions and align instruction to support improved teaching and learning (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). In addition, research points to the important role school district central offices play in providing schools new knowledge about best practices and supporting schools learning about those practices (Spillane & Thompson, 1997). As Honig (2008) asserts, these studies anchor district research and practice but do not provide information about what central office administrators do on a day-to-day basis to support improving student outcomes. Furthermore, they do not provide insight into how central office administrators collaborate or work together in professional communities (Honig, 2008; Honig & Hatch, 2004).

Honig (2008) draws from organizational and sociocultural learning theories to describe what central office administrators might do to support improved outcomes, noting that central office administrators may participate in assistance relationships with schools. In some districts, central office administrators have started to convene principal professional learning communities with the goal of strengthening principals' instructional leadership. When central office administrators approach this with a teaching orientation and central offices create the conditions

for success, this strategy has proven to be effective (Honig & Rainey, 2014). While this places central office administrators within school-based teams, it does not address how central office administrators collaborate with one another to create district-wide coherence and build their own knowledge and skills to provide meaningful assistance to schools.

To support the learning of superintendents, a role that is associated with a feeling of isolation, Hatch and Roegman (2012) describe how superintendents in New Jersey come together to engage in instructional rounds (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) and activities to identify problems of practice in their districts. In addition to providing peer-based support, these groups provide superintendents with the opportunity to learn from one another as they try to influence positive change within their districts (Thomas Hatch & Roegman, 2012). Other superintendents and central office administrators have implemented instructional rounds in their districts to establish a collaborative culture and develop a common language and understanding of high quality teaching (City et al, 2009; Hatch, Hill, & Roegman, 2016). Participating in instructional rounds creates the opportunity for administrators to interact with peers they do not work with every day and provides the opportunity for mutual engagement in a process that has the potential to improve teaching and learning. In the process, rounds could contribute to the shared understanding and shared purpose that are associated with communities of practice (Hatch et al., 2016).

Additionally, there is growing enthusiasm for partnering with external organizations (e.g. consultants, foundation-based projects, researchers) for district improvement (Farrell & Coburn, 2017). External partners can provide the tools, expertise, and other resources that are also associated with a community of practice and support improvement and change at the district level (Farrell & Coburn, 2017; Honig & Ikemoto, 2008). While creating and maintaining a

productive partnership can be difficult, when successful, the collaboration between an external partner and the school district central office can contribute to changes in the districts' culture, norms, and beliefs about instruction and help develop the knowledge and skills of administrators (Marsh et al., 2005). Under some conditions, district leaders can learn in ways that support their improvement efforts (Farrell & Coburn, 2017). External partners have been heavily relied on as part of turnaround efforts at both the state and federal level (Le Floch, Boyle, & Therriault, 2008). Next I will summarize the research on collaboration as it relates to school turnaround efforts.

Theme 3: Turnaround Work and Collaboration

States, not the federal government, have the constitutional responsibility for providing public education in the United States, and throughout history states delegated this responsibility to local school districts (McDermott, 2006). However, shifts since the 1960s have led to increased state and federal roles, including a focus on accountability and standards. Today, the federal government has greater control of education than at any other point in history, and standards and assessment-based accountability have become central to education policy.

NCLB built upon earlier state and federal reforms to mandate that schools and districts dramatically improve performance and expanded the role of the federal government in education. While deferring to states in the context of standards and measures of success, annual testing was required nationally in grades 3 – 10, and sanctions were imposed for schools that did not improve. There was an expectation that the average score for all students would improve year to year and the scores of various subgroups within a school or district would also improve. These subgroups included historically underserved populations including Black and Latino students in addition to students with disabilities and low-income students. The ultimate aim was to

eliminate the achievement gap between White middle class students and ethnic minority students (Valenzuela, Prieto, & Hamilton, 2007).

Across the country, schools and districts that continually failed to meet improvement targets were labeled as "in need of improvement" and faced a series of sanctions including "school improvement," "corrective action," and finally "restructuring" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In Massachusetts an annual Accountability Report is published classifying all districts into one of five accountability and assistance levels, and generally, districts are classified into the level of its lowest performing school. The highest performing districts are designated Level 1 and the lowest performing are designated Level 5, which represents receivership (Accountability, Partnerships and Targeted Assistance, 2017).

Once a district enters receivership in Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) commits to providing resources for developing research-based tools designed to support continuous school improvement. The district develops a three-year turnaround plan with recommendations from a local stakeholders group (e.g. teachers, parents, workforce, early education, or higher education) and the Commissioner of Education.

Turnaround efforts incorporate measures meant to quickly narrow persistent achievement gaps. Since school turnaround is a relatively new concept and utilized infrequently prior to the passage of NCLB, there is limited research on the impact of turnaround efforts. However, early reports on the success of turnaround schools and districts are mixed (Finnigan, Daly & Stewart, 2012; Mette & Scribner, 2014) and no single strategy has proven to be effective (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). In order for accountability systems to work, they need to appeal to high-performing teachers and administrators. Simply intensifying pressure and sanctions, both central to turnaround efforts, only creates defensiveness and turns people off (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2006).

Tremendous pressure and short timelines to reach goals are associated with limited school improvement. These features lead to limited exploration and learning and result in action plans that are unlikely to lead to new learning or have a large impact (Finnigan, Daly & Stewart, 2012).

Mette and Scribner (2014) describe a turnaround case study in which the school principal used data to effectively identify problems and weed out ineffective teachers, but was ultimately unable to motivate existing teachers. Despite gains in student assessment scores, the reliance on assessment burdened teachers, overwhelmed students, and left the principal feeling that the turnaround process damaged the school's culture.

Turning around a chronically underperforming district cannot be accomplished by any one single leader, administrative team or by a few eager teachers. This is one reason that using collaborative teaming structures to accelerate improvement is an ongoing strategy in turnaround efforts. Collaboration is often centered on inquiry cycles to quickly assess how well strategies are working (Lane et al., 2016). Little is written about the role of central office administrators in these inquiry cycles or the collaborative practices used in the central office as administrators work to support schools in realizing their goals for improving outcomes for all students.

Summary of the Literature

Over the past two decades, reform efforts have underscored the importance of teachers not being left to rely on their own and included an emphasis on educator collaboration. Until recently, collaboration was frequently advocated, while the effects of collaboration were investigated with less frequency. In recent years a number of studies have linked teacher collaboration and well-connected teacher networks with positive outcomes for teachers and these benefits to teacher practice are thought to indirectly affect student achievement. Principals

purposely develop communities of practice within their schools and central office administrators also play a role in establishing a collaborative culture.

In addition, various policy initiatives now call on central office administrators to adjust their work practices to support teaching and learning, requiring them to build their own knowledge and skills to provide meaningful assistance to schools. Participating in instructional rounds is consistent with the idea of a community of practice and one way that central office administrators can support organizational learning and district-wide improvement. Partnering with external organizations is another way central office administrators collaborate and one that has been heavily relied on as part of turnaround efforts at both the state and federal level. Further, the use of collaborative teaming structures is an ongoing strategy in turnaround efforts. However, little is written about the role of central office administrators in these efforts or how collaboration occurs in the central office as administrators work to support schools in realizing their goals for improving outcomes for all students.

In sum, while there is a growing body of research on educator collaboration, particularly at the school level, there is a need for additional research on how collaborations occur within the central office for administrators working to support improved teaching and learning across a district. My individual study will be focused on what collaboration looks like and how it occurs among central office administrators.

Conceptual Framework

Despite the need for more research on central office administrator collaboration, research on school improvement leads us to hypothesize that the task of improving outcomes for all students in a district, particularly those who have been underserved, will only be realized when district leaders work together. Unlike collaborative teams at the school level, which are likely to

be more stable and structured, collaboration of central office administrators is likely to be more flexible due to the shifting nature of the work and the many demands on administrators' time (Edmondson, 2012). Due to the anticipated flexible and dynamic nature of collaboration at the central office level, I turn to the concept of communities of practice from sociocultural learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) as my conceptual framework. This practice-based theory of learning in which fluid social relations are enacted with a self-selected group of participants (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Thompson, 2005), is a pertinent conceptual framework to guide this study for three reasons. First, it places learning in practice, which is central to effective collaboration and fits with this study, which aims to explore the practice of central office administrators in one district. Second, this theory acknowledges the role of social relationships in learning, also an important aspect of collaboration as individuals share their individual knowledge and increase their collective knowledge and capacity. Third, participation can be self-selected and often individuals participate in multiple communities of practice. This is likely to occur since central office administrators engage in many different kinds of work and must address multiple demands.

The dynamic of legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice helps us understand that social structure and meaning are negotiated through participation. The more people participate, the more they learn and identify with the group. This leads people to participate further and increases learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Drawing on several learning theories to describe the characteristics of communities of practice, Wenger (1998) emphasizes the way people think, experience, and learn as they participate in social activity. In recent years, communities of practice have received recognition from both academics and practitioners as a way of thinking about learning, identity, and motivation within groups (Thompson, 2005).

Wenger's (1998, p. 125-126) indicators that a community of practice has formed, presented in Table 1, take into account the ideas summarized above including identity, relationships, and participation, in addition to the ideas of joint enterprise and shared repertoire of ways of reasoning with tools and artifacts. With regard to interactions, it is not necessary that all participants interact intensely with everyone else, but, the more they do, the more they will resemble a single community of practice. Similarly, it is not necessary that everything participants do be accountable to joint enterprise, but the more this is the case, the more evidence there will be that they have spent time negotiating what it is they are trying to accomplish. Further, a repertoire may not be completely locally produced but the more there is evidence that it has been adopted and adapted for the purpose of the group, the more it is likely that people are involved in "doing together" and engaging in a sustained way (Wenger, 1998).

