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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

IMPLEMENTATION OF AN INTER-DISTRICT CURRICULUM
CONSORTIUM AMONG TEN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS
IN COLORADO: A CASE STUDY

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Jim D. Copeland

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
School of Teacher Education
Educational Studies

October 2014

This Dissertation by: Jim D. Copeland

Entitled: *Implementation of an Inter-District Curriculum Consortium among Ten Rural School Districts in Colorado: A Case Study*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, School of Special Education

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

Mia K. Williams, Ph.D., Research Advisor

Christy Moroye, Ph.D., Committee Member

Dana Walker, Ph.D., Committee Member

Spencer Weiler, Ph.D., Faculty Representative

Date of Dissertation Defense _____

Accepted by the Graduate School

Linda L. Black, Ed.D.
Dean of the Graduate School and International Admissions

ABSTRACT

Copeland, Jim D. *Implementation of an Inter-district Curriculum Consortium among Ten Rural School Districts in Colorado: A Case Study*. Published Doctor of Education dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2014.

This dissertation examines the implementation year of an inter-district collaboration between 10 rural public school districts in Colorado. In the spring of 2013, the superintendents of these 10 districts met and began a discussion of how their small rural districts could collaborate with each other in an effort to cope with the implementation of the new mandates required by the Colorado State Legislature: new Colorado State Standards, the Educator Effectiveness Act, and the new assessment system—Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

Three specific questions guided my research:

- Q1 What historical, cultural, and political phenomena led to the formation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth?
- Q2 What were the perceptions of two specific stakeholder groups, administrators and teachers, regarding the Consortium's formation, leadership, and potential outcomes?
- Q3 In what ways did the characteristics of rural school communities influence stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation of the inter-district curriculum collaborative?

Historically, collaborations between schools districts in rural settings have been rare, other than some collaborations for financial reasons. This study interviewed 12 teachers and six administrators, randomly selected from the participating

districts to gain their perceptions of the collaborative effort. In addition, I sent a Likert survey to all participants, who I asked to share their ratings on 10 statements and to voluntarily add their personal comments. I attended many meetings, from the early planning stages through the implementation year. As a superintendent of one of the participating districts and a member of the steering committee, I had great access to all meetings and persons involved in the collaboration. Therefore, my role was as a participant observer.

Recurrent themes emerged from the data pertaining to research question number two that influenced that acceptance or resistance of the collaboration among the two stakeholder groups listed in research question two (teachers and administrators) including: (a) suspicion that the effort would fade away over time as had others; (b) a longing for teacher agency (concern regarding a perception of lack of control over their profession); (c) perception that their district's administrative leadership was vital in any kind of initiative if it was to be successful; (d) that the purpose of any collaboration as perceived by the teachers was an important factor in their acceptance or resistance; and (e) that, generally, teachers had a positive outlook regarding the opportunities for collaboration, even though many concerns about its purpose existed.

Rural culture affected teachers' perceptions as three major themes emerged through the interviews, observations, field notes, and artifacts pertaining to research question number three: (a) a perception of individual independence, of which most were very proud; (b) a perception of isolation, which affected their actions; and (c) a perception of competition between districts that was, at times, stronger than a cooperative spirit. The study is significant in that it may provide a guide for future collaboration

plans between small rural districts. District administrators who decide cooperation with each other is preferable to isolated efforts when it comes to providing a quality educational system for their teachers, and students may use the information that emerged in this study for guidance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the late fall of 2012, on a typical northeastern Colorado morning, 11 public school district superintendents began to discuss and to commiserate about the increasing stress and pressure all felt due to several new legislative educational mandates that would take effect that next school year (2013-2014). These mandates included the Colorado Educator Effectiveness Law, the new Colorado State Standards for K-12 public education, and the upcoming Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a, 2013d, 2013e, 2013g). This discussion took place during a regular monthly Northeast Board of Cooperating Educational Services (NEBOCES) Superintendent Advisory Committee meeting. Out of that discussion the origins of the Northeast Consortium for Student Growth and Achievement grew. I was part of that discussion, as superintendent of one of those rural Colorado school districts.

When Katherine Lee Bates wrote the lyrics “for amber waves of grain,” as part of the now-treasured song “America the Beautiful,” she was specifically describing a large part of the American landscape that is still the rural heart of the nation (Bates, 1905). This region, which generally includes the central part of the United States and extends from Texas on the south and to the Dakotas on the north, is known as the Great Plains and is mostly inhabited by Americans who farm and ranch the remote and less-populated

parts of the United States or, if not farming and ranching, working in those support activities that enable farmers and ranchers to carry out their livelihoods. It is a part of America that has been romanticized by numerous authors and artists as a last vestige and remaining root of the American spirit of independence (Dowling, 2010). To educate the children of those living in rural America, schools were established and were seen as their children's path for greater success in life (Herrick, 1945; Zentner, 2006). Some of us actually live in this picturesque part of the country by choice. I was drawn to it by the images of it provided in literature (Plowden, 1994). Many of the stories my parents told me in my youth, while growing up in a large urban center, were based on their own childhood experiences as children of farmers and were rooted in the isolated rural regions of East Texas. They had a profound influence on me and I decided to live in rural communities and work their schools. Many of their stories included ones about the schools they attended. The schools located in these rural areas provides the focal point of social activities, and public educators are still generally trusted to make the appropriate decisions regarding their students' educations (Chance, 1999).

Rural schools have long been bastions of independent thinking and centers of community social life (Hadden, 2000). People who lived in rural communities would walk, ride in wagons or on horses, and later, drive into rural towns to connect to their neighbors and visit about mutual interests (Hadden, 2000). As depicted in American folklore and images, the inhabitants of rural American towns and their outlying areas shared a common work ethic that could best be described as a sun-up-until-sundown attitude of hard labor (Jordan, 1993). Their very survival depended on the success of the harvest (Barnard, 1987; Webb, 1981). They were and are a proud people who do not

want to depend on someone else for their daily needs (Cirbo, 2009; Hamil, 1976; Webb, 1981). This independent thinking and spirit survives today in the rural towns that remain (Abbott, Leonard, & McComb, 1982). According to Cuban (1993), past conversations in many communities that pertained to their expectations of the local schools revolved around stressing what they considered “American” (p. 183).

If a town loses its school, the town declines and eventually disappears. This is a well-known phenomenon, and it is in large part the reason that most towns fiercely fight to keep their schools (Feldman, 2003; Salinas, 2000). Those fortunate rural communities who have been able to retain their schools have survived as entities, and their schools are the current gathering points and social centers of the broader community they serve (Hadden, 2000). In the United States, when looking at the sheer number of campuses (28,902 of 88,000 schools), the largest category of schools is rural (Chen, 2010). The focus of this research was how present-day collaboration between rural schools, which has the potential to extend their very existence, may be successfully implemented.

Northeast Colorado

Northeast Colorado sits squarely in the American Great Plains and fully embraces the mental mindset of this independent American West. In Colorado, 86 of the 178 school districts are classified as rural (Colorado Department of Education, 2013f). This rural classification contains the largest number of school districts in Colorado, the other classifications being Denver metro, urban-suburban, outlying city, and outlying town. Therefore, these statistics indicate that many small towns retain a school. Northeast Colorado provides prime examples of this statistic. The towns of Peetz, with a population of only 237, and Fleming, with a population numbering 402, still retain their

schools, as does Ovid, with a population of 317 (*Colorado Very Small Towns*, 2013). Many other rural Colorado towns are similar and could also be listed. Towns in the northeast region that have not been able to keep a school have generally declined and disappeared. Communities in northeast Colorado that formerly had a school, such as Leroy, New Haven, St. Petersburg, Dailey, Sedgwick, and others, are empty remnants of what used to be, possibly still retaining a small chapel where members who barely number in double digits still gather to worship and socialize.

Colorado State Mandates

Colorado adopted statewide curriculum standards, and all school districts must comply with these standards (Colorado Department of Education, 2013d). These standards align with the national common core standards and put Colorado in the national movement along with many other states in adopting consistent and common educational standards for all the school districts located in the respective states (Staskowski, 2012). While these standards are broad, the implications for not thoroughly teaching them to students are stark. The required high-stakes state assessments' questions are based on these adopted standards (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a). These high-stakes assessments are increasing in number. Students' abilities to perform well on the state assessments depend, in large part, on whether their teachers have covered these adopted standards. In Colorado, the assessments are undergoing a transition period. The original Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) that was used as the high-stakes assessment beginning in the year 1997 is being transitioned into the new Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) which will begin in the 2014-2015 school year. The PARCC assessment was developed as the result of a 20-

state partnership (Colorado Department of Education, 2013g). In the transition between CSAP and PARCC, Colorado used a Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) until the 2014-2015 school year (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a). Therefore, it is imperative that teachers be attentive to making sure they have designed their curriculum accordingly to cover the new standards. Teachers may feel the pressure to align or rewrite curriculum as needed to cover those tested standards. Curriculum is defined as:

Depending on how broadly educators define or employ the term, curriculum typically refers to the knowledge and skills students are expected to learn, which includes the learning standards or learning objectives they are expected to meet; the units and lessons that teachers teach; the assignments and projects given to students; the books, materials, videos, presentations, and readings used in a course; and the tests, assessments, and other methods used to evaluate student learning. (Curriculum, 2014)

Curriculum writing in smaller, rural districts may be daunting since there are normally no curriculum departments or even a single individual dedicated to curriculum writing or oversight. Rural schools may struggle with curriculum writing since many rural teachers may teach four or five subjects, which would mean that they must create four or five different lesson preparations and may have little time to actually create and write curriculum for each subject that they teach. Many teachers also perform numerous roles in addition to teaching such as club sponsor, coach, or bus driver (Franklin, 2012).

In addition, the Colorado Legislature passed the Educator Effectiveness Act in 2010, which directed all Colorado school districts to comply with the Colorado State Model Evaluation System, or one that meets all the components of it (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e). This legislative action initiated a new teacher evaluation system for the state beginning with the 2013-2014 school year. All teachers

must now be rated according to a new teacher rubric, of which 50% is based upon student academic growth (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e). Student growth must be measured by a set of assessments, decided by each district, but including the statewide assessment. If a teacher's students do not show growth, or show low growth for two consecutive years, then the teacher may lose their tenure status (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e). This puts pressure squarely on teachers and schools to cover the state standards and elevates the importance of state assessment results. The stakes for teachers are now higher since their professional status is so directly tied to their students' performance on the state assessment (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e).

Colorado State Standards and Assessments

Most rural Colorado teachers begin their careers operating with general independence when it comes to deciding what to teach and the method of teaching, with little possibility of true collaboration, similar to rural teachers in other states (Smeaton & Waters, 2013). The principle of local control in the schools of Colorado has, in the past, given broad freedom to teachers to make those decisions and practice their craft as professionals (Colo. Const. art. ix, § 15). Teachers in rural northeast Colorado typically fit this pattern. Local control gives broad powers to local school boards to determine curriculum, graduation requirements, and many other educational decisions; therefore, uniformity is not always present between school districts and, if it is, varies in scope. For example, one school district might require community service credits for graduation, while others do not. Some require more foreign language credits than others. Math may be taught in a different sequence in different high schools. However, with the adoption of the new Colorado State Standards by the Colorado State Board of Education, all

Colorado schools are now required to cover the same state-adopted standards, regardless of size of school, their demographic makeup, or the amount of freedom school administrators and teachers typically enjoyed in the past regarding curriculum and assessment decisions (Colorado Department of Education, 2013d). The standards are assessed on a high-stakes testing program presently called the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP), given annually in grades 3 through 10, in the subjects of reading, writing, and math (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a). Science is tested at Grades 5, 8, and 10 (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a). Social studies were added in the 2013-2014 school year for Grades 4, 7, and 11 (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a).

