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Leading from the Middle: Building Partnership and a Coherent Learning Organization

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Maria Elena Esquer

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Leading from the Middle: Building Partnership and a Coherent Learning Organization

by

Maria Elena Esquer

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Christina Christie, Co-Chair

Professor Kristen Rohanna, Co-Chair

This study examined the impact the strategy of leading from the middle has on becoming a learning organization. The leading from the middle strategy offers an opportunity for site leadership teams to focus on a few systemic goals with transparency and a collective voice to boost positive student outcomes. The research design is a mixed-methods, single-district case study. The study's sample was comprised of interview transcripts from 11 teachers and administrators and 85 School Leadership Team (SLT) members' responses to a survey that measured the before and after effects of the LfM strategy implementation across 28 TK-8 sites in a large urban district. After collecting mixed methods of data, including comparing pre-and post-survey data, I identified patterns of collaborative learning opportunities, inclusive cohort structures, and enhanced pedagogical practices to improve student learning. My findings from the interviews and surveys characterize the efforts of School Leadership Teams (SLTs) around the focus on the dimensions of a learning organization (Kools & Stoll, 2016) a shared vision,

professional learning, team learning, and systems for exchanging knowledge. Additionally, patterns emerged within the findings that depict how leading from the middle may have contributed to increased feelings of elevated trust toward peers, central office cohort members, and capacity building at the relational, instructional, and organizational levels. These findings were central markers of changes in the feelings of agency within SLT members. My findings suggest that LfM contributed toward Discovery School District becoming a learning organization.

The dissertation of Maria Elena Esquer is approved.

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Christina Christie Committee Co-Chair

Kristen Rohanna, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

DEDICATION PAGE

I dedicate this body of work to my Mami y Papi. You taught me from a very young age to love learning through your example. You taught me to love my language and to be proud of my culture. Cuba linda y bella! It is because of you, I wanted this dream. Los quiero a los dos muchísimo y no hay ni un día en que no pienso en ti Papi, en el cielo.

I also dedicate this to the love of my life, my husband and best friend George. There are no words to thank you for the sacrifices you have made so I could indulge in this learning. It is because of you and your unconditional love that my dream came true.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE NEED FOR LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE

After leaving the principalship, I joined the central office's instructional team as the new Assistant Superintendent. I was eager to support sites and address concerns across the district I had served in for eighteen years. In meeting personally with all school site leaders, feelings of mistrust and lack of staff voice permeate each conversation. The one-size-fits-all approaches did little to build culture and raise student achievement. It became evident that planning and implementing systemic change was an urgent need. I met with the instructional team, looking at research-based strategies to address the feelings of disconnection and improve students' outcomes. After careful consideration, I was confident that empowering agency and developing collaboration between sites and central office could bring the sustainable systems change necessary if leading from the middle became the systemic strategy.

Bringing in cohort leaders of principals and creating site leadership teams to discuss needed improvement areas became the focus. Members of the instructional team would participate with site teams as co-learners, listening to site and teacher leader ideas with a genuine resolve to listen and support what was best for each site. Co-creations of School Implementation Plans would become the center of collaboration, not compliance. Leading from the Middle (LfM) would create discussion and a change of practice while fostering relationships and positive culture. As DuFour and Fullan (2013) once stated, "unless leaders recognize the need for whole-system reform aimed at changing the very culture of the system, schools will be unable to meet the very challenges they must confront."

Introduction

Leading from the middle (LfM¹) is an intentional strategy that, at its heart, strengthens a system of learners. LfM is defined informally as a strategy where site middle leaders, including administrators and teacher leaders, partner with the central office instructional team to decide which actions best serve students' needs to increase achievement. This strategy could potentially influence the district to become a learning organization at all levels, thereby creating systemic change toward a mutually shared vision to improve pedagogy and strengthen collaboration toward enhancing student outcomes (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019).

Continuously improving student achievement is a challenge on the minds of most educators (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Many solutions and programs have been proposed across public school districts in the United States as educators seek out the "silver bullet" that will

¹ LfM is used as both a noun and verb in this dissertation, (Fullan, 2015).

ultimately remediate their challenges. Often, school site leaders search for the next best answer and do not consider district-led solutions as the best and most viable choice for implementation (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

The district, often called the central office, supervises and supports all schools. Central office leaders include directors, coordinators, classified managers, assistant superintendents, and the superintendent, each responsible for overseeing human resources, business and fiscal communications, instruction, special education, student services, and maintenance and operations. However, the team at the top is often viewed as part of the problem and not the solution. The central office then passes the strain of raising student achievement from themselves to the site personnel they serve (Johnson et al., 2015). This pressure for success can create a problem leading to mistrust and a feeling of powerlessness among all stakeholders (Johnson et al., 2015), particularly between stakeholders at sites and the central office.

My research aimed to learn how central office instructional leaders and site-level leaders can work together in mutually supportive ways, utilizing the strategy of LfM to develop a coherent learning organization. Most of the current research is international, specifically from Canada, Great Britain, and Scotland.

Statement of the Problem

Background of the Problem

The findings of systems disconnect between a central office and site teams is familiar in education (Johnson et al., 2015). Central office instructional leaders are under significant pressure to ensure that growth and improvement in student achievement occur across their school sites. When it comes to these crucial decisions on curriculum, district-wide initiatives, programs, or other areas of focus that seek to improve student achievement, these leaders have traditionally

experienced making these decisions without a clear purpose or transparency with the school sites they serve. The significant impact on school site leaders is the feeling that these decisions have been imposed upon their site teams without seeking their input on its implementation (Johnson et al., 2015).

This lack of inclusion may, as a result, prompt teams to complain about the lack of input and, consequently, result in a lack of commitment to the designed plan. They may need help understanding the reasons behind the decision or the pressure felt by leaders at the district level to see growth in student achievement.

Central office instructional leaders who oversee pedagogy, professional learning, pacing, and assessment, also feel the pressure to increase accountability (Honig, 2008). Accountability measures such as No Child Left Behind and ESSA create pressure to raise student test score achievement. As a result, states have initiated numerical representational dashboard accountability measures that brand school districts and schools with achievement level descriptors indicating standardized scores (Furger et al., 2019). Studies show that these measures do not improve achievement in the long term (Furger et al., 2019). State and federal funds offer extra resources such as differentiated assistance and other external evaluation measures that require school districts to provide evidence of strategies and interventions that raise student learning growth and impact district culture by perpetuating the disconnect between the central office and site teams (Johnson et al., 2015).

Developing a strong culture of change requires authentic collaboration, trust, and a shared vision, holding members accountable without making the process execrable, monitoring learning outcomes, and building the necessary connections to foster coherence for continuous improvement (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Fullan and Quinn (2016) define coherence as a "shared

depth of understanding about the nature of the work" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 1). This shared understanding between district and site leadership drives instructional focus and systems change toward continuous improvement.

Leading from the Middle, Coherence, and Learning Organizations

One approach to building a shared understanding and coherence is a strategy known as leading from the middle (LfM). Fullan (2015) formally defines LfM as:

"a deliberate change strategy that increases the capacity and internal coherence of the middle as it becomes a more effective partner upward to the state and downward to its schools and communities, in pursuit of greater system performance." (p. 22)

In other words, the operationalization of leading from the middle exemplifies a school district that employs the strategy of LfM and its measurable impact. It gives site leaders and site leadership teams a voice by sharing leadership, decision-making, and focusing collaboration on a few systemic goals that include transparency and openness to learn from and support others in the organization (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Through LfM, continuous systemic learning can occur within the organization (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). A district-wide strategy toward continuous improvement, including central office and site staff working in tandem, fosters a coherent learning organization (Johnson et al., 2015).

Senge (2006) defines learning organizations as the following:

"Learning organizations [are] organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together." (p.3)

Continuous improvement while learning in an organization is an ongoing process fostered by LfM. As the organization strives toward learning, LfM promotes the expansion of human and social capacity (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). Learning new strategies, listening to

inclusive voices, and planning measurable actions must begin with nurturing faith in the system and the people within it to see the connection to the big picture of teaching and learning (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020; Senge, 2012). Senge (2012) contends that this results-oriented focus guides the collective to be a learning organization. In studying the systems strategy (LfM), a coherent partnership between the central office and school sites seeks to improve student outcomes and focuses on collaboration with principals and teacher teams to strengthen all learning persistently within the organization.

Existing Gaps in the Research

Limited research on LfM is available. The term "leading from the middle" was coined from a ten-year empirical study that examined 72 districts in Ottawa, Canada, because of the researcher's findings on systems reform and the ineffectiveness of both top-down and bottom-up leadership (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). However, studies show that middle leadership has varying definitions, prompting Harris and Jones (2017) to identify the need to continue to study it. Moreover, current studies do not identify any specific strategy like LfM. Instead, it examines the leadership characteristics of site and district leaders or the effects of leading *in* the middle (LiM), which is different from leading *from* the middle (LfM). LiM places department and grade level leaders as the collaborative who rally their peers to implement top-down initiatives. LfM galvanizes these same middle leaders in developing their initiatives to best meet the needs of students, increase learning, and create systems change.

Additional research gaps exist in the United States. Several studies on middle leadership completed in England, Wales, Australia, and New Zealand lead to a potential future inquiry as to why other nations have recognized the importance of this topic while more American researchers have not. However, the empirical studies available from these nations do not include a roadmap

that districts or schools can take to put LfM into practice. The unavailability of studies in the United States limits the growth of this strategy across the more extensive American educational system.

Statement of the Purpose

This study investigated how leading from the middle (LfM) is implemented in a school district and potentially contributes to its development as a coherent learning organization. The focus on improving teaching and learning is critical to student success and thus requires the intentionality of collaborative decision-making between central office instructional leaders and site teams (Fullan, 2009).

Research Questions

1. How was LfM implemented in a TK-8 school district?
2. In what ways, if at all, did LfM contribute to the district becoming a collaborative learning organization?

Overview of the Research Design

This study is a mixed-methods, single-district case study, chronicling the process of implementing the LfM strategy. Through interviews, document analysis, and pre and post-perception surveys, I elicited data regarding implementing LfM as a systems strategy. Understanding the LfM implementation process may provide more profound insight needed to improve and build an inclusive district culture that ultimately strengthens leadership at all levels of the district system. The methodology of this study incorporates insight from central office instructional leaders, teacher and school site leaders who have LfM, and other staff who worked alongside these participants to evaluate the LfM implementation process.

Study Significance

The study contributes knowledge to both theory and practice. First, little to no research on (LfM) includes the collaboration and partnership of the central office, highlighting the need for research that has at its core the pursuit of continuous improvement for students and pedagogy, increased efficacy, and capacity building of teachers and principals. Moreover, research needs to be done on the steps necessary for a school district to implement this intentional strategy successfully. Second, the study of LfM can assist in how a school district can successfully implement this intentional strategy and what steps need to be taken to nurture relationships between the central office and school sites, built on mutual respect and shared leadership, resulting in a reduction of feelings of discontent, and disconnect.

These relationships indicate connections and increase the support and resources needed by staff and students to improve learning (Johnson et al., 2015). Additionally, examining how LfM fosters a coherent learning organization as central office and site teams collaborate on evidence-based best practices considers the results and assesses the potential toward higher levels of student learning. It is also important to evaluate the conditions under which LfM leverages voice and professional capital for leaders engaging in this work while providing a roadmap for other districts to solidify themselves as a learning system.

This study can assist other central office instructional leaders with a customized roadmap to meet their specific needs in building a coherent learning organization. LfM may also help in future studies on building principal capacity, teacher leadership, site leadership team development, reciprocal accountability, and central office transformation through the strategy of LfM.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Leading from the middle (LfM) strives to cultivate a partnership between central office instructional leaders and school sites, strengthening the district as a coherent system and learning organization. This study aimed to understand how the LfM strategy is implemented and potentially contributes to a coherent learning organization. This literature review begins with defining central office coherence and its connection to the greater context of developing a learning organization. Featured case studies of districts demonstrate positive outcomes for students through central office and school site collaboration toward building a learning organization. Next is a more extensive review of the empirical research on LfM as a potential solution to increasing student outcomes.

Additionally, I analyze and synthesize the differences between leading *in* the middle (LiN) versus leading *from* the middle (LfM), including the connection to professional learning communities and the limitations of current studies on this topic. I then discuss the conceptual framework that guided this study. It is grounded in Hargreaves and Shirley's (2019) LfM research and Senge's (2006) Five Disciplines of a Learning Organization. However, this literature review does not address the LfM movement recently begun in higher education because the movement is based on a curriculum that empowers middle leaders through real-world projects. LfM research at the K-12 level, in comparison, is defined as an intentional strategy.

Central Office Coherence

Fullan defines coherence as a "shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 1). Central office instructional leaders engaging in continuous

improvement understand how the culture, systems, structures, resources, stakeholders, and environments underpin the implementation of varying strategies across schools within the district (Johnson et al., 2015). Viewing their organization as a cohesive system whose mutually dependent parts intentionally connect to classroom teaching and learning requires the central office to build coherence with all stakeholders recognizing their role in implementing strategies. The process of building coherence is strategic and intentional, with central office and site leaders needing transparent communication and collaboration regarding its planning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Coherence to Achieve Continuous Improvement

Other empirical findings corroborate the need for developing coherence for continuous improvement of learning across a school system. A case study conducted by the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) at the Harvard School of Education found that their interviews with five urban school districts showed similar results when examining leadership and its distribution for coherence between the site and central office (Johnson et al., 2015). Achieving coherence further necessitates an inclusive backward mapping plan of the eventual desired outcome and targeted actions by all organizational stakeholders, including potential barriers to success.

Additional literature in systems coherence stresses that neither district nor site can work in isolation if the shared goal is high student success levels. Student success, then, becomes a primary focus of LfM. When the site and district partner with a common focus while collaborating on leadership tasks, teacher capacity and student achievement increase. This finding emerged from a case study conducted (Chrispeels et al., 2008) in a school district in

Southern California. Approximately 100 staff members participated in interviews, observations, focus groups, and surveys regarding collaborative leadership tasks.

Further results indicated that these leadership tasks offered the opportunity for continued collaboration, dialogue, and instructional experiences that strengthened teacher pedagogy. Student standardized test scores rose the following year, indicating the need to continue partnerships with their district office (Chrispeels et al., 2008). These strategies for continuous improvement increased student success and opportunities for further collaboration.

More empirical data support the strength of coherence theories. A review of the literature conducted by Welton and Robinson (2015) included the elements critical for coherence at both the district and site levels. Most studies determined that similar factors, such as the instructional program, capacity building, and cultural coherence, were compulsory. Fullan and Hargreaves (2012) showed that cultural coherence requires building a district-wide learning culture of collaboration. A survey conducted for the Ottawa Catholic School Board found that to make a coherence framework that improves services, a strategic practice of leveraging teacher voice in the change process and instructional pedagogy is necessary while noting the need for accountability and building social and human capital to improve student learning outcomes (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012).

Human and Social Capital to Create Coherent Learning Organizations

Social and human capital include ideas, skills, and credibility with regard to specific content. Fullan and Hargreaves (2012) define the credibility the system bestows upon an individual. Social capital then becomes the talent of the group as individuals work together. Human capital, they state, considers qualifications, knowledge, skills, and emotional intelligence (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). Data from another study showed similar results. The qualitative

case study by Pil and Leana (2009) points to the need for teacher social capital. They found that a higher level of human and social capital, as seen in the study of 130 elementary teachers, leads to higher teacher performance levels as they witness the talents, skills, and knowledge of others.

Teams working with high human and social capital levels will also achieve better results (Pil & Leana, 2009). Their findings showed a strong correlation between high levels of capital, as measured by teacher voice that uses the group to grow the group, leading to improved student performance (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). In other words, the groups use their expertise to improve the outcomes of the whole. Often undercut by mistrust and negative views of central office leadership's litany of possible solutions to instructional issues, human and social capital become essential for building coherence and partnership.

Sharing Accountability: Agreements to Build Partnership

Sharing accountability requires agreement from central office leaders to avoid falling into past compliance measures. Clearly defining roles, processes, resources, responsibilities, data measurement, and input opportunities change the culture (Srinivasan & Archer, 2018). An earnest effort toward change is to consult leaders and teacher members through surveys and robust professional learning discussions, considering their thoughts or views on implementing organizational change (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2016). Bringing in teacher and leader voices from site teams addresses the complexities of collaboration based on a shared understanding of the purpose (Srinivasan & Archer, 2018). This shared understanding of purpose helps to build a coherent learning organization that centers on the relationships necessary for continuous improvement (DuFour et al., 2006; Dumas, 2020; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Senge, 2006).

Learning Organizations for Teaching and Learning

In *Schools that Learn*, Senge (2012) explains that collaboration and conversation that examines the district system's strengths and flaws are necessary for a learning organization's goals to materialize. As previously stated in Chapter One, Senge (2006) defines learning organizations as the following:

“Learning organizations [are] organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.” (p.3)

School systems or districts that do not build their members' capacity around the big picture of teaching and learning by infusing structures that encourage open collaboration cannot call themselves an organization that learns (Senge, 2012). The learning must be deep and free of the central office's top-down rhetoric, emboldening risk, reflection, error, conflict, and failure as opportunities to make meaning of the experiences and the actions taken as teachers collaborate (Senge, 1996). Teacher collaboration provides the opportunity for job-embedded learning while working as a team on the thinking and learning skills necessary to increase student achievement and strengthen instructional pedagogy.

The same is true for site teachers and admin leaders. Involving as many within the organization as possible to participate propagates the exchanges of ideas, reflection, relationship connections, and understanding of the desired shared vision (Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2016). In his writings, Senge (2012) asks how exactly an organization becomes one where learning is the priority. The answer lies in the organizational infrastructure changes at the district level to ensure the transformation into a learning organization.

Infrastructure changes include redesigning existing structures and constructing new ones (Senge, 1996). This infrastructure reshaping cannot be done by an individual or a group in isolation. It may begin with a small group of individuals within the district who see a need for change and then involve others in the process. Creating new infrastructures requires sharing ideas, reflecting on current realities, and a working learning environment that sees the organizational processes as a natural part (Senge, 1996). These processes also value the team members' assets as continuous learners, problem solvers, thinkers, capacity builders, and learning communities in action (Dawood et al., 2015).

Learning communities understand that learning is critical for achievement and not achievable alone. Central office and site instructional leaders must take a balanced approach to intentional learning strategies, procedures, and plans through reflective questioning and data analysis practices (Serrat, 2009). Learning fuels a supportive culture of support, information seeking, and sharing research-based ideas. Additionally, learning that evolves from planned approaches inspires natural examples of overseeing and guiding change within learning cycles.

Participating as a collaborative team in learning cycles facilitates inquiry at the individual level, creating mental models that then become organizational responses while taking action. Both actions generate a response, leading to individual learning and shaping unique mental models and organizational memory (Kim & Senge, 1994). Inquiry cycles allow an organization to understand the conceptual and operational parts of learning.