Table 4

Indicators that a Community of Practice has Formed

(1) Sustained mutual relations – harmonious and conflictual

(2) Shared ways of engaging in doing things together

(3) The rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation

(4) Absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely continuing of an ongoing process

(5) Very quick setup of a problem to be discussed

(6) Substantial overlap in participants' description of who belongs

(7) Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise

(8) Mutually defining identities

(9) The ability to asses the appropriateness of actions and products

(10) Specific tools, representations, and other artifacts

(11) Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter

(12) Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones

(13) Certain styles recognized as displaying members

(14) Shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world

Since communities of practice can form without being named, it is possible that central office administrators are part of learning communities that they may not explicitly state or acknowledge, and therefore, collaborate more frequently than they believe. The ideas of collaborative structures, joint enterprise, and learning in practice, which can be seen in the indicators of communities of practice above, will be used to help me identify the extent to which communities of practice exist in the district. Table 2 summarizes and describes these three aspects of collaborative learning communities, which taken together will allow me to analyze

both collaboration and the way knowledge is shared and created. It is the lens with which I

analyze and describe collaboration in the district as it was shared through interviews and direct

observation.

Table 5

Aspects of Collaborative Learning Communities

Aspect	Description
Structures	Organizational structures and teams Specific tools, representations, and other artifacts Formal and informal meetings

Joint enterprise	Shared ways of engaging in doing things
	Knowing what others know, what they can do, and
	   how they can contribute to the enterprise
	Quick setup of a problem to be discussed
	Ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and
	   products

Learning in practice	Participation
	Rapid flow of information and propagation of
	   innovation
	Conversations and interactions are part of an ongoing
	   process

Methods

This qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009) was designed to explore the

collaboration of central office administrators working in support of historically marginalized

students. Because turnaround districts often serve the populations of historically marginalized,

underserved students that we were interested in studying, we conducted our investigation in one

specific district designated as Level 5 in January 2016. This means at the time of data collection,

which occurred from August 2017 to November 2017, the district was in their third year of

implementing the turnaround plan.

Data Collection

Using qualitative research methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), data were collected in an effort to understand the social relationships, structural components, and ways knowledge is shared when central office administrators collaborate. We designed the study to be emergent and flexible to allow ourselves to respond to changing conditions in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and allow the research team to follow up on important insights and relevant data. The primary source of data collection was interviews of central office administrators. We followed up with an observation of a central office meeting and a document review to help triangulate information collected in the interviews and enrich the data (Yin, 2009).

Interviews. Typical of qualitative studies, interviews were the primary source of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2009). While the goals of the larger study were to better understand the work practices of central office administrators when striving to improve outcomes for historically marginalized populations, the focus of my individual study was to better understand how central office administrators collaborate.

The district was relatively small in size and therefore we interviewed all nine central office administrators in the district. This included the Superintendent/Receiver, Chief of Strategy & Turnaround, Chief Academic Officer, Chief of Pupil Services, Chief Financial and Operational Officer, Chief of Talent, Chief of Family and Community Engagement, Executive Director of Secondary Education & Pathways, and the Executive Director of Schools. Conducting interviews was an effective way to collect data for my study as it allowed me to gain insight into the collaborative practice of central office administrators and the factors that support or hinder collaboration without embedding myself in the central office to observe day-to-day interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewing all central office administrators allowed

for interviewees to provide corroborative or contrary evidence on their views of central office

administrator collaboration (Yin, 2009).

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol (Merriam, 2009), which is provided in

Appendix A. They each lasted approximately 45 – 60 minutes and all interviews were recorded

and later transcribed. Interview questions were carefully worded to be broad and open-ended,

allowing for a discussion to unfold between the interviewer and interviewee (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016; Yin, 2009). Prior to asking questions about the specific areas of study, overarching

questions were posed to help set the context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We asked what some of

the district goals were, which provided specific information about collaboration in the district as

well.

To the greatest extent possible, questions were written to gather data related to multiple

areas of study (Yin, 2009). An example of this is a question that was aimed at gathering

information about how and what policies are being implemented in the district and how central

office administrators collaborated to implement those policies. When interviewees answered, we

learned how policy is implemented, how central office administrators collaborate to make sense

of and implement policy, and how central office administrators communicate about their work to

support historically marginalized populations, which is another area of focus in the larger study.

Three interview questions were written to gather specific information about the

opportunities for central office administrators to collaborate and the collaborative practices in the

district: (1) We know from reading the turnaround plan that professional collaboration is a

priority area. What does this look like at the central office?; (2) When collaborating with central

office colleagues, what processes or strategies would you say work well or support your efforts

to collaborate?; and (3) What are some challenges you face when collaborating with central office colleagues?

Additional interview questions that will provide information related to my area of study and serve multiple purposes include: (1) Who are the people [internal and external] you turn to for advice related to the district's goals and efforts?; and (2) What internal and external policies are central office administrators currently focused on? How do you and your colleagues work together to implement these policies?

Observations. To gain a first-hand sense of how central office administrators collaborate in the district and to triangulate information, one observation of a meeting on a topic related to improving teaching and learning took place after the individual interviews. The meeting involved three central office administrators and other administrators on the teaching and learning team. This allowed me to study the actual behavior of district administrators (Creswell, 2012). By focusing on the extent to which participants interact and the extent to which evidence of joint enterprise and learning in practice exists, observation data expanded upon the data collected through interviews.

While observing this meeting, details were jotted and later expanded into lengthier descriptive fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). To the greatest extent possible, quotes and statements made by participants were recorded as actions and reactions. Completed field notes began with a description of the meeting environment and provided details such as the tools or artifacts used or created, what individuals did or said, and how members contributed to the learning.

Document review. To enrich the data collected in interviews, data also included a document review (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, I analyzed the district's turnaround plan as well

as reports related to the turnaround plan to gain an understanding of the historically marginalized

populations served in the district and to learn the district goals and the improvement strategies

that relate to collaboration. This allowed me to better understand the role of central office

administrators in collaborative teaming structures and how collaboration occurs in the central

office as administrators work to support schools in realizing their goals for improving outcomes

for all students.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously allowing the researchers to think

about existing data while collecting new data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The team

kept a research journal throughout both data collection and analysis. Details about events,

decisions, questions, and wonderings were recorded (Yin, 2009). Entries were made after each

interview, observation, and each analysis in order to capture the investigators' reflections,

tentative themes, hunches, ideas, and additional things we wanted to pursue based on what was

derived from the data set (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). I also kept my own

research journal related to collaboration. As I read the entries of others and looked at the raw

data, I recorded ideas, hunches, and questions related to my specific area of study.

The team utilized text segment coding and labeling to organize various aspects of our

data in order to form descriptions and broad themes (Creswell, 2012). For the purposes of my

study, data were coded as it pertains to collaboration and communities of practice using the

broad categories of (1) collaborative structures, (2) relationships, (3) joint enterprise, (4) shared

repertoire, and (5) learning (Miles et al., 2014). Using these broad categories allowed me to

analyze both the structure of collaboration and the extent to which knowledge may be shared and

created (Wenger, 1998). Other codes emerged during data collection related to collaboration

(Merriam, 2009). Second Cycle coding occurred as a way of grouping the indicators into more specific categories (Miles et al., 2014). After coding, data were synthesized to better understand the degree of frequency that district leaders collaborate and the conditions that both promote and hinder central office administrator collaboration. Findings are presented in a narrative discussion.

Study Limitations

Qualitative case study is a reliable research design, as it describes interactions in a realistic context (Yin, 2009). As previously mentioned, this study relied primarily on qualitative interviews, making the researcher the primary vehicle for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). As a result, how collaboration occurs and the conditions that both hinder and support collaboration will be predominantly self-reported. This creates the potential for individual opinions or biases. While our research team, consisting of central office and building level administrators, will use collaborative coding to recognize and document potential biases among our research team, it is more difficult to control biases that are present among the research participants. Despite this, the data collected will provide insight into how central office administrators in this district think about and experience collaboration.

While one observation occurred and the turnaround documents were reviewed to triangulate and enrich the interview data, central office administrators were relied on to determine the meetings and events to be observed and arrange access to these meetings. This is a limitation as other meetings may have provided important data to which we did not have access.

The aspect of time is also a limitation of this study. With approximately four months to collect data, I only study how central office administrators collaborate for a fixed period of time.

I do not investigate how central office administrators learn together or how collaborative practices develop over time.

Finally, the main unit of analysis is the central office administrators and does not include their relationships with schools. As a result, this study will not go as far as to measure the impact of central office administrator collaboration on schools.

District Context

Before delving into findings, it is important to understand the broader context of the district. The district went into receivership in April 2015 after being designated as Level 5, or chronically underperforming. The receiver was appointed in July 2015 and the turnaround plan was presented to the community in October 2015. At the time of data collection, fall 2017, the district was beginning their third year of turnaround work.

A central theme of the turnaround plan is that of "rapid improvement" for the benefit of all students in the district. The plan acknowledges that some students in the district were previously allowed to fail and was written in an effort to raise the bar and provide all students with a "world-class education." This idea was also communicated in interviews with administrators saying that the focus of the district, particularly this year, can be described as "excellence" and "urgency." To achieve excellence and "move the needle," as one participant stated, administrators talked a lot about holding people accountable, prioritizing their time, and focusing on the "real work" and results.

The turnaround plan states that one of the critical action steps to facilitate turnaround in the district is "extend time to increase learning opportunities for both students and staff." Five priority areas are identified to achieve rapid improvement, including "develop leadership, shared responsibility, and professional collaboration." In interviews, some central office administrators

shared that collaboration, as written about in the turnaround plan, was a strategy for teachers and school-based teams. One administrator, who also works directly with a few schools in the role of a school supervisor, agreed that collaboration was a school-based initiative, but felt it was her role to ensure that "collaboration is rich and supportive of increased rigor" within each of the schools she works.