Colorado Growth Model

One of the characteristics measured on the assessments is a student's individual growth in reading, writing, and math (Colorado Department of Education, 2013h). This measure is called the Colorado Growth Model. It is a system developed by Colorado that allegedly shows growth of each student by placing them in a reference group with other students who are being tested in the same specific subject and grade level. According to the Colorado Department of Education description, after sorting students according to subject and grade level, each student is placed in a group of students who have similar test scores. Each group of students is composed of students whose score results for that particular subject and year are similar. The following year, each student's score is compared to the others in their assigned reference group to show who grew the most and least, thereby creating a norm-referenced measure of growth. The number of students in a reference group is not defined, nor are the identities of the other students in a particular

student's group revealed. This growth score is reported, and the school is held accountable for how much growth their students show. Pressure increased for teachers to produce results on these specific state-mandated measurements or assessments. As a result, what is taught, or the curriculum of a school, is increasingly based primarily on the makeup of a single high-stakes test (David, 2011).

Educator Effectiveness Act

In 2010, the Colorado Legislature passed the Educator Effectiveness Act (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e). There was much political discussion between professional teachers groups, such as the Colorado Educators Association (CEA), the professional administrators group called Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE), the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB), and private lobbying groups, around the requirements of the Educator Effectiveness Act. Each group's concerns were basically determined by the perspectives of the professionals they represented. The CEA wanted safeguards to protect a teacher's job security, CASE wanted provisions that made it easier for administrators to conduct the evaluations and dismiss teachers who they evaluated as ineffective, and CASB wanted to maintain the principle of local control for individual school boards. Eventually, the result was a teacher evaluation system that contains a provision that 50% of teachers' evaluations are based on whether their students have shown educational growth during the year in which they were taught by the individual teacher being evaluated. The result of a teacher's students not showing growth is a designation of *ineffective* and will place the teacher in a category that could result over time in losing their tenure status (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e). Implementation of this Act requires administrators to examine in

greater detail efforts of teachers to make sure that their students not only score a passing score on the assessment, but that they also show educational growth as measured by the Colorado Growth Model. It also requires building principals to provide professional growth activities for teachers as indicated by the results of the evaluation. While each school can decide to add other assessments that measure growth for this component of teacher evaluation, the state assessment must be used in determining the teacher's effectiveness (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e).

In many rural schools, teachers may be isolated, being the only individual teaching a particular subject or grade level. Since teachers' effectiveness is now based largely on their students' academic growth, the importance of following a curriculum that covers the state assessments' questions has grown exponentially (David, 2011). If rural teachers feel that students may not be growing academically based on state assessments and other assessment results, they may feel compelled to seek outside help to develop different or more extensive curricula. Collaboration with other rural teachers may now make more sense when seen in the light of communicating and sharing the work involved with teaching in rural schools.

Northeast Board of Cooperative Educational Services

Realizing that expertise and funds were limited for rural schools, the State of Colorado, in 1965, set up centers that currently enable a level of cooperation between its smaller school districts (Boards of Cooperative Services Act, 1965). In the part of Colorado where I conducted this study, the center is called the Northeast Board of Cooperative Educational Services (NEBOCES) and is located in the small town central to its members. It is comprised of 12 Colorado public school districts: Akron, Buffalo

(Merino), Frenchman (Fleming), Haxtun, Holyoke, Julesburg, Lone Star, Otis, Plateau (Peetz), Platte Valley (Revere-Ovid), Wray, and Yuma. These 12 districts share special education services and other more minor programs such as E-rate applications, federal title grant applications, and Carl Perkins Cooperatives, primarily, in my experience as a rural superintendent of one of the member districts, for budgetary reasons and lack of availability of professional staff at each individual school. The associations between member districts that make up the NEBOCES vary in strength, with some districts not even attending the regularly scheduled meetings. However, based on my experience as a rural superintendent, the real bond that holds together the various districts is the monetary savings realized when sharing professional services and the fact that there are limited numbers of professionals available who are essential to carry out the requirements of school districts; therefore, sharing them makes sense. One example of shared expenses in the NEBOCES is the sharing of the Director of Special Education. The sharing of the Director of Special Education eliminates the necessity of each district locating a qualified individual and paying the funds necessary to employ that individual. The Special Education Director is responsible for overseeing and directing the special education departments in each of the 12 individual member schools. Other required special education personnel are also shared between the member districts, such as therapists and diagnosticians. It would be extremely difficult for each of the individual schools districts to bear the costs alone or, in many cases, to even find qualified individuals to perform those required duties. Another example of cooperation between the districts is having a single individual who completes all the grant applications and oversees the grant

operations for the federal Title programs that serve educationally disadvantaged students needing remediation in the various school districts within the NEBOCES.

Each individual school district still retains the authority to make its own decisions regarding these and other programs and remains autonomous, having their own popularly elected school boards. The level of participation in the NEBOCES is approved ultimately by the 12 individual school boards, based on superintendent recommendation. Therefore, the degree of participation in the cooperative options provided by the NEBOCES varies from school to school.

Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth

Ten of the member districts of the NEBOCES made the decision to participate in a new kind of collaboration, not based on budgetary pressures, but on educational ones. Two of the member districts did not choose to participate. One of those rarely attends any NEBOCES functions and does not generally participate in the NEBOCES activities. In addition, it does not fit the criteria of a rural district as set forth in my study since its enrollment exceeds the upper limit of 750. The other district, according to the opinion of its former superintendent who left in December, 2013, had political divisions occurring within its community which made collaboration with other districts impossible. The 10 participating districts broke new ground in Colorado when they formed a curriculum collaborative in which all 10 districts used the same curriculum and developed common assessments that showed individual students' educational growth. It was named the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth. The idea sprang from a meeting of member superintendents in the spring of 2013. The superintendents, whose districts faced increasing pressure to meet the requirements of the new state mandates

connected to the adoption of the Colorado State Curriculum Standards, the increasing number of high-stakes assessments in the required state assessment system, and the new teacher evaluation system called the Educator Effectiveness Act, began an ongoing discussion of how to address our concerns regarding implementing these mandates in our rural districts (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e). This discussion centered on ways or actions we could undertake to make the implementation of these mandates easier for our staffs and more successful for the students.

Over time, an outcome of this ongoing discussion was the formation of a steering committee made up of volunteer superintendents and principals from the districts that were interested in forming a consortium to share a common curriculum and common assessments. The participating districts span five counties, include approximately 312 teachers, and educate 3,276 students in the northeast Colorado region (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e). The perceived potential for increasing student achievement in these rural schools was palpable among the participants of the steering committee.

While most of the NEBOCES cooperative services to this point were based on costs savings and lack of availability of certain required qualified personnel for the individual rural districts, this venture was based on solving mutual educational challenges regarding curriculum, student assessment, and teacher evaluation as it relates to both. The foci of this study were the perceptions of the collaboration's stakeholders regarding implementation of the newly formed rural consortium and to determine if there are rural cultural characteristics present which affect those perceptions.

Problem

Throughout the history of public education, there have been increasing numbers of mandates, some federal, and some from the state legislatures, being placed on all schools, including rural schools (Bertola, 2007; Pendell, 2008; Sood, 2010). This influx of mandates has affected rural schools in that they have limited administrative and staff positions and may be strained to cover all of the expectations being placed upon them. Rural schools are left to adjust and/or increase the duties of their limited staffs, simply to comply with the requirements. The mandates previously described (the passage of uniform State Curriculum Standards, the state assessment program, the Colorado Growth Model, and the Teacher Effectiveness Law) may have placed enormous pressure on small rural schools that are not able to benefit from personnel solely dedicated to the implementation of these mandates (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a, 2013d, 2013e). Were the increasing state mandates, which were directly connected to school and teacher accountability, creating the environment in which increased cooperation or collaboration was more likely? Rural collaboration has historically been difficult, partly because of distance and isolation of staffs. However, was there now an increasing possibility of acceptance of it between professionals working in independent public school districts because of these pressures?

In addition, Colorado maintains open enrollment between schools, which means that parents may choose the school in which they enroll their children, with some restrictions (Public Schools of Choice Act of 1990). Schools may refuse a transfer request from a parent if there are not adequate facilities, a suitable educational program, or appropriate staff. However, many transfer requests are honored since the state funding

follows the student. In other words, school districts are, at times, competing for the same students. This environment may have created a competitive, rather than a cooperative spirit between independent school districts (Green, 2008).

Three efforts of rural curriculum collaboration were currently being attempted in Colorado. All three efforts were in the initial implementation stage. Two of these attempts were between multiple districts in the southwestern part of the state. The third one, and the focus of this study, is taking place in the northeast part of Colorado.

According to the NEBOCES Executive Director, Tim Sanger (personal communication, September 5, 2013), the tightness of agreement of the cooperative effort is greatest in the northeast attempt. Could professionals in the 10 individual rural school districts in a local control state that have operated independently of each other come together in a collaboration involving curriculum decisions and student assessments? Could the competitive spirit that exists between these rural schools be overcome when it comes to cooperating with each other in academic areas? Would cultural characteristics of these 10 rural communities surface that inhibit, or encourage collaboration between rural school professionals in different districts?

The superintendents and school boards of these 10 Colorado school districts agreed to use a common curriculum with a common scope and sequence. They also planned to develop common assessments to be used as part of the determination of student academic growth for all subjects and grade levels through collaboration. .

Purpose and Research Questions

The implementation of the NEBOCES curriculum collaborative was a large undertaking, requiring much time of the leadership of the 10 cooperating districts. The

effort began in the spring of 2013. However, what were the perceptions of the participants regarding the implementation of the consortium? Did participating teachers and administrators perceive the consortium as beneficial in that it improved their daily practices, helped improve their evaluation that was based on the new Educator Effectiveness Law, helped insure that the curriculum they used aligned with Colorado State Standards, and that it had potential to increase their students' academic achievement? A search of the literature revealed that cooperation between public school districts in a rural setting had not been researched. There was no indication in the literature that a cooperation of this scope in Colorado among rural districts and involving curriculum had been researched. According to the NEBOCES Director, Tim Sanger (personal communication September 5, 2013) and as previously stated, three rural curriculum collaborations are presently being attempted in Colorado. The focus of this study was on the northeast Colorado effort and its stakeholders' perceptions during the implementation phase of the collaborative or consortium. How was the NEBOCES curriculum collaborative perceived by the teachers in the 10 districts; specifically, how were the principals' and superintendents' decisions and actions perceived? Through this study, I also explored any specific cultural characteristics of rural communities related to stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation that emerged. Answers to these questions emerged from the data collected in this study.

Research Questions

Three specific questions guided my research:

- Q1 What historical, cultural, and political phenomena led to the formation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth?

- Q2 What were the perceptions of two specific stakeholder groups, administrators and teachers, regarding the Consortium's formation, leadership, and potential outcomes?
- Q3 In what ways did the characteristics of rural school communities influence stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation of the inter-district curriculum collaborative?

Question 1 focused on the perceived pressures felt by the individual district administrators, represented by a steering committee, which may have encouraged the formation of a large collaborative effort between districts and individuals that previously had rarely worked together on this type of effort. Did the fact that the state had dramatically increased accountability requirements, beginning with the 2013-2014 year, on individual districts make the committee members more receptive to forming this type of cooperative? Did they perceive that these increased pressures might cause their staffs to be more acceptable to the idea that mutual benefits might be realized if educational cooperation with fellow educators outside the boundaries of their own individual districts occurred? What were their perceptions regarding the reason that some districts opted out of the Consortium?