To be considered a district or school that learns through learning cycles means that teams recognize that the operational part of learning is defined by evaluating the practices implemented and the improvements made. Conceptual changes, however, address demanding issues that require operationalizing steps and skills for implementation to promote needed change (Kim &

Senge, 1994). Site leadership teams address operational and conceptual learning examples when tackling a problem of practice, such as implementing a new writing strategy or a topic like individual equitable grading practices that require more discussion on the root causes of inequity (InnovateEd, 2016). Discussions leading to conceptual learning leverage the relational trust built within the organization and the desired student-centered learning climate (Ash & D'Auria, 2013; Bryk et al., 2010).

Accomplishing a change toward improving schools further requires leadership driven to foster learning through a student-centered culture that coheres instruction, builds human capital, and develops ties with the community to improve schools as learning organizations (Bryk et al., 2010; Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2016; Senge, 1996). Leaders are change designers, teachers, and stewards of a culture based on mutual trust and a shared vision (Fullan, 2009; Harris & Jones, 2018; Kools & Stoll, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004; OECD, 2016; Senge, 1996). Central office leaders fall into this category as they design learning in collaboration with schools, build a supportive learning environment, and apply distinct methods and practices (Harris & Jones, 2018).

Central office leaders engage with site and teacher leaders to build a learning environment that reflects current strengths and growth areas while capitalizing on the trust already produced. The learning environment includes four characteristics: psychological safety, openness to ideas, appreciation of differences, and reflective practice opportunities (Garvin et al., 2008). Team members who feel the environment is safe will explore new ideas, take risks by discussing complex topics, ask questions viewed as less than intelligent, or admit failure. The process of fostering such safety entails specific and deliberate actions.

Actions require practice acquiring, sharing, and interpreting information across all organization or district levels to strengthen collaboration across all groups (Garvin et al., (2008). Groups learn through inquiry, problem-solving, and professional development that consider new instructional strategies, continuous improvement, and influential leadership (Fullan, 2009; Harris & Jones, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2004). Much time, effort, and collaboration are needed to achieve alignment, trust, positive culture, and authentic learning experiences that consider identification as a learning organization (Harris & Jones, 2018).

Identification includes performance measures, yet there are other things to examine. Improving student achievement through focused teaching and learning connects to feelings of liveliness, positivity, and connection for all stakeholders. Connection through exchanges of ideas and questions captivates members and encourages continuing to build the learning organization (OECD, 2016). Even in times of conflict, the shared vision becomes the focal point as conflict deepens learning, allowing the organization to move forward with joint inquiry instead of personal agendas (Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2016; Senge, 1991). Becoming a learning organization is challenging, and concrete "how-to" instructions require more coherent planning and monitoring, which current research has not addressed (Harris & Jones, 2018).

Central office and site leaders who aspire to become a learning organization can use current academic literature to begin planning around culture, mindset, and reflection. These elements require nurturing a supportive learning environment, deliberate practices, and strong leadership that empowers co-learning and a collective voice to propel learning forward (InnovateEd, 2016). Learning as an organization necessitates rethinking traditional pedagogy, expectations, collaboration, and decision-making. A clear strategy may help an organization implement the

steps and strategy necessary to become a strong learning organization (Fullan, 2009; Harris & Jones, 2018). LfM may be such a strategy.

Leading from the Middle (LfM)

LfM was born out of a ten-year empirical study in Ottawa, Canada, with 72 districts examining system coherence and collective responsibility to continuously improve student learning (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Continuous improvement requires the implementation of intentional strategies that are clearly defined and articulated. Fullan (2015) defines LfM as "a deliberate change strategy that increases the capacity and internal coherence of the middle as it becomes a more effective partner upward to the state and downward to its schools and communities, in pursuit of greater system performance." (p. 22)

In other words, school districts and the sites they serve become change strategists in their joint pursuit of becoming a learning organization. The central office works with its school sites to create direction, goals, and resources. Fullan and Gallagher (2020) describe this work as liberating, leveraging for those at the sites as the middle strengthens and lateralizes across the system. Hence, for the system to be successful, education leaders need to interrelate up and down the system. Top-down approaches do not work, as they are not usually sustainable due to a lack of buy-in from the bottom.

In addition, both top-down and bottom-up approaches yield further concerns. Leaders at the top do not know everything across complex systems (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Bottom-up approaches present a challenge since they have not demonstrated growth for all schools in the system (Fullan, 2009; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). LfM is neither top-down nor bottom-up in its approach. Instead, it is a linked strategy that marshals system coherence, capacity building, and commitment with continuous sustainable

improvement as a goal (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). LfM then allows a central office to work with its schools as a partner. LfM aims to reduce silos and close gaps between schools of high and low performance (Fullan, 2015; Fullan & Gallagher, 2020; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019).

LfM as Builders of Capacity and Voice for Site Teams

LfM came about as part of the "Essential for Some, Good for All" (ESGA) project by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE, 2018). Conducted in two parts from 2008 - 2018, this consortium funded the project to examine the effectiveness of ESGA. CODE funded this research to examine the effectiveness of ESGA. ESGA examined increasing achievement results for students with disabilities while building teachers' capacity to recognize their responsibility for all students' success across the districts. Districts reinforced commitment with the help of retired superintendents who led the charge, created their inclusive strategy, and regularly connected with other districts at annual meetings (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Part one shared several results.

First, the Ottawa educators devised the term LfM, which looked at both top-down and bottom-up leadership. The term came from the collaborative work shared as districts created their strategies for inclusion. Second, these strategies, though different across the system, met the students' needs in each learning community as the teachers or the middle, shared ideas for their implementation (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Ten original study districts chose to participate in part two.

Commissioned in 2014 by the CODE Consortium to further explore and communicate the consortium's theories of action regarding LfM. Part Two evaluated its strong points, limitations, and theory testing of leadership from the middle (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves &

Braun, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). The study, which included mini-case studies of observations and 222 interviews of participating members by the Boston College research team, found several strong points, including honing the seven principles from the first study that helped frame LfM. The seven principles include responsiveness to diversity through the fostering of solutions to meet the needs of the learning community; responsibility for all students; initiative by focusing on a few goals; integration through efforts with other network entities; transparency of results and ideas; humility and openness to learning from others; and designing supportive structures and processes across the system (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). These principles highlight a philosophy of practice with students at its core, a structure of interdisciplinary teams, and a culture of collaborative professionalism for improving student outcomes (CODE, 2018; Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019).

Another strong point that helped distinguish between LfM and leading *in* the middle (LiM) was top-down and bottom-up leadership. The first study highlighted system leadership beginning *in* the middle to later growing *from* the middle. Understanding how each style disregards the middle, participants engaged in deep inquiry and decision-making, understanding the fragmentation and incoherence of top-down and bottom-up leadership styles. In essence, it provided more support for the idea of leadership *from* the middle.

Leading *in* and Leading *from* the Middle (LfM vs. LiM)

System leaders in this study looked to the middle for collaboration, efficacy, and shared decision-making. Working collectively, leaders formulated closer looks at inclusion and other strategies from the first study. The new study noted that the "middle" is not a tier or set of leaders in a specific position but a way of being (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). LfM develops pedagogy that nurtures relationships based on

shared values and goals, teacher voice, trust, problem-solving strategies, and distributed leadership without hierarchical chains. This distributed leadership, at its core, is a way to get closer to the students and support their learning (Fullan, 2015; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Hargreaves & Giles, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019; Johnson et al., 2015). As a result, LfM develops a deeper layer of cohesion, and collective efficacy of the team, transforming learning in communities with initiatives designed by teams to improve practice at its core. The study valued LfM as a promising means to develop equity of voice, mutual trust, and collaborative inquiry to improve teaching and learning (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019).

LfM juxtaposes LiM, the latter also addressing teaching and learning but only as a way to collaborate around top-down initiatives instead of implementing their own. LfM is strategic, empowering voice and joint work with equal decision-making power. LiM is more focused on improving standardized performance on initiatives not designed by the collective. Hargreaves and Shirley (2019) suggest that LiM is a start. Conversely, if a school system truly wants to see significant achievement success, change must come from collaboration amongst all voices within the system. The relationships build capacity, cooperation, continuous learning, and coherence. The results of the study found that both LiM and LfM can help to cohere a learning system.

However, the results are not self-sustainable as new initiatives come into play without central office support and commitment to a collective voice that is ongoing (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Hargreaves & Giles, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). The discussion presented in the following section addresses the role that professional learning communities play in the concept of leading *from* and *in* the middle, which lends credence to this current discussion on systems learning.

Professional Learning Communities Leading in the Middle (LiM) or Leading from the Middle (LfM)

Empirical studies that present LfM as a strategy for becoming an organization that learns are not available in educational research (Bowen et al., 2007; Hargreaves & Giles, 2006). Although LfM aims to improve student outcomes, it also addresses the learning that an organization creates (Hargreaves & Giles, 2006). Nevertheless, central offices employ several strategies to become a learning organization, including developing professional learning communities (PLC), (Hord, 1997). The principles of being a professional learning community are much like the ones utilized by an organization that conceptualizes middle leadership, raising the question of whether a PLC leads *in* or *from* the middle.

Research studies concerning PLCs appear silent on this question, indicating a need for further research that examines this issue. Given that researchers equate a learning organization to a professional learning community, more inquiry could benefit communities looking to determine which change strategy to implement (Antinluoma et al., 2018; Hargreaves & Giles, 2006; Hipp et al., 2008; Hord, 1997). Current literature could inform prospective school systems that the characteristics and implementation of both PLCs and leading *in* and *from* the middle show similar results. The focus on shared leadership and a student-centered vision empowers team members to positively influence student achievement and build cultures of collaboration, capacity, trust, autonomy, accountability, and success (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Olivier & Huffman, 2016). The latter, though, is not guaranteed. Much like middle leadership, interpretation, implementation, and impact of PLCs vary, further complicating the already complex question of this change approach as guided *in* or *from* the middle (Antinluoma et al., 2018; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Hairon et al., 2015; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves &

Giles, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019; Hipp et al., 2008; Jacobson, 2010; Olivier & Huffman, 2016; Sims & Penny, 2014; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017).

Effective initiative implementation sees results (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; DuFour et al., 2006). PLCs and leading *in* and *from* the middle show promising results when executed as intended. Roles, vision, strategic direction, and support structures at all levels lead to organizational change within the system. The complexity this change represents to a learning organization typifies a clarity and transparency of definition and intentionality that manages tensions as they arise. It further expects professional capacity building and adaptability as members struggle with shared decision-making that propels them to look toward only the group for answers (Hargreaves & Giles, 2006). Such an implementation infers an inclination toward leading *from* the middle (LfM). In contrast, other studies than those shared in this review portray different results of top-down and bottom-up leadership without the middle (Hairon et al., 2015; Jacobson, 2010; Olivier & Huffman, 2016).

Leading *in* the middle, (LiM) cultivates change through the collaboration on top-down initiatives through the stipulation of urgency, fidelity, and compliance. Focused on results that reform the system, middle members develop measures, creating buy-in from other team members on the aims none of them helped to formulate (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Studies on PLCs discuss this groupthink and lack of group voice and concerning top-down objectives. These objectives usually devise short-term measures, narrow in focus, and are proposed to attain results rather than collaborative dialogue that encourages risk-taking or innovation. Compliance of this nature may result without member enthusiasm, understanding, coherence, or sustainability improvement (Jacobson, 2010).

Additionally, bottom-up approaches noted in reviews of PLCs indicated few opportunities for professional learning. As a result, little direction from the key leaders at the site or district level produces mistrust, fragmentation, and a lack of communication for clarity (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). Both top-down and bottom-up PLC approaches impede the critical practices necessary for a collaborative culture that focuses on the joint work of teaching and learning practices within and across schools (Hairon et al., 2015; Jacobson, 2010; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). This type of systems change necessitates more research that could empirically answer the question of PLCs as leading *in* or *from* the middle as related to creating coherence in a learning system.

Like LfM, future research can benefit systems leaders by clearly defining a PLC. Additionally, by distinctly outlining potential barriers to implementation, resources, and benefits to system members, a "how-to" of action steps contributes to planning the trajectory of and needs for implementation. The limitations of the available research on LfM report similar results regarding the need for clarity.

Limitations of Leading in (LiM) and Leading from the Middle (LfM)

Clarity of intentionality and implementation actions help conceptualize the work ahead (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Without this conceptualization, a results-only environment emphasizes limitations in the Canadian and British studies on LfM. Limitations included managing the tensions in contradictions that occur because of the need to produce results continuously. Similarly, in the LfM study, Hargreaves and Shirley (2019) indicate that the discovery made within the Ottawa CODE study was partly due to the research conducted in two parts, leading researchers to conclude that the results are inferred and not generalized. A further limitation demonstrated more favorability toward LfM than may have otherwise occurred since participants

read summaries of the report, corrected oversights, and made recommendations (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Therefore, as noted by the researchers, there is a need for more studies to clarify the meaning and interpretation of LfM. A study conducted in the United Kingdom by Mel Ainscow, Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Manchester, found similar limitations and positive results.

Beginning in 2007, Ainscow wanted to examine how to infuse best practices across all schools through a project known as the Greater Manchester Challenge (GMC). He structured the study to focus on leadership and collaboration around finding solutions with grouped teams across the school system in Manchester, England, and Wales. As the project progressed, training and development helped teams find the strengths and capacity within their members, forsaking the competitive drive and replacing it with a higher call to advance outcomes for all students, not just their own. Principals, teachers, and other regional leaders worked together to LfM. As a result, by 2011, most schools in Manchester placed above the national average on standardized exams (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). Results were balanced on academic gains and an emphasis on collaboration and wellness. Like the Ontario study, sustainability rose as a concern, as did the need to conduct more studies on the interpretation, implementation, and impact of LfM (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019).

The concern of needing more studies can be attributed to the definition and interpretation of LfM. Systems define the meaning of and participation in LfM in various ways. Case studies conducted by the Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform in 2004 explored relationships between central offices and schools (Allen et al., 2004). The profiled districts participated in LfM but different from the way the other studies reference. Mid-level educators included program managers, content area directors, budget specialists, and other non-cabinet positions.

These middle managers worked on closing the achievement gap and raising literacy outcomes. The study found that the mid-level leaders helped improve student achievement through collaborative processes that chronicled district initiatives through the communities of practice perspective as a frame. Because these initiatives do not originate from the middle as their ideas, the Cross-City Campaign research exemplifies leading *in the middle* versus *from the middle*. Furthermore, their research does not provide guidance on how to implement LfM in schools. Moreover, the plans created by each district highlighted in the case studies discuss the strategies each used to meet district goals but not their own (Burch & Spillane, 2003).

The case studies of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle districts underscore the idea that LfM must include teams of individuals to focus on problem-solving decisions and allocation of resources to get closer to improving teaching and learning to raise student achievement (Allen et.al., 2004; Burch & Spillane, 2003). Teachers and leaders interviewed stated that, although there were pockets of success, all three districts could not make a change in practice as desired on a large scale for two reasons. First, pressures and mandates from NCLB lead to fragmentation and discord. Second, the collective capacity of participants across the system lacked the strength necessary for success (Burch & Spillane, 2003). In *Districts on the Move*, however, Westover (2019) reports on four districts on the move leading coherent systems of continuous improvement that include LfM.

LfM has evolved to include leaders on the school leadership team members to expand support for exploring practices that positively impact student learning outcomes (Westover, 2019). On these teams, leadership is shared among site leaders and teacher leaders. Together, they work toward a shared vision, co-learning through collaborative inquiry cycles while building collective capacity to improve student learning (Westover, 2019). Decision-making

power is distributed amongst department and grade-level teams. Still, in the preliminary stages of study, four California districts are enhancing the definition of LfM to create new learning that identifies the core essentials focusing direction, collaborative cultures, accountability, cycles of inquiry, and deeper learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Westover, 2019).

In sum, the studies reported in this review further justify the need for more research. More studies can assist districts in planning and implementing LfM, which may result in increased fidelity, organizational learning, and student outcomes. Studies of LiM and middle leaders are more readily accessible (Grootenboer et al., 2015; Grootenboer et al., 2019). The availability of these resources for LiM indicates a need to continue the scholarly understanding of LfM that empowers central offices to embark on their implementation journey. This study, from the perspective of the central office, proposes to add to the literature a way for LfM to focus on creating partnerships within the system that improves outcomes for students, not just the ones in a particular school or those in a PLC grade level team or departments, but ALL students. Moreover, the education organization's goal must be to make this process how business is conducted daily. Current research shares that no concrete guide is available for becoming a coherent learning organization (Bowen et al., 2007; Fullan, 2015; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019; Westover, 2019). Changes needed must come from the middle (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020). The frameworks addressed next conceptualize LfM as a driver of change and learning.

Relevant Theoretical Frameworks

This study sought to learn how central office instructional and site-level leaders can work together in mutually supportive ways for continuous improvement through the deliberate strategy of LfM, navigating change that develops a coherent learning organization. This section explains

the frameworks and principles that undergird both LfM and learning organizations. The next section explains how the LfM principles and components guided this study.

Leading from the Middle (LfM)

LfM, an intentional system change strategy, requires central office instructional leaders and site leadership teams to collaborate on the necessary actions and decisions to develop the district as a learning organization. Hargreaves and Shirley (2019) indicate that the principles embedded in the change strategy of LfM spark the need for further research. The seven principles include responsiveness to diversity through the fostering of solutions to meet the needs of the learning community; responsibility for all students; initiative by focusing on few goals; integration through efforts with other network entities; transparency of results and ideas; humility and openness to learning from others; and designing supportive structures and processes across the system (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019).

These principles help to create collective actions and voice that coheres a system based upon a focused direction, deep learning, collaborative cultures, and accountability, as noted in Fullan's Coherence Framework (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Connecting these quadrants allows central office instructional leaders and site teams to participate in distributive leadership practices that successfully enhance LfM to meet student needs.

Meeting student needs is the desired result and is always a concern for educators (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012). Hargreaves and Shirley (2019) additionally report that participants in the study shared their reflections on LfM, detailing three interrelated components: philosophy at the heart of educational practice, a structure of interdisciplinary teams and committees, and a culture of collaborative professionalism for the success of all students. In reviewing each principle, it is clear there is greater depth and complexity regarding students, teaching, and

learning (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). First, the philosophy of LfM is, at its core, about student learning and well-being. The philosophy extends to teacher practice by contributing to student discovery and feelings of happiness. Teachers work together to create their shared vision, detailing actions that promote the change necessary to improve student achievement and positivity toward learning.

The second component underscores these teams and the need for central office leaders to participate in the process. Central office leaders create the structures for site leadership teams, sharing the decision-making power that leads to the "flattening" of the organization at the grass-roots level to concentrate on learning (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Gone are the power plays and chain of command. Instead, a collective group remains to share their voice, expertise, and goals for advancing student outcomes through their joint work. Collaboration yields high levels of trust, building the foundation for professionalism and a focus on learning.