The district has undergone and continues to undergo significant restructuring. As one central office administrator stated, there has been "a lot of change and a lot of turnover." Currently the district considers nine administrators to make up the central office team. All nine have been appointed to their roles since receivership, and eight of the nine are also new to the district. A new central office administrator position was created for the 2017-18 school year, and therefore, a new team member joined the district in July. During data collection, I learned the district was still reorganizing and changes were being made to both the roles people played in the district and the meetings they attended. Of the now nine central office administrators, seven are considered cabinet members and four are considered school supervisors (two are both cabinet members and school supervisors). The cabinet and school supervisors each met separately and therefore, limited opportunities existed for all of the central office administrators to interact with one another. I now turn to findings of this study on the ways central office administrators interact and collaborate to support marginalized populations.

Findings

This qualitative case study explored the ways central office administrators interact and collaborate to support historically marginalized populations in a turnaround district. The purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions: (1) How do communities of practice emerge within the central office when working to improve outcomes for historically

marginalized students?; and (2) What conditions foster or hinder administrator collaboration? The findings, synthesized in Table 3, suggest that efforts were made by central office administrators to collaborate in the district and conditions existed that both supported and hindered collaboration.

First, I summarize the structures that were in place that support and limit collaboration. The district prioritized time to collaborate and collaboration occurred in formal and informal meetings. Central office administrators used tools, such as agendas, protocols, project plans, and a data dashboard, which is another structure that allowed collaboration to occur. Structures that hindered collaboration included the organizational structure of the central office and the lack of authority to make decisions. Next, I turn to the extent that joint enterprise existed among central office administrators.

Central office administrators in the district were broadly engaged in joint enterprise related to improving outcomes in the district for all students. However, the number of priorities and the structure of meetings did not allow administrators to negotiate a joint enterprise to narrow the focus of their work related to a challenge for which they are mutually accountable.

Finally, I summarize the conditions that supported and hindered learning in practice. There were instances in which learning in practice seemed to occur in the district, including during meetings of job-alike groups and departments. In spite of this, the number of priorities in the district appeared to create an implementation orientation and there was an overreliance on prior knowledge, as opposed to new learning that was anchored in practice. I now turn to the findings about collaborative structures in the district and how they support and hinder collaboration.

Table 6

Factors that Support and Hinder Collaboration

Aspect of Collaboration	Factors that Support Collaboration	Factors that Hinder Collaboration
Structures	Providing time for collaboration Use of tools (e.g. data dashboard)	Organizational structure of the central office Authority to make decisions
Joint enterprise	District goals and signature benchmarks	Number of goals in the district Structure and expectations for meetings
Learning in practice	Meetings of job-alike groups and department groups	Implementation oriented Overuse of prior knowledge

Structures

The turnaround plan included five priority areas that the district would focus on. One of these five areas was to "develop leadership, shared responsibility, and professional collaboration." While collaboration is often unpredictable, districts frequently establish structures in an effort to support collaboration (Datnow, 2011). This was evident in the district. The turnaround plan stated the district will "develop and/or enhance systems and structures at the district and school levels to encourage and facilitate professional collaboration across and within schools." Benchmarks related to this strategy included evaluating current processes and structures and creating opportunities and time to collaborate, learn from each other, and share best practices.

Support collaboration. Analysis of interview data identified various structures that were employed in the district that appeared to support central office administrator collaboration. These fell into two types of supports, including providing time for central office administrators to work together and using tools. Tools included agendas, protocols, and the data dashboard.

Providing time. Many of the central office administrators spoke about meeting time that was set aside to support collaboration. This included cabinet meetings and meetings with their teams, both departmental and school-based in the case of the school supervisors. As one central office administrator said, "not a week goes by that we're not talking about what is happening in the schools, and then that provides the opportunity for other district divisions to push into our meetings." Another administrator talked about weekly meetings over the summer that included both chiefs and school supervisors to prepare for the first day of school. This administrator felt this was both positive and supportive, in part because it gave school supervisors access to cabinet members.

Administrators talked about working with both formal and informal teams. Due to the shifting nature of the work of central office administrators and the many demands on time, informal teams consisting of two or more individuals was described by all central office administrators. Some talked about working with individuals on their teams to plan events or figure out how to help teachers grow. Others talked about collaborating with another central office administrator to accomplish a task or consult around a specific student case or parent complaint. One participant described working with other central office administrators to "consult on something that is very focused such as a task I have." Another participant described her work with central office colleagues by saying, "often we meet together and bounce

preliminary ideas off each other, come to provide reasoning behind things, and understand where

each other is coming from, and decide who is going to take charge of next steps."

Many of the administrators also talked about having regular one-on-one meetings with

the Superintendent and regular one-on-one meetings with the Chief of Strategy & Turnaround.

Both of these meetings were highlighted as ways central office administrators work together,

however, they appear to be less about collaboration and more about checking in on progress.

The meetings with the superintendent were described as coaching meetings, and one

administrator shared that he helped her prioritize her time during these meetings. She said that

her schedule "had me doing some things, and the superintendent wanted me to prioritize my time

in a different way, and he talked through the changes, like why prioritize this over that." The

meetings with the Chief of Strategy & Turnaround were described as opportunities to check in

about how a project plan is going.

Many central office administrators also talked about quarterly retreats when describing

collaboration. These meetings were half-day meetings in which all the central office teams got

together to problem solve. One participant explained, "we look at data, assess progress toward

benchmarks, and make changes based on where we are. For example, last June, at the quarter 4

retreat, we identified the most significant gaps and those informed the benchmarks for the

current year." Another participant said the retreats provided the opportunity to "dive into other

people's benchmarks." As illustrated by these quotes, the retreats were viewed as effective and

provided an opportunity to learn what was happening with other teams and departments.

Time was provided to allow central office administrators to collaborate. This was evident

in descriptions of formal meetings such as cabinet meetings, meetings with school supervisors,

and quarterly retreats. Central office administrators also had time to meet and collaborate with their departments and teams.

   Use of tools. Central office administrators talked about a number of tools that supported collaboration in the district. Tools that support collaboration open dialogue between perspectives, invite different levels of participation, and allow the team, or community of practice, to learn. The tools used in the district included agendas, protocols, benchmark document, project plans, and the data dashboard.

   For example, agendas were created for meetings and protocols were used. One protocol mentioned in interviews included a protocol used in cabinet meetings when a cabinet member is presenting.   A participant explained, "a cabinet member features one aspect of the data dashboard and talks about how each of the schools is doing. Then the other cabinet members can ask questions. First clarifying questions are asked, then probing questions, and then we discuss. The presenter then talks about some reflections and where they are headed." This allows administrators to understand how the district is progressing towards benchmarks and engage in discussions about how they might improve.

   In addition, the signature benchmarks and project plans were highlighted as tools for supporting collaboration. Roles are assigned in project plans (e.g. owner, manager, approver), and believed by some to support collaboration by having multiple people assigned to one project. One administrator stated, "it involves a lot of collaboration across all departments in some cases, depending on the nature of the benchmark and the project." This allows central office administrators to work with others, and in some instances, with a broader range of people.

   The data dashboard was described as another tool that supports collaboration. Specific indicators that were part of the dashboard were determined to be important and as one

administrator said, the dashboard shows "you're either on track or you're off track." One

administrator said, "when we're talking about measuring our progress, we know what tool we're

using, what data points we're talking about." This participant felt that the data dashboard was

helpful so when they talked about data, there was no misunderstanding about what they were

talking about.

The district used tools including meeting agendas, protocols, project plans, and the data

dashboard to focus their time and work together. This supported the collaboration of central

office administrators in the district by increasing opportunities to participate and learn from each

other.

Hindering collaboration. Although time and tools provided structural support for

collaboration, participants also identified several aspects of the structure of their work that

hindered collaboration. Structures that hindered collaboration included: (1) the organizational

structure of the central office administrators; and (2) authority to make decisions.

Organizational structure of central office administrators. As previously described, all

central office administrators in the district were new to their roles and almost all were new to the

district, which impacts their ability to collaborate and operate as a community of practice. Upon

receivership, the central office team was reorganized and new administrative positions were

created, including Chief of Strategy & Turnaround and Chief of Family & Community

Engagement. Most recently, the role of Executive Director of Schools was created and a new

administrator began in this role in July 2017.   In addition to new administrators, the

responsibilities of some central office administrators have continued to shift. For example, the

role of the Chief Academic Officer had been to work with curriculum, instruction, and

assessment and lead the teaching and learning team. The role shifted in 2017-18 to be more of

an Assistant Superintendent. One administrator shared that the Chief Academic Officer has been

involved with "putting out fires and working specifically with three of the 11 schools." Another

participant provided an example of this when she mentioned that the Chief Academic Officer had

been at a school on the morning of the interview because a staff member at the school had passed

away over the weekend.

With roles of central office administrators shifting and new administrators joining the

central office administrative team, challenges and limitations of the meeting structure were

created. Cabinet meetings, which almost all participants referenced when describing

collaboration of central office administrators in the district, included the Superintendent, Chief

Academic Officer, Chief of Strategy & Turnaround, Chief of Family & Community

Engagement, Chief Talent Officer, Chief of Pupil Services, and Chief Finance & Operations

Officer prior to interviews. One participant described the challenge of the cabinet meetings. She

said, "what we found often is we didn't have the right people at the table to talk about those

signature benchmarks because we needed to talk to the school supervisors who weren't on

cabinet or, for example, we needed the Deputy Chief of Pupil Services." One central office

administrator who was not part of the cabinet meetings talked about how the cabinet developed

the signature benchmarks and shared, "then the work filters down to the people who actually

have to support the work, for example the director on the teaching and learning team, some of

the directors in pupil services or family engagement, and the school supervisors who are actually

in the schools making sure the work is happening." These quotes illustrate the challenges

created by the organizational structure of the central office.

At the time of data collection, the cabinet was split into two groups that would begin to

meet separately and other administrators were added to the meetings. There would be one

meeting related to instruction and student support, which would include school supervisors and directors. The second meeting would be related to finance and operations. One reason cited for the most recent restructuring was to ensure the right people were at the table during meetings. The shift was viewed positively and one participant felt the change would provide "continuity between what we say should be happening and what is actually happening." In addition, some central office administrators did not feel they were part of efforts to collaborate at the central office. One specifically said, "I'm not part of the central office team." The change of the meeting structure will likely change that feeling, however it will likely take time for the team to come together, establish team norms, and begin to collaborate effectively.