Question 2 examined perceptions of the teachers and administrators as stakeholders during the implementation of the inter-district educational consortium. What actions were perceived as personally beneficial to them during implementation of the Consortium and which ones were perceived by the teachers and administrators as detrimental? How were the activities in which they participated actually perceived? Did the actions and goals of the Consortium provide the potential for increased student performance on assessments? Did they perceive that inter-district collaboration between professional educators was beneficial? Finally, did they see this effort as strengthening

the educational program for the students in their schools? Understandings may be discovered that will be helpful to those school districts who are considering future collaborations. Hopefully, answers will provide a guide for the leaders of future collaborations between independent school districts.

Finally, Question 3 searched for cultural characteristics that emerged in rural communities that possibly affected the collaboration between different rural school communities. By searching for unique cultural characteristics of rural communities that emerged in the study of this collaborative effort, future prospects or proposals for rural collaboration may benefit or, at least, be understood in terms of rural culture.

Assumptions

Since my extensive experience as a teacher, principal, and superintendent in rural schools has been extremely positive for myself and my family, I am very interested in contributing to the continued success of rural schools. Increasing numbers of state mandates have the potential to affect rural districts in dramatic ways. Some of these mandates have indirect consequences. For example, the new Colorado state assessments will require technology upgrades in the school where I worked as superintendent. Many rural districts already operate with limited human resources and some, with decreasing monetary resources due to decreasing enrollments. I have personally struggled with finding enough personnel hours to implement new mandates that start as a good idea in the legislature, but are mandated on districts statewide without sufficient funding to locally implement them. A current example which is creating some hardship is the Educator Effectiveness Act (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e). It requires much more time for my principal to implement than our old local teacher evaluation

system. No extra funding for implementation accompanied this mandate, including funding that enabled my district to cover the extra time required of the principal or to cover those duties for which he was formerly responsible, but had to give up in order to implement this new evaluation system. This is not an argument that the new mandate is a bad idea. It is simply an example of how my school district struggles with the implementation of a new mandate. In my experience, most mandates come with insufficient funding or, in some cases, no funding, to help my district in its implementation. In addition, based on my experience growing up in a major metropolitan area, yet working in rural settings, rural culture is unique from cultures of urban and suburban areas in many ways. These characteristics may shape the acceptance or rejection of cooperative efforts between schools in different rural communities. In the rural communities where I have lived and worked, I witnessed a general mistrust of anything that did not originate from within the community itself. Any mandate that came from the state level was always initially considered suspect in the communities in which I worked. This not only included those mandates on the schools, but also on the other local entities such as the town or the water system. In one rural district in Texas where I lived and worked as superintendent, the school district was also responsible for maintaining the local water system. Even though the state's monthly testing of the water was in the best interest of the community's health, the inspection process was seen as intrusive, and their occasional findings of impurities or toxins were widely dismissed as a conspiracy to eventually close down the system, thereby shutting off the community's water supply. A suspicion of anything that was not local was conveyed to me in many conversations during my career in rural communities and was a general attitude that was easily

perceived, even without specific verbal reinforcement. I witnessed this sense of suspicion of the outside in every rural community and school in which I lived and worked. Since I arrived in all of the communities where I was superintendent as an outsider myself, it always took me time to gain the trust of the communities. I gained the trust of some in months and some in years, and for some, I never did gain their trust. It was important for me to be seen as fighting for the interests of the local school and making the school district successful in spite of those outsiders whose actions made that task more difficult in the eyes of the community members. This atmosphere, present in all rural communities where I served as superintendent, made collaborations with outside groups more difficult and took strong leadership on my part to make them feasible for consideration.

Effective school leadership is a crucial ingredient in any attempt at collaboration or cooperation between individual rural schools, or in this study, between individual rural school districts with their corresponding independent governing boards and administrations. In the past, districts tended to operate with a disconnected, disjointed approach toward each other.

Finally, while actual school consolidation remains a negative concept in most rural communities, the term collaboration or cooperation may be perceived in a more positive light. Most rural educators see collaboration as beneficial and contributing to increased student achievement. Collaboration between schools is seen as helpful and perceived as a positive development (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Elmore, 2000; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001).

Significance of Study

If collaboration is seen as beneficial, or even vital, in the survival of rural schools, then these results may help preserve rural schools as thriving entities (Chance & Segura, 2009). While there is much research on collaboration and its benefits as related to student achievement, most of the research has been done in larger school districts with the collaboration taking place between teachers that teach in the same school or the same school district (Friend & Cook, 2013; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Mattessich et al., 2001). The collaborators teach the same subject(s) and/or teach at the same grade level, which makes collaboration easier and more useful to the participants. There is scant research when it comes to the feasibility or success of collaboration between separate school districts in rural settings. In many cases, rural schools are expected to do more and with fewer resources, less monetary and fewer human resources (Franklin, 2012). By studying the implementation of this particular rural inter-district collaborative effort, results may help guide future decisions and actions regarding cooperation between small, isolated rural schools.

Summary of Chapters

In Chapter II, I will review literature that reveals the effects of past school educational collaborations and its possible effects on student achievement. Do teachers understand the proposed change or reform and perceive that it will benefit them in their roles as teachers and indirectly benefit their students (David & Cuban, 2010)? A brief history of collaboration will be summarized, and the challenges of collaboration between isolated rural schools will be examined. The evidence of the benefits of educational collaboration regarding student achievement will be presented. Rural schools and their

unique cultural characteristics will be explored. The perceived roles of rural schools to their communities will be described. This curriculum collaboration is a major change in these rural districts from their past practices developing curriculum and assessments individually and usually in isolation from professional peers. Therefore, research pertaining to organizational change will be examined, and leadership required to implement organizational change will be addressed. What types of leadership actions are required for successful collaboration? What in the literature reveals stakeholder perceptions in past collaborations and if or how those perceptions affect the collaboration effort itself? Chapter III will describe in detail the methodology of this case study. Chapter IV will present the findings from the data collected. Finally, Chapter V will present discussions of findings, implications, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

For the past three decades, educational research studies examining the effects of collaboration of efforts between teachers, between administrators, and between schools as entities document positive results when measured by student achievement or many other aspects of educational institutional factors (Eastwood & Seashore-Louis, 1992). Those collaborations have included lunch program consortiums, special education cooperatives, transportation collaborations, and others. In fact, one of my major impetuses for joining school collaborations as superintendent of several rural, isolated, public school districts has been cost savings for districts in the era of shrinking government budgets. However, when specifically looking at the effects of educational collaboration between teachers when it comes to sharing and discussing teaching strategies with the established goal of increasing student achievement, the results are clear. Student achievement almost always improves as collaboration between educators increases (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Elmore, 2000; Friend & Cook, 2013; Lickona & Davison, 2005; Mattessich, Murray-Close, Monsey, 2001). Based on research for this study, educational collaboration has primarily focused on urban and suburban schools districts (McCord, 2002; McCoy, 2000). These are areas where populations are concentrated and collaborations may be more easily established and maintained because they can occur within schools, and even within departmentalized subject areas or grade levels. This

might be partly because those schools have multiple teachers within each grade level and subject department. In addition, many of those districts have multiple schools across which collaboration may be established. They are normally governed by one central office, which is able to make decisions that affect the entire district, thereby having influence over all schools and their corresponding staffs. Not only are many rural schools operating with one teacher per grade level or content area which make collaboration difficult because of a lack of other professionals with whom to collaborate in the same subject area or grade/age level, but also many teachers are isolated from other schools by the distance between them which makes it difficult to establish real and meaningful collaboration with other teachers who share content or grade levels. However, as long ago as 1945, cooperation between rural schools and agencies was encouraged (Herrick, 1945).

Another factor that might negatively affect rural collaboration between school districts is the ever-present competitive spirit that exists between rural communities (Green, 2008). Rural schools compete against each other in numerous ways: sports teams, academic teams, and for students' enrollments. The state of Colorado rates schools according to students' assessment results, thereby allowing communities to compare their schools against neighboring schools (Colorado Department of Education, 2013c). The state also makes public certain statistics such as graduation rates and college readiness, again allowing communities to compete in essence with each other for better results (Colorado Department of Education, 2013c). Though generally good-natured, this competitive spirit may inhibit or discourage educational cooperation or collaboration between staffs in different communities (Clauss, 1999). In Colorado and

other states, these communities often vie for the same students since many states, including Colorado, are open-enrollment states, meaning students and their corresponding state funding go to the school in which they choose to enroll (Samuels, 2012). The independent nature of the American West may also encourage individual teachers to make decisions in isolation, thereby exercising their freedom to decide their own curriculum and daily lessons. In Colorado, schools districts are granted local control, meaning that school boards have broad powers to make curriculum decisions and graduation requirements, which may or may not correlate with their neighboring districts (Colo. Const. art. ix, § 15). All of these factors may affect the extent to which collaborations between individual school districts are successful or even desired.

Several factors are now present in Colorado that may change the normal inclination of schools and educators to remain isolated in their decisions and operations. In the past, in my area of the state, the pressures that forced area schools to consider collaborations with other school districts were primarily budgetary or financial in nature. For example, it was financially beneficial for districts to form cooperatives that covered special education's many legal requirements because the costs to provide those services alone were prohibitive, and it is difficult to find enough qualified personnel for every small rural district. Therefore, it is common to see special education cooperatives in rural areas since the ability to find and pay for qualified special education professionals is limited in most rural communities. Consequently, many districts have banded together to form special education cooperatives because when local efforts and finances are pooled, the ability of smaller and more isolated school districts to provide those services required by federal and state laws regarding special education mandates is enhanced. Other

services are also becoming more cooperatively designed, such as lunch programs or distance learning programs, all primarily based on the cost savings these cooperatives provide the member schools in addition to solving the problem of the lack of qualified personnel in each rural local school district. Rural schools, in particular, have long been encouraged to collaborate in order to produce cost savings (Clauss, 1999). The collaborations formed between rural school districts over time in order to save money were difficult to implement, but the pressure of strained finances may have created the atmosphere in which many schools overcame those obstacles. However, other factors are now present in Colorado, aside from monetary ones, which are creating a new mindset of cooperation because the benefits are being perceived as greater than any liabilities.

The focus of the literature review will be characteristics and challenges of rural schools, organizational change and its obstacles, the role of educational leadership in the collaborative process, the benefits of educational collaboration, and my theoretical framework

Rural Schools

Rural school educators are expected to meet the same required accountability measures as all other types of school districts, even though fewer numbers of students and staff are involved. “We know that we are expected to do more with less—or rather, the same with less. I can name more than one rural district where the principal, bus driver, and basketball coach are the same person. The accountability remains the same” (Franklin, 2012, p. 28). Rural schools face unique obstacles in the implementation of many state requirements. Well-intentioned decisions made by state legislatures may affect school districts differently based on size/enrollments. They are usually motivated

by political pressures from various constituencies and since democracy is, by definition, controlled by majorities, rural voices, because of smaller population numbers, may be diminished. The differences between the actual characteristics of urban/suburban schools and rural schools and the communities they serve are great (Colorado Department of Education, 2013c). Therefore, rural schools are left to adapt many of those requirements in creative ways in order to be compliant. According to Diane Ravitch (2010), small schools (which include most rural schools) have advantages in human relationships which help their students achieve, but have major disadvantages when it comes to being able to offer diversified curricula which is so vital for students in the present age. In other words, students enjoy the benefits that accrue from the social connections ever present in small communities where most everyone is acquainted with each other, but face major disadvantages due to lack of course offerings that their counterparts in bigger schools enjoy.