The third component, collaborative professionalism, results from the trust given to school teams of teachers and leaders by the central office to collaborate around the vital work of teaching and learning. The collaboration advances the exchange of ideas, evaluation of practices, implementation of new instructional strategies, and the timelines and actions necessary to achieve learning (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). This professionalism leads the organization to develop the conditions from which the teams learn. In his seminal work, *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*, Peter Senge (1996) discusses organizations that learn through the lens of team mastery and four other disciplines that are the cornerstone of a learning organization.

Senge's Learning Organization

The five disciplines of a learning organization assist in understanding why some organizations learn and others do not. Senge (1996) discusses that attaining learning is not like following a map or checklist. Instead, the organization that learns will manage, apply, grow, and use knowledge effectively (Cropper, 2003). Using that knowledge requires all five disciplines to be used simultaneously since they are interrelated. The five disciplines include systems thinking, mental models, shared vision, personal mastery, and team learning. While there may not be a formula, beginning with systems thinking allows for a big picture of the organization.

A systemic view creates all the parts connected in any organization, including the other four disciplines. These connections help to develop strong relationships that rely on each other in complex times. In a school district, opportunities that empower stakeholders to see the big picture and put all disciplines into practice also grow guiding ideas and insights (Senge, 1996). Viewing problems and goals as part of the organization's larger context also generates an understanding that explains the current reality involved in examining a problem of practice that amplifies the experience of learning (Senge, 2012). Issues at the systems level need middle leaders' influence, often making small actions result in more significant results. Our mental models play an extensive role in turning small steps into reality.

Mental models shape our reality. They shape how we view ourselves and others. Senge (2012) specifies that mental models are invisible to us until we look for them. Once found, attitudes and suppositions can be studied and discussed with others to discover common understandings. These discussions toward solving problems lead to learning and creating new mental models that help navigate systems change. Districts that learn work collaboratively with teams across their system to develop a collective sense of togetherness. Discussing complex constructs such as shared vision and personal mental models, an open and trusting district culture

subdues feelings of isolation and powerlessness. Sharing the decision-making further guides actions that impact the system positively and galvanize a shared vision.

Building a shared vision requires a nurturing commitment toward creating the organization's future that all stakeholders wish to have. Commitment to the shared vision may follow if they are encouraged to probe, study, and innovate (Senge, 2006). Central office leaders must cultivate this commitment to the shared vision by including stakeholder teams in its creation. Without a shared vision, a learning organization cannot exist. Teams work together on a common focus, a sense of mutual purpose through common dialogue and risk-taking, and distributed leadership that builds learning (Cropper, 2003). As teams start sharing, developing, discussing, and reflecting, thinking and learning within the organization grows.

Thompson and McKelvey (2007) state that team learning is different from teaming. Team learning, the fourth discipline, requires a common language to develop a shared vision. Precise language sets the tone for how the team will nurture collaboration, voice, and a safe environment for members to share their thoughts, assumptions, and practices. Central office leaders who inspire site teams to build their daily thinking leads to a shared understanding that aids a learning team (Senge, 2006). While learning together, the personal mastery of team members also expands.

Personal mastery is integral to an organization that learns. Individual learners engage in their professional learning that is personal and continuous. All members of an organization should take advantage of the opportunities they may need to build their mastery. Central office leaders must provide site staff with open and engaging opportunities to learn based on site and personal interest, not a top-down agenda for unrelated topics. An organization that learns and

leads *from* the middle may develop systems thinking, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and personal mastery (Senge, 2006).

Leading from the Middle to Develop a Learning Organization

Unifying LfM and learning organizations contemplates the core components of getting closer to the children and the learning through strengthening interdisciplinary teams of people who know the students and organization best (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). LfM then permeates the culture, habits, and relationships that promote innovation and creativity to solve problems, improve outcomes, and modify current mental models of distrust. These new mental models work to eliminate cynicism and inspire collaborative professionalism. Senge (1996) describes mental models that capture the need for reimagining assumptions to create an openness to new ideas that can lead to a systemic change of deeply embedded practices and policies by stakeholder teams (Newcomb, 2003).

Senge (2012) discusses that people, not structure, are the most critical assets in all organizations. Collaborating in teams and within groups cultivates the discussions needed to examine the organization's assumptions, values, beliefs, and purposes. A district that learns capitalizes on its people to form a commitment to creating a culture that embraces knowledge, mistakes, planning, sharing ideas, and setting new ideals. LfM builds the commitment to a shared vision created from the middle, lessening the fragmentation of initiatives to build capacity that creates a learning community. Developing the collective ability of people to design and pursue the actions necessitated by the shared vision, Senge (2012) states collaboration needs not to be an isolated opportunity but should be job-embedded, increasing reflection and learning for the organization, not just the individual.

The current study is informed by the LfM principles and Senge’s learning organization discussed in the previous section. The study's conceptual framework, shown in Table 1, illustrates how their concepts connect to the research questions and guide my study.

Table 1

Framework Concepts and Their Connections to the Research Questions

Research Question Connections	LfM Principles Framework (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019)	Learning Organization Framework (Senge, 2006)
LfM implementation and contributions	Lesson design based on student need	Creating continuous learning opportunities for students and staff
	Development of pedagogical practices to assist students with critical skills and deeper learning	Teams sharing ideas around effective practices to meet student needs
	Collaborative inquiry in agendas	Developing common language
	Cycle of inquiry evidence	Trust building activities that fortify relationships and develop a commitment to the shared vision of student success
	Protocols used by teacher teams	A collective voice that plays key role in systems change
	Trust building activities	
Collaborative learning organization	Professional learning led by SLT members for the benefit of the whole group	
	Site team collaborations	Focus on teaching and learning in dialogue and planning
	District Leadership Team (DLT) collaborations	Norms and expectations for collaboration
	Trust building activities that leverage strengths	Fostering shared ideas Commitment by leaders to learning from one another

Research Question Connections	LfM Principles Framework (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019)	Learning Organization Framework (Senge, 2006)
	Planning sessions evidence around the shared vision	
	Collaborative problem-solving to meet student needs	

Conclusion

Improvement efforts seeking to improve student outcomes frequently arise in educational systems. Choosing the most effective strategy for school districts compels leaders to examine their needs as they strive toward continuous improvement. This literature review focused on the systems strategy of LfM to cultivate a partnership between central offices and school sites. Leaders utilizing this strategy collaborate to build a cohesive learning organization. In doing so, continuous improvement translates to perennial learning. More studies are needed that chronicle the checklist or steps required to achieve a coherent learning organization that leads from the middle.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this study, I examine how leading from the middle (LfM) was implemented in a real-world setting and its potential contribution to developing a school district as a coherent learning organization. As such, the following two research questions guided this study.

Research Questions

1. How was LfM implemented in a TK-8 school district?
2. In what ways, if at all, did LfM contribute to the district becoming a collaborative learning organization?

Research Design and Rationale

Case Study

To address the above research questions, this mixed-methods, single-district case study chronicled the process of a few site teams implementing the LfM strategy. Through semi-structured interviews, surveys, artifacts, and documents, I collected data regarding the implementation of LfM as a systems strategy to determine whether it contributed to the district becoming a learning organization. Understanding the implementation of LfM may provide the knowledge of the needed improvements to build an inclusive culture that strengthens distributed leadership across the district system. Thus, this case study contributes to knowledge of organizational phenomena (Yin, 2014). The phenomenon, in this case, is how districts can lead from the middle to develop a coherent learning organization and synergize the relationship between the sites and the central office. This study incorporated the insight of teachers and site leaders who participated in LfM and central office staff working alongside participants to evaluate this strategy's implementation process.

Case study rationale. The case study design was best to meet the goals of this study because it allowed multiple data methods to understand the complexity of the case in the most complete way possible within its real-life contexts, collecting data about human events and behavior from within the bounded system of DSD site leadership team members and the work already completed within the district (Yin, 2014). Additionally, this design best explains the research questions and addresses the propositions that may further develop the learning organization and the LfM strategy.

Methods

Site and Population

The site and population of this study is an urban elementary district north of Los Angeles, California, that serves its community of learners of nearly 19,000 students, 1800 classified staff, 1020 faculty, 52 central office leaders, and 61 site leaders.

District selection. Empirical studies have shown that increasing collaboration in urban districts at both the site and district levels increases student achievement and trust (DuFour et al., 2006; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Honig, 2008). The site of this study, now called the Discovery School District (DSD) to protect its identity, has been learning the elements of leading from the middle since 2016. DSD is representative of many urban school districts that could benefit from this study as a roadmap for their own. DSD has 29 sites-5 middles, 7 K-8, 17 TK-5, and almost 19,000 students. Demographics include Hispanic/Latino (68%), Black/African American (16%), White/Caucasian (8%), and Other (8%) comprise DSD. Approximately 39% of DSD students are English Learners, 94% qualify for the National School Lunch Program (receive free/reduced lunch), and 16% are identified as Students with Disabilities (SWD). DSD is currently a member of the group receiving Differentiated Assistance from the

Los Angeles County Office of Education. The latter is a result of minimal progress toward improvement shown on the California Dashboard. This district was chosen for the study because it mirrors the typical demographics of many urban districts in the Southwestern United States. DSD was also selected because it fully engaged in LfM to increase continuous improvement for four years. Since a limited body of research currently exists about how districts implement and maintain a system focus that involves leading from the middle, DSD provided an essential context for studying this phenomenon.

This case study provided a lens through which to view the implementation of Senge's (1996) five disciplines in organizations that learn, along with Hargreaves and Shirley's (2019) LfM philosophy of students at the heart, building a structure of interdisciplinary teams and cultivating collaborative professionalism. Furthermore, choosing DSD for the case study helped to determine if this implementation contributed to its organizational learning, driving future decisions and policies at the district level. Helpful data included reflection protocols to gauge successes gained wisdom from the process, and next steps, including creating a logic model to continue the implementation. DSD has begun to make use of the data from this study to reflect and further improve relationships that enhance teaching and learning.

It is essential to explain the need for this type of contemplation briefly. Deemed as low, the overall morale and apathy of staff toward central office leaders, evidenced in negotiation sessions with labor partners, board of trustees meeting commentary, and partner visits with the local county office of education, provided an additional challenge for the new superintendent. Labor partners spoke about the lack of trust, communication, and overall feeling of ungratefulness toward employee job performance without cause. County partners voiced a need for more precise focus, collaboration, and urgency toward student achievement.

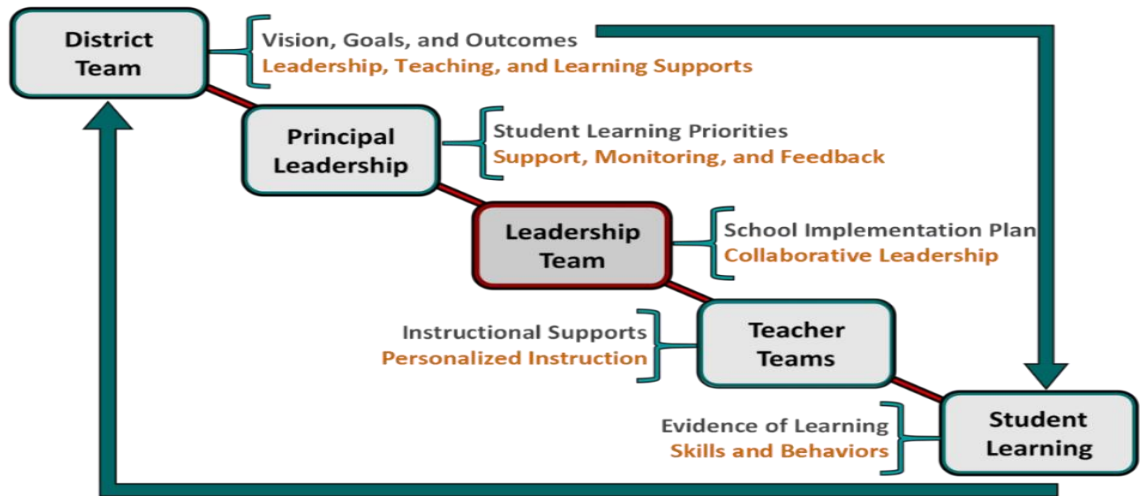
As the new superintendent found his way, teams formed to create a new strategic plan for the district, including all stakeholders. They addressed instructional priorities as well as a new mission and vision. Cabinet members changed, and the new plan began to form new talking points with labor and county partners.

From August 2016 through March 2020, DSD participated with another consortium of districts in California, employing the strategy of LfM and developing system coherence. All districts were working on similar desired outcomes with InnovateEd, a strategic partner with Michael Fullan. Educational Services instructional leaders in DSD partnered with the sites to improve teaching, learning, and collaborative processes between the central office and site leaders.

Figure 1 below is a visual representation of how DSD applied LfM through the Site Leadership Team (SLT), who were the middle leaders in this educational system. Initially presented by Jay Westover of InnovateEd (2016) to Cabinet members, it details the responsibilities of each level as it builds coherence and change up, down, and between all groups, similar to Fullan's definition (2015). Figure 1 depicts what was seen by DSD's SLTs on all PowerPoints and resource materials presented at each cohort session from 2016-2020. The visual also helped explain to members that DSD as a district was also in the middle within the state structure, considering the California Department of Education was at the top.

Figure 1

Structures and Processes Within a Coherent System of Continuous Improvement Leading from the Middle (InnovateEd, 2016)



Although Innovate Ed is no longer a consultant with DSD due to the pandemic, the work of coherence and LfM continued within the district differently. Collaborative sessions were no longer possible due to the mandatory and recommended COVID-19 safety measures set in place by the California Department of Public Health and the challenges SLT members faced due to distance learning.

Access. A goal of this study as a graduate researcher and employee of the district was to build a partnership between site teams and central office instructional leaders. As a district employee, I have access to all sites and employees and continue to build rapport and trust as I have done over my career. Many knew I was a UCLA doctoral student and would ask about my progress. On top of securing approval from the university research board, I requested permission for the study through the district's IRB team. I explained the safeguards offered to volunteer participants, including the anonymity and confidentiality of all interview and survey participants. Confidentiality was necessary due to my position within the district. I answered questions and offered to make changes, though no one requested I do so.

Site Selection. All 28 sites, placed into five cohorts for geographical proximity and ease in vertical collaboration, collaborated in six sessions a year from 2017 to 2019. In addition, each

site's leadership team included 8-10 members for 25 sites and 2-3 for four smaller schools totaling 299 members. The leadership cohorts were comprised of teacher leaders, site administrators, and a member from Educational Services during collaborative cohort sessions.

For this study, I purposefully sampled four school sites across four cohorts through an invitation to participate in an interview. I did not include the cohort of five schools for which I was the Educational Services partner. Based upon a sample of sites that demonstratively fully implemented LfM, selected sites included two elementary sites and two special programs housed on K-8 campuses. The selected sites included two TK-5 campuses and two K-8 campuses noted for their special programs: one offers dual language instruction; the other provides a sensory experience for students diagnosed with Autism. These sites created a reflective and trusting environment, harnessing learning and collective strengths to improve student outcomes. Further, they cultivated opportunities for shared decision-making, including small choices such as scheduling, extending to significant culture-building decision-making to generate the change necessary for equity and deeper learning. The documents and artifacts from these sites and the district helped strengthen the analysis and discussion in the next chapter.

Recruitments. Once the DSD IRB team approved the study, I began emailing district and site leaders as well as site leadership team members from the four schools to be sampled, inviting them to participate. I clarified that while I am currently a Central Office leader, I was a UCLA graduate researcher in the Educational Leadership Program for the study. Furthermore, I explained that my only interest was in making our district a better place for all stakeholders and an organization that learns and listens to one another to improve student outcomes and increase teacher and site leader efficacy. I took great care to ensure the participants were comfortable with the process by explaining and checking for their understanding of anonymity and

confidentiality. I answered all questions posed by the participants and encouraged them to be candid and brutally honest. In order to safeguard an objective and impartial review of the results, I clarified that the transcripts would be analyzed with an unbiased lens to assess the LfM strategy implementation and its contribution to student growth and district progress as a learning organization.

In addition to recruiting participants from the district and the four sampled schools to participate in the study, I recruited 299 survey participants from all the Site Leadership Teams (SLT) across the 28 schools. I reiterated to the SLT members that participation was voluntary, confidential, and anonymous. Any participant could drop out of the study or not take the survey. I stated that sharing results would occur after university acceptance of this dissertation, even if the results were unfavorable. As a demonstration of gratitude for their time, I offered all interview and survey participants a small gift card.

Data Collection Methods

This case study design used for the study enabled evidence collection for each research question through each method. This study utilized surveys, interviews, artifacts, and document analysis. The data collection occurred in phases. First, all potential participants received an explanation of the online interview. The purpose was briefly described so participants could determine their desire to participate. Second, throughout the data gathering process, artifacts and documents from the cohort sessions from August 2016 through March 2020 were gathered and organized to provide additional context. Documents and artifacts, including session surveys and feedback collected after every session to plan and improve future sessions, were also included and categorized. The teams determined templates for agendas, session surveys, data analysis protocols, and other session items to standardize their use across the district. Lastly,

participants were recruited via email to participate in the survey. As with the interviews, participants were given the purpose and scope of questions regarding a learning organization so participants could determine their desire to participate. The following paragraphs discuss in more detail the data collection tools of surveys, interviews, contextual artifacts, and document reviews.

Surveys. Data collected through surveys of site leadership team (SLT) members included site leaders and teacher leaders. The survey emailed to all 299 individuals across 28 schools asked for their feedback using a 5-level Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Participants also had the option to select Not Applicable or Neutral. The survey was available for the month of February 2022. 85 participants took the survey equaling a 28.4% response rate. Two additional email reminders were sent after seven days and then again on day 20. Participants reflected on DSD as a learning organization, pre-and post-implementation of LfM. This reflection ascertained their views on learning concerning specific components of their role as an SLT or DLT member. The survey incorporated and adapted dimensions for length from the Kools et al. (2020) Learning Organization instrument that operationalizes learning organizations into several dimensions. Table 2, presented below, includes both pre and post-LfM through the work with the SLTs.