With new central office administrators and the titles and roles of central office administrators shifting, the time set aside to meet and collaborate did not include all central office administrators that needed to be at the table. As a result, information needed to trickle down from the cabinet to directors, school supervisors, and others responsible for doing the work. This was identified an as area to improve and efforts are being made to ensure all central office administrators that carry out the work attend meetings.

Authority to make decisions. While some central office administrators talked about autonomy to make decisions, it appears that the superintendent is the decision maker, which hinders collaboration. Project plans, which were described as a structure that supports collaboration, assign the role of approver, and as one central office administrator stated, "we have the superintendent as the approver for almost everything."

In another administrator's description about a time that he collaborated, he talked about working and consulting with others to create alternative options to an existing structure. In this example, he explored options and then presented the options to the superintendent. When a decision was

ultimately made it was the superintendent, not the team, to arrive at the decision. Other

administrators also talked about presenting ideas to the superintendent or going to a specific

central office administrator who appears to be close to the superintendent to learn what he is

thinking.

One administrator felt the district administrators needed to be clear about decision rights.

She elaborated, saying that in the district people are hesitant to make decisions because

previously they were told 'do this' or 'follow this script.' She stated that they are working to

empower people to make decisions, which can be a challenge when people are fearful of making

the wrong decision or don't know they are empowered to make decisions.

In the meeting observed, authority to make decisions also appeared to hinder

collaboration. In the observation, those with higher-level positions in the district spoke more

frequently. Others did not speak at all unless it was their turn to share or a question that was

asked of them directly. As a result, few voices dominated the discussion and made decisions.

This was also brought up in the interviews. One administrator shared that he feels they try to

engage people in meaningful dialogue in meetings so that one or two people do not dominate the

meeting, but this remains an area to improve.

The unpredictable nature of collaborative teams requires teams to have some level of

decision-making authority. Collaborative teams need authority to make decisions about how to

respond to challenges, and what might improve teaching and learning outcomes. The

superintendent was widely viewed as the decision maker, which does not allow collaborative

teams the authority to make decisions and work in new ways.

Summary of structures. Conditions in the district exist that both support and hinder

collaboration. On the one hand, collaborative structures were in place to support collaboration.

Time was set aside for central office administrators to meet and tools were used to make efficient use of the meeting time. Agendas were created and protocols were used to invite participation. The benchmark document, project plans, and data dashboard were utilized to facilitate collaboration, provide focus areas, and measure progress. On the other hand, collaborative structures also hindered central office administrator collaboration. The majority of the central office administrators were new to the district and their roles continued to evolve, which impacted their ability to collaborate with each other. In addition, the superintendent was the decision maker and therefore, teams did not have authority to try new ways of working. There was an understanding of the conditions that hinder collaboration, even if the link was not made to the impact on collaboration. Efforts are being made to restructure meetings to improve the learning and work of central office administrators.

Joint Enterprise

Within sociocultural learning theory, learning involves an individual's engagement with others in particular activities. Joint enterprise is the idea that a collaborative team takes on a complex project or challenge for which the individuals on the team are all mutually accountable. Joint enterprise is negotiated by participants and their negotiated response to the challenge creates a situation where it belongs to them despite all the forces and influences beyond their control (Wenger, 1998). In other words, after spending time negotiating a problem of practice and developing an action plan, a team is more likely to feel a sense of ownership and mutual accountability for the work. There was some evidence of the central office administrators' engagement in joint enterprise, however there were limitations to the extent that joint enterprise existed in the district.

District goals and signature benchmarks. The joint enterprise of central office administrators broadly relates to improving outcomes for all students. Many central office administrators talked about the district's benchmark document that guides district work. This document was also frequently referred to in the teaching and learning meeting observed. The district currently has 29 benchmarks and six signature benchmarks, which was described as a reduction over the three years the district has been in receivership. There is a general consensus that the benchmarks are meaningful and, accordingly, the benchmark document is a tool that helps to focus the work of central office administrators. This document creates an opportunity for all central office administrators to contribute in some capacity to the broad challenge of improving the district.

Number of goals in the district. The benchmark document falls short of helping the central office teams to engage in joint enterprise around a problem of practice for which they are mutually accountable. With 29 benchmarks, specific endeavors are assigned to different teams and when central office administrators meet, the "owner" of the benchmark updates others on progress made. One administrator shared that often the central office administrators will say they are going to work on something together but then there is too much to do and they don't do it. Another stated that the "overload of urgencies" prevents administrators from collaborating to address a specific challenge or problem of practice.

Some central office administrators expressed the desire to reduce the number of goals and priorities in the district. One participant said, "I wish we would be clear about what our priorities are. I mean we have five clear priorities, six signature benchmarks, but I'm not really sure what the work entails and how that's penetrating into schools." She went on to say that, "there is so much that needs to be done that people aren't always able to focus on the most

pressing issues." As illustrated by this quote, some central office administrators did recognize the importance of engaging in a negotiation of a joint enterprise, although this was not directly stated.

Structure and expectations of meetings. As one administrator said during the interview, "meetings start and end so punctually." He went on to share that he didn't feel there was space to engage in deeper, richer collaborative conversations. He said, "there needs to be more work time and think time, longer periods of time where people can really hash things out." This was observed in the teaching and learning meetings. The meeting started and ended on time and the amount of time for each agenda item was adhered to very closely. The facilitator of the meeting kept time and he moved the group along by saying things such as "we are now at 1:22, this conversation ends at 1:30 so let's just take three minutes to talk to the person next to us about what we are communicating to each of those audiences. I'll time us." This discussion was about how to talk to different audiences including principals, parents, and students about the MCAS results. The team shared ideas such as hosting a parent night, meeting with individual students to set goals, and giving parents strategies for supporting students at home. It was unclear who would share these ideas, with whom they would be shared, and how they would be enacted. At the end of the discussion the facilitator said, "Thank you everyone for your thinking on that. Let's move to the next agenda item." The discussion turned to a review of action items from the week prior, which consisted of defining roles and identifying how many people in the district were working in the capacity of a coach.

Later in the meeting, the individuals reported out on the progress they made on their projects. There were a few instances of people sharing they would need help with their individual projects. For example, one person provided an update on vacation academy. He

shared that he will need support to determine who the target students for vacation academy are and what will be taught. A discussion did not take place about how to do this and the conversation moved to the next person. As illustrated by the range of agenda items and flow of discussion, there were limited opportunities to negotiate a joint enterprise and create mutual accountability.

Summary of joint enterprise. Central office administrators in the district were broadly engaged in joint enterprise related to improving outcomes in the district for all students. The number of priorities, as evidenced by the number of benchmarks in the district, and the structure of meetings did not allow administrators to negotiate a joint enterprise to narrow the focus of central office administrators' work related to a problem of practice for which they are mutually accountable.

Learning in Practice

Collaborative teams are held up as a promising improvement strategy in part because they place learning in practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). There are instances in which learning in practice occurs in the district including during meetings of job-alike groups and departments. The implementation orientation in the district and the overreliance on prior knowledge appear to limit new learning anchored in practice and hinder collaboration.

Meetings of job-alike groups and department groups. Almost all central office administrators described collaborating with their teams and departments. During meetings with teams and departments, many central office administrators described tackling problems related to their particular focus in the district. One participant talked about working with someone on his team to figure out "how we authentically help teachers with what they do everyday." Another participant talked about improving recruitment and increasing the hiring of diverse candidates.

A third highlighted the increase in the number of students enrolled in preschool as a success of her team. While cabinet meetings were described as meetings to update other central office administrators about progress made towards a specific benchmark, and the meeting observed followed a similar format, the work and learning required to meet goals appears to occur informally and in departments.

Implementation-oriented. While turning around a district provides many opportunities to tackle problems, the number of goals and initiatives in the district creates a situation that can best be described as reactive. As one administrator said, "I feel like we are on the go and react and react and react." This appears to create a culture where administrators have an implementation orientation as opposed to a learning orientation. One participant talked about working with the superintendent and her desire for him to offer professional advice. She said, "Unfortunately, it hasn't turned out to be that way. It's accountability and checking that things are getting done, so there's little space for that professional advice." She went on to say that, "we just have to be focused on implementation all the time." This was also observed in the teaching and learning meeting. The group was task-oriented as opposed to taking a learning stance. The agenda had specific times for each agenda item and, as described above, the group moved through the agenda, sticking very closely to the time allotted for each item. This was also how meetings were described during interviews. One participant said, after cabinet meetings "there are action items that we need to complete." This illustrates the focus on implementation in the district.

Overreliance on prior knowledge. The implementation orientation in the district appeared to limit opportunities for new learning, both at the central office and school level. All of the central office administrators talked about the importance of improving instruction but few

talked about adult learning and the culture needed for learning to occur. One participant said, "Asking for more collaboration around specific teaching and learning strategies or big projects or initiatives, we just haven't been able to get there." As a result, central office administrators appeared to be relying on their prior knowledge to shift practice in the district as opposed to collaborating to learn new ways of working.

Many emphasized holding others accountable for improvement. One central office administrator described the needs in the district by saying that, "teachers need to be held accountable for delivering quality instruction." She went on to say that "principals need to be in classrooms observing instruction. That's their number one focus and when there is not good instruction, or when teachers are not meeting the mark, they need to be held accountable." Placing an emphasis on accountability presumes people know how to solve the challenges faced and limits new learning.

Despite the tendency to overuse prior knowledge, one administrator shared that the superintendent has prioritized support of principals this school year and as an example, talked about a week long professional development attended over the summer by principals and central office administrators, Building Excellent Schools (BES). Others talked about this training positively saying that it really changed them. One administrator said he came back inspired and feeling like "we really need to figure out what to do." This illustrates some acknowledgement of needing to participate in new learning.