Expectations of rural school leaders are many and varied. They are expected to wear many hats daily and must be adept at switching those roles numerous times in a single day (Chalker, 1999; Copeland, 2013). I have chosen to study rural collaboration since that is my personal reference for the last 30 years.

The culture of rural communities is unique from urban or suburban communities. There is an anonymity present in larger communities that is totally lacking in small rural towns (Jenkins, 2007). Most rural schools are fiercely supported by their communities (Salinas, 2000). As populations decline in many rural towns, their schools struggle to remain open. They face the increasingly hard tasks of making decisions on how best to expend funds which are in some areas shrinking due to declining enrollments, finding

highly qualified staff, and implementing the ever-increasing federal and state mandates (Franklin, 2012). However, schools in rural communities are the center of most activities, and buildings are routinely used for all kinds of community gatherings and events (Hadden, 2000). Schafft and Jackson (2010) stated, “Historically, rural schools have served important roles as centers of social activity and cultural meaning, helping to maintain local traditions and particular identities of rural communities” (p. 2). In most rural communities, the school buildings are the only structures in the town that are capable of hosting community-wide events. They also provide numerous activities such as sporting events, plays and concerts for the community members to attend, and in some cases even serving as venues for family gatherings or reunions. The rural context was described this way in a study by Chance and Segura (2009):

Other significant themes that arose in this study were the characteristics of small schools and the closeness of the rural community. Students talked about the importance of knowing their peers since third grade and how they looked out for one another. Parents described the importance of “keeping a watchful eye out on all the kids” and how they had known the families of their children’s friends for over 30 years. Parents were always willing to help one another. Most families at Valley High School had known one another since elementary school. Parents talked about how many times they had been to others’ homes in the past few years. (p. 15)

This quote illustrates the unique atmosphere and connectedness present in rural communities that are often lacking in urban and suburban communities. People know each other’s business, which may be perceived as an advantage or a disadvantage, depending on the circumstance (Jenkins, 2007). There is a connection between the parents and the teachers who may have actually taught the parents when they were in the school. School board members are usually available and approachable, and those who are not accessible normally do not remain on a rural school board for long. There is an

expected access to school leadership by parents that is often not present or available in bigger city schools, but that is an ever-present expectation in rural schools (Copeland, 2013; Tobin, 2006).

Since school funding in Colorado is based on student enrollment, and since small towns consider maintaining a school as vital for their community, the environment may create a sense of competition, rather than collaboration (Green, 2008). Also, the competitive nature of school-sponsored sports creates community pride in a rural town that goes deeper than in larger suburban or urban schools. As mentioned above, those sporting events provide the time and place for rural communities to congregate and support their school and town and each other. According to Schmuck and Schmuck (1992), the majority of a rural community's population is present at Friday night football games. While there, not only do they cheer on the team, but they may discuss matters that are mutually important to them such as farming conditions, local families, deaths or sicknesses of mutual acquaintances, farm auctions, or the local price of gasoline or diesel. The culture of various rural communities, even in different geographic areas or with different ethnicities, have more in common than not. Schmuck and Schmuck (1992) concluded:

In fact, the culture of the small districts we visited extended beyond regional differences. A school in a Hispanic mining community of the Southwest, or one that was primarily black in the rich farmland of the Mississippi Delta, or a school built in 1893 and populated by Norwegians of the Midwest all looked more alike than different. (p. 9)

Rural towns are rich in local pride and a sense of place, and the school is the centerpiece of their communal activity, providing not simply a place for educating their children, but a gathering place for the population itself. Strong connections are made over the years in

a rural community between its people because they are socially and emotionally bound by work, play, and family. These connections extend many times into their political and religious leanings and create a culture that is tight and loyal to each other and to the exclusion of those who are not within its self-defined circle. In this environment, collaborations between schools in different rural communities are sometimes hard to implement.

The spirit of the American West is an independent one (Fauntleroy, 2004; Kolpas, 1999). This independent spirit flows into every corner of Colorado's rural communities' relationships, including the teaching staff of its schools. While loyalties and connections are strong between a rural community's members, this spirit creates a sense of stubborn individual independence (Chance & Segura, 2009). The very sense of identity of a rural community creates a competitive atmosphere when the idea of collaboration between communities or organizations is considered (Sears & Lovan, 2006). Many times, collaboration between separate rural communities is seen as a weakening of their perceived independence. When the ethic of rural communities may be best described by a "pull yourself up by your own bootstrap" mentality, collaboration is a concept that can be difficult to instill. In a recent study of rural school administrators' professional connections, findings indicated that in rural districts, collaboration or mutually cooperative relationships are more likely to occur within districts than across districts (Hite, Reynolds, & Hite, 2010). In fact, the same study found that rural administrators who had stronger inter-district professional relationships also had lower within-district influence and centrality. Knowing or realizing this aspect may inhibit a rural school administrator from being willing to reach out across school district lines to form

collaborations. However, since many small rural schools have single-teacher departments or grade levels, true collaboration of educational professionals may require an inter-district approach if the purpose is to improve teaching, thereby improve student achievement. The physical isolation of many rural teachers and administrators may require a different approach to collaboration that is unique in concept and design from their urban and suburban counterparts, but nonetheless, just as important. A study of collaboration between rural schools by Muijs (2008) found that school-to-school collaboration widened opportunities for learners and increased the schools' abilities to address vulnerable populations, but also created conflicts of power and equity between the schools. These conflicts are exacerbated by the ever-present competition in which these schools are engaged at almost every level, whether it is sports competitions, academic competitions, or funding competitions (Clauss, 1999; Green, 2008). These challenges that exist in the culture of rural communities are ones that must be considered and overcome if true collaborations are to be implemented across district and community boundaries and become successful in the long term.

Organizational Change

Organizations may be thought of as tools that are created and used by individuals that have that ability to coordinate peoples' actions in order to achieve outcomes that are sought or prized by those individuals (Jaffee, 2001). If the outcomes produced satisfy the desires or needs of the people they serve, then there is little impetus for change. However, if organizations are perceived as not satisfying those desired outcomes, then demands for organizational change will develop over time, even though the type or design of organizational change may not be defined. Organizational change is difficult to

achieve and can easily go awry (David & Cuban, 2010; Kilgore & Reynolds, 2011).

There are numerous reasons for the difficulty of organizational change. One is that organizational change involves the ability to control and manage humans, which are able and willing to resist change. “If humans were passive objects, rather than active subjects, they would readily conform to organizational dictates” (Jaffee, 2001, p. xvii). Argyris (1999) stated that “Human beings also show remarkable ingenuity for self-protection. They can create individual and organizational defenses that are powerful and which that power is largely in the service of poor to mediocre performance as well as of antilearning,” (p. 157). The key to successfully implementing organizational change is taking steps to overcome these challenges. One step might be a shared leadership approach, which is conducive to collaborative efforts where all are included (Williams & Lindsay, 2011). Another might be through collaboration. While Richard Elmore (2009) believed that organizational change is needed for schools to show improvement in student achievement, he also asserted that it cannot occur without conflict. Dr. Ben Levin (2009) believed that change implementation could not be “assumed or left to chance,” but must be “carefully nurtured” (p. 264). In other words, it does not naturally occur, but must be planned.

Michael Fullan (1993a, 2010a, 2010b) has written extensively about change in the organization of and practice in America’s schools. He maintained that schools have a vital role to play in the overall changes that are coming in the global environment since no other institution has “greater potential to impact how society changes over the long term” (Fullan, 2010a, p. xi). He discussed in detail the role of leadership to initiate, implement, and support change (Fullan, 2010a). The importance of school leadership in

organizational change is discussed in greater detail below in its own subsection. Fullan (2010b) asserted that the basic challenge in leading change in a school is:

Finding the smallest number of high-leverage, easy to understand actions that unleash stunningly powerful consequences. . . . It strips away overloaded change-cluttered commotion-and gives us the essential core of what we need in order to get real change owned by the critical mass. (p. 16)

He further discussed the importance of maximum change occurring with concise effort (Fullan, 2010b).

Fullan (2010a) also elaborated on several of the changes in school organization that he believed have the potential to increase student achievement, therefore making the school institution more productive. Many of these involve collaboration between teachers in a process he called “lateral capacity building” (Fullan, 2010a, p. 12).

Historically, schools have relied on individual capacity to accomplish their goals.

Teachers isolated themselves in their individual rooms and basically operated alone (Cuban, 2013; Hargreaves, 2009; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Smith, 2008). This creates the situation of a few master teachers in each school making a real difference in some students’ lives. This isolation requires schools to implement organizational change to “deprivatize teaching” (Fullan, 2007, p. 36). According to Fullan (2007):

Deprivatizing teaching changes culture and practice so that teachers observe other teachers, are observed by others, and participate in informed and telling debate on the quality and effectiveness of their instruction. . . . Changing this deeply rooted norm of privacy is tough because such a change requires tremendous sophistication as well as some risk taking by teachers and other leaders. (p.36)

However, according to Smith (2008), the challenge of organizational change in many schools is the ability of individuals to learn how to be a member of a team. Senge (2006) contended that “Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations” (p. 10). Organizational change is

required if true lateral capacity is increased in a school (Fullan, 2010a). Teachers must communicate through collaboration and, in so doing, learn from each other if student achievement is to be increased (Fullan, 2010a). Collaboration is a change in the way teachers have traditionally approached teaching (Cuban, 2013). Successful teacher collaboration focuses on student achievement through examining ways in which their own classroom practices may be changed and improved, thereby resulting in increased learning for all (DuFour et al., 2006). It usually involves transparency regarding individual teaching strategies and student assessment results, which all relate to curriculum (Fullan, 2010a). Teachers put limits on their own learning when isolating themselves in their classrooms (Fullan, 1993b).

Sustainability of change is also important if organizational change is to persevere in a school (Fullan, 2010a). Boyle (2009) stated:

As successful strategies and extraordinary efforts become routine, improved performance gathers momentum. Success breeds success among collaborating schools with a shared allegiance. At some point it reaches a critical level where so many schools are moving this way, and supporting each other, that [it becomes] almost self-sustaining. (p. 26)

David and Cuban (2010) wrote the following with regards to reforms or changes that involve teachers in schools: “Any reform aimed at improving student learning depends wholly on how much teachers understand the reform, believe that it will help students learn more and better, and can tailor the reform to their classrooms” (p. 186). In other words, without the teacher buy in on the change or reform, the success will be minimal and will not be sustained. This relates to teachers developing ownership of the changes being implemented. It normally does not come at the beginning of the change, but is

usually an outcome of a successful change implementation (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, strong leadership is one ingredient that is essential to implementing lasting organizational changes (Argyris, 2010; Fullan, 2010b; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009; Smith, 2008; Van Clay, Soldwedel, & Many, 2011). While leaders cannot force teachers to change, they need to “create a system where positive change is virtually inevitable” (Fullan, 2010b, p. 62). A gap in the literature exists in the study of cooperation between schools in rural settings and the perceptions of the stakeholders involved as regards to its effects on their roles and their students’ academic achievements.