Table 2

Learning Organization Retrospective Pre and Post-Survey Measures (adapted from Kools et al., 2020; OECD, 2016)

Questions 3 and 7	Questions 4 and 8	Questions 5 and 9	Questions 6 and 10
Developing a shared vision centered on the learning of all students	Promoting and supporting continuous professional learning for all staff	Fostering team learning and collaboration among staff	Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning
The school's vision is aimed at enhancing student's cognitive and social-emotional outcomes, including their wellbeing	Professional learning of staff is considered a high priority	Staff collaborate to improve their practice	The school's development plan is based on learning from continuous self-assessment and is updated at least once every year
The school's vision emphasizes preparing students for their future in a changing world	Staff engage in professional learning to ensure their practice is critically informed and up to date	Staff learn how to work together as a team	Structures are in place for regular dialogue and knowledge sharing among staff
The school's vision embraces all students	Staff are involved in identifying the objectives for their professional learning	Staff help each other to improve their practice	Evidence is collected to measure progress and identify gaps in the school's performance
The school's vision is understood and shared by all staff	Professional learning is focused on students' needs	Staff observe each other's practice and collaborate in developing it	Staff analyze and use data to improve their practice
Staff are inspired and motivated to bring the school's vision to life	Professional learning is aligned to the vision	Staff give honest feedback to each other	Staff use research evidence to improve their practice
All staff are involved in	Mentors/coaches are available to	Staff listen to each other's ideas and opinions	Staff analyze examples of good/great practices and failed

Questions 3 and 7	Questions 4 and 8	Questions 5 and 9	Questions 6 and 10
Developing a shared vision centered on the learning of all students	Promoting and supporting continuous professional learning for all staff	Fostering team learning and collaboration among staff	Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning
developing the school's vision Students are invited to contribute to the school's vision Parents are invited to contribute to the school's vision	help staff develop their practice All staff receive sufficient support to help them in their roles Staff receive regular feedback to support reflection and improvement Students are encouraged to give feedback to teachers and support staff Staff have opportunities to experiment with and practice new skills	Staff feel comfortable turning to others for advice Staff treat each other with respect Staff spend time building trust with each other Staff think through and tackle problems together	practices to learn from them Staff learn how to analyze and use data to inform their practice Staff regularly discuss and evaluate whether actions had the desired impact and change course if necessary

The anonymous survey allowed for an authentic self-assessment of the district's LfM strategy implementation. I pretested the survey with a small team of SLT members willing to provide feedback on its ease, readability, clarity of items, and the indications of pre and post-LfM implementation on the learning organization dimensions. The only feedback I received

was to add a question to solicit participant interest in receiving a gift card for their participation in the survey. This would allow participants to ensure their anonymity in taking the survey but express wanting the token of appreciation. Participants completed all surveys online through a link sent to their email. Surveys took approximately 10 -15 minutes to complete, and none of the participants reported any issues. Appendix B contains the entire survey with all four dimensions and their accompanying items.

Interviews. The study also included concurrent interviews with individual SLT members, site leaders, and teacher leaders who participated in a forty-five-minute interview regarding their experiences on the leadership team, LfM, and the district as a learning organization. The interviewees were recruited via email. I sent the recruitment emails to the SLT members at four sites that fully implemented LfM. These SLT members collaborated with each other and their peers to ensure a collective voice for the improvement of student success, equitable access, and systems change. The interviews included semi-structured questions to prompt robust discussion. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom in December 2021 and recorded via the Zoom recording feature, the chat transcript, and a cellular device (in case Zoom failed). All participants consented to have the interview recorded. Interviews were conducted over the first two weeks of December, and participants signed up directly on a Google Sign-up created by the interviewer

The facilitator who conducted the interviews was a former interviewer for the New Teacher Induction Program for the California Department of Education (CDE). We met several times before the interviews for preparation and question review. A pretest of the questions, performed with several teachers for clarity and feedback, enhanced potential participant responses through additional questions about surprises throughout the LfM

implementation process. (These teachers were past leadership team members at school sites not invited to participate in the interview and, as a result, were not part of the actual study.) Confidentiality was stressed. The interviewer took notes on what participants said during the interviews without adding inferences or their own thoughts. They noted clarifying or extending questions to ask the participants based on their responses. Although I am the researcher, I did not know who the volunteers were or what they may have shared due to my positionality. The interviewer provided me with the interview transcripts without names, marked as Participant Interview One, Two, through Participant Eleven. I recruited and invited up to three SLT members from each site to participate in the interviews. However, this did not happen. In total, 11 interviews were conducted, and all sites and the central office were represented. More detail about the participants is noted in the data analysis portion of this chapter. Appendix C presents the interview script with questions and welcome information.

Artifacts. Artifact collections included charts, PowerPoints, collaborative session feedback, and participant collaboration materials created during cohort sessions conducted from August 2016 through March 2020. These sessions provided quarterly opportunities for principals, coaches, and teachers to engage in lesson design and assessment via evidence-based cycles of inquiry. Teacher teams gathered evidence of current student achievement to identify areas of need. They then utilized curriculum standards and common assessments to implement high-yield instructional strategies in their classrooms that engage students in rigorous learning opportunities. Teacher teams developed expertise with collaboration protocols that guided instructional planning, data analysis, student work evaluation, and learning rounds. Additionally, teacher teams established structures and processes for sharing promising practices and receiving support to improve teaching and learning. Other products created in preparation for session

reflection, such as collaborative agendas, were collected to analyze traits and trends related to LfM and the characteristics of a learning organization.

Documents. I also collected district documents relating to the prioritized actions of the School Implementation Plans (SIP). Innovate Ed progress reports and inclusions in team presentation preparation documents were further reviewed for traits and trends related to LfM and characteristics of a learning organization. Additional measures included the cycle of inquiry results analyzed by SLTs to improve teaching and learning throughout the process. For context, documents collected from each session across cohort and central office collaborations were included in the review. Table 3 below contains a myriad of sources of data collection to answer each research question.

Table 3

Data Collection Sources

Research Question	Surveys	Interviews	Documents	Artifacts
How was LfM implemented in a TK-8 school district?			Session PowerPoints & agendas Learning Guide (InnovateEd, 2017)	Collaborative session agendas Session PowerPoints
In what ways, if at all, did LfM contribute to the district becoming a collaborative learning organization?	Participant surveys- (Kools et al., 2020) Learning Organization Scale	Participant interviews, coded and themed		

Data Analysis Methods

Surveys. Survey data was collected through Qualtrics and downloaded into JASP to analyze each learning organization dimension presented for pre- and post-implementation views of the 85 respondents. The dimensions included developing a shared vision centered on the learning of all students, promoting and supporting continuous professional learning for all staff, fostering team learning and collaboration amongst staff, and embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning (OECD, 2016). Items answered within each dimension were analyzed, including the comparison pre and post-LfM. Although there were ten questions on the survey, the four dimensions included items ranging between eight and eleven items per question. Each dimension and its items were then repeated to determine if there was an effect on the district due to LfM. To clarify, survey questions one and two provided demographic data. In contrast, the remaining questions were paired (three/seven, four/eight, five/nine, and six/ten) to provide data on the potential development of DSD as a learning organization.

I developed composites for each domain by summing the individual items under them. Pre- and post-composites were paired into the following dimensions: Shared vision (questions 3 and 7); continuous professional learning, (questions 4 and 8); fostering team learning and collaboration, (questions 5 and 9); and embedded systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning, (questions 6 and 10) (Kools, et al., 2020). The pre-and post-composites were analyzed as paired samples in JASP and RStudio, which provided data as a paired samples T-test. The T-test summarized descriptive statistics such as mean, median, and standard deviation and p and t values comparing each pair. These dimensions were chosen because they best represented the district's work on LfM. The review of this quantitative data is discussed more thoroughly where the findings are presented in Chapter 4.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 SLT members across district cohorts outside the instructional day (after school or on a Saturday). The interviewer recorded them on Zoom and transcribed the recordings. I received no access to any of the recordings to maintain confidentiality. The participants' identities were protected by generalizing them as "Participant One" through "Participant Eleven." After reading the transcripts, I uploaded them into the Delve Qualitative Software tool. I utilized the suggestions and information from Saldaña (2021) to begin the coding process. First, I used deductive coding to begin my analysis. I created structural codes for what I was looking for from my research questions and relevant frameworks that guided my study. I then analyzed the transcripts again, using inductive coding, looking for new patterns in addition to anything I may have missed with the previous coding. I reorganized the codes into patterns, trends, and categories according to how LfM may have improved teaching and learning outcomes and evidence of the district as a learning organization. I tracked the patterns surfacing through the categories developed, capturing connections and discoveries from the interview data.

Table 4 below is a representation of the information known. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and correlated to their original number on the transcript.

Table 4

Interview Participants Demographics

Participant Number	Pseudonym	Role	Gender
1	Sarah	Administrator	Female
2	Adam	Administrator	Male
3	Amelie	Teacher	Female
4	Kaitlyn	Teacher	Female
5	Araceli	Administrator	Female

Participant Number	Pseudonym	Role	Gender
6	Karol	Teacher	Female
7	Lucy	Administrator	Female
8	Ramona	Administrator	Female
9	Xochitl	Teacher	Female
10	Madelyn	Teacher	Female
11	Citlali	Teacher	Female

Artifacts and Documents. Documents and artifacts were collected between August 2016 and March 2020. In analyzing PowerPoints, agendas, and the InnovateEd Learning Guides (2017-2018), I looked for the common patterns in the LfM implementation, the actions taken, the information provided to SLTs, and the connection to the learning process in DSD.

Positionality

To mitigate the potential confusion over my dual roles (district administrator and UCLA graduate student), I clarified that my primary role was researcher only since positionality and perceived power within the district could concern a participant. In creating safeguards, I provided honest answers to all questions, fully protected participant anonymity and confidentiality, and remained committed to being transparent regarding the findings of this work. I was candid in my email communication that through this study, my only interest was to learn if, as a district, we are progressing toward being an actual learning organization that ultimately benefits us all. The process of coding and transcript reading allowed me to learn more about their perspectives, including their thoughts, feedback, and suggestions. I did so with an open mind, including writing memos and reflections to curtail bias.

I encouraged candid, honest feedback in the spirit of promoting growth. Since I am not a direct supervisor of site leaders or teachers, I expressed that I could assure participants that

expressing their perspectives and sharing their truths would be welcome and accepted without repercussions. Although some members later disclosed to me that they participated in the interviews, I cannot attribute any particular items of information received from the interviewer to them specifically. Moreover, because I had few details on the identities of the interview participants, I could not disclose any specific feedback or comments provided during the study to any of their direct supervisors.

Ethical issues

The ethical issues related to this study are varied. I clarified that my role was solely to be a researcher, not an administrator. I maintained confidentiality and will continue to do so after the study results are shared with the participants. I have no access to any of the original recordings. All data was secured and not shared with supervising leaders by either the interviewer or me throughout the study. I emphasized and highlighted that those who volunteered to participate always had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Voluntary participation also warranted their right to drop out of the study at any time. I assured all school personnel that while LfM is the district's strategy to improve our system's results and efficacy as a learning organization, candid honesty was greatly encouraged in the interview sessions, and no repercussions would result from their feedback. The only goal of the study was to enhance and not harm anyone within the district's community of learners. I kept all transcripts, documents, and other related materials to the study in a locked desk to which no other employee had access. The recordings were password protected and secured by the interviewer. Further, upon the filing and university approval of this dissertation, the interviewer will delete all recordings from their desktop and hard drive to eliminate any possible future use or breach of confidentiality.

Reliability and Validity/Credibility and Trustworthiness

Addressing credibility relies on increasing validity and reliability. As the primary researcher, I examined my study for potential biases, reactivity from the participants, and transferability. Additionally, I monitored procedures to ensure the highest caliber of study by employing systematic protocols for collection. Even with this level of care, two possible threats to validity and reliability are notable.

First, as previously mentioned, my positionality is an issue. I have been a part of the larger context, the planning, and the pre-pandemic implementation, indicating a passion for the idea of systems change that could create a bias in interpreting the results and conducting the study. To minimize my bias, I only used direct quotes and relied on all sources of evidence to base conclusions. I trained the interviewer on implementing LfM, which allowed for the brainstorming of probing questions as part of the training process. This preparation included confirming the interviewer's understanding and following through to ensure that the interview process was set up to ensure the participants could feel comfortable engaging in and answering the questions.

The structure of the interview may also have contributed to participants' reactivity, a second credibility issue requiring attention. Even though there is anonymity, encouragement for honesty, and confidentiality, participants may have realized that I would receive the information, thus wanting to please me or only elaborate on the aspects of the work. They may have wanted to disagree, not seeing value in LfM and wishing for the district to be more top-down but did not say so, thereby impacting the study's credibility. I triangulated the data through interviews, surveys, and document reviews to minimize bias and reactivity.

Conclusion

This study used a mixed-method, single-district case study design to learn if LfM contributed to developing a coherent learning organization. I utilized surveys, interviews, artifacts, and document reviews to examine how a district could employ LfM. Through my careful attention to the validity and reliability, my study determines not only the next steps for the district but also provides much-needed research in this critical area of implementation and evaluation of LfM to establish an effective learning organization.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter reports the findings of a mixed-methods, single-district case study. The study sought to examine if the strategy of leading from the middle (LfM) contributed to the Discovery School District² (DSD) becoming a coherent learning organization. In DSD, central office instructional leaders and site-level leaders from the School Leadership Team (SLT) partnered to implement this strategy toward the shared vision of improving student learning and building instructional capacity.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How was LfM implemented in a TK-8 school district?
2. In what ways, if at all, did LfM contribute to the district becoming a collaborative learning organization?

The subsequent sections present the case study and its findings in detail from mixed data sources, including document analysis, statistical survey results, and interview themes that encompass the connections between them. Based on the findings from these methods, the study suggests that there are several ways in which LfM may have contributed to DSD becoming a learning organization.

The findings show DSD implemented LfM through a team-based approach to its process. Over the span of four years, different teams of leaders and teachers came together to build the capacity of the team to lead in various areas. Relational capacity was built through engagement in collaborative sessions. Instructional capacity was strengthened through intentional planning that monitored progress with evidence of student learning. Organizational capacity was designed

² Discovery School District and participant names are pseudonyms

through inquiry to create a common purpose framed in joint decision-making to meet targeted outcomes.

It is important to note here that one of the study's limitations is the sample, which includes participants wholly immersed in the implementation of LfM. Therefore, the findings do not necessarily represent the views of the less closely involved staff. This limitation is addressed at greater length in Chapter 5. It is also important to disclose that although I am a researcher for this dissertation, I was also part of the central office instructional team guiding the implementation of LfM from 2016 to the present.

The Case of Implementation: Leading from the Middle (LfM)

This section answers the first research question and describes DSD's actions to implement LfM. It includes a reintroduction of LfM, a document analysis, a timeline, and an implementation summary.

LfM: Definition, Timeline, and Actions

DSD partnered with whole systems change expert InnovateEd in 2016 to improve teaching and learning across its system. LfM, defined as a deliberate change strategy, builds the capacity of the middle—that is, the Site Leadership Teams while seeking to increase performance impact on decision-making and achievement (Fullan, 2015). Hargreaves and Shirley (2019) explain further that LfM is not a tier group but an intentional strategy to build leadership across teams of people in and across schools to improve student outcomes and experiences. As evidenced in planning documents for DSD, operationalizing LfM included firming relational, instructional, and leadership capacity through the School Leadership Teams (SLTs) and supporting groups of administrative leaders at the site and central office level.

To implement the LfM strategy, InnovateEd and DSD worked together on a multi-year plan, including these multiple teams meeting in collaborative sessions. Critical features targeted in collaborative session PowerPoints were rooted in clarity, commitment, communication, collaboration, strategic objectives, leadership, high performance, and coherence across the system (InnovateEd, 2016). Each team's preparatory work included understanding the operationalization of the LfM strategy.

The timeline depicted in Table 5 provides an overview of the scope of work DSD engaged in to apply LfM during 2016-2020. Each time marker indicates the emphasis on the in-depth opportunities for professional learning received by various teams to develop an understanding of the strategy and its potential effect on raising student achievement. Each year added to the work of the previous one. A more in-depth description of the application of LfM by the groups listed follows Table 5.

Table 5***Timeline Overview of the LfM Implementation Process, Teams, and Actions in DSD******(InnovateEd, 2016-2020)***

Year	Participating Team	Implementation Process Actions
2016-2017	DLT and Principals	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Created multi-year plan to implement LfM2. Launched Fullan and Quinn (2016) coherent systems leadership3. Examined root causes of low student outcomes4. Created a common language
2017-2018	DLT, Principals, SLT	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Evaluated and reflected upon pedagogical practices within teaching and learning2. Developed School Implementation Plans (SIP) plans to improve student outcomes3. Created inquiry cycles around problems of practice
2018-2019	DLT, Principals, SLT	Shared evidence of student learning
2019-2020	DLT, Principals, SLT	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Session structure changed for SLTs while continuing the work of previous years within the school2. March 2020-Pandemic stopped all sessions, and SLTs discussion shifted to safety and online instructional needs

2016 through 2020: Implementing Leading from the Middle

A key component of LfM is the collaboration between district leadership, such as Cabinet, directors, and middle leaders or Site Leadership Team members, including teachers and site administrators. As such, I first describe the collaboration structures before detailing the specific activities in DSD's LfM process in the next section.

Collaborative Sessions: Creating a Shared Vision

Collaborative sessions began in 2016 and continued through March 2020. The agendas of the sessions reveal that the desired outcomes were increased learning and cultivating a partnership with the central office. The plan created by InnovateEd, the DLT, and principals indicated that the role of the Superintendent and the instructional services division was to limit district initiatives and create conditions for capacity to expand. In this multi-year plan, bringing a myriad of groups together, beginning with the principals, was determined by the Cabinet³ and InnovateEd as a priority.

Principals. Principals met together through two different opportunities. First, they met as a group three times during the school year. Second, cohorts allowed site leaders to participate in smaller teams. Principals worked together an additional three times a year with their cohorts to examine the various components of LfM and engage in learning rounds to understand its potential impact on student learning through goal clarity and effective collaborative work (Fullan, 2015). All agendas from the whole group and cohort sessions through these years incorporated advisory feedback for the DLT.

District Leadership Team. Members of the DLT included the Cabinet, the central office instructional team, and cohort lead principals. Agendas indicate that the DLT met five times a

³ Cabinet members consist of the Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents.

year to prepare for the work with site teams. Each agenda included defining capacity-building strategies for continuous systemic improvement, evolving high-impact leadership practices, and clarifying support systems across DSD.

School Leadership Teams. From 2017 through June 2019, agendas and PowerPoints reveal that school teams met six times a year during the school day for an all-day session. Teams also met monthly in between sessions. Most school teams had one representative per grade level or department, their site administrators, and a central office instructional team member.

2016 through 2017: Laying the Foundation for LfM

During this school year, the beginning of the groundwork for LfM was laid in DSD through the collaboration of the DLT and principal collaborative. This groundwork was part of the multi-year plan for providing the skills and knowledge to improve organizational capacity. Based on session documents, these two groups created and reviewed the essential concepts and data regarding leadership, student performance, and the need for dialogue around key language. The findings of their action to implement LfM is discussed next.

Launching Coherent Systems Leadership for Change

The DLT and all of DSD's principals spent the 2016-2017 school year understanding LfM systems and the plan their schools would develop for goal setting to improve student outcomes. PowerPoint slides confirm that the Coherence Framework of Fullan and Quinn (2016) was used as a base to begin dialogue framed by its four domains: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, fostering deeper learning, and securing accountability. These four areas became the primary work of the DLT. PowerPoints indicate that the strategic efforts of each group were geared toward building a collaborative culture, with teams making the decisions that

would improve best teaching practices while staying accountable to the learning of adults and students.