Another participant described participating in "on track meetings" the day prior to the interview. He said "the teams are just nowhere close to doing what they need to do to get these kids on track." He talked about his plan to change the structure to improve teaching learning. Specifically, he wanted to set up weekly "on track meetings" to monitor progress that include

administrators and coaches and the use of coaches to support teachers and improve teaching and learning. His goal is to "shift from a very teacher-centric approach, teacher stands at the front of the room and delivers instruction, to a student-centered approach where students actually have to do work during the period." While this does not appear to resemble the work at the central office, it is a start towards anchoring learning in practice and supporting the learning of new strategies and ways of working.

Summary of learning in practice. There were instances in which learning in practice seemed to occur in the district including during meetings of job-alike groups and departments. However, the number of priorities in the district appeared to create an implementation orientation. As administrators continued to be more reactionary in their work, and felt the need to move on to the next challenge, they appeared to use prior knowledge, as opposed to new learning that was anchored in practice.

Summary of Findings

One of the research questions of this study related to the conditions that foster and hinder collaboration. Structures in the district existed that both support and hinder collaboration of central office administrators. Time to collaborate and tools used supported collaboration. The organizational structure of the central office and limited authority to make decisions hindered efforts at collaboration.

The second research question related to communities of practice and how they emerge within the central office. To better understand how communities of practice emerge, I focused on two specific elements, joint enterprise and learning in practice. The joint enterprise of central office administrators related broadly to improving outcomes for all students, however there were limitations to the extent that joint enterprise existed in the district. The number of goals and

structure of meetings, which frequently provided central office administrators with updates about

progress towards benchmarks, limited the extent to which central office administrators were

engaged in negotiating a joint enterprise. Finally, there were instances in which learning in

practice seemed to occur in the district, however an implementation orientation and overreliance

on prior knowledge limited adult learning, at least at the central office level.

With these findings in mind, I now explore the implications for central office

administrators working to support and improve outcomes for historically marginalized

populations.

Discussion

While the research on collaboration is clear that improving outcomes at scale is hard

work and cannot be accomplished by educators working in isolation, this study revealed that

efforts to collaborate across a central office team and collaboration intended to build collective

knowledge to meet the needs of a large population of historically marginalized students is

challenging. With the work practices of central office administrators shifting and central office

administrators now required to play key roles in efforts to improve (Honig, 2008), there is a

broad understanding that efforts to collaborate must extend to central office administrators.

Many central office administrators in the district believed there were opportunities to collaborate

with central office colleagues, and clearly valued collaboration. However, some felt that the

efforts in the district aimed at improving collaboration were intended for school-based teams.

This is no surprise given the focus on teachers in the body of research that exists on collaboration

and the extent to which this guides practice. There is limited research on central office

administrators and how they collaborate or work together in professional communities.

In her research on the role of central office administrators', Honig (2008) described central office administrator's participation in assistance relationships with schools, which therefore placed them in school-based teams. There was evidence of this type of relationship in the district, particularly with regard to those in the role of school supervisor. It appears that it is through these assistance relationships that central offices administrators in the district support marginalized students. The research shows that by providing schools with new knowledge about best practices and supporting schools' learning about those practices, they can impact positive change. To capitalize on this type of relationship with schools and provide meaningful assistance, central office administrators in the district should examine the extent to which there is district-wide coherence, particularly among those in the school supervisor role and consider the extent to which school supervisors have the opportunity to build their knowledge and skills.

School supervisors and other central office administrators in the district appear to need space to develop new learning and capacities, which has the potential to accelerate improvement. Regardless of whether or not central office administrators felt that efforts to improve collaboration extended to them or if they felt meetings attended were valuable, all central office administrators talked about formal and informal meetings they attended with other central office administrators. The district clearly wanted and was engaged in work to make meetings productive. However, despite efforts, several central office administrators reported that meetings got in the way of the "real work" or were structured to provide updates on the work happening across the district, which falls short of collaboration. This limited spontaneous learning and the potential unexpected positive outcomes described by Hargreaves (1994) in his work on collaborative teams.

Within sociocultural learning theory, learning involves an individual's engagement with others in particular activities. The idea of joint enterprise is often thought of as a problem of practice with long-term value that grounds these engagements (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The absence of a specific challenge or problem of practice that has been negotiated by the central office administrators, appears to create a situation in which the participants of this study are reacting as opposed to exploring possible solutions to challenges, learning new ways of working, and taking proactive measures at improving teaching and learning for all students in the district. The number of goals and benchmarks in the district make it challenging to negotiate the two or three most important and high-leverage goal areas, however doing so will facilitate joint enterprise and support learning in practice.

Finally, communities of practice develop in stages. It is unrealistic to believe that with the large number of new central office administrators in the district, a mature community of practice with a sense of identity, combining new knowledge and a sense of collective responsibility would exist. Two factors exist that suggest a community of practice exists in its early stages. First, the central office administrators in the district have started to develop relationships with one another and as they continue to work together their relationships and sufficient trust will likely develop. Second, there is already common ground and a broad joint enterprise that connects the central office administrators in the district. The next step will be to establish the value of shared knowledge and decide what knowledge should be shared and how. Typically communities of practice start as loose networks that hold the possibility of becoming more connected. Once mature, they have the potential to grow in both membership and depth of knowledge shared (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

As the central office administrators in the district continue to work together and launch their community, it will be important for the central office team to define the scope of the work in a way that aligns with important issues for the district and identify the knowledge needs that will help the community develop.

Implications for Future Research

This study investigated how central office administrators collaborate to support historically marginalized populations. The research is relatively thin in the role central office administrators play in improving outcomes for marginalized students. It is also thin on what collaboration looks like among central office administrators. Future research on this topic could extend to other districts to better understand if the findings of this study were unique to the district studied or if patterns begin to emerge. It would be interesting to examine how central office administrators collaborate in support of historically marginalized students in a district that is not designated as Level 5, and therefore does not have the added pressure of turning around a district in a relatively short period of time. In addition, an opportunity exists to build upon this study by conducting a longitudinal study to examine how collaboration evolves over time in the district.

Conclusion

Collaboration is frequently held up as a successful practice for improving schools, yet it is studied with less frequency and research on collaboration of central office administrators is thin. In addition, little is known about how the turnaround process facilitates collaboration or is facilitated by collaboration. This study adds to the research on collaboration by describing the collaboration of central office administrators when working in support of historically marginalized students. The concept of a community of practice from sociocultural learning

theory was used as a lens to analyze the collaboration of central office administrators. Findings

suggest that efforts were made by central office administrators to collaborate in the district and

conditions existed to both support and hinder collaboration. The district prioritized time to

collaborate and collaboration occurred in formal and informal meetings. Central office

administrators used tools, such as agendas, protocols, project plans, and a data dashboard, which

supported collaboration. Structures that hindered collaboration included the organizational

structure of the central office and the lack of authority to make decisions. Central office

administrators in the district were broadly engaged in joint enterprise related to improving

outcomes in the district for all students. However, the number of priorities and the structure of

meetings did not allow administrators to negotiate a joint enterprise to narrow the focus of their

work related to a challenge for which they are mutually accountable. In addition, there were

instances in which learning in practice seemed to occur in the district, including during meetings

of job-alike groups and departments however, the number of priorities in the district appeared to

create an implementation orientation and there was an overreliance on prior knowledge, as

opposed to new learning that was anchored in practice. Since the concept of a community of

practice is of interest to scholars and practitioners, the findings of this study have implications

for both. Practitioners may reflect on their collaborative experiences and identify areas of focus

for their own practice. Findings may be helpful in improving the collaboration within the school

district studied, ultimately improving adult learning.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how central office administrators in a turnaround district organized their work in support of marginalized student populations. In doing so, our research team examined leadership actions through four distinct lenses related to communication (Palmer, 2018), collaboration (Smith, 2018), policy implementation (Galligan, 2018), and social network ties between and among district leaders (Kukenberger, 2018). Through the use of semi-structured interviews and document review, Galligan (2018) examined the policy implementation process of the central office administrators in a Massachusetts turnaround district focusing specifically on their ability to work together and balance internal and external policy demands with the purpose of better supporting marginalized students. Kukenberger (2018) considered and analyzed how the structure and flow of social relations between and among the central office administrators affect turnaround efforts and goals designed to support marginalized populations. In the same district context, Palmer (2018) explored the relationship between central office administrators' language and their support of historically marginalized students. Specifically, Palmer looked closely at how language shows commonality or disconnect in understanding and action between and among central office administrators when they work to support marginalized students. Smith (2018) studied the conditions that foster or hinder collaboration when working to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students and how communities of practice emerge among central office administrators.

Three central findings emerged following an in-depth analysis and synthesis of each individual study. First, as required by the Massachusetts system for support, central office

administrators organized their work in support of marginalized students in accordance with external, turnaround policy demands. Second, as the district transitioned into receivership (Accountability, Partnerships and Targeted Assistance, 2017), evolving organizational structures and systems posed various barriers and opportunities to accelerate improvement for these students. Third, the specific emotions central office administrators described seemed to influence progress toward signature benchmarks and goal attainment meant to improve outcomes for marginalized students in the district.

The following sections discuss these findings and their implications for both practice and future research. First, we discuss each of the three key findings regarding how central office administrators in this turnaround district organized their work in support of marginalized populations. Second, we provide recommendations for practitioners. Third, we expose the limitations of this study and provide recommendations for future research.

Central Office Administrators Organized Their Work in Accordance with Turnaround Policy

Collective findings indicated that central office administrators in this district organized their work in support of marginalized students in accordance with turnaround policy. As previously mentioned, the turnaround plan identified five broad goals that are either explicitly or implicitly designed to benefit traditionally marginalized students. A synthesis of findings from each author's individual studies revealed that as central office administrators organized their work around turnaround policy, they attempted to bring structure and focus to their work by scaffolding the amount of work needed to meet broad turnaround goals. As we discuss below, this structure offered benefits and challenges.