Educational Leadership

Effective leadership of a school is a vital component in making sure that all its students reach their full learning potential (Barth, 1990; Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley, & Beresford, 2000). Strong school leadership cannot be underestimated (Fullan, 2010b). New leaders must build relationships with those they attempt to lead (Fullan, 2010b). “The single factor common to successful change is that relationships improve. . . . Thus, leaders build relationships with diverse people and groups—especially with people who think differently” (Fullan, 2002, p. 18). A level of trust must be developed for the leader by those that are led. Trust is built when leaders are perceived as providing security, a basic human need (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Avolio (2010) maintained that effective leadership requires a leader to be less consumed by his own needs and more concerned with his staff’s needs. He further indicated that a leader who is perceived as “authentic” by the staff is already well on the way to being an effective leader (p. x). Authenticity is

defined by Webster (2013) as something that is true or genuine. In other words, the staff must believe that their leader is honest to himself, to his staff, and to his task, and that his motivations are not selfish. “Integrity requires action. . . . Authentic leaders embody character in action: they don’t just say, they do” (Evans, 2001, p. 90).

Studies have shown that if specific leadership behaviors “are followed by principals and superintendents, schools could improve” (Hoyle & Torres, 2010, p. 116). Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) found that “the quality of school-level leaders and the specific practices in which they engage is second only to teachers’ influence in predicting student achievement” (p. 323). Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) asserted that “there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader” (p. 5). Richard DuFour and Robert Marzano (2011) suggested that effective leaders both direct and empower their teachers in collaborative efforts such as professional learning communities (PLCs). Fullan (2010b) basically stated that he knew of no improving school that did not have a strong principal who was good at leading improvement.

Strong leadership is a directed effort, not a haphazard process that simply includes a set of disconnected actions. It is well-planned, tightly organized, and focused on improvement. Successful leadership of collaborations is not a top-down approach, but a sharing of power and an acceptance that all parts of the organization have contributions that are worthy and should be considered when participating in collaborative efforts. Communication skills are a vital part of collaborative leadership and can determine the success or failure of a leader (Cottrell & Harvey, 2004). Strong school leadership must

model the characteristics of good team collaboration. As explained by DuFour et al., (2006), this modeling starts at the central office level:

In every instance of effective system wide implementation of the PLC process we have witnessed, central office leaders visibly modeled the commitment to learning for all students, collaboration, collective inquiry, and results orientation they expected to see in other educators throughout the district. (p. 211)

In rural districts, the central office leadership is usually the superintendent, since that is the only administrator at the central office/district level. In some rural districts, there is only one administrator on staff. Therefore, rural leaders have far less ability to delegate responsibilities and often must bear the load of any educational change that takes place in his/her district. Gulka (1993) found that changes occur more rapidly and with less resistance when key individuals learn to master leadership skills which allow them to cope and manage the changes that are desired.

Richard and Rebecca DuFour (2012) have written extensively about successful collaborations and the vital role of leadership. In their research and experience with successful collaboration, they found that for collaboration to be successful in a school, leadership must take three basic actions: (a) establish that collaborative teams must focus on student learning, (b) adequate time must be provided to the teams during which collaboration can take place, and (c) ensure that there is shared responsibility for student learning among the staff who make up the collaborative teams. If collaboration is attempted and any of these three actions are not completed by school leadership, which usually means the principal, then the opportunity for success is severely inhibited (DuFour & DuFour, 2012). These steps sound simple, but a rural school leader is challenged by the fact that scheduling is normally severely restricted by the limitations of the number of teaching staff who, because of small enrollments, must teach multiple

subjects within and sometimes across disciplines. Therefore, freeing up time in the schedule for individuals to join in a meaningful collaboration is a real challenge, although essential (Mattessich et al., 2008). Establishing shared responsibility is also, at times, a challenge in a rural school. When there is possibly only one teacher who teaches a secondary subject, the feeling is sometimes present that as long as his/her students are successful on assessments and are showing improvement, all is well—regardless of how they are achieving or not in other subjects areas not taught by that individual. As in Colorado, there are normally also certain grade levels or subjects that are not assessed on the high-stakes state assessment (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a). This sometimes creates an attitude among those staff who teach untested subjects and/or grades that they are free from any responsibility for those grade levels and subjects that are included in the state assessments. Therefore, establishing a shared responsibility among the various staff members is a challenge that must be overcome by strong leadership (Mattessich et al., 2008).

One powerful way that a school leader can build the capacity of their staff to collaborate is to “create the conditions that require them to work together to accomplish a specific goal” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 159). This requires leaders to strategize ways to accomplish this feat. Since many teachers have the tendency to work in isolation, this may require leaders to start with small steps. For example, a principal may require the elementary staff to collaborate on developing a recess duty schedule, with the hope that the collaborative skills developed from that simple, non-academic collaboration will transfer to a collaboration that actually affects student achievement later on. DuFour et al. (2006) stated that:

Leaders who demonstrate reciprocal accountability do more than just hope teams will be successful in developing SMART goals: they are committed to providing teams with the resources and support that increase the likelihood that teams will be successful in establishing and achieving high quality SMART goals. They provide clarity regarding why the work is to be done; consider what teams need in order to build shared knowledge about the work; supply teams with tools, templates, and examples to facilitate the work; establish criteria to help teams assess the quality of the work; and monitor progress of each team to intervene and assist when a team struggles. (p. 158)

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) put the responsibility of the collaborative team's success on the school leader. The importance of school leadership on the success of a collaborative effort is underscored time and time again by most researchers who study collaboration in schools.

Leaders are encouraged to actually be a part of the collaborative team, usually as a facilitator. This allows them to use their leadership abilities to make sure real collaboration occurs. It also provides an opportunity to lead by example. However, when administrators become part of the collaborative team, it can also create challenges. Since they, by their job role definition, are not only filling a role as a team member and, in many cases, the collaboration team facilitator, they are also responsible for evaluating the job performance of the other team members outside the collaboration. Keeping the two roles separate can be a real challenge and could possibly even inhibit the collaboration process (Friend & Cook, 2013). The benefits of having the administrator sit in with the collaborative team have to be weighed against the disadvantages of having the boss present. Many times, this will depend upon whether the leader has established his leadership style prior to the collaboration effort as one which invites input from the staff.

Shared leadership styles are more conducive to administrators including themselves on the collaboration team than are top-down leadership approaches. Cornell (2000) found that good leadership encourages good leadership on the part of others. One of the prized superintendent traits according to Texas school board members is “promoting collaboration” (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008, p. 6). According to the results of one study that specifically examined rural leadership, the ability of the leader to ensure that everyone feels valued and included in the process of collaboration is vital to the success of collaboration (Williams & Lindsay, 2011). These studies establish that if a school leader has already made clear that the opinions and values of the staff members are important in making decisions, then collaboration is more likely to be successful. The United States Department of Education (1999) found that “researchers who study educational leadership are coming to view leadership as a shared process involving teachers, students, parents, and community members” (p. 6). Good leadership is increasingly described as involving the entire staff in a collaborative decision-making process that models shared vision and cooperation (Lambert, 2003). Therefore, it is increasingly clear that the role of an educational leader is to bring individuals together to share ideas for solutions to the challenges schools face in educating their students. If this practice has been established in a school district by its leaders, then successful collaboration is a real possibility.

Benefits of Collaboration

Educational collaboration is seen as essential to educator effectiveness and as a characteristic of successful schools, especially since much of it concerns comparing and developing curriculum and assessments and has a direct effect on student achievement

(Friend & Cook, 2013). Collaboration is defined by Mattessich et al. (2008) as “a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals” (p. 4). Collaboration is determined to be a vital ingredient in the success of high-achieving schools (DuFour et al., 2006; Elmore, 2000; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Mattessich et al., 2008). “Collaboration holds out the possibility of better thinking on the part of both administrators and teachers and increased cognitive growth as participants articulate their thought processes, listen, and respond to the thoughts of others” (Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Hoy & Mackley, 2000, p. 257). It is widely accepted that schools that collaborate are more successful than those who do not (Fullan, 2010a). Eastwood and Seashore-Louis (1992) stated, “The single most important factor for successful school restructuring and the first order of business for those interested in increasing the capacity of their schools is building a collaborative internal environment” (p. 215). According to Little (1990), collaborative work between teachers is likely to result in increased student achievement, increase confidence among the staff members who collaborate, and increase the capacity of the staff by sharing of the strengths of the individual teachers and also finding solutions to cover the weaknesses that emerge through the collaborative efforts. Conrad (2008) compared collaboration versus individual efforts to a bundle of sticks being much harder to break than a single stick. Collaboration is seen as a learning tool for teachers in itself (Fullan, 1993a). Teachers generally consider collaboration with fellow professionals as a powerful learning possibility (Lohman, 2005). The simple coming together to share ideas and solutions to the unique situations teachers face every day is perceived as a far more effective professional development technique than school-wide or district-wide meetings

that are basically designed so that an expert shares knowledge through general lectures. Those types of professional development are more useful as an occasional motivation technique, rather than a true learning experience for the audience. According to Wheatley (1999), “We have known for nearly a quarter of a century that self-managed teams are far more productive than any other form of organizing . . . by joining with others we can accomplish something important that we could not accomplish alone” (pp. 152-153). Collaboration reinforces that age-old idea that together we can accomplish more than we can as single individuals in almost any arena of life.

Reinforcing the idea that collaboration increases the achievement of students in a school, the National Education Association, in a study conducted in 2003 and cited by DuFour et al. (2006) found that:

High-performing schools promote collaborative problem solving and support professional communities and exchanges among all staff. Teachers and staff collaborate to remove barriers to student learning and communicate regularly with each other about effective teaching and learning strategies. They have regularly scheduled time to learn from one another. (p. 142)

Teams that collaborate are essential if a school intends to improve student outcomes. Rather than relying on being able to place individual master teachers into each classroom, schools are increasingly realizing that collaboration is a more realistic approach to improving instruction and, therefore, improving student achievement. In 2007, Blanchard wrote:

A team can make better decisions, solve more complex problems, and do more to enhance creativity and build skills than individuals working alone. . . . They have become the vehicle for moving organizations into the future. . . . Teams are not just nice to have. They are hard-core units of production. (p. 17)

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future found in 2003 that:

The key to ensuring that every child has a quality teacher is finding a way for school systems to organize the work of quality teachers so they can collaborate with their colleagues in developing strong learning communities that will sustain them as they become more accomplished teachers. (p. 7)

When considering best practices to teaching, it is simply logical to come to the realization that quality teaching is not simply an individual endeavor or accomplishment. It is best achieved by empowering a team whose efforts allow those collaborators to move beyond what they could do as individuals and to realize that they can do much more as a collaborative team (Carrol, 2009). If change is needed in a school, collaboration is the one vital ingredient to ensure that it takes place. “School improvement relies on involvement by a collaborative, school-based school improvement team as the cornerstone and energy source for school-by-school change” (Lezotte, 2005, p. 183).

Another benefit of successful collaboration among teachers is that it promotes a responsibility for students’ successes or, in some cases, failures that is shared among the teachers, regardless of grade level or subject taught (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Collaboration among staff promotes the solving of conflict between staff members. However, its purpose “is not to avoid critique and conflict, but to deal with both respectfully and constructively” (Goulet, Krentz, & Christiansen, 2003, p. 325). Many schools struggle with collaboration because the individuals who need to collaborate in order to improve have not been taught the skills needed for successful collaboration. The question is not whether collaboration is beneficial, but exactly how it is successfully implemented in those schools where it is not present.