Identified Root Causes for Poor Student Outcomes

To create coherence, centering direction toward a few initiatives and goals toward improvement in student performance outcomes (InnovateEd, 2016). Agendas and PowerPoints provided protocols and information for the DLT and principals to analyze data, examining both lag and lead metrics. The DLT and principal teams engaged in agreed-upon structures such as the Five Whys and Circle Map as part of the protocols to determine root causes and evidence-based strategies to address the issue identified (InnovateEd, 2016). Their work with these protocols resulted in exploring common language as a district.

Established Common Language for DSD

As part of the coherence-making planning documents, the DLT and principal meetings in the 2016 school year discussed critical terms to facilitate building a common language with site teams, promoting clarity and communication. Protocols listed on the PowerPoints and agendas assisted in developing a prioritization of terms, collectively defining examples, and non-examples of terms such as LfM, learning communities, scaffolding, rigor, and accountable student talk in preparation for the dialogue with SLTs that would occur in the next school year.

2017 through 2018: The Learning of Site Leadership Teams Begin

In 2017, SLTs were added to the groups meeting throughout the year. Based on session agendas, adding this group increased the number of middle leaders and allowed for the continuation of a common language discussion in DSD and the development of coherent systems leadership, again as a strategy of LfM.

Evaluation of Pedagogical Practices

In their first year, SLTs undertook to learn about instructional pedagogy and assessment in the 2017-2018 school year. Agendas from both the SLT and principal collaboratives show time allotted for examining learning targets, unwrapping standards, necessary student skills, and prioritizing strategies for high levels of learning, such as Webb's Depth of Knowledge. Student lag and lead statistics and the DLT gap analysis of potential root causes were also reviewed by the SLTs.

Through these collaborative meetings, SLTs defined the indicators of student success and the staff practices necessary to achieve desired results. SLTs engaged in the Teaching and Learning Framework to increase knowledge in selecting instructional practices. Members designed lesson targets, performance outcomes, and added learning tasks for each phase of instruction, including a gradual release of responsibility through the lesson, guided instruction, collaborative and independent learning (InnovateEd, 2017). SLTs planned instruction, student learning experiences, and assessments for desired learning outcomes using this framework. In addition, the Learning Guide provided (InnovateEd, 2017) assisted SLT members with the decision-making protocols necessary for School Implementation Plan (SIP) planning.

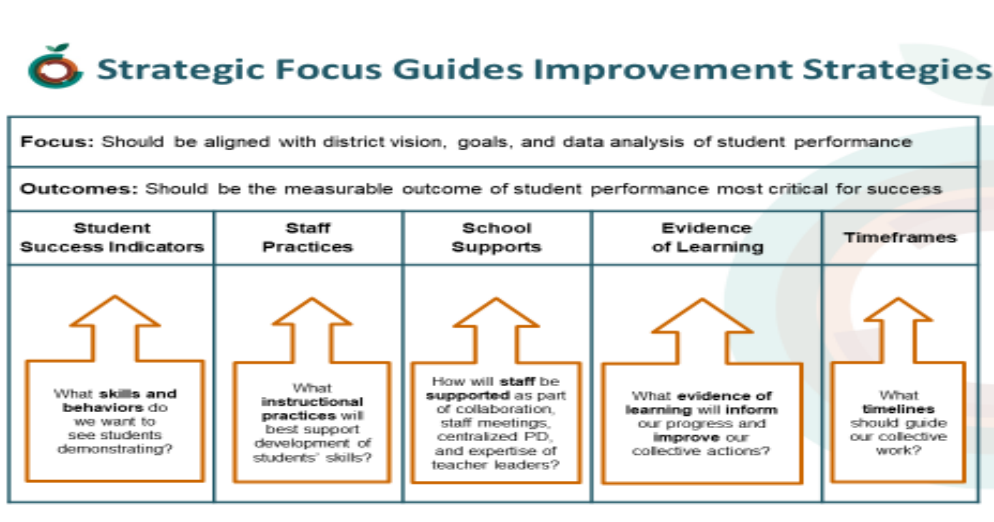
School Improvement Planning and Collaborative Decision Making

The DSD LfM strategy required grade-level and department teams to set SIP student learning goals as part of their school's collaborative Professional Learning Community time. It required site teams to consider the skills students needed most as part of their metrics. PowerPoints presented during the collaborative LfM sessions included strategies SLTs could use when returning to their grade or department team. These strategies assisted in simplifying decision-making around goals, essential staff practices, and evidence of learning.

As evidenced by agendas and PowerPoint slides, SLTs worked collectively to choose high-leverage best practices to extend strategic thinking. Figure 2 illustrates the SIP framework and practices utilized by SLTs. These practices and support focused on developing the strategies and preparation teachers need for providing first instruction. Such preparation of practice included looking at standards, looking at student assessment data on local measures, and creating success criteria that students and staff could understand and describe. More detail is provided later in the section sharing the analysis of interview data.

Figure 2

School Implementation Plan Template (InnovateEd, 2016)



At SLT sessions, schools shared SIP plans to increase efficacy and best practices across sites (InnovateEd agenda, 2017). Another core inclusion to the process was building capacity for the teacher leaders LfM through inquiry cycles members would develop as part of their role.

Development of Inquiry Cycles

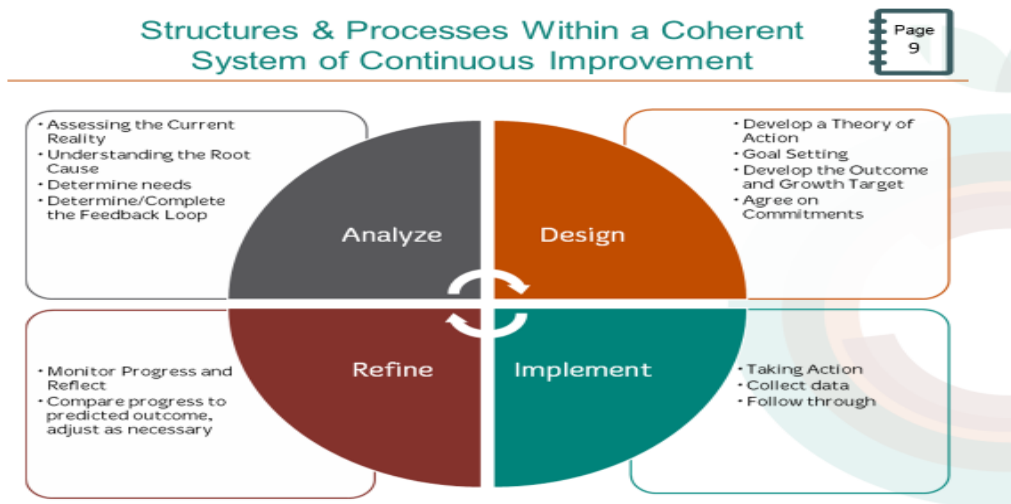
The inquiry cycle was the structure and the process for improvement of instructional practice, using the SIP to impact teaching and learning daily by developing collective expertise. SLTs engaged in six-week cycles, measuring student skill progress on performance data. SLTs

participated in these consistent cycles, collaboratively planning targeted instruction as guided in session PowerPoints. Evidence was collected and brought to subsequent sessions as required by the dates on the agenda.

The cycle's framework was created by InnovateEd (2016) to ensure clarity of the process. The framework's elements are included in Figure 3. This figure shows the cycle and the action steps SLTs used to LfM around a specific problem of practice (InnovateEd, 2017). More information on inquiry cycles is presented later in this chapter.

Figure 3

Cycle of Inquiry (InnovateEd, 2016).



2018 through 2019 The Work of LfM and Learning Continues

During the second year, SLTs continued communicating, planning, and decision-making with grade level and content area site teams, agreeing jointly to commit to actions to amplify student learning.

Shared Evidence of Student Learning

In 2018, the DLT, principal collaboratives, and SLT reflected on the work of the previous year and its potential impact on achievement through practices listed in the Learning Guide

(InnovateEd, 2018). Agendas continued to include the areas of learning and leadership practices. PowerPoints included calibration of student work with members highlighting an emphasis on student skills, strengths, and growth areas through a work sample or assessment, including generating recommendations and next steps. These steps refined the SIP, offering more opportunities to LfM, continuing collaborative practices, and determining new lead metrics. Looking at the results prompted further conversation at the DLT and principal sessions, continuing the collaboration for the next levels of support for the new year.

2019 through 2020: The Year of Unforeseen Change

This year saw changes in a myriad of ways. DSD changed the collaborative team session structure, and the world entered a pandemic still discussed today. SLTs time together to focus on site goals and planning shifted, but the actions, goals, and learning did not. Sessions still focused on inquiry and student learning evidence until March 2020.

Session Structure Changes

SLT session structure changes shifted due to a concern for substitute teacher needs across DSD. Due to the change in time available for collaborating, PowerPoints and agendas were considerably shorter and included less capacity building and team planning time. However, these documents still indicate that SIPs were being refined, inquiry cycles were continuing, and student evidence of learning was continuing to contribute to the continuous improvement of teaching and learning.

March 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic

As Covid-19 closed schools and staff worked from home, agendas show SLTs were learning the nuances of online instruction and working with families to support the use of

technology. SLTs did not meet again officially to continue the process of the LfM implementation from March 2020 until the reopening of schools in August 2021.

Summary of the LfM Implementation

Table 6 presents a summary of the collaborative learning session practices and activities of the groups participating in implementing LfM beginning in 2016 through the onset of Covid-19 in 2020. This table highlights each collaborative team's role, purpose, and actions over the years of implementation. Throughout the years, teams revisited their responsibilities and purpose to ensure coherence and commitment to the process.

Table 6

Summary of Collaborative Process Structures for Implementing LfM (InnovateEd, 2016-2020)

Team	Responsibilities in Implementation	Purpose
Cabinet	<p>Create conditions for capacity building</p> <p>Provide site support for LfM</p>	Limit initiatives to concentrate on LfM to increase learning as an organization
District Leadership Team (DLT)	<p>Institute and grow coherent systems leadership</p> <p>Focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability (Fullan & Quinn, 2016)</p>	<p>Ensure clarity, commitment, collaboration, and accountability around the identified strategic focus</p> <p>Examine data and evidence of root causes and progress</p>
Principal Collaboratives	Develop communities of practice among principals	Build instructional leadership and capacity to provide SLT support to LfM
School Leadership Teams (SLT)	<p>Define the focus of school improvement while monitoring the learning of adult teams and examining student skills and behaviors</p> <p>Be responsible for communication with peers at the site</p>	<p>Develop a clear focus for goals and direction to support teachers with the SIP</p> <p>Strengthen teacher leadership</p> <p>Measure impact on student learning</p>

Building Toward a Learning Organization

Part of the implementation of LfM was to strengthen instruction and learning. The second part of the research focus of this dissertation was to examine if LfM contributed to DSD becoming a learning organization. This reminder is important as an organization collectively develops beliefs and norms by creating intentional conditions, strategies, and processes to support the learning culture (Kools & Stoll, 2016). When put into practice consistently, this intentionality for learning becomes a value that the organization must nurture (Senge, 1996).

DSD employed LfM as a catalyst to begin the organizational learning process. The cohort structure of collaborative sessions assisted in designing a vision for learning through the growth of SLT agency, communication, inquiry, professional learning, and the examination of data. To assess if LfM did contribute to DSD becoming a learning organization, 299 SLT members were invited to take a survey that featured four of the seven dimensions of the Kools and Stoll inventory (2016) listed here: developing a shared vision, continuous professional learning, fostering team learning and collaboration and embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and information. A composite score was developed for each one by summing the individual items.

Using a paired sample t-test, the analysis compared respondents' perceptions of those dimensions pre- (retrospective pre-) and post-implementation to determine if survey participants perceived a difference post-implementation of LfM regarding DSD as a learning organization. In trying to make sense of the data in a practical sense, I also descriptively analyzed the pre-post changes on the initial 5-point Likert Scale⁴. Cohen's d effect sizes were also calculated for each paired sample t-test.

⁴ Values to examine shifts in the Likert Scale were calculated by dividing the summed items score by the number of items in the dimension. The Not Applicable option was set as a missing value.

Table 7 displays the descriptive survey statistics, including the standard deviation, mean, and median. Pre- and post-composites were paired as follows: Shared vision, questions 3 and 7; Continuous professional learning, questions 4 and 8; Fostering team learning and collaboration, questions 5 and 9; and Embedded systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning, questions 6 and 10 (Kools, et al., 2020). Table 2 in Chapter 3 also details these pairings and dimensions.

Table 7

Descriptive Survey Statistics

Survey Questions	SV pre	SV post	PPL pre	PPL post	FTLC pre	FTLC post	ES pre	ES post
Valid	73	78	79	78	79	77	79	81
Missing	8	3	5	3	2	4	2	0
Median	33.00	37.00	37.00	46.50	38.00	46.00	27.00	34.00
Mean	30.79	36.41	36.73	43.92	38.16	44.75	26.38	32.50
Std. Error of Mean	0.96	0.76	0.95	1.07	0.96	0.91	0.81	0.74
Std. Deviation	8.24	6.72	8.36	9.45	8.60	8.06	7.26	6.69
Minimum	9.00	11.00	13.00	13.00	11.00	13.00	8.00	8.00
Maximum	45.00	45.00	54.00	55.00	55.00	55.00	40.00	40.00

Note. SV = Shared Vision; PPL = Promoting Professional learning; FTLC=Fostering Team Learning and Collaboration; ES= Embedding Systems for Collecting and Exchanging Knowledge and Learning (Kools, et al., 2020).

The survey's results suggest that respondents' perceived increases in all four dimensions before and after engaging in the SLT work while implementing LfM. Statistical and analytical results for each are given in the ensuing paragraphs.

Table 8 shows the effect size of the results between the two means—pre- and post-implementation. Reported as the value of Cohen's d, these results in all dimensions are .7 or .8,

signifying the large effect size. Overall, the results suggest that participants perceived an increase in DSD as a learning organization after engaging in LfM.

Table 8

Paired Samples T-Test

Learning Organization Dimensions (adapted, Kools & Stoll, 2016)	Measure 1 Pre InnovateEd SLT and LfM work	Measure 2 Post InnovateEd SLT and LfM work	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Developing a shared vision centered on the learning of all students	Survey Question 3	Survey Question 7	-5.91	69	.05	0.747
Promoting and supporting continuous professional learning for all staff	Survey Question 4	Survey Question 8	-6.25	73	.05	0.805
Fostering team learning and collaboration among staff	Survey Question 5	Survey Question 9	-6.56	75	.05	0.790
Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning	Survey Question 6	Survey Question 10	-6.82	78	.05	0.876

Note: Appendix B contains all of the survey information and questions given to participants.

In the Shared Vision dimension, there was a statistically significant increase of 5.6 points $t(69)=-5.919$, $p < 0.05$, suggesting an increased understanding, commitment to, and development of the shared vision. The nine individual item increases in means ranged from .382 to .821. The descriptive analysis of the change in the Likert Scale showed more than a half-point increase, on average, from 3.42-4.04 or .62, indicating a shift from neutral to agree.

In the Promoting Professional Learning dimension, there was a statistically significant increase in the mean by 7.1 points $t(73)=-6.256$, $p < 0.05$, signifying that respondents increased their perceptions that this area was a priority, with relevant, clear objectives, and an opportunity to attempt new ideas with the aid and feedback of other team members promoting growth. The eleven individual item increases in means ranged from .358 to .863. The descriptive results of the change in the Likert Scale showed more than a half- point increase, on average, from 3.39-3.992 or .66, suggesting that the group moved from neutral to agree.

In the Fostering Team Learning dimension, there was a statistically significant increase of 6.6 points $t(75)=-6.563$, $p < 0.05$, suggesting that respondents felt working as a team to improve practice while building trust and respect increased from before to after implementing LfM. The eleven individual item increases in means ranged from .399 to .750. The descriptive results of the change in the Likert Scale showed more than a half-point increase, on average, from 3.46-4.06 or .60, indicating an increase in responses shifting from neutral to agree.

In the Embedding Systems dimension, there was a statistically significant increase of 6.1 points $t(78)=6.828$, $p < 0.05$, indicating that SLT members' perceived increase in their use of data towards closing gaps, bolstering instructional practices, strengthened decision-making, intensified action taking, and increased dialogue. The eight individual item increases in means ranged from .598 to 1.148. The descriptive results of the change in the Likert Scale showed a point increase, on average, from 3.29-4.06 or .77, a shift from neutral to agree. This data demonstrated the most significant gain of any dimension.

LfM as Contributor to Learning

The interviews provided insight into how the LfM strategy may have been an influence, producing statistically significant scores on the learning organization dimensions found in the

survey. This section describes the themes that emerged from interview participants, including the ways LfM may have helped move DSD toward being a learning organization. Themes are framed from the dimensions of the survey to provide clarity and connectedness between research methods. Table 8 presents the themes that emerged.

Table 9

Interview Themes

Learning Organization Theme (Kools, et al., 2020) LfM Subthemes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	Total
Shared Vision												
Collective Goal Setting	x		x	x		x	x	x		x	x	8
Developing SIP Plans	x	x			x		x	x		x	x	7
Promoting Professional Learning												
Continuous Adult Learning for Student Success	x		x	x	x		x		x			6
Developing SLT Voice and Trust	x	x		x	x	x			x	x		7
Fostering Team Learning												
Inclusive Structures		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	9
Planning Learning Experiences	x	x				x	x	x	x	x		7
Embedding Systems												
Collaborative Inquiry Cycles	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	10
Cohesive Systems Leadership	x		x		x	x		x	x	x	x	8

Shared Vision

Eight interview participants described setting goals and developing the SIP plan as key facilitators of SLTs and site teams having a shared vision for student learning and success.

Setting goals and designing a plan resonate similarly with this survey dimension, highlighting vision development that included all staff and their motivation to make their goals and plans a reality for students. Collective goal setting is addressed first.

Collective Goal Setting

Session activities were planned purposefully to increase coherence, learning, and vision setting during the years SLTs met together (InnovateEd, 2017). During the interview, participants were asked to describe their cohort sessions. Frequently discussed themes included the importance of being there as a team, collaborative knowledge acquisition through activities such as article jigsaws on rigor, best instructional practices, and focusing on joint tasks toward an expected outcome. A common outcome through the setting of goals was a central theme for eight of the interview participants who discussed the process undertaken by SLTs.

Sharing their experiences, participants spoke about what goal setting included. Participants noted how interesting it was to hear the varied goals of other SLTs. The eight participants also indicated that the cohort session portions related to setting goals were helpful because SLT members began to understand the needs of students at the other sites for improving learning. Needs varied yet the dialogue showed more similarity, alleviating feelings of isolation and collecting new ideas that could also potentially help their site as well. The opportunity to collaborate further clarified instructional concepts that helped members to create realistic goals for improvement. Further, the vertical articulation between sites explored new insights into

instructional strategies whose implementation were often made into goals. Madelyn shared what the process was like to collaborate in this way during the cohort sessions:

We would collaborate as a site. We would discuss our goals, and then we would be mixed in with the other sites and share our goals (...) We were starting to maybe learn from each other and kind of adapt our ideas based on what we were learning (...) we were actually developing our vision of what we wanted for our site in collaboration with other sites. It was becoming like one, one vision leading from the middle.