Central office administrators scaffold turnaround goals. Research on central office leadership suggests that school reform depends on a highly effective and efficient central office leadership team (Honig, 2013; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Additional scholarly research on school reform designed to support marginalized populations identifies the importance of a collective approach to this difficult work (Datnow & Park, 2009). Since turnaround plan goals are rather broad, central office administrators in this district scaffolded the workload needed to achieve these goals over time. For the purpose of this study, we defined scaffolding as the creation of levels of support and clarity that attempt to simplify the work needed to reach the turnaround goals. In other words, large broad goals meant to support marginalized students were broken down into smaller, more specific action steps representing short-term actions needed to reach the long-term goals written in the turnaround plan.

The primary way that central office administrators in this district scaffolded their work was through the creation of annual benchmarks. These benchmarks were developed, revised, or created in part at the annual summer retreat for all central office administrators. During the three years of receivership, the number of annual benchmarks decreased each year. During the period of study, the district had 31 benchmarks, five of them dubbed "signature benchmarks." All central office administrators identified their work in support of marginalized students in reference to the annual benchmarks. When central office administrators were in meetings, they provided updates to each other regarding the status of their work in terms of progress towards meeting these benchmarks.

Although the annual benchmarks were more specific than the turnaround goals, central office administrators attempted to provide additional focus to their work through the creation of project plans. These plans were developed in collaboration with the Chief Academic Officer and

guided the day-to-day short-term work needed to meet the annual benchmarks. All of this work was intended to better support traditionally marginalized students in the district. Communication around these project plans flowed within departments, from one central office administrator and the team of employees that h/she supervised, with regularity. Communication about project plans from once central office administrator to another happened with less frequency.

Benefits and challenges. The approach of scaffolding the broad goals of the district turnaround plan into smaller, more manageable steps provided both benefits and challenges for the district. Since turnaround results across the country have come with mixed results, there is no single approach that researchers or practitioners have identified as the most beneficial way to approach turnaround work. Additionally, the sheer number of changes required within the short timeline provided for change places turnaround schools and districts under tremendous pressure (Finnigan, Daly & Stewart, 2012; Mette & Scribner, 2014; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005).

With no silver bullet for approaching turnaround work in support of marginalized populations, the central office administrators in this district took a seemingly logical and efficient approach to the daunting task of overhauling a district in a three-year time frame. The primary benefit to this approach was a collective understanding of the turnaround plan and its implications for traditionally marginalized students by each central office administrator, as well as the collective value placed on the goals within the plan. It would seem that if each central office administrator shared an understanding of and an appreciation for the turnaround plan, this similar understanding and appreciation would guide the work they do on a daily basis. Additionally, the identification of signature benchmarks provided focus to the work of central office administrators in terms of identifying priorities and high leverage areas of improvement for marginalized students.

This approach also aimed to foster collaboration and communication. Through updates provided to key central office administrators, they were able to track the status of progress towards goals and benchmarks. Through periodic meetings and retreats, central office administrators updated other central office administrators who oversee different departments on the progress of their work. This gave each central office administrator some sense of the work in support of marginalized populations that occurred in other areas, and provided the opportunity for feedback.

While this process was efficient given the number of benchmarks and the relatively short time frame to reach each one, this process also offered challenges. While there was a shared understanding of the work in support of marginalized populations and some collaboration and communication across the central office, a collective approach to carrying out the work was not the focus of the central office administrators in this district. As a result, a central office administrator's understanding of how all of the work interrelated or interesected may have been limited.

Another challenge to this approach was likely not unique to this district, but coud be a shared challenge for many turnaround schools and districts working to better support marginalized student populations. The natural pressures of reaching so many goals in such a short amount of time may have limited exploration, creativity and learning among central office administrators (Finnigan, Daly, & Stewart, 2012). Instead of spending time together negotiating a joint enterprise, and then planning, testing, and analyzing interventions, central office administrators had to work as quickly as possible, while sustaining a high degree of critical reflecction, during their work in support of marginalized populations. If time was not a tremendous pressure, the central office team could likely have benefitted from more

opportunities to learn collectivelly, plan new interventions, and analyze results together, potentially resulting in more creative and focused work in support of marginalized populations.

Summary. Central office administrators in this district organized their work by scaffolding large, broad turnaround goals into smaller, more manageable benchmarks and project plans. This work was meant to support traditionally marginalized populations in this turnaround district, and the scaffolded approach guided the daily work of each member of the team. While this approach was efficient given the numerous goals and short time frame allotted for completion, it may have limited the ability for central office administrators to fully understand each other's work, and to work collectively over time to find the most creative and targeted ways to meet turnaround goals and benchmarks. We now turn to the evolving organizational structure in the district and the benefits and challenges of this structure.

Evolving Organizational Structure Poses Opportunities for Success and Challenges

Findings underscored the extent to which the central office had been reorganized since receivership. A synthesis of findings suggests that while the reorganization was intended to indirectly improve outcomes for historically marginalized populations, it provided both opportunities for success and challenges.

Reorganization of central office. As previously stated, the district went into receivership in April 2015 after being designated as Level 5 and the receiver was appointed in July 2015. Since that time, the district underwent, and continues to undergo, significant restructuring. Since entering into receivership, all of the nine central office administrators were appointed to their roles and eight of the nine are also new to the district. In addition to hiring new administrators to fill existing central office administrator positions, the district also created new central office administrator positions. The creation of these new positions, one of which

was created in July 2017, led to shifting responsibilities of other administrators. With each new administrator joining the leadership team, and at times filling a role that did not previously exist, the work of existing administrators shifted. This, in turn, led central office administrators to rethink their meeting structure.

Collaboration and joint work in support of marginalized populations occurred during meetings in the district and, at the time of data collection, there was some feeling that the right people were not always at the table for district-level meetings. This led some to feel that the efforts to improve collaboration was solely intended for school-based teams. The district made changes to the meeting structure during the fall of 2017 in an effort to build cohesion to the work of central office administrators. It is important to recognize that our findings capture a snapshot at a time of change, and do not represent the entire album of change.

Benefits and challenges. The evolving organizational structure of the central office has provided opportunities for success, as well as challenges in terms of support for marginalized students. A central office team of new administrators can be a challenge as administrators in a turnaround context are tasked with implementation of district-wide change with a limited understanding of the history and context of the work in the district. Further, relationships of central office administrators impact improvement efforts (Collins & Clark, 2003; Honig 2006) and newly formed teams have not had the time to develop relationships characterized by trust, which facilitates improvement.

At the same time, these new administrators brought new perspectives and ideas to the district, and they brought their existing networks and relationships to play as they sought external advice and support. In this district, the hiring of new central office administrators provided an opportunity to increase the diversity of central office administrators. Research points to the

importance of a diverse staff, particularly in districts serving a diverse student population or a

population such as the one in the district studied, in which most students are students of color

(Alim, 2005). In line with this body of research, a specific recruitment strategy was employed to

attract the individuals to their new central office roles and diversify the central office to be more

representative of the population served in the district. The intentional development of a diverse

leadership team that is more representative of the student population served in the district should

be viewed positively. With male and female administrators, two Puerto Rican administrators,

one Mexican administrator, and one who is half Cuban, the administrative team could more

easily approach their work to support marginalized populations with an understanding of the

culture and values of families in the district (Hammond, 2015).

The work of central office administrators was organized and planned in meetings, which

included cabinet meetings, quarterly retreats, and department meetings. Quarterly retreats and

cabinet meetings were regarded as meetings for central office administrators to work together to

create annual goals and benchmarks meant to support marginalized students, and to update one

another on progress towards these goals. While participation in these meetings created clarity on

district goals and benchmarks and broadly connected the work of central office administrators

around improving outcomes for all students, there was a feeling that the right people were not

always at the table for meetings. The addition of new central office administrators and shifting

roles contributed to this challenge and at the time of data collection, the district was taking steps

to ensure the meeting structure worked better for central office administrators.

Research suggests external partners can provide the tools, expertise, and other resources

that support improvement and change at the district level (Farrell & Coburn, 2017; Honig &

Ikemoto, 2008) and can be heavily relied on as part of turnaround efforts (Le Floch, Boyle, &

Therriault, 2008). This was evident in the district when central office administrators highlighted the multiple external partners they work with on a regular basis. One partnership that was viewed as particularly productive was the partnership with ESE. This partnership seemed to contribute to the development of new ideas and a collaborative approach towards organizing their work in support of marginalized populations. In addition, central office administrators talked about partnerships they had from their previous work prior to working in the district that they leveraged in their new roles in the district.

Summary. Since entering receivership, the central office has been and continues to be reorganized. While the reorganization was intended to improve outcomes for historically marginalized populations, it provided both opportunities for success and challenges. Hiring new administrators provided the opportunity to diversify the central office while posing challenges with regard to their collective knowledge and understanding of the district context. The work of central office administrators was organized and planned in meetings, which continued to be restructured as new administrators joined the central office team. Similar to other turnaround districts, external partnerships, in particular the partnership with ESE, was a structure that central office administrators viewed positively and that contributed to the development of new ideas.

The importance of the affective side of turnaround leadership

Turnaround work is complex and places an enormous amount of emotional pressure on central office administrators as they work to address various issues that impact academic achievement for marginalized students. The three-year period to improve student outcomes creates urgency in central office administrators as they work to meet the turnaround plan goals. Tremendous pressure and short timelines to reach goals can correlate with limited school improvements (Finnigan, Daly & Stewart, 2012).

Consistent with Mintrop and Trujillo (2006), Friedman, Galligan, Albano, and O'Connor (2009), concluded that intense pressure and sanctions critically impact turnaround efforts. These demands can also create defensiveness and deprofessionalize teachers, administrators, and staff. In this district, interview data provided evidence of these pressures among central office administrators. Central office administrators described their actions to reorganize and shift priorities, achieve and maintain compliance, and communicate changes to constituents in order to better support and serve traditionally marginalized populations.