The literature is clear that collaboration between teachers has the potential to increase student achievement. Schmoker (2005) wrote, “Isolation is the enemy of improvement. . . . Teachers learn best from other teachers” (p. 141). However, little

research specifically addresses collaboration or the challenges of collaboration in rural settings between districts. The rural culture is unique from their urban or suburban counterparts in many characteristics (Castle, Wu, & Weber, 2011). The physical characteristics are different, and the culture itself is different. The challenges of real and meaningful collaboration between rural school districts and the perceptions of their stakeholders need to be studied if the real potential for student achievement is to be reached in those rural settings. This will require strong leadership that understands the rural school and its setting. Fullan (1996) stated:

Schools must not only be collaborative internally, but they must also be linked to the outside. It is only when the school also has connections to the outside-with a healthy relationship with both its local and larger environments-that the collaborativeness will last. (p. 497)

My study will add to the growing research regarding collaboration, in general, and, specifically, collaboration in rural schools.

Theoretical Framework

I analyzed my data through the lens of organizational change (Cuban, 2013; Fullan, 2010a; Jaffee, 2001) using a constructionist framework (Crotty, 1998). I view my world from a social constructionist theoretical framework which also defines how I develop my own understanding and design my inquiry. Meaning is constructed from our world, not discovered (Crotty, 1998). In the social constructionist tradition, I will incorporate context-dependent inquiry (interviews) and inductive data analysis (Creswell, 2007). The social constructionist tradition asserts that we are already embedded in social and conventional institutions which have preceded us and from which we construct meaning (Crotty, 1998). Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (as cited by Crotty, 1998) said, “What of a truth that is bounded by these mountains and is a falsehood to the world that

lives beyond?” (p. 42). Crotty (1998) described this as social constructionism and further describes it as: “all knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). I collected data from individuals to analyze how their constructed meanings have affected their acceptance or rejection of the curriculum consortium implementation. I further analyzed data collected and individual responses given to determine how or if the rural setting and context of the participants of this study have affected their perceptions of the successes and failures of implementation of this rural curriculum consortium.

The Consortium was developed as an organizational change to be implemented in the 10 member school districts. It required an attempt at transformational changes in the ways that teachers in different school districts shared and developed curriculum and student assessments. Teaching strategies of individual teachers were shared so that not only teachers learned from each other, but in doing so, enabled their students’ learning to reach a greater potential. Common assessments were developed collaboratively across the 10 districts in the Consortium by teachers who were working in groups based upon academic subject and grade level taught.

This represents an organizational change from the past practice in these rural school districts of individual teachers making those decisions and creating their own student assessments in the professional isolation of their own classrooms. Through the lens of the research and writings of educators such as Fullan (2010a) and Cuban (2013) who are concerned with organizational change in schools, the need for it, and the results of it where it has been implemented, I analyzed the data collected from this study. I used

Jaffee's (2001) idea that organizations are formed for the purpose of achieving outcomes desired by the individuals they serve. Specifically, he maintained that the impetus for and acceptance of organizational change are directly related to the perceptions of stakeholders as to whether this change fulfills their personal and professional needs and produces the desired outcomes. The goal of a social constructionist researcher is to "rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation" (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). Through the lens of organizational change and within the social constructionist framework, the perceived successes or failures of the implementation of this inter-district curriculum consortium was analyzed.

Potential Contributions to the Field

It is hoped that the study of the collaborative effort between these ten rural school districts will add the already existing body of literature which indicates the benefits of collaboration, adding specific findings that might help rural schools. It is also hoped that it will add to the existing research of how to implement organizational change—in this case, organizational change in rural schools. The study will hopefully fill in some gaps in the literature by providing findings regarding inter-district academic collaborations that are specific to rural community and school settings. The findings may provide beneficial data for rural districts that are considering partnering for future collaborations.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to seek answers to the following guiding question: Was a substantial collaborative effort among multiple local control rural school districts in Colorado perceived by the stakeholder groups of administrators and teachers as successful and helpful? Sub questions include:

- Q1 What historical, cultural, and political phenomena led to the formation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth?
- Q2 What were the perceptions of two specific stakeholder groups, administrators and teachers, regarding the Consortium's formation, leadership, and potential outcomes?
- Q3 In what ways did the characteristics of rural school communities influence stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation of the inter-district curriculum collaborative?

The focus of this qualitative study was to study the phenomenon of inter-district collaboration. According to Merriam (2009), "Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning . . . how people make sense of their lives, what they experience, and how they interpret those experiences" (p. 17). Qualitative design allowed me to understand the challenges faced by and the successes experienced by the participants in this rural collaboration, to draw conclusions as to whether this particular implementation has been successful, and to provide guidance to rural schools considering inter-district collaborative partnerships.

I selected a case study approach as appropriate for this study (Stake, 1995). More specifically, this was a descriptive case study as described by Yin (2003), as I described the sociocultural context, along with the experiences of the participants of a comprehensive collaboration effort among 10 rural districts to use a mutually agreed upon curriculum. This effort not only required all 10 participating districts to use the same curriculum, but also to develop and adopt the same scope and sequence across districts in all subjects and grade levels. The Administrators of these districts chose to mutually adopt the Colorado State Sample Curriculum, which had been developed by teams of volunteer teachers representing the various grade and subject areas that they taught (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). These teams of teachers had met over the previous year and created the curriculum documents, which also created a scope and sequence. Actual lesson plans were not included, nor were assessments (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). Common assessments were jointly developed and adopted by the consortium of districts. While each district retained their control over the decision to participate, once they joined in the collaboration, all districts committed to the agreements and mutually planned professional development for their staffs. I, as superintendent of one of the participating districts and a member of the collaboration steering committee that led this innovation, investigated the inter-district implementation of a curriculum collaborative among 10 rural school districts in northeast Colorado. Since I am the superintendent of one of the 10 participating school districts, I conducted this research as a participant observer as described by James Spradley (1980).

For purposes of this case study, the case was bounded by geographic location—northeast Colorado—and by district type—rural (defined in this study as districts with

less than 750 enrollments, K-12, and whose economic bases were tied to agriculture). This was in keeping with the definition of qualitative case study (Creswell, 2007). This effort was considered an educational innovation since it was one of the first attempts of its kind in Colorado, specifically in northeast Colorado and among the 10 school districts. Therefore, according to Stake (1995), this 10-district consortium was defined as a “case” (p. 2).

According to Yin (1994), a case study uses real-life events to research or study current phenomena and must rely on more than just one source of information. This case study studied a particular collaborative effort within the context of the real lives of the 10 districts’ administrators and teachers. These stakeholders (the administrators and teachers) were included as sources of information for this study.

Participants

The broad community encompassing the 10 districts also included the efforts of the Northeast Board of Cooperative Educational Services (NEBOCES), of which all 10 districts were members. The NEBOCES Director assisted me by providing background information on each of the districts and communities and by making some of his staff available. The Director and his staff worked closely with the school districts involved in this curriculum collaboration effort and have worked on many previous major and minor educational endeavors. The Director had been in place for 15 years and had extensive knowledge of the districts included in this case.

As part of the protocol for this research design, strategies for access to the various sites within the broad case were specifically developed. As a participant-observer, as described by Spradley (1980) and which is discussed in greater detail below in the

researcher stance section, access to the superintendents was already present through relationships established over time in previous communications and meetings. The access to the building principals and teachers involved in this collaborative effort was granted through each district superintendent. Participation in this curriculum collaboration was voluntary on the part of each district and was recommended by each superintendent. Therefore, broad and encompassing access for the researcher was present and even encouraged by the superintendents as educational leaders of their districts and communities. These superintendents provided a bridge over which I was able to cross into the individual worlds of the various districts and communities in order to collect artifact data, observe various stakeholders, and establish personal contact with them. The access accorded to the researcher provided major benefits for this study. In order to answer this question, semi-structured interviews were conducted and a Likert survey instrument link was emailed to all participants who were asked to complete the short 10-question online survey. In addition, observations were done of the many meetings and CTT groups, many artifacts were collected, and domain analysis was done.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 randomly selected teachers and six randomly selected administrators, which produced 154 single-spaced pages of transcriptions and over 67,000 words. Generally, the same questions were asked of all 18 participants (Appendix A). However, at times, questions were expanded or added per the semi-structured design. The randomly selected participants varied in years-experience, from this being their first year to teach to one participant who was completing her 26th year and one administrator completing his 30th year as an educator (see Table 1).

Table 1

Sample Characteristics Showing Pseudonyms, Years-experience, and Job Role

Pseudonym	Role	Years-Experience
Heather	Teacher	1-5
Amber	Teacher	1-5
Carl	Teacher	1-5
John	Teacher	1-5
Nancy	Teacher	1-5
Carla	Teacher	5-15
Marlin	Administrator	5-15
Bobbie	Teacher	5-15
Candy	Teacher	5-15
Arlene	Administrator	17-19
Breck	Administrator	17-19
Bart	Administrator	17-19
Mandy	Teacher	17-19
Kristi	Administrator	20+
Ashley	Teacher	20+
Lucy	Teacher	20+
Kesha	Teacher	20+
Doris	Administrator	20+

A Likert Scale survey link was emailed to all participants in the Consortium which, at the beginning, totaled just over 300 and included all teachers and administrators in all participating districts. Seventy-five responded to the survey. It contained 10 statements (Appendix B). The respondents had the option of adding comments to any or none of the 10 statements. Of the 75 respondents, 37 chose to respond to at least one of the questions, while 38 chose to make no comment on any of the questions. The results of the survey are shown in Appendix H.

As stated previously, 10 school districts located in northeast Colorado decided to participate in this collaborative effort. All were rural in nature, rural being defined for this study as districts with enrollments of less than 750 students in K-12 (kindergarten through 12th grades) and whose economic base is primarily agricultural. The northeast region of Colorado is part of the Great American Plains and provided the backdrop or setting for this study. It was typical farm and ranch country, and grain elevators dotted each small town or former town.

The demographic characteristics for these 10 public school districts include the following data. Enrollment ranged from 109 to 724. Their percentages of racial minority ethnicities ranged from a low of 10% to a high of 44%. Each school district in Colorado earns points based on test scores, graduation rates, and academic growth. The points awarded toward accreditation status for each school district by the Colorado Department of Education each year are divided by the total number of points possible and provides a percent. This percent represents the ratio of points earned to points possible. As the ratio increases, a district's accreditation rating increases. The range of the ratios for the 10 participating districts was a low of 61 to a high of 86. Statewide, the range of the 178

school districts in Colorado was 39 to 92. Therefore, the 10 districts' accreditation ratings were based on ratios that fell in the mid- to upper-ranges when compared to the other public school districts statewide (Colorado Department of Education, 2013c). Finally, the superintendents' length of years in the districts ranged from a first-year superintendent to one with eight years of experience in his district (T. Sanger, personal communication, September 5, 2013).

Student academic growth rates were assigned to school districts based on the results of applying the Colorado Growth Model to each student (Colorado Department of Education, 2013i). The results were compiled for each school and listed by district, school campus, and each grade. The data results for the 10 cooperating districts in the Consortium are as follows: (a) for whole districts, the range of growth was 41 to 94; (b) for secondary campuses, the range of growth was 33 to 87; and (c) for elementary campuses, the range of growth was 50 to 91 (Colorado Department of Education, 2013i). Was the fact that students are generally academically successful in a particular school within the collaborative more likely to produce less buy-in for the teachers and administrators or greater buy-in for participation in the collaborative? Conversely, was the fact that students generally performed lower on state assessments in a particular district in the collaborative more likely to produce greater buy-in for the teachers and administrators or less?

During my eight years as a superintendent of one of these 10 districts, administrators, teachers, and boards of education had not cooperated with each other in such a broad and comprehensive manner as this collaborative required. Colorado schools were established under the local control concept (Colo. Const. art. ix § 15). This concept

established basic independence for each separate school district to make decisions based on local community needs and desires (Colorado Department of Education, 2013b). The principle of local control did not encourage cooperation between districts (inter-district), but rather allowed broad discretion for each district or community to decide such things as which curricula to teach across grades and subjects, which courses to require of students for graduation, what level of salaries to pay their teachers, facility decisions, budgets, and other substantive decisions regarding public education. In addition, local sports rivalries have added to a competitive spirit, rather than a cooperative spirit between these districts. Therefore, collaborations were rare to nonexistent.