Madelyn's thoughts convey the collaborative nature of the sessions, the learning across sites, and the attention given during their collective time to goal setting as a potential part of the vision for the SLT. This extended opportunity for Madelyn and the other participants to refine goals aided in developing the SIP vision.

School Implementation Plans (SIP) to Increase Student Skillsets

During the interviews, participants were asked to talk about their experiences as SLT members. The main themes were quite varied and detailed the need to be collaborative with peers, the initial confusion in understanding the expectations for LfM, the focus on instruction through standards and evidenced-based practices, and their role in designing the SIP for student growth. These themes emphasize the SIP as a connecting tool for skill building as part of the vision for student learning. The SIP, completed by each SLT, integrated specific skills students needed to acquire as part of a set goal. LfM potentially contributed to the skill-building planning through decision-making and dialogue while looking at the various pieces of the SIP and how to better meet student skill needs. Lucy specified,

What they're seeing as a part of their plan, is directly affected by leading from the middle, having their leadership and their people work on their plans. So just seeing that growth,

you can see the plans in the beginning and how they're developed, they're written with so much more intention now, and they're more focused and because, they're just getting better at it by practicing and planning.

Lucy's thoughts illustrate how intentionality fostered specific focal points for members regarding which skills and practices were chosen. This intentionality increased the exchange of ideas. Another interviewee, Adam, discussed that he worked on steadily designing student success skill indicators using the state standards as a guide, additionally revisiting the SIP as a team to monitor progress regularly and make additions as needed for learning and continued goal setting. Amelie acknowledged, "we saw improvements in the students, and I think it also helped bring us together as a school because we had a clear vision in mind of what we were all working toward."

The views shared by Lucy, Adam, and Amelie help frame the view that SIP planning was an essential part of being on the SLT, fundamental to the vision of increasing affirmative student outcomes, and facilitating DSD's understanding of the learning SLTs needed.

Promoting Professional Learning

Over the several years of implementation of LfM, sessions were called professional learning days as part of the calendar DSD provided to principals, the DLT, and SLTs. SLT session outcomes for the day incorporated pedagogy, student data review, and decision-making that, according to interview participants, led to continuous adult learning and collective voices. The latter also aligns with this survey dimension as staff identified the objective of the professional learning, ensuring the focus of their learning was cohesive with their vision.

Continuous Adult Learning for Student Success

Each cohort session offered professional learning for SLTs on evidence-based instructional practices and sharing ideas to expand learning and LfM (InnovateEd, 2016). Interview participants were asked how the implementation of LfM as a strategy worked in DSD. Participants discussed various themes, indicating they felt LfM was working as intended to build capacity, including the opportunities to collaborate, share ideas and decision-making, empower reflection through data, and nurture assets-based learning for adults during the cohort sessions.

LfM captures learning and support for adults and students (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Madelyn indicated her appreciation of the growth tone of the sessions. She stated it helped her to feel more confident to LfM. Similarly, Sarah shared how the opportunity to learn and collaborate developed comradery between schools instead of competition. She said, “these sessions were kind of nice to be acknowledged for what we shared and for everyone in the room to learn and lead. Thank you for creating these opportunities for us to meet and see other sides of that [LfM].” Another participant, Karol, discussed that LfM as a cohort with other sites in the room allowed for professional learning connected to needed support. In response to why LfM may be working in DSD, she focused on the value of professional learning by disclosing,

Mainly because each site would develop their site plan and have their focus goal areas, support was part of that. So, if the needs were professional learning and improving writing across grade levels, it would happen. Materials and resources too, we would look at them and have more discussion.

Karol’s comments also highlight the professional learning that occurred when SLTs evaluated their progress and found a need. Examining SIP and student data was a part of the professional learning for SLTs. Strategies to close gaps and ideas for meeting student needs were

shared across sites. Six interview participants discussed data as a means to improve student outcomes, highlighting both triumphs and growth needs. Ramona stated,

We really enjoy the fact of looking at data together. I am looking at the data with the team and seeing our student's strengths, seeing the areas that they need to improve in, and then working together as a team on how to help the students advance academically. What I love is the kind of debriefing we can have with the other grade-level leaders and hearing from them their ideas for students. We empower each other; we empower students.

Madelyn, Sarah, Karol, and Ramona's thoughts centered on the adult learning they perceived was assisting LfM toward making a difference in DSD, offering opportunities to SLTs to hear one another, expand communication, and encourage SLT voice to champion students receiving what they need for success.

Developing School Leadership Team (SLT) Voice

As noted in the document analysis, the planned cohort sessions offered a safe space for disclosing opinions and decisions, engendering efficacy to improve student outcomes. In the interviews, participants were asked about their thoughts on the opportunities experienced for developing a teacher or leader voice and its impact on teaching, learning, and decision-making for both students and teachers. Common themes surfaced amongst seven interviewees who discussed the increased communication channels necessary for strengthening collective voice, understanding the "why" behind needs, clarity with peers to build relationships, and consistently inspiring others to make decisions as leaders from the middle. Collaboration and agency seemed to go hand in hand for several SLT members. One interviewee, Ramona, stated,

We are collaborating with them [peers] and then expressing what we think is important to make a change within our site. So, I see having a voice through the ability to learn

together, collaborate, and teach others to then come to an agreement about what we saw together, did together, and how we can make changes (...) we've been studying, setting goals together, hearing each other, working on strategies, and deciding on what the focus will be for our site.

Like Ramona, Madelyn linked collaboration with voice to communicate and develop commitment from peers based upon results and discussions centered on observed student essentials for learning. She shared,

Opportunities to develop a teacher's voice, I see it as an opportunity to communicate to not just my grade level colleagues, but our site colleagues why we think that a goal is important or that resources might be necessary. We've had so many opportunities for professional development (...), So in a way, we are collaborating with them and then expressing what we think is important in order to make a change within our site. We actually get to voice our opinions, we get to express our experiences. We are the ones that, day by day, are seeing the needs in the classroom as the needs of the children change (...). We can bring it together in collaboration with others, and then we can make those changes that will directly impact our students. We're not waiting for the changes to happen (...). That's exciting.

Madelyn's confident voice as a culture builder describes the enhanced open mindset for active listening and joint actions toward a common vision. Citlali shared that this common vision encouraged a voice that may not have been popular. Yet, engaging in these deliberations may have made teams stronger. She spoke about this challenge,

When you come together, it's like we all have to work towards the common goal, and you have to be able to hear each other and allow for people to have concerns or disagreements

to have a voice because that's when it truly becomes the most productive. When people who have different opinions voice their concerns, you really start thinking about, you know, what is it that's really going to matter or what's going to make a difference. We have built a stronger culture of collaboration, but we had to really build that trust within the organization, that takes time. It was not easy.

According to these participants and others, implementing LfM enabled agency, relational capacity, and collective professional learning that fostered SLTs working together as a team.

Fostering Team Learning and Collaboration

Collaboration is essential to coherent systems leadership and contributes to learning (InnovateEd, 2018). In DSD, the interviews suggest that collaboration assisted SLTs in boosting their instructional practices and relationships as they listened to one another and engaged in decision-making while learning to LfM as a team. As explained in this section, the qualitative data describes the inclusive structures and the planning of learning experiences for students that fostered trust and respect, as demonstrated by the interviewees who shared their thoughts and the statistical significance of this survey dimension. Like the survey items, the shared themes included expanding collaborative practice and providing honest feedback.

Inclusive SLT Structures

During cohort sessions, all participants interacted with one another collaboratively. To gather evidence on this inclusive connection, interview participants were asked to describe the collaboration between administrative and leadership team participants. The responses from the interviewees illustrate the importance of having varied roles as part of the SLT, including the central office and principals, to support as equal members of the leadership team.

These inclusive structures aided in the SLTs learning, according to nine participants who emphasized that meeting with all key site and central office leaders in the room provided more opportunities to collaborate. The interviewees discussed that candor was always encouraged, and the norms created by the teams allowed for questioning, dissent, and discourse that galvanized learning. This learning was significant to teacher leaders. Kaitlyn highlighted her feelings about the change in perception of central office leaders and site administrators as a result of the collaborative structure that brought everyone together,

I think you see a different side of the leadership team when you're at those meetings because when you're not at the leadership team, well, I call it the Death Star, the district office, you never want to go over there before because that means it's a them and us situation. But when you're at those sessions, you're on a level playing field, you're all there for the students, I feel like it's more of a we're all together and that's very much how it was. It felt like we were all there for a common goal doing the same thing, and it felt like even the administrators, no matter what level they were, because there were principals and assistant superintendents. No matter what their place was (...), even they could learn something and they did.

Kaitlyn's comments suggest that seeing the administrators in the room as part of the team, not their role, began to develop new perceptions of administrators and the building of trust. Equally important for improving relational capacity was principal participation as part of the process.

Essentially, principals became lead learners (Fullan, 2009) alongside their teams, which sometimes involved vulnerability. Principals mentioned they were unsure what would happen as they allowed their teams to lead. However, the engagement of activities within the inclusive

structures helped keep the task at the forefront and continue building understanding amid moments of hesitation. Three site leaders discussed the resilience of their team. During the interview, Adam stated,

It wasn't pleasurable when we started, you know, it was definitely difficult for even me as the leader of the school, going with eight other teachers from my school. It was not easy at all because I had to hold the team together (...) because people didn't understand what it was about, including myself. I mean, what the benefits were going to be (...). By the second month into it, my staff started getting the gist of it. We started understanding our assignment. We were able to be successful in doing that. And as we do the assignments, knowledge of the process, the space we're working in, it got more tangible to us, in touch with feelings. Now we know where we're going. So that was my experience (...) we got better at it, we stuck to it.

Both Kaitlyn and Adam spoke about the common goals and tasks that helped SLTs learn as teachers and site leaders. Since central office leads were also in the room, participants were asked about levels of support during the interviews. They shared the central office instructional team enhanced cohort sessions. Six mentioned central office team leads being a resource, and two central office interviewees discussed the power of being on the SLT as a support in the process. Citlali talked about the approachability of central office instructional leads as a resource. She stated,

Well, I think there's always an opportunity for collaboration (...) there's always the opportunity for two-way communication to take place during that time. There is a lot of support available. All of our district people are very approachable which makes it helpful.

I don't think we have any administrators there that even teachers feel like they can't send an email, set up a phone call. I think that's helpful.

Central office interviewees answered correspondingly. Karol shared, “I work with four different schools and seeing their growth as they worked together with their leadership team, it was a really neat process for me, asking questions and making observations rather than telling anyone what to do.”

In answering the questions of collaboration between groups and central office support, participants worked collectively, using the inclusive structure to strengthen team learning within the SLT. The following section addresses how the collective planned for the learning of students.

Planning Student Learning Experiences

As previously reported in the document analysis, SLTs concentrated on planning learning experiences through collaborative conversations for a common school-wide objective. As part of the SIP, there was a dialogue about goal setting, analyzing data, and amplifying progress by making decisions to shape student outcomes based on site needs. To seek their thoughts on this process, interview participants were asked to describe their shared decision-making and who benefited. Addressed most by seven participants were themes that incorporated a focus on their joint learning, building the SLTs as a team, potential limitations experienced because of their preparation, and decision-making that aided the instructional program to benefit students. The latter also directly connects to the statistically significant dimension items on the Kools and Stoll (2016) survey concerning collaboration to improve practice, building trust, and listening to one another as they fostered team learning.

Based on the thoughts shared, planning student learning grew to be academic in discussion and application. The participants consistently discussed essential state instructional

standards across content areas and the need for critical thinking within these areas. Working together on instructional planning that could benefit students also may have benefitted the adults. Sarah noted in her interview that collaboration made planning more purposeful and reflective for her team.

I think we have definitely understood where we are and our thoughts. It's made us aware and intentional of looking at the standards, to look at where are we as a school site and how are we going to move our students forward. It made us aware of how have we been creating these lessons. How have we prepared them [student lessons] as well for the teachers to understand, OK, this lesson doesn't meet it [standard], but then how is that going to be communicated with the other staff?

Sarah's reflection was similar to others in that unintended consequences developed when planning decisions that would benefit students. Additionally, described in the interviews were conversations about learning with teammates regarding the need to adjust the lesson or approach when barriers arose to meet student needs across grade levels. Three interviewees noted that primary and upper elementary saw difficulties in instructional practice implementations they did not anticipate. Madelyn discussed the effect of the latter on the collective planning efforts:

We started at the beginning wanting to have more rigorous instruction in writing and reading. (...) we came up on our site with some lofty goals of having the kids write from two sources and reading complex text. The issue we learned was that the upper-grade teachers weren't considering our primary teachers, and they were feeling very frustrated. So, the reason why this worked was because of going back and listening to their voices. We came up with changes so we could have everybody make progress and make an impact with students rather than just the upper-grade teachers. We knew where we made

a mistake not listening to some members because we had these very lofty goals, and we wanted to make a big difference, but we learned from that mistake.

Both Sarah and Madelyn described the planning of learning experiences as a benefit of the shared decision-making of LfM, applying reflection through team learning to improve student outcomes. The latter may have also possibly contributed to revitalizing the system within DSD, including the structures needed for continued improvement.

Embedding Systems for Collection and Exchange of Knowledge and Information

Continuous improvement means continually acquiring new knowledge, skills, and understanding to improve one's actions and results (Fullan, 2009). Collecting and exchanging knowledge and information involves using data to improve and analyze practice, update actions in plans based on outcomes, identify gaps, analyze instruction, and have regular dialogue around evidence-based research practices. These elements reflect the most significant findings from the survey participants in this dimension. SLTs engaged in this knowledge exchange process through collaborative inquiry cycles that promoted LfM and the exchange of knowledge and information to deepen instructional practice and underpin cohesive systems change.

Collaborative Inquiry Cycles

Equally noted in the interviews, in response to the question asking about collaboration with colleagues after the sessions, 10 participants discussed common themes, such as evidence of student learning, curricular rigor, planning for growth, and cycles as a means for transparency. These cycles included looking at student work samples and the inclusion of teacher best practices and metrics for student and SLT learning (InnovateEd, 2016). Specifically, participants asserted that engaging in cycles allowed teachers to see what students needed and what actions needed to be taken. Further, this collection and exchange of information during a cycle helped SLTs create

learning experiences. Karol communicated during the interview, "What are you seeing when you go through a cycle of inquiry with student work? You know, what are they struggling with? What do you need to do to help them? That's been really rewarding learning for me."

Learning about student needs is also connected to collaboration around common expectations and rigor. Interviewees shared that understanding expectations across schools as they shared evidence from their cycles was a revelation to SLT members. During the interview, Lucy stated the differences SLT members noted regarding the rigor of the lesson planning. She explains the experience of seeing that in some schools, expectations were lowered,

We got to share across the district and could compare some of the evidence from the students. So, for example, in one meeting, in particular, one school, they had the same assignment, same standard. They planned it. They went back into the cycle of inquiry. They came back, and the level of rigor was completely different. Interestingly, different. So that's been really great. I'd like to see some more of that as well because I think that was really powerful. We didn't have to say anything. It was just like, Oh, your kids did this, so you could see the lower expectations in one school versus another.

Xochitl shared similar observations of the cycles about collaboration with peers, progress monitoring, planning trial and error, and student increases in learning from one cycle to another.

There were different things that we tried. We broke down the standards as we focused on one particular piece of them rather than the whole thing. We decided that we were going to focus on one particular objective. We were going to divide up the kids into different levels. We were going to keep data through an exit ticket so that we could have immediate feedback, but we were also going to be looking at the assessments. (...) We were going to work on it for six weeks, so everybody gave their input. We all felt really

good, this is going to work, and we divided up the groups. (...) We were moving them, and it was really it was great to see that the next time they had to test they were, they were moving forward. Then we also saw what we were doing wrong, you know, like, Okay, this is not working because it's not really being very specific. It worked really well, because in the end, the kids actually did well.

Karol, Lucy, and Xochitl's comments illustrate the importance of collaborative cycles to exchange knowledge for deeper learning. SLTs continued to LfM to plan the next instructional practice to be measured in the cycle, infusing new methods to make a more coherent and cohesive system.

Coherent and Cohesive Systems Leadership

Fullan and Quinn (2016) define coherence as a shared understanding of the depth and purpose of the work, a common agreement rooted in specificity and clarity. Relatedly, cohesion is characterized by France Education International (2019) as a part of but more than coherence. In essence, cohesion is exemplified by the unit of people engaging in understanding how pieces connect together, with LfM as a collective responsibility that transforms leadership, learning, and well-being across a system (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Based on the interviews, LfM's collaborative learning experiences in DSD may have contributed to cultivating value toward coherence and cohesion.

Interviewees were asked about their views on the value of LfM and if any results had surprised them. The most reoccurring themes were intentionality for the learning of all students, peer buy-in, and team agreements made and committed to by the SLT. Six interviewees discussed these common agreements for student learning across grade levels, helping all teachers begin to understand the bigger coherent systems picture and their roles as systems leaders LfM.

Interviewees verbalized these practices, particularly on teams centering on student achievement and learning from mistakes and successes. Xochitl conveyed what it was like for her team:

It was really exciting to see what we learned together. Yes, we moved so many (students) up to the next level. So that kind of gave us encouragement to say, OK, this is working. (...) Either way, whether it was successful or not, I think the opportunity to have that learning and conversation and to be focused on our students, was just really good. That surprised me. You know, we had a really good team of people, but we had a couple of skeptical people that were like, I'm not sure what this is. But in the end, what really surprised me, they were the biggest advocates of the program at the very end of it. They were like just very excited to be part of it, and they were motivated. So, it was the whole process. Seeing these teachers changed their outlook about it. It was very interesting.

Xochitl's thoughts described the learning of her team and their agreement to continue to LfM while engaged in the coherence-making student-centered process.

Commitment to the process and the unit was also discussed as a value. Eight participants identified that the value of LfM concerned the commitment to building a culture of growth and leadership as a member of the SLT. Comments included the value of the work, the efficacy it can bring because of struggle, and the learning and leadership enriched by it. Amelie commented,

If you want the collaboration, the participation, and you really want to move forward, then you need to allow these individuals to have the opportunity to lead, lead from the middle, to have that opportunity to collaborate, to speak, to share, and learn from our successes and our mistakes because that's the only way to grow.

Amelie's appeal for continuing LfM embeds cohesive and collaborative learning opportunities that include exchanging knowledge, leading to growth, and extended leadership.

Additionally, when asked about LfM and the importance of developing their leadership skills, these eight participants viewed leadership as a value and necessity. Common themes included building on team strengths, seeing results, striving to do more for students, and the change in a system produced when teams look at instructional practice, progress, and sharing the responsibility for leadership. Lucy shared,

I've seen what it is like top-down only and making that shift to leading from the middle. I think it was pretty amazing to see that happen. I mean, we are not all the way there yet, but even when we are critical of things, I think back to the beginning of this, where we were a few years ago, and we are getting there for students, getting them what they need. We've done a lot of great things, and when there's reflection, leadership like this is a really good thing.