A synthesis of findings from individual lines of inquiry revealed three prominent emotions of central office administrators in this turnaround district as they worked to support marginalized students: (1) frustration; (2) lack of cohesion among team members and, (3) the emotional toll of turnaround work.

Frustration. Findings from Palmer (2018) illuminated language of frustration when participants discussed working in support of marginalized students. This language derived from the complexity and urgency of the workload required in a turnaround district. Language of frustration included words of disappointment when discussing the inability to accomplish tasks and goals, or feelings of constraint. This came from trying to organize or meet with others to discuss obstacles or concerns. Their expressed helplessness also revealed a sense of frustration with the structural issues facing district leaders. The complexities and limited time to improve status created frustration as central office administrators attempted to tackle the issues that impacted the success of all students. Exposure to central office administrators' frustrations may compound students' inability to feel supported and negatively impact their sense of belonging.

Lack of feeling cohesive among team members. Findings from Galligan (2018) and Smith (2018) suggested time, lack of clarity around roles, and decision-making authority,

periodic problems with follow through, and communication structures limited the ability of the central office team to co-construct and implement policy in support of marginalized populations cohesively. These central office administrators found themselves reacting to issues and needing to prioritize issues during their day-to-day work. These feelings of lack of cohesion resonated when central office administrators did not have the time, clarity, or organizational structure to support marginalized populations.

Similarly, Kukenberger (2018) found that central office administrators in this district relied heavily on various external ties rather than internal ties. It is possible that this reliance on external ties is related to network instability, since there has been stability in the form of a state partnership since the district went into receivership. In general, network instability can impact the work of the central office leadership team and the district's ability to make measurable progress towards turnaround goals designed to support marginalized student populations. Research on school reform indicates that leadership turnover and inconsistent organizational structures limit and strain relational ties between and among central office administrators as they work to support marginalized populations (Leithwood, 2013).

Emotional toll. Central office administrators working in support of marginalized populations in a turnaround district expereinced feelings consistent with Theorharis' (2007) description of social justice leaders facing resistance and the meotional toll this resistance creates. Central office administrators often face resistance in a turnaround district from many stakeholders, such as teachers, administrators, students, families, and community members.

Central office administrators in this district were purposeful in their work, as they used the turnaround plan as a guide to attempt to improve student outcomes. They had to implement strategies for professional and personal self-care to keep the emotional toll from the work at bay.

When central office administrators in a turnaround district do this successfully, they can make significant accomplishments in their work to support marginalized students. The daily requirements of what can be described as a "nearly impossible" job, combined with a belief that they can and must create just schools for all students, can take an emotional toll on these central office administrators. This toll may have serious implications on a central office administrator's emotional and physical well-being and impact overall ability and capacity to affect timely change.

Benefits and challenges. Prioritizing the emotional complexities and demands of turnaround work for central office administrators is essential when supporting marginalized students. By paying attention to feelings of frustration, focusing on cohesion among central office administrators, and understanding the emotional toll that turnaround work creates, central office administrators may be able to identify and execute best practices and better meet the needs of marginalized students. One major challenge that central office administrators faced was the inability to carve out time to support professional and personal wellbeing due to the extreme demands of the turnaround plan.

Summary. Central office administrators in any turnaround district face an enormous amount of pressure and complexity as they address various issues that impact academic achievement. The three-year turnaround timeline creates urgency in their work, which provokes emotions and actions that influence their work. In this district, three prominent emotions resonated with central office administrators as they organized their work in support of traditionally marginalized populations: frustration; a lack of feeling cohesive among team members; and the emotional toll of this work over time. Frustration was shown in their language, organization, and references to lack of time to address crucial work. A feeling of a lack of

cohesion among team members related to some unclear roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority. Lastly, an emotional toll was seen through the resistance central office administrators faced in a "nearly impossible" job that was combined with a strong will to create an environment of academic success for all students.

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Recommendations for Practitioners

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In light of current research on turning around low performing school districts and our research findings, we recommend that the central office administrators adopt and implement an improvement process as they work to increase positive outcomes for traditionally marginalized students. We further recommend that the district revise the turnaround plan to encompass two specific aspects: maintain focus on a few targeted teaching and learning goals and clearly define roles and responsibilities for central office administrators. Finally, we recommend that district administrators develop a structure that includes time for self-care. We now discuss these recommendations.

Adopt and Implement an Improvement Process

The district has made efforts to ensure that meetings matter and are productive. However, several central office administrators reported that despite these efforts, meetings got in the way of the "real work," or, they were often "updates on work" that was happening in other departments even when agendas were set and protocols were used. Inevitably, time was the number one barrier to capitalizing on recurring meetings with a consistent group of central office administrators. Therefore, it is critical that the central office team evaluates how they currently utilize meeting time and whether or not they are focusing on using the time together as an opportunity to learn together. The district would benefit from adopting an improvement process and establishing meeting practices that are explicitly related to improvement cycles. This would

require the central office team to organize for collaborative work, spend time inquiring about data and current best practices to create a problem of practice, develop an action plan, implement the plan, and assess its effectiveness. While there is a number of improvement processes, the Data Wise Project, based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is one process that could be used for this work. Structuring meetings in this way would provide central office administrators the opportunity to negotiate a joint enterprise and support learning that is anchored in practice (Wenger, 1998).

Additionally, implementation of a clear step-by-step improvement process may improve the way district and school meetings are planned and facilitated while creating consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to drive decision making with a focus on supporting a large number of marginalized students in the district. Using a clear process and focusing on student data to identify a problem of practice and improvement strategy will likely increase instructional equity for all students and enable the central office administrative team to better support schools in a strategic and collaborative manner. This process will also aid in streamlining the benchmark goals and efforts aimed at improving outcomes for all students in the district.

Revise District Turnaround Plan

Effective district leaders focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Since 2009, Massachusetts' state system of support, along with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), has worked collaboratively with turnaround districts to develop evidence-based improvement plans that include targeted benchmark goals. Similar to many districts, the turnaround process in this district began with some formal planning activities that incorporated stakeholder input and ESE guidance and resulted in a turnaround plan with many benchmarks. While an effort was made to

reduce the number of benchmarks, at the time of data collection there were approximately 30

benchmarks toward which the district was working.

Maintain focus on a few teaching and learning goals. Successful district improvement

plans allow for a coherent approach to improvement that is sustained over time and does not

overload schools with excessive numbers of initiatives (Leithwood, 2013). However, when a

district enters into receivership, the stakes are high and the timeline is short, and navigating this

pressure can be incredibly challenging. Much of the pressure felt in this district was a result of

the combination of excessive goals and benchmarks and a short timeframe in which to reach

them. Through identification of essential goals, this pressure may decrease to a point where

collective understanding and ownership of work in support of marginalized students increase.

When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. Reducing the number of district

benchmarks may enable the district to guide their improvement efforts on explicit well-

established frameworks. While there was a shared understanding and appreciation of the

turnaround goals and benchmarks, there was limited evidence of collective or shared work across

central office administrators in the district. By negotiating the highest leverageable teaching and

learning goals for the marginalized students served in the district and focusing efforts on making

progress towards the agreed upon goals, central office administrators will be more likely to work

collaborativelly and build collective knowledge to impact practice in the district.

Develop explicit roles, expectations, and responsibilities. Among all school-related

factors that contribute to school learning outcomes, leadership is second only to classroom

instruction (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). In this study, central

office administrators reported confusion regarding their roles and decision making authority. The

lack of clear processes and structures created frustration and confusion among central office

administrators. Clearly defined roles, expectations, and responsibilities for members of the central office leadership team, including a process for determining membership and distributed decision making authority, will allow the district to maximize the knowledge, skills, and motivation of each member. If this happens, it has the potential to accelerate improved outcomes for marginalized students.

As the district worked to improve outcomes for marginalized students, several shifts in the organizational structure of the central office team were made. Development and maintenance of a consistent leadership team will play a role in achieving the outcomes outlined in the district's signature benchmarks and goals. While the changes in the district were meant to increase productivity, efficiency, and impact outcomes, and appeared to be largely positive, there may be unintended consequences related to roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority. Once roles have been clearly defined, the district should distribute decision-making authority across central office administrators. The district may also consider establishing decision making committees with representation from various stakeholder groups, administrators, teachers, students, parents/guardians, and community members, for important or significant decisions to ensure that new initiatives are integrated with existing routines and practices.

Develop a Structure that Includes Time for Self-Care

Finally, central office administrators in turnaround districts face an enormous amount of emotional pressure as they address the various issues that have impacted the achievement of marginalized populations. The importance of making space for self-care and honoring the emotional aspect of doing the work is key to success in supporting marginalized student populations. Providing time to meet with colleagues to support each other, share work, and celebrate success will go a long way. In addition, devoting protected time to talk about the

challenges in turnaround work is equally important in promoting emotional wellness and supporting self-care.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are several limitations to this case study. First, although this case has provided insight into the work of central office administrators in a district in need of accelerated improvement, it is a case study of one district, which limits the generalizability of findings. We relied on data collected from semi-structured interviews with central office administrators and did not include any other district level or school level leaders. Exploration of the whole network would better represent the connections, collaboration, and language use between school leaders and central office administrators. Analyzing building level perceptions would provide additional insight into policy interpretation and implementation as well. Existing research confirms that the presence of powerful, effective school leadership is essential to turning around failing schools. Further research should include the role of the principal in a turnaround district in order to better understand how their work is organized and distributed in conjunction with central office administration.

Second**,** this study was conducted in November of 2017, two years after the district entered into receivership and one year after the Receiver requested permission to modify the district's turnaround plan. Data collected from nine semi-structured interviews, document review and one observation led the research team to the key findings and recommendations. We recognize that this was a moment in time and that the district has many organizational and structural improvements in motion. Future research could include exploration of multiple turnaround districts in Massachusetts over time. These longitudinal studies may allow us to examine the interaction between and among internal (district and school level) and external

partners (ESE, consultants, community agencies, etc.) and the effectiveness of the implementation of turnaround strategies resulting in outcomes over time.