A variety of “raw texts” (Piantanida & Garman, p. 88) were collected from these districts in various forms. These included administrative and board meeting agendas where this topic had been discussed, shared leadership team meetings where applicable, and various meeting minutes and summaries which pertained to the collaboration effort. These were examined to add background, richness, and depth to the data collected through interviews.

Sampling Methods

Random sampling, as described by Creswell (2007) and Merriam (2009), was used in the selection of the participants to interview. Teachers and administrators from my own participating district were excluded from the face-to-face interviews for the obvious reason that I was conducting the interviews, and my role as their superior might unduly influence their responses. Teachers and administrators that represented various spectrums of the Colorado Growth Model—such as consistently high-growth rates or consistently low-growth rates for their students’ academic progress on state

assessments—were in the pool of possible interviewees (Colorado Department of Education, 2013h). Data that identified to which stakeholder group the individual belonged, the district in which the interviewee was employed, and number of years of teaching or administrative experience were collected from each individual interviewed.

I obtained lists of participants from each school in the Consortium. I simply gave each teacher a number and each administrator a number. I then used an online randomizer to give me a sufficient number of individuals to interview from the two stakeholder roles from which I collected data – teacher and administrator. I emailed the first number on the randomizer list from each group. The email explained my research and asked them to voluntarily agree to an interview. Most readily agreed, although a few declined, citing time constraints. I continued this process until I had agreements from 6 administrators and 12 teachers.

Semi-structured Interviews

I used the semi-structured design for questions (Creswell, 2007). These interviews were conducted face-to-face and simultaneously recorded on two devices: an iPad and a digital recorder. This provided a backup in case of failure of either device. The semi-structured interview had the advantage of allowing the researcher to adjust questions based on the answers given. As Merriam (2009) states, “This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 90). The flexibility that the semi-structured interview design granted to the researcher over the rigidity of the highly structured interview design allowed for greater exploration of unanticipated responses of the interviewee. In other words, the direction of the interview varied during the course of

it from the preconceptions of the researcher towards reacting to the answers of the interviewee as each responded to the open-ended questions (see Appendix A).

These data came in the form of answers to open-ended questions with the purpose of obtaining the various perspectives of each group regarding the implementation of this collaboration (see Appendix A). These interviews were conducted during the implementation of the consortium to determine the attitudes of the administrators and teachers of this collaboration project. All interviews were conducted in the room or office of the individual being interviewed at a time mutually agreeable to the participants, with the exception of one administrator who I met at the NEBOCES offices. I personally transcribed all recorded interviews.

A Likert survey with 10 statements was emailed to all 310 participants in the Consortium. A total of seventy five participants chose to return the survey. The voluntary survey asked the participants to anonymously rate 10 statements from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (see Appendix B). The voluntary respondents also had the opportunity to add comments to any of their ratings.

A research journal was kept and referred to throughout the study. The journal was used by the researcher to record impressions, observations, ideas, and thoughts while the raw data were collected during the study. I refer to it during the analysis of data.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using various techniques typically associated with case study research (Stake, 1995). Semi-structured interviews were extensively conducted to collect data from the two consortium stakeholder groups who were studied: administrators and teachers (see Appendix A). The stakeholders included teachers across

all 10 school districts which participated in the curriculum collaborative effort. These teachers numbered approximately 312. Since the Consortium efforts and its ultimate success in large part depended upon the commitment of the teachers, it was vital to collect interview data from them in order to analyze it for emergent themes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 teachers randomly selected from the case of 10 districts. Likewise, administrators comprised another stakeholder group in the Consortium. Their ability to sell the idea of cooperation and collaboration was vital in its successful implementation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six randomly selected administrators from participant districts.

The interviews were conducted as follows: from the case, which was comprised of the 10 participating districts, 6 administrators and 12 teachers were interviewed through random sampling, using semi-structured interview techniques (see Appendix A). In addition, electronic open-ended surveys were sent to all teachers and administrators participating in the Consortium. Since these were completely anonymous, I had no influence on the responses. As mentioned, this was designed as open-ended Likert survey. (See Appendix B).

Follow-up interviews were conducted if deemed useful or necessary to collect more data or dig deeper into what had already been collected. Observations of various meetings related to the implementation of the collaborative were done. These observations included meetings of the leadership team, comprised of superintendents and principals, periodic meetings of the entire consortium staff, which took place six times during the school year, with additional ones planned for mid-August and one for mid-June. At these meetings, professional learning communities (PLCs), which were

established in order to facilitate collaboration between school districts, met. Major curriculum decisions were made in these PLCs, which were given the specific name of Consortium Team Time (CTT) by the Consortium Steering Committee. I attended as many of these all-day CTTs as possible and wrote down observations.

An open-ended Likert survey was designed using Survey Monkey as an electronic tool and was distributed to all individual participants. They were anonymous. The surveys collected data regarding the opinions, perspectives, and attitudes of the participants of this collaborative (see Appendix B). The timing of these surveys was near the end of the face-to-face interview sessions. They were analyzed to show possible corroboration of the data collected from the interviewees during the implementation of the Consortium. I used the Likert survey to give me broader input from a wider pool of respondents, not for means data, but for the possible corroboration of the face-to-face interview data. I included graphs in Chapter IV to show the numbers of those who disagreed, were neutral, or agreed. I especially mined the comments for insight from those who anonymously participated in the survey. I believed that a simple survey would attract more respondents to participate than a detailed questionnaire, with the opportunity to make comments.

I conducted many observations of many events and activities of the Consortium including planning meetings, steering committee meetings, and CTT groups. I also made observations during the interviews. The foci of my observations were the individuals who participated in the Consortium and, at times, the setting. Questions guiding my observations included: (a) who was present; (b) what was the purpose of the individual(s)' presence; (c) to ascertain the attitudes of individuals present, if possible;

(d) to assess the general climate of whatever group was present for the observations; and
(e) to look for any cultural characteristics of those present which might provide findings for my research questions.

Multiple artifacts were collected including meeting agendas, meeting minutes as available, and curriculum artifacts. Curriculum artifacts included scope and sequence documents from the Colorado State Sample Curriculum, common assessments that were developed and adopted by the CTTs, curriculum units that were developed, and possibly, examples of daily lesson plans. Table 2 illustrates the research questions, data collected to address each question, and how analysis was done.

Table 2

Research Design

Research Question	Data Collection	Analysis
What led to formation of the NE Consortium?	Semi-structured interview (6) with administrators (random sampling) Artifacts: -Steering Committee meeting minutes -NEBOCES Superintendent Advisory Committee meeting minutes Researcher journal	Interviews were recorded/transcribed, coded and analyzed; meanings interpreted; lessons learned; qualitative thematic analysis
What are the perceptions of the stakeholders regarding implementation?	Likert Scale survey (distributed to all participants) Semi-structured interviews (12) with teachers (random sampling) Artifacts: -Steering Committee meeting minutes -Feedback summaries done by NEBOCES Superintendent Advisory Committee meeting minutes -NEBOCES Superintendent Advisory Committee meeting minutes -Curriculum documents; assessments Researcher journal	Coded and analyzed; meanings interpreted; recorded/transcribed; lessons learned; assertions; qualitative thematic analysis
Rural cultural characteristics that emerge which inhibit or encourage collaboration?	Likert Scale survey (distributed to all participants) Semi-structured interviews (12) with teachers (random sampling) Semi-structured interviews (6) with administrators (random sampling) Artifacts: -Steering Committee meeting minutes -Feedback summaries done by NEBOCES staff -NEBOCES Superintendent Advisory Committee meeting minutes	Meanings interpreted; lessons learned; assertions; interviews recorded/transcribed; coded and analyzed; domain, taxonomic, componential analysis; contrastive analysis; qualitative thematic analysis

Data Sources

I used various data sources for the respective research questions. For question one, I used transcriptions from the six interviews I did with the randomly selected administrators. Their answers to my questions provided a rich source of data which gave

me information and insight into their perceptions regarding the implementation of the consortium. Also, I attended the many organizational and planning meetings of the superintendents as we planned the implementation of this consortium. From those meetings, I used my personal notes, minutes and summaries produced by NEBOCES staff, and simple observations to determine the background, reasoning, and perspectives of the administrator participants as the consortium was planned and implemented. I also wrote and used my researcher journal. It later reminded me of thoughts I had during those meetings.

In addition to the six administrator transcripts used for question one, I used 12 teacher interview transcriptions for research question two. The transcriptions of the teacher interviews gave me a source of data from the teacher perspective. Teacher perceptions became clearer as I asked them the same semi-structured interview questions that were asked of the six administrators (Appendix A). Additionally a Likert Survey was sent to all 310 participants, of which 75 were returned. Those who completed the survey were allowed to add written thoughts to the questions, which were used for an additional rich source of data. I used my researcher journal for additional data. I used artifacts, including curriculum documents produced during the collaborative meetings (CTTs): common assessments and lesson activities suggested. Finally, I used meeting observation notes and minutes as appropriate and feedback summaries done by NEBOCES.

For research question three, I again used the Likert survey responses, interview transcriptions of both stakeholder groups (administrators and teachers), and the artifacts mentioned above as used for questions one and two.

Research Procedures

Participants' lives were not disrupted or manipulated by the procedures used in this study. I submitted my research proposal to the University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board and received approval before beginning the research (Appendix C). Permission was solicited and obtained before conducting any data collection procedures described herein. Consent forms were used for all participants (Appendix D). No vulnerable populations were used for this study.

All data collected were kept in a specific location (406 N. Washington, Fleming, CO 80728 and later 144 Safari Drive, Saratoga, WY 82331), accessible by me for a period of time according to accepted research practice (Merriam, 2009). Writing was done and stored on my password-protected laptop computer. Confidentiality of all participants was respected. Once data were collected, all references to individuals and their school districts was by pseudonyms for the individuals interviewed and letters for their school districts. My personal contact information was made available to all participants to allow further communications if desired.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined trustworthiness as those qualities of a study and its findings that make it worthwhile to readers. While it is risky to proclaim broad generalizations from a case study, some findings may, in fact, be generalized to an extent and with limitations. "Generalizations about a case or a few cases in a particular situation might not be thought of as generalizations and may need some label such as *petite generalizations*, but they are generalizations that regularly occur all along the way in case study" (Stake, 1995, p. 7). Lincoln and Guba (1985) believed that transferability or

extrapolation of findings from one case to another is possible, but dependent on the researcher providing the reader enough detail about the case. They believe that transferability is the responsibility of the reader, rather than the researcher, and that researcher attention to detail and descriptions of the case will allow the reader to make decisions regarding the generalization or transferability to other cases.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded and I transcribed them as soon as practical after being individually completed. James Spradley (1980) described the role of a participant observer in research, and I followed the role he described for a researcher who also participates in the phenomenon being studied. The participant observer, as opposed to the participant, comes to a situation to not only participate in the activities, but to observe the “activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation” (Spradley, 1980, p. 54). From the recorded interviews conducted and the transcriptions they produced, I conducted analysis on each one to discover “universal semantic relationships” (Spradley, 1979, p. 110). Spradley suggested certain semantic relationships as most useful, based on his own research: “Strict inclusion, Spatial; Cause-effect; Rationale; Location for action; Function; Means-end; Sequence; Attribution” (Spradley, 1980, p. 93). I used these semantic relationships to complete domain analysis worksheets (Appendix I). After analysis of the interviews and discovering the semantic relationships that emerged, each semantic relationship was further examined to discover and organize domains according to Spradley’s (1979) “procedures” (p. 118). Further, taxonomy of this particular case under study—the implementation of a rural school curriculum collaborative—was developed (Spradley, 1979). This study is not specifically an

ethnographic study; rather, it is a case study. The domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis was done to discover cultural aspects of rural schools/communities that contributed to the successes or to the challenges of this type of rural collaboration (Spradley, 1980). Recurrent themes were noted from the domain analysis, taxonomic, and componential analysis (Spradley, 1980).