Lucy indicates there is more opportunity for leadership work ahead. As knowledge continues to be systemically collected and exchanged through inquiry cycles and collaborative learning, the value of LfM shared by the participants also connects coherence and cohesion toward transforming culture and wellbeing in DSD.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter presents the answers to research questions that guided this study. The mixed-methods, single-district case study utilized a document analysis, survey results, and interview data that share the common themes of collaborative planning that sought to improve instructional practices, examine evidence of student learning and build capacity toward collective voice and systems leadership. The multi-year implementation focused on common language and monitoring of practice through cycles of inquiry that sought to also vitalize the organizational and relational capacity through dialogue and collective commitment to the

process. The findings suggest that LfM cultivated a shared vision for improving student outcomes, leading to the continuous learning of both students and staff, proposing that the strategy of LfM did contribute toward DSD becoming a learning organization. In Chapter 5, these themes are further explored in connection to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The next chapter will also feature the limitations of the study and its implications for practice and policy.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

"Teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. This is where the 'rubber meets the road'; unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn."

-Peter Senge

Increasing learning at all levels is the purpose that drives school districts toward finding solutions for this longstanding challenge (Fullan, 2009). The solutions sought have been tethered in top-down implementations of multiple initiatives, all seeking to reach desired outcomes in light of state-imposed accountability. District top-down culture is not novel and has been noted in numerous studies (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Honig, 2008; Johnson et al., 2015). These studies indicate that school site teams rarely have input in decisions that directly affect their classroom instruction, interaction with peers, and choosing initiatives that best meet school and student needs while underpinning learning.

In completing this research, I examined whether the strategy of leading from the middle (LfM) contributed to the Discovery School District (DSD) becoming a learning organization. Through an inclusive and collaborative structure, LfM was utilized to increase learning and transform the existing district culture from top-down implementation to a sustainable system of shared decision-making toward improving pedagogy and relationships between the central office and school site teams. This research also aimed to discover the mutually supportive ways LfM was implemented amongst these teams.

With this study, I seek to increase the limited body of literature on LfM and districts as learning organizations, providing what I believe is the first to incorporate one as an influence on the other.

In this chapter, I include a summary of key findings, providing an interpretation based on previous research. Next, I address the implications for team members of the central office and the school site, including both individual site administrators and teachers, who must build collective voice, efficacy, and learning toward a shared vision. I then provide recommendations for future research. Lastly, I offer a final reflection on the effect of leading and learning from the middle in DSD.

Broad Summary of Findings, Interpretation, and Connection to Prior Research

This mixed-methods, single-district case study employed a document analysis, a survey instrument, and semi-structured interviews to gather evidence. Triangulating the data permitted me to look for common themes and categories that highlighted the findings introduced in the previous chapter. The evidence gained from this study suggests that the research questions guiding the study were answered. In sum, how LfM was implemented helped to contribute toward DSD becoming a learning organization.

Research Question #1: How was LfM implemented in a K-8 District?

The first research question delved into what DSD did to implement LfM. The document analysis findings signified that DSD took a team approach to implement LfM to increase learning and design a culture of distributed leadership of the middle through intentional planning to respond to student needs (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). The collaborative teams became lead learners and planners, confirming the research that an organization cannot learn without open access to collaboration (Senge, 2012). In DSD, each key step kept students' learning at the core, thus confirming the findings of LfM research, which includes the structure of interdisciplinary teams and supportive structures and processes for students across the system. The opportunity for collaboration opportunities provided each team time to listen to new ideas, learn new concepts,

discuss challenges, and plan next steps. Each strategic action evaluated the current reality in DSD, examining student learning impacts from the past, present, and future. This finding is significant because dialogue amongst the members sought to understand at a reflective level the reasons why students have done poorly or done well, leading to sharing of best practices and discussion, collaboration, and pedagogical inquiry helped to isolate potential barriers to increasing learning that students and teachers may be experiencing. This finding also confirms the research assessing schools as learning organizations. Kools et al. (2020) found that collaboration across schools and teams provided a deeper focus on improving student outcomes by recognizing an emphasis on teaching and learning.

The importance of teaching and learning was also highlighted in the analysis completed in this study. The study found that identifying root causes for poor student outcomes produced collaborative discussion, enhancing the common language that facilitated a deeper inquiry into measurable pedagogical practices. Prior research conducted by Hargreaves and Shirley (2019) indicates that a deeper inquiry into teacher pedagogy promotes assessing strengths and areas for growth. This level of assessment also calls for shared decision-making for student success as teachers and leaders make choices relevant to evidence-based best instructional practices to aid in strengthening student outcomes (Kools et al., 2020)

Based upon the application of their shared decision-making, all teams in DSD involved in LfM focused on developing the critical thinking skills students need, employing high-leverage practices while mapping out success indicators and evidence of student learning on School Implementation Plans (SIP). This finding confirms the research concerning learning organizations and the need to create plans and frequently revisit them, communicating and striving for heightened student outcomes through cycles of inquiry (OECD, 2016). DSD cohort

teams had the opportunity to revisit their plan and discuss their learning during the collaborative session and with peers at the site. The latter is important because research has shown that teams that build a collaborative culture develop strategies to create coherent systems, use planning and goal documents to focus direction, creating continuous improvement while keeping accountability to one another and the actions for learning within the plan (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). In implementing these steps for LfM across all schools, DSD implemented the LfM strategy transparently and strategically, aiming to nurture strong leadership toward a student-centered culture.

Research Question #2: In what ways, if at all, did Leading from the Middle Contribute to the district becoming a collaborative learning organization?

The findings for this research question indicate several ways that LfM may have contributed toward DSD becoming a learning organization. The survey and interview findings suggest that SLT members found that their actions fortified a shared vision that was enhanced and understood through the systemic professional and team learning fostered through the implementation process. The following are the major themes that arose from the data: goal setting and planning, the continuous learning of the teams, member agency and choice, inclusive cohort structures, planning learning experiences, and the collaborative inquiry cycles used to increase pedagogy and systems leadership. In this next section, I will connect the findings to the studies reported in the literature review.

Developing a Shared Vision Through Goal Setting and SIP Plans

A shared vision includes actions or initiatives toward a shared purpose (OECD, 2016; Senge, 1996). Similarly, one of the principles of LfM involves limiting the number of initiatives and taking the opportunity to develop strategies and goals to address challenges toward the

desired common outcome (CODE, 2018). The findings suggested that setting goals and designing a SIP plan assisted teams in understanding a shared vision. The SIP plan was structured into categories to ensure having only a few goals and actions to implement as part of the plan. Through this planning process, SLT members and peers created a vision that provided focused direction for improving student outcomes (OECD, 2016). Interview participants consistently discussed the different goals created to assist students, including content strategies and improving standardized test results. Creating these goal areas and placing them in the SIP allowed the SLTs to reflect on the current culture in DSD, building a strategic and intentional plan to meet student needs (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The plan's intentionality also called for examining resources and staff practices to support the implementation of LfM and its aim toward a vision of continuous improvement (InnovateEd, 2016). This broad finding discusses looking at student data, moving their learning toward the skill areas of need practice, and sharing their experiences with peers. This finding is important because these are actions that DSD can continue applying across its schools, thus focusing the direction of the system and securing accountability for improving student outcomes designed in SIP plans (Westover, 2019).

It was not surprising to see these results, as previous research indicates that involving as many members as possible multiplies the understanding of the shared vision while building relationships and commitment (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; OECD, 2016; Senge, 2012). Survey results on this dimension corroborate this finding as respondents indicated that staff was inspired and motivated to bring the vision to life together (Kools et al., 2020), thus confirming the budding social capital of the group (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012; Kools & Stoll, 2016; Pil & Leana, 2009). Being able to collaborate over a few goals deeply allowed SLTs to be more intentional in their SIP plan.

Moreover, interviewees discussed their gratitude for the opportunity to collectively create the SIP, including being able to focus on the specific mastery required through teacher-led high-leverage research-based practices noted to eradicate skill deficits. The intentional alignment described in this finding is necessary for becoming a learning organization and confirms one of the frameworks guiding my study. The Five Disciplines of a Learning Organization (Senge, 2006) state that building a shared vision necessitates commitment that must be built through exploring and learning new practices.

Promoting Continuous Adult Professional Learning and SLT Voice

Research studies suggest that improving teaching and learning occurs most when teachers and leaders are learners (Fullan, 2009; Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2016; Senge, 2012). This building of human capital increases the skills and knowledge necessary for implementing new ideas and producing change (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). The outcomes desired for professional learning sessions in DSD were to increase capacity around the following: a shared vision, pedagogy, data review, and decision-making toward implementing newly learned knowledge. Interviewees and survey respondents indicated that professional learning allowed members to explore new learning aligned to the vision, build relational capacity with peers, understand current data, and embolden SLT agency. This finding confirms prior research which discusses that professional learning that considers new strategies strengthens group learning as the group connects to the strengths and knowledge areas of peers (Dawood et al., 2015; Fullan, 2009; Harris & Jones, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2004; Pil & Leana, 2009). This information is notable because exploring new ideas led SLTs LfM to use their voice to decide to serve their students and peers best. SLT voice directly connects with another principle finding in the research on LfM: humility (CODE, 2018). In hearing different voices across the cohort, SLT members in this

study revealed that learning from others was a powerful experience that boosted comradery and commitment.

Interviewee comments discussed voice at length and its impact as a result of LfM to increase learning for both adults and students through various areas such as topics for professional learning, goal setting, and strategy use. This finding concurs with previous studies highlighting the importance of professional learning and voice as capital (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012; Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2016). Capital is also developed when there is disagreement. Citlali discussed this as relevant to voice-building collaboration because voices shared are only sometimes agreed upon by other members. This finding also confirms that voice addresses complexities of collaboration about the shared vision and relationships necessary for continuous improvement (DuFour et al., 2006; Dumas, 2020; Fullan, 2015; Senge, 2006; Srinivasan & Archer, 2018).

Fostering Team Learning Within Inclusive Structures for Planning Learning Experiences

A part of a learning organization is seeing the whole together as a team and looking to one another for answers while building trust (Ash & D'Auria, 2013; Bryk et al., 2010; Hargreaves & Giles, 2006; Senge, 1996). Correlating to the latter, LfM fosters learning by raising the expectations for the team to learn together, creating experiences for students to develop skills necessary for higher-order thinking and creativity, and enhancing teams to be able to learn together and from one another (CODE, 2018; OECD, 2016).

The inclusive structures finding from my study confirms the enhanced opportunities to collaborate and improve teaching and learning while LfM (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). As part of the big picture with inclusivity, both site and central office members were members of the cohort teams. As such, these opportunities

increased information and understanding for change through dialogue and an atmosphere of safety to be truthful, contributing to partnership and a potential reversal of perception regarding leaders at the top of DSD (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Garvin et al., 2008). As a result, small culture shifts from separate to united validated that teams using this dialogue continued their commitment to the shared vision and the learning of each member (Senge, 2012). The results pertinent to dialogue in this study were related to the common language used across DSD. This finding was meaningful because it fostered a clear understanding and learning of concepts and actions to be defined and implemented, increasing the team's learning.

The latter underpins research that shares that the fulfillment of team learning is enhanced by developing a common language and protocols for decision-making, made meaningful when working with different team structures (Westover, 2019). This shift from collaborative learning to collaborative professionalism (CODE, 2018; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) was described in the actions taken by the SLTs

Prior studies show collaborative professionalism is more than joint work. Hargreaves and Shirley (2019) specified that the Ontario study found that collaborating deeply helped to attain better student results. The finding of inclusive structures further validates the research as teams worked together to build instructional and relational capacity as they considered desired student outcomes and put their thoughts to paper (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019; OECD, 2016).

Senge (1996) also describes team learning as thinking through problems. The responses of interview participants indicate that sharing decision-making power to plan learning experiences for students and their teams increased the team's learning about instructional processes and content, such as standards, and working through barriers that arose as a team. This finding confirms that the collaborative learning of a team can reduce isolation while aiming to

ensure equitable learning when all students learn at high levels and receive the instruction necessary to close gaps in their learning (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019).

Embedding Systems of Knowledge Through Collaborative Inquiry Cycles and Cohesive Systems

Interview and survey findings noted that SLTs engaged in exchanging knowledge and information systemically, looking at evidence of student learning through inquiry cycles, both as an SLT, a cohort and as part of their site team. This finding confirms the research that indicates that teams must be able to analyze data points and discuss their learning to impact student learning (Kim & Senge, 1994; OECD, 2016; Serrat, 2009). Moreover, districts that set goals that all schools will become learning organizations must make examples of success and disappointment a part of their collective learning (Kools & Stoll, 2016; Senge, 2012). Inquiry cycles showed members the data as it was, allowing for reflection on the results.

Interview participants shared that looking at the evidence from implemented strategies with students gave them a lot to consider, especially regarding rigor and instructional practices. This finding further supports the shift to collaborative professionalism through feedback, dialogue, and protocols that helped SLTs engage in consistent cycles to monitor student progress and instructional decision-making while consistently updating their plan (CODE, 2018; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The survey findings also indicate that SLT members post-Innovate Ed found that staff use data to improve their practice, even when the data is not considered positive. These findings emphasize the learning that these cycles provided to SLTs (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019).

The learning from the cycles of inquiry also reflects all the LfM principles from Hargreaves and Shirley (2019): transparency, humility integration, responsibility, design, initiative, and responsiveness to diversity. Transparency of results as members shared all evidence from the cycle regardless of the outcome. Humility to learn from one another was strengthened as members listened to one another to learn about the best practices. Integration with other cohort members across site teams created more opportunities to learn about other perspectives and ideas for improving student achievement. Responsibility for all students as schools shared their data across the cohort of schools, leading to a new shared vision for all students in DSD. Designing structures and processes systemically to impact more students became intentional, based on the results of the cycle. Initiative was focused on meeting the target skills students needed. Lastly, responsiveness to diversity as the myriad of student needs was assessed to provide suggestions to aid their growth. These principles also connect to DSD improving cohesive systems leadership as SLTs continued planning the next steps.

Cohesive systems leadership reinforces the understanding of LfM as a collective responsibility that intensifies learning. The interview findings suggest that SLT members began to see the larger context and commitment for leadership, LfM, and DSD as a learning organization. This clarity is vital to any district working toward becoming a learning organization as it represents a commitment to students and an awareness of the actions needed to increase outcomes. SLT members described their learning as a means to build growth for adults and students, aligned to goals, member assets, and leadership. These thoughts are also reflected in learning organization research (Senge, 1996; Senge, 2012).

This finding also highlights both frameworks guiding this study. First, the work of Peter Senge's five disciplines (1996) as teams learned together through the LfM implementation.

Personal mastery in professional learning was also established. Mental models may have been challenged for SLT members as they processed their learning. Systems thinking was developed through the collaborative sessions and the professional learning offered as SLTs use their collective voice around a shared vision.

This finding on a cohesive system also is relevant for the LfM strategy with the principles previously mentioned and the framework working together (CODE, 2018). All the learning engaged in by the SLTs was aimed at implementing LfM to create a culture of collaborative professionalism, a philosophy with students at the center, and interdisciplinary teams working together toward a vision of learning for all.

In summary, this study offers the intersection of LfM as a strategy for becoming a coherent learning organization. As SLTs engaged in the work toward the shared vision of high levels of learning for all students, LfM provided opportunities to strengthen adult learning as a collective. The interview comments indicate that these opportunities were both rewarding and challenging as teams worked together to create a culture of inclusivity and accelerating pedagogy. This study also suggests that districts employing the LfM strategy may find that allowing staff to lead through shared decision-making also builds relational trust that helps to explore a different mental model for leadership and learning. DSD's journey of learning and its implications are discussed next.

Implications for Practice and Implementation

The findings of this study have numerous implications for practice as LfM is a relatively new concept and not well known to most school districts. However, in connecting it to developing as a learning organization, it is imperative for district personnel at all levels to consider the diversity of the students served, limiting the number of new initiatives in order to

create a deeper understanding of necessary actions to improve student success, and creating a culture of learning for both students and staff (Senge, 2012). The latter requires intentionality and planning for inclusivity and systemic efforts beginning with district instructional leaders.

School Districts Instructional Teams and Cabinet Members

School district Cabinet members and instructional leaders considering the strategy of LfM to help create schools as learning organizations must consider several key points in planning for the implementation process.

Take a Risk and Share the Leadership

To improve student outcomes, organizational culture, and relational capacity, districts can distribute leadership to SLTs. School districts operate mainly as top-down entities, contributing to the familiar disconnect teachers and leaders feel with a vision not created by them (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). This disconnect may lead to compliance but discounts the utilization of staff strengths, creativity, expertise, and knowledge to increase student learning. While a risk that could be challenging, the results of this study suggest it should be considered a possibility to nurture learning and collaborative professionalism.

Lead from the middle, not in the middle

If a district does decide to LfM, it will be essential to remember that the middle is not a tier making decisions and a learning plan but a team transforming and embedding a culture of collaborative professionalism for all. Districts must go beyond the ideology of professional learning communities and examine the root causes of student performance to understand possible solutions. Leading in the Middle (LiM) is a start, but districts must extend beyond this to maximize success (CODE, 2018). To build from LiM, districts must be clear and specific in

operationalizing and defining LfM. Communicating analyzed results could increase the likelihood of sustainability if LfM is shared as a standard strategy and practice (CODE, 2018).

Clearly Define LfM, Roles, and the District as a Learning Organization

LfM as a contributor to becoming a learning organization requires a precise definition understood by all involved. Districts will need to decide the structure they might use, whether several cohorts across schools or begin with a pilot group to measure progress. Instructional central office team members should plan to join the group. Being a part of the group is essential as it creates a common understanding of the purpose, involvement, potential benefits, and commitment level for SLT members. Being clear of the expectations provides the vision of the investment in staff and their potential contributions to the district becoming a learning organization.

A district as a learning organization must also be defined clearly, and steps toward achievement must be strategically planned to ensure clarity, communication, commitment, and accountability (InnovateEd, 2016). Districts can read the research and results in this study and continue their learning with the work of Peter Senge and Kools and Stoll. Learning organization research compliments LfM as the dimensions and elements from both Senge and Kools and Stoll encourage shared decision-making, team learning, a shared vision, and embedding systems.

Join or create communities of practice to share ideas and deepen learning

Districts considering implementing LfM should consider joining or creating a community of practice. Communities of Practice (COP) share common concerns or strategies in development to create new knowledge, share best practices, and find solutions for a problem of practice (InnovateEd, 2016). COPs extend learning for all participants and increase resources to

the participating members. Central office instructional staff should not be the only members. SLT members, both teachers and site administrators, should also be part of the COP.