To determine the influence of district superintendents on student achievement and turnaround strategy, additional research might focus more directly on the role of the Receiver/Superintendent. Waters and Marzano (2006) found the correlation between superintendent tenure and student achievement to be statistically significant (.19) which suggests that the length of time a superintendent remains in a district positively correlates with positive student outcomes. Understanding the impact high stakes accountability has on one person charged with leading and organizing the work may provide insight into turnaround timelines and strategies for improving student outcomes in districts that are deemed as chronically underperforming.

Conclusion

American schools are becoming more diverse at a time when achievement and equity gaps continue to persist, contributing to the marginalization of certain populations of students. In order to address these gaps, central office administrators may focus their collective reform work on supporting traditionally marginalized student populations. Especially in districts in turnaround status or state receivership, the ways in which central office administrators organize their work in support of traditionally marginalized populations is a critical, yet understudied research topic.

This qualitative case study explored how central office administrators in one mid-size turnaround district organized their work to support traditionally marginalized students. By analyzing collaboration, language, policy implementation, and social ties, this study concluded that central office administrators in one district organized their work in support of marginalized

populations in the following ways: (1) central office administrators attempted to scaffold turnaround policy; (2) central office administrators were part of an evolving organizational structure with changing organizational structures; and (3) there is an emotional component to the work of supporting traditionally marginalized students in this district. Each of these findings illuminated benefits and challenges for the district in their support of marginalized students.

Overall, this study recommends that central office administrators implement a more focused improvement strategy to guide their collective work in support of marginalized students. Specifically, this improvement strategy should define clear roles and responsibilities for each central office administrator, maintain a focus on teaching and learning goals, and develop meeting structures designed to improve student outcomes. While this study attempted to address a research gap by investigating how central office administrators organize their work in support of marginalized students, it may serve as a catalyst for future studies to systematically identify work practices that address school reform in the name of closing equity and achievement gaps.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Introduction

"Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to talk with me today. I am here to learn about the turnaround work your district is doing to better support marginalized students. As a district leader, you are in a unique position to help us understand this important work and we greatly appreciate your participation in this study. The interview will consist of a set of questions about your background, relationships and collaboration, and the specific work in which central office administrators are engaged.

The aim of this study is to better understand how the central office administrators in Holyoke organize their work in support of marginalized student populations. As we learn about your district we plan to analyze the interview data collected through four lenses: collaboration, policy implementation, communication, and social networks.

I want to let you know that throughout the course of this study, I will work to preserve confidentiality. We will not use your name or reveal other identifying information in study publications. At any time during this interview, you may choose not to answer a question or to stop the interview. Before we begin, please read this consent form and if you agree, sign it. Feel free to ask me any question about the study."

Signing of consent form

"For the purposes of accuracy, I'd like to record this conversation. Do you provide consent for me to record?"

"From time to time, you may see me jotting some notes on this paper for my own reference."

"Before we begin, do you have any questions about the study?"

Question Categorical Codes

BQ = Background Questions	**PI = Policy Implementation**
OAQ = Overarching Questions	**C = Communication**
COL = Collaboration	**SN = Social Networks**

Sample Questions and Possible Prompts

"To get started, please state your name and your position in the district"

Background

1. Tell me about your work and your experiences here in the district? **(BQ)**
   a. *Possible Probe: What are the primary responsibilities in your role?*
   b. *Possible Probe: What is your educational and work background?*
   c. *Possible Probe: What motivations/values inform or ground your work?*

2. When did you join the district and why? **(BQ)**
   a. *Probe: What do value most about working here?*

3. What are some district goals that are related to improving outcomes for historically marginalized populations?**(OAQ, C, PI, COL)**
   a. ***Probe:*** *How do district leaders work together to establish goals?* **(PI, COL)**

4. How are turnaround priorities communicated? **(OAQ, C, PI, COL)**

5. Some policies that we work on in education happen as a result of external pressure, either from state or national agencies. Other policies are internally driven by the people working directly in the district or the community. What internal and external policies are you currently focusing on? **(PI, C, COL)**
   a. *Possible Probe: How and why did you decide to enact these specific policies?*
   b. *Possible Probe: How do external policy demands fit or not fit with your local district goals?*
   c. *Possible Probe: How do external policy demands fit or not with your personal values and beliefs about goals for schools, districts, and traditionally marginalized and underserved students?*

6. How do you and your colleagues work together to implement these policies? **(PI, C, COL)**
   a. *Possible Probe: How and why did you decide to enact these specific policies?*
   b. *Possible Probe: How do external policy demands fit or not fit with your local district goals?*
   c. *Possible Probe: How do external policy demands fit or not with your personal values and beliefs about goals for schools, districts, and traditionally marginalized and underserved students?*

7. How do you and your colleagues in the central office work to balance external policy demands with internal goals? **(PI)**
   a. *Possible Probe: How have you adapted or reshaped external policy demands to fit your internal district goals?*
   b. *Possible Probe: How do you work with building level leaders to negotiate this fit and navigate possible tensions?*

8. What are the ways that you talk in the district about underserved or marginalized students? **(C)** or What language or discourse do you use when you talk about or discuss underserved or marginalized students? How does the discourse vary according to the audience?
    a. *Possible Probe: What kinds of language does the district use?*
    b. *Possible Probe: What message do you think underserved or marginalized students hear?* **(C)**
    c. *Possible Probe: Why, tell me more?*
    d. *Possible Probe: What message do you think underserved or marginalized families hear?* **(C)**
    e. *Possible Probe: Why, tell me more?*
    f. *Possible Probe: What message do you think teachers hear?* **(C)**

Relational Ties/Collaboration

9. With whom do you work with and/or interact with on a day-to-day basis? **(SN)**
    a. ***Probe:*** *How often do you interact (people stated in answer) - daily, weekly, monthly?*
    b. *Who do you turn to most on the central office leadership team? How often?*

10. Who are the people [internal and external] to whom you turn for advice related to the district's goals and efforts? **(SN, PI, C, COL)**

11. *Who are the [internal and external] people who turn to you for advice related to the* district's goals and efforts?
    Note: *for each relational tie determine closeness, duration, and frequency to determine the strength of tie.*

12. Share a time when you needed professional advice about your work tied to supporting marginalized students in the district? Why did you decide [internal or external] to seek advice? **(SN, C)**

Collaboration

13. We know from reading the turnaround plan that professional collaboration is a priority area. What does this look like at the central office? **(COL)**

14. When collaborating with central office colleagues, what processes or strategies would you say work well or support your efforts to collaborate? **(COL)**

15. What are some challenges you face when collaborating with central office colleagues? **(COL)**
    a. *Possible Probe: How might your current collaborative structure be improved?*

16. Provide a few examples of what you have done to build the capacity of the schools in order to better support marginalized populations? (**COL, C**)
    a. *Possible Probe: Of the processes or strategies you have tried, what has worked effectively? Why have these strategies or processes worked? What has not worked and why?*
    b. *Possible Probe: What efforts have been abandoned or are unsustainable?*

Closing Remarks

17. Is there anything else you would like to share? Is there anything else that I should know?

"Thank you for your time and participation in this study. Our plan is to interview each member of the leadership team. Again, all of the data collected and everything you said will be kept confidential. Over the next few months, we will be analyzing the data. If I have other questions, is it okay for me to contact you to schedule additional time? After we generate our findings for the study, we plan to share them with the district. Likely this will occur in the early spring."

Appendix B

Pre-Observation Checklist

Observation Checklist (Creswell, 2013, p. 217)			
	Did you gain permission to study this site?		Will you develop rapport with individuals at the site?
	Do you know your role as the observer?		Will your observation change from broad to narrow?
	Do you have a means for recording field notes such as an observational protocol?		Will you take limited notes at first?
	Do you know what you will observe first?		Will you take both descriptive as well as reflective field notes?
	Will you enter and leave the site slowly, so as not to disturb the setting?		Will you describe in complete sentences so that you have detailed field notes?
	Will you make multiple observations over time?		Did you thank our participants at the site?

Appendix C

Observation Protocol

Observation Field notes:	Date:
Setting:	
Participants (if applicable):	
Observer:	Role of Observer:
Start Time:	End Time:

Time	Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes (insights, hunches, themes)

Appendix D

Interview Protocol Refinement: Phase 1

Phase 1: Ensure interview questions are aligned with research question of whole DIP and

individual research studies.

Check the box to map the interview questions to the research topics/questions.

	Background	Overarching	Collaboration	Policy Implementation	Communication	Social Networks
Question 1						
Question 2						
Question 3						
Question 4						
Question 5						
Question 6						
Question 7						
Question 8						
Question 9						
Question 10						
Question 11						
Question 12						

Appendix E

Interview Protocol Refinement: Feedback on the Interview Protocol

Mark yes or no for each item depending on whether you see that item present in the interview protocol. Provide feedback in the last column for items that can be improved.

Aspects of an Interview Protocol replicated from Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 825	Yes	No	Feedback for Improvement
Interview Protocol Structure			
Beginning questions are factual in nature			
Key questions are majority of the questions and are placed between beginning and ending questions			
Questions at the end of interview protocol are reflective and provide participant an opportunity to share closing comments			
A brief script throughout the interview protocol provides smooth transitions between topic areas			
Interviewer closes with expressed gratitude and any intents to stay connected or follow up			
Overall, interview is organized to promote conversational flow			
Writing of Interview Questions & Statements			
Questions/statements are free from spelling error(s)			
Only one question is asked at a time			
Most questions ask participants to describe experiences and feelings			
Questions are mostly open ended			
Questions are written in a non-judgmental manner			
Length of Interview Protocol			
All questions are needed Questions/statements are concise			
Comprehension			
Questions/statements are devoid of academic language			