School Leadership Team (SLT) Members- Have an Open Mind and Trust the Process as You Lead

SLT members beginning to learn about LfM should keep an open mind. Teacher leaders, in most cases LiM, are working with their grade level or department team to implement an initiative they were not a part of designing (CODE, 2018; Fullan & Gallagher, 2020). The differences in LfM will perhaps excite SLT members truly wanting to lead or frighten them with the responsibility of making decisions and communicating with their teams. Either way, trusting the process and being invested in the learning could make substantial differences in student outcomes. However, trusting the process does not mean questions cannot be asked or concerns cannot be raised.

On the contrary, SLTs should deeply explore the site's needs, including strategic steps to improve outcomes while working as a team (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The findings of this study propose that members should use their voice for making decisions, planning for learning, sharing evidence of student work, and sharing concerns. SLTs must also share this agency with their peers as they may have contributions or fears to add to learning as a team.

Site Teachers-Share Your Ideas to Improve Student Learning

Implications for practice for site teachers are similar to that of the SLT. Site teachers should be open-minded in working with their SLT representatives and see them as teacher leaders to provide resources, knowledge, and feedback. Sharing thoughts and ideas with the SLT lead can benefit most situations. Having an open mind can create more open dialogue toward student-centered solutions (Senge, 1996). If team members are not ready to understand or willing

to LfM, remaining positive and open to new ideas supports the shared vision. Continuing to seek clarity would be helpful if there is a need for more understanding. Provide solutions based on your thoughts and remember that student learning is at the center of all goals and actions (Senge, 2012).

Site Administrators Embrace Sharing the Power but Lead

This study showed that site administrators in this process shared leadership and decision-making. As the leader on the campus, ensuring that the process is being implemented alongside fellow SLT members means staff will need to be able to come to you when there are issues or concerns (Westover, 2019). Site administrators also provide additional support and accountability for the implementation. The rest of the SLT does as well, but as site principals and assistant principals, ensuring the commitment to the vision could, in time, yield results of higher learning for both students and adults in your school community. Involving parents and other staff while communicating information necessary for understanding is helpful (CODE, 2018). Being an active participant and modeling your commitment can provide reassurance while setting the tone for all staff.

Implementing in Other Contexts

The results of this study indicate that LfM is a strategy that contributes to a district becoming a learning organization. Although implementing this strategy is challenging, DSD found some critical practices other districts could apply to implement this strategy. These fundamental practices include the continual collaborative learning of teams, keeping student equity at the center, and sharing leadership and decision-making with flexibility and resilience amid challenges among SLTs.

These challenges help to fortify learning through frequent dialogue and collaborative experiences that promote transparency and unique solutions for teams to meet student needs. The collaborative time provided opportunities to examine evidence-based teaching practices designed to improve instruction. While one goal of this time was to define and design learning outcomes, challenges developed among job-alike groups. The implication of this challenge is that change is a messy process. Other districts implementing LfM may find teachers feel like they are in competition with one another. Individual schools may feel the same levels of competition within a cohort. Site administrators may need help sharing the leadership and how to be team members during and outside the collaborative session. However, during these times of challenge, the learning of all students and staff must remain the focus.

The learning of all students requires the mapping of outcomes to be based on student needs. Teachers, as a result, may need additional professional learning or support to improve pedagogy and meet the skill and relationship areas students need to succeed. Therefore, LfM is a promising equity practice that considers individual skills, strengths, and targets for learning. It balances an equitable approach with a structured process that allows autonomy while building coherence. Across a school site, teams undertake cycles of inquiry, engage in professional learning, and participate in similar protocols but meeting the needs of their students is always a priority. Autonomy is achieved through collaborative and inclusive sessions with central office partners and SLTs who together prioritize the actions necessary for student success as a result of shared decision-making.

Districts considering this strategy of LfM must understand that this agency and flexibility increase the potential for acceptance and success. It is about leadership that comes from the middle and not top-down. Top-down leadership can promote disconnect and fragmentation

among initiatives districts try to manage. The interview participants consistently discussed how the ability to share in the decision-making developed their leadership, empowerment, camaraderie, trust, and increased communication toward a common goal and vision for student learning. Because SLTs share a collective voice, it could also foster sustainability. As new team members or school staff come in, the processes and goals created continue as they are not dependent on a specific leader or person as seen in distributed leadership but on a collective of leaders, thereby extending distributed leadership. This shared decision-making and autonomy seek to build a reciprocal relationship between LfM and a learning organization as each contributes and develops the other. Measuring this relationship could be a part of the student assessment process that future researchers might investigate.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are inclusive of several considerations. First, generalizability is a potential issue in case study research (Maxwell, 2012). While a typical urban district in a high-poverty area, DSD represents only one case, and thus the results may not be generalizable. However, the purpose of the case study was not necessarily to be generalizable but transferable. This case study offers this opportunity while considering the issues related to implementation in another context, as discussed in the previous section.

Although the survey sample represented close to 30% of the 299 possible respondents, the sample only represented teachers participating fully in LfM. Although all eligible site and central office administrators were invited to take the survey, the rest of the teaching staff was not. The latter was because the SLTs were the consistent members who were the most involved over the years of implementation. Throughout implementation, the teacher workforce has changed yearly, bringing in new staff as others leave and retire. Therefore, many of the teachers

in DSD at the time of the survey were very new to the district and may have needed to be more knowledgeable about implementing LfM.

Second, although all researchers must be cautious of their own bias, given how LfM and building a learning organization are specific goals I participated in developing for DSD, I clarified my biases while reviewing the data, choosing documents, artifacts, and presenting information and results of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Reflection and transparency were key to controlling for bias.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on how a K-8 district implemented LfM and in what ways, if at all, LfM contributed to the district becoming a coherent learning organization. The findings across all methods in this study suggest that LfM may have contributed toward DSD becoming a learning organization through inclusive groups, cycles of inquiry, intentional planning, job-embedded professional learning, and leveraging voice. Especially given the limited research in the United States and abroad, several ideas for future studies could assist researchers interested in expanding the understanding and scholarship of this topic.

Student Data and Achievement

One of the aims of LfM is to increase student achievement through collaborative learning and decision-making. The latter requires planning the pedagogical practices necessary within the content standards that drive teaching and learning while gathering the evidence across various assessment measures to gauge progress and next steps. While this study did not look at standardized testing results due to the pandemic stoppage of state and local testing, future research could investigate if LfM impacts student learning on systematized testing measures. System measures include local benchmark growth and teacher-created content area assessments

over time. Studies could measure any or all of these assessments to examine if LfM increases student scores. Looking at assessment results is notable, given that state departments and county offices of education are still mandated to assist districts struggling to show improvement in student results. Implementing the LfM strategy could give researchers a demonstration of higher scores that help other districts consider it a way to create change within their system. Increased student success is a continual goal of any district and seeing how a research-based strategy model such as LfM can be emulated could provide additional assistance.

Collective Efficacy of Teachers and Leaders

Because of the intentionality necessary to fully implement LfM and its potential challenges, a high degree of collective efficacy for teachers and site administrators could prove to be an asset. Collective efficacy is defined as the shared belief that through their actions, teachers can influence student outcomes (Hattie, 2012). Previous studies have shown teacher efficacy to have a potentially high effect size, closing the gaps in learning (Hattie, 2012). A suggestion for future research could then blend LfM and collective teacher efficacy. Due to the shared decision-making, intense planning, and inquiry that seeks to improve learning, investigating the potential effects of LfM on the collective efficacy of teachers and leaders could provide districts with additional potential to improve student achievement. Research on collective leader efficacy could also strengthen leadership across a district, adding to the current body of research whose study of efficacy has focused on strengthening an instructional leadership team's belief that it can impact learning (DeWitt, 2021; Donohoo et al., 2016). The effectiveness of LfM could be measured by the levels of efficacy experienced and the impact on student learning.

Future Implementation of LfM

Another recommendation for future study is the implementation itself of LfM in a district. The results of this study demonstrate that DSD implemented the strategy inclusively and intentionally, planning each year with critical actions for implementation. Other districts, though, could decide to do something differently, planning a different set of actions or groups. In doing so, researchers could find different results.

Changes in Methodology and Participants

Similar to a change in the implementation process, the methodology employed by the researcher could vary. In this study, only four dimensions of the Kools and Stoll (2016) survey were used to evaluate if LfM contributed to DSD becoming a learning organization. Another study could use all seven dimensions, potentially getting another result than this study based on interpretation and data. Participants could also add to the study.

For example, this study did not elicit student perceptions regarding their learning. It would be interesting to assess whether upper elementary, middle, or high school students perceived a difference in their learning due to the strategic planning and decision-making completed on their behalf by the SLTs.

Final Thoughts

The findings from this study offer constructive insight into how DSD implemented the process of LfM. It examined the viewpoints of SLT members regarding the implementation and contribution of LfM, helping DSD toward becoming a learning organization. The results of this study confirm several areas of prior research around a shared vision, adult learning to better student learning, and systems leadership for improving practice. Additionally, the findings speak to the two main frameworks that guided the study, confirming the previous research (CODE, 2018; Kools & Stoll, 2016). Most importantly, this study demonstrates the interconnected nature

of LfM and a learning organization, broadening current research findings. LfM is a strategy that includes a philosophy of students at the center, a structure of interdisciplinary teams, and a culture of collaborative professionalism shaped by a common vision toward student learning (CODE, 2018). This learning builds relational, instructional, and organizational capacity while tied to a cohesive system that takes collective responsibility for all.

Although I realize the study's limitations, I am encouraged by the learning consistently addressed through the mixed methodology. I realize these results are limited to the small group of SLT members and not all of the teachers and leaders served in DSD. Therefore, this study cannot claim with certainty that DSD is a learning organization. However, it is a start. The members involved in implementing LfM did value the agency it provided and the collective learning that resulted. Currently, in DSD, the aim to be a learning organization continues, and LfM remains the chosen strategy.

APPENDIX A

Examples of Connection Between Theories and Data Collection and Analysis

Description	LfM Principle (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019)	Learning Organization Disciplines (Senge, 2006)	Districts/Schools that Learn Characteristics (Senge, 2012)	Learning Organizations (Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2018)
Student identity and responsiveness in creating solutions and practices to meet needs	Responsiveness to diversity	Systems Thinking Mental models	Personal visions Personal and group reflections Responsiveness to tension/conflict	Learning with and from the external environment and larger learning system
Collaboration in a Professional Learning Community	Responsibility	Mental Models Team learning	Determining current reality Root causes documents in relation to a Problem of Practice	Establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation, and exploration Promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff
Looking at student data	Responsibility	Personal mastery	Alignment not agreement	
Plan strategies to help students with their learning				
Fewer in number and more collaboration to respond to needs and problems that ensue. Create initiatives rather than implement other initiatives	Initiative	Shared vision Personal mastery	Articulating individual and collective aspirations as noted on joint work task documents Consulting and Co-Creating for direction setting for vision, learning, and degree of active involvement	Establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration
Literacy reforms to close the gaps (Example)	Integration	Shared vision	Theory of action/change steps of root causes and current reality	Developing and sharing a vision centered on the learning of all students

Description	LfM Principle (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019)	Learning Organization Disciplines (Senge, 2006)	Districts/Schools that Learn Characteristics (Senge, 2012)	Learning Organizations (Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2018)
		Personal mastery		
Results, discussion, ideas, and strategies shared with and amongst team members and networks across schools	Transparency	Personal mastery Mental Models Systems thinking	Cycles of inquiry Evidence of student learning	Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning
Learning from and with others	Humility	Mental models Team learning	Trust and team building activities Protocols for Reflection and dialogue	Modelling and growing learning leadership
Collaboration to work together on the other principles put into place through intentional design	Design	Team learning Personal Mastery	-Coherent common language to manage complexity and understanding	Creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff
Staying close to the students and to the practice needed to educate Cohesive systems thinking	A philosophy of educational practice and what is at the heart of it	Systems thinking Mental models	Personal mastery Cultivation of Reflection Aspiration for self, students, organizational vision	Developing and sharing a vision centered on the learning of all students
Placing teams and structures and purpose in place	A structure of interdisciplinary teams	Team learning Systems thinking	Collective commitments among team members reflective loops	Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning

Description	LfM Principle (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019)	Learning Organization Disciplines (Senge, 2006)	Districts/Schools that Learn Characteristics (Senge, 2012)	Learning Organizations (Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2018)
			middle leaders' protocols for increased advocacy	
Dialogue, trust- building, shared decision- making Habits and practices of collaboration for student outcomes	A culture of collaborative professionalism for all students' success and learning	Team learning Shared vision	Co-creation of School Implementation Plans (SIPS) Cycle of inquiry on problems of practice	Developing and sharing a vision centered on the learning of all students Promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff Establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration Modeling and growing learning leadership

APPENDIX B

Leadership Team Surveys⁵

Introduction statement Please read this introduction in its entirety. My sincerest thanks for your participation. This questionnaire is to be completed by school leaders, faculty, and learning support team members from the central office. The questionnaire should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Select one answer per question. There are no right or wrong answers. Your answers should reflect your honest and critical opinion on the current situation in your school or our district (for central office team members). Dimensions on the survey ask both about your thoughts prior to our work with Innovate Ed and your School Leadership Team (SLT) as well as all current work with your School or District Leadership Team (SLT or DLT). If applicable, please answer in relation to the time frame from 2017 to the present. The set of dimensions is the same so we can ascertain a retrospective view of any changes, if any, you may have found in participating in this work on building a learning organization that leads from the middle.

Respondents may elect to receive an electronic gift card for participating. To receive a \$10 Amazon gift card, at the end of the survey, choose yes and you will be routed to another page where you can write in your email. Responses are completely anonymous with or without an email provided.

Please answer the following questions based upon the provided scale
Scale- Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
Schools as a Learning Organization Scale (RQ2)

Question 3

Prior to the collaboration with Innovate Ed and/or your site or district SLT, how much would you have agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

Question 7

Since our work with Innovate Ed and SLT, how much has changed? Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

Developing a shared vision centered on the learning of all students

“In my school (for site team members) or in our district (for district team members)...”

⁵Adapted from *The school as a learning organisation: The concept and its measurement*. Kools M, Stoll L, George B, Steijn, B., Bekkers, V., Gouedard. (2020, 0124). Eur J Educ.

- The school’s vision is aimed at enhancing student's cognitive and social-emotional outcomes, including their wellbeing
- The school’s vision emphasizes preparing students for their future in a changing world
- The school’s vision embraces all students
- The school’s vision is understood and shared by all staff
- Staff are inspired and motivated to bring the school’s vision to life
- All staff are involved in developing the school’s vision
- Students are invited to contribute to the school’s vision
- Parents are invited to contribute to the school’s vision
- External partners are invited to help shape the school’s vision

Question 4

Prior to the collaboration with Innovate Ed and/or your site or district SLT, how much would you have agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

Question 8

Since our work with Innovate Ed and SLT, how much has changed? Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

Promoting and supporting continuous professional learning for all staff

“In my school (for site team members) or in our district (for district team members).”

Professional learning of staff is considered a high priority

- Professional learning of staff is considered a high priority
- Staff engage in professional learning to ensure their practice is critically informed and up to date
- Staff are involved in identifying the objectives for their professional learning
- Professional learning is focused on students’ needs

- Professional learning is aligned to the vision
- Mentors/coaches are available to help staff develop their practice
- All staff receive sufficient support to help them in their roles
- Staff receive regular feedback to support reflection and improvement
- Students are encouraged to give feedback to teachers and support staff
- Staff have opportunities to experiment with and practice new skills
- Beliefs, mind sets and practices are challenged by professional learning around equity, race, and culture

Question 5

Prior to the collaboration with Innovate Ed and/or your site or district SLT, how much would you have agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

Question 9

Since our work with Innovate Ed and SLT, how much has changed? Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

Fostering team learning and collaboration among staff

“In my school (for site team members) or in our district (for district team members)...”

- Staff collaborate to improve their practice
- Staff learn how to work together as a team
- Staff help each other to improve their practice
- Staff observe each other's practice and collaborate in developing it
- Staff give honest feedback to each other
- Staff listen to each other's ideas and opinions
- Staff feel comfortable turning to others for advice
- Staff treat each other with respect

- Staff spend time building trust with each other
- Staff think through and tackle problems together
- Staff reflect together on how to learn and improve their practice

Question 6

Prior to the collaboration with Innovate Ed and/or your site or district SLT, how much would you have agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

Question 10

Since our work with Innovate Ed and SLT, how much has changed? Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning

“In my school (for site team members) or in our district (for district team members) ...”

- The school’s development plan is based on learning from continuous self-assessment and updated at least once every year
- Structures are in place for regular dialogue and knowledge sharing among staff
- Evidence is collected to measure progress and identify gaps in the school’s performance
- Staff analyze and use data to improve their practice
- Staff use research evidence to improve their practice
- Staff analyze examples of good/great practices and failed practices to learn from them
- Staff learn how to analyze and use data to inform their practice
- Staff regularly discuss and evaluate whether actions had the desired impact and change course if necessary

APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interview Protocols

Script Welcome. Thank you so much for your time today. It is greatly appreciated. This interview will be an applied protocol for a doctoral research project I am conducting on behalf of an employee in your district who is also a doctoral student. Your identity and all comments will be held as confidential. The doctoral student will receive only transcripts of this interview without any identity markers. This student is trying to learn from this study how to make your district the most effective and coherent learning organization it can be as well as improve the strategy of Leading from the Middle to best serve students and staff in reaching the highest outcomes of success for the entire community of learners here in Discovery School District. I will be asking you about your experience as a SLT member over the two years that you were a part of the cohort collaborations with Innovate Ed but please feel free to draw from all your experiences to the present regarding Leading from the Middle from the district and/or school perspective.

This interview is being recorded for coding purposes only. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Opening question:

Tell me about your experience as a teacher. What are some of the things you love about teaching?

Interview questions:

1. How did you learn about the Site Leadership Team (SLT)? Why did you decide to participate?

(RQ1)

2. Tell me about your experiences participating on this team? (RQ1)

Follow up: what decisions have you been a part of making? Who did it benefit?

3. What opportunities have you had to develop a teacher's voice? What does it mean to you?
What areas, if any, could a teacher's voice impact learning and decision-making for teachers and students? (RQ2)

4. I remember schools met in cohort pairs or triads. Can you describe what these sessions were like? (RQ2)

Follow up: I would like to hear more about these sessions. Can you tell me about what it was like to collaborate with your colleagues (on your grade level team [teachers], your staff [admin]) after the sessions? (RQ1)

5. How would you describe the collaboration between administrative team/leadership teams, if there were any? (RQ 2)

6. What advice would you give to other districts who want to engage in a similar process? (RQ2)

7. How has the LfM strategy worked so far? Are there examples you can share? How do you recommend it move forward? (RQ1)

8. What has resulted from your LfM experience that has surprised you over the last two years?

9. What has been the level of support LfM has received from the central office? Tell me a little more about this. (RQ1)

Follow up: How could it have been different or improved? (RQ1)

10. What are your thoughts about teacher leadership? What is it like to be a teacher leader? With site administrators, and your fellow teachers? (RQ1)

11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating in this interview. Here is the list of choices for the \$20 E gift cards you can choose from: Target or Amazon. Thanks again!

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