The raw texts included conversations, field notes, observations, written meeting agendas and minutes, interviews, and a Likert survey. The interview transcriptions and Likert Survey comments were coded, and analyzed using “qualitative thematic analysis” (Seale, 2004, p. 314). According to Seale, (2004), when coding, “the analyst is marking sections of the text according to whether they look like contributing to emerging themes” (p. 313). He further elaborates “. . . the meaning of particular code words can develop as new segments of data prove hard to fit into existing coding categories” (p. 313). According to Seale (2004), large quantities of qualitative analysis “can be termed as qualitative thematic analysis” (p. 314). From analysis, assertions or interpretations of the meanings discovered in the analysis of this case was described (Creswell, 2007). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) described it, I was able to ascertain certain findings as they emerged from the analysis of data collected for this study.

Researcher Stance

I have extensive experience in public education, with 36 years total experience. This experience includes 9 years as a secondary science teacher, 3 years as an assistant middle school principal, 3 years as a junior high school principal, and 21 years as superintendent of four public school districts, three of which are in Texas, and one in Colorado. Every position I held was in a rural district, except the first one, which was

suburban. Growing up in a major southern American city and attending a large suburban high school, the decision to live and work in rural school districts was a purposeful one. Therefore, this case study is further defined as intrinsic (Stake, 1995). It is of personal interest to me since rural education has long been a passion. I have spent the last 32 years in rural schools. Therefore, I have gained expertise in that setting and community.

I was also a participant observer in this study since I served as superintendent of 1 of the 10 participating school districts. As a participant observer, I had several roles in the case study. According to Yin (1994), the participant observer “may actually participate in the events being studied” (p. 87). Yin (1994) further described advantages associated with the researcher being a participant observer—the first being that the researcher has much greater access to the events or groups being studied, and second is the ability to have the perspective of reality from inside the case study, rather than the perspective of an outsider. Being a participant observer of this particular case study allowed me to use the basis of trust that had been previously established between fellow school district leaders. The associations and relationships that have been commonly experienced provided for a bigger window that showed a more vivid landscape of the collaboration itself than would otherwise have been possible. There can be problems associated with the role of participant observer, as Becker (as cited in Yin, 1994) also points out. The researcher may become a supporter of the project or event—in this case, the curriculum consortium—or become biased in some way.

Spradley (1980) illustrates the types of participation (see Table 3). Spradley defines complete participation as research situations in which the participant observer has “turned ordinary situations in which they are members into research settings” (Spradley,

1980, p. 61). Since I was a superintendent of one of the participating districts and was, in my job role, normally involved in all activities associated with the implementation of this consortium, I classified myself as a complete participant.

Table 3

Spradley's Types of Participation

Degree of Involvement	Type of Participation
High	Complete
	Active
	Moderate
Low	Passive
(No involvement)	Nonparticipation

I worked as superintendent in 1 of the 10 participating districts for eight years. However, I was not native to the district, but actually from another state, so in that sense, I was still perceived as an outsider by many in my community since it takes many years to establish insider status in rural communities, if at all. Understanding social characteristics and interactive dynamics of rural communities gave the study greater credibility since I have been immersed in rural social and physical settings for most of my life and career. My perspective has been shaped by that connection.

As superintendent of one of the participating districts, I realized I was part of the perceived power structure of the Consortium, one who had made implementation decisions. While the power of my position is not something I normally consider as I carry out my job functions, I need to acknowledge that it might be perceived in ways that

affected the responses during my face-to-face interviews. To overcome this, I tried to have some casual conversation at the beginning of each interview with the teachers and to ease any perceptions that I planned to use my power in any way that would be detrimental to the individual teachers.

I embraced the social constructionist tradition that emphasizes that we are already embedded in social and conventional institutions that have preceded us and from which we construct meaning (Crotty, 1998). I was raised by two loving parents who taught me that truths were the same for everyone. Things were black and white, and whether I agreed with them or not was beside the point. When I began this doctoral program and studied Crotty and the constructionist tradition, the meaning of truth changed for me. Michel Eyquem de Montagne (as cited by Crotty, 1998) said, “What of a truth that is bounded by these mountains and is a falsehood to the world that lives beyond?” (p. 42). This quote changed my thinking and even though I read this quote near the beginning of my doctoral program, it was the one that changed me the most. It made me realize that the truths I construct might differ from the truths someone else constructs. This was profound for me personally and caused me to think differently than I had before. This study was approached from this general researcher stance.

Summary

It is hoped that the findings from this study help may fill gaps in the literature regarding cooperative efforts between school districts in a rural setting, which are commonly small and isolated. The perceptions of the stakeholder groups involved in this particular collaborative effort in northeast Colorado were elicited and analyzed. Through my analysis as a participant observer in the Northeast Consortium for Student

Achievement and Growth, themes emerged which provided findings which may help future collaborative efforts among rural schools.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

My findings are based on information from the data I collected, which includes my personal observations as a participant observer, semi-structured interviews with randomly selected participants, artifact analysis, results of a Likert survey sent to all participants, and domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis (Spradley, 1980). The purpose of this chapter is to report the findings from the data collection. This analysis is guided by the following three research questions:

- Q1 What historical, cultural, and political phenomena led to the formation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth?
- Q2 What were the perceptions of two specific stakeholder groups, administrators and teachers, regarding the Consortium's formation, leadership, and potential outcomes?
- Q3 In what ways did the characteristics of rural school communities influence stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation of the inter-district curriculum collaborative?

This chapter consists of six sections followed by a brief summary of findings. The first section is a discussion of domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis using the guidelines described by Spradley (1980). The second section describes the findings from data related to research question number one. In section three, a description of the findings related to research question two is included. In this section, recurring themes

found from the data are described. Each theme is identified and given its own subsection. In these subsections, interview statements are organized as from teachers, administrators, and myself as a participant observer. Likert survey data as relates to the theme is discussed and each theme subsection includes a summative statement comparing the different voices. Likert survey data is also shown in three figures: Figure 1, Likert Survey Statements 1-4; Figure 2, Likert Survey Statements 4-8; and Figure 3, Likert Survey Statements 9-10. The statements are broken into three figures so they can more easily be seen. They are bar graphs for each statement, with the three bars separated into *disagree*, *neutral*, and *agree* labels. Section four describes the findings related to research question three. Again, they are organized as in section three, with themes listed in subsections. The subsections contains findings from teacher, administrator, myself as participant observer, Likert survey comments and a summative statement on the different voices. The fifth section lists other observations and is followed by a brief summary of findings.

Domain, Taxonomic, and Componential Analysis

Using Spradley's (1980) domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis procedures, the data produced findings in the form of recurrent themes. These are described and analyzed using the data in the sections of this chapter addressing the research questions.

Domain Analysis

Using domain analysis, several semantic relationships were noted (Spradley, 1980). Using the semantic relationships "cause-effect" (x is a result of y), "rationale" (x is a reason for), "function" (x is used for), "means-end" (x is a way to do y), and

sequence (x is a step of y), domain analysis worksheets were completed (see example, Appendix I). The following subsections elaborate and give examples of the some of the “cover terms” and their corresponding “included terms” identified from the data (Spradley, 1980, p. 95). A partial domain list is provided in Appendix K.

Cause-Effect

Using this semantic relationship, several themes emerged when examining the semi-structured interview responses and from observations. A perception of independence on the part of the educators interviewed was caused, in part, by the following: “upbringing,” aloneness or isolation, a system of one teacher per grade/subject, skepticism of the “outside” (state, federal), and competition between communities/schools. Teacher Candy’s comments included: “Coming out of (names the state where she was raised, which is a rural farm-based state)—very independent—you work hard . . . and get ahead” (May 12, 2014). Administrator Arlene said, when describing her board as representative of her community, “Very conservative, very religion-based, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps . . . they’re a tough bunch . . . they’ll grab ahold of that steer’s leg and hold on” (May 5, 2014). Aloneness and isolation were repeated themes and a spoken reason for initially establishing the Consortium. The superintendents repeatedly stressed the fact that teachers were teaching in isolation, with one teacher per grade/subject—in some cases two. Many responses in the interviews expressed a skepticism of the outside and/or outsiders. Doris made this comment when talking about acceptance when she moved here 30 years ago after marrying a local native: “I’m from Denver, married a local, and even now, I’m considered an outsider—even though I’ve been here 30 years. . . . I think it’s a second-generation thing. Kelsey

[daughter] will be ok” (April 7, 2014). Resentment was expressed many times as there was a perception of interference by state and federal governments. Competition was mentioned by some in their responses as causing an attitude of rivalry, instead of cooperation. Isolation causes the feeling of independence to increase, the need to collaborate to increase, increases the job expectations on the isolated teacher, increases competitiveness, and increases the skepticism of state/federal mandates. Many of these ideas have been previously discussed in detail and were expressed in several quotes regarding the perceptions that this might just be another passing fad that would go away before it really had a chance to catch on—that many initiatives had come and gone over the years, and we always just moved on to the next one without much long-term follow-through on any of them. Leadership was found to cause an increase in the acceptance of the Consortium by the participants. It also helped the CTT groups develop the common assessments by providing an administrator in every CTT group. Leadership also helped foster a positive outlook or perception among the participants. These findings reinforced or supported the themes that emerged from the interview responses. The other theme that emerged from the interviews, from the voluntary Likert survey comments, and from observations at meetings was the theme of time, or time constraints that teachers felt. Several quotes regarding the perceptions of many of the teachers and administrators about being overwhelmed were previously included. The perception of teachers was that the increasing mandates or job requirements were nearly impossible to get done during the time they had available. Therefore, time constraints caused frustration, an acceptance of the Consortium, and skepticism, and it caused a need to meet together (collaboration) in order to get help to get it all done.

Rationale

Major domains of the semantic relationship of rationale were collaboration, common assessments, and common calendars. Reasons for collaboration were the increasing number of state mandates, the need for creation of common assessments, the isolation experienced by most of the Consortium participants, the new teacher evaluation requirements, and the desire for student improvement. In addition, these domains were observed in the meetings that I attended where initial planning took place and also in the interviews.

Function

Major domains in the semantic relationship *x is used for y* were the State Sample Curriculum, common assessments, and CTT Groups. The State Sample Curriculum was used for each participating district's curriculum, used for sequencing the units taught, and used for creating the common assessments. Common assessments were used for gauging students' learning of the curriculum, comparing data between schools and districts, and remediation planning. CTT Groups were used for creating the common assessments, meeting once per month, grouping like-grade level or subjects taught, and communicating face to face and through email between meetings.

Means-End

The major domains that became apparent using this semantic relationship were: (a) ways to deal with mandates, (b) ways to take control of their own evaluation, (c) ways to create common assessments, (d) ways to end or diminish the isolation, and (e) ways to keep focus. All of these domains emerged as reasons for participation in the Consortium

itself and were revealed in observations of the many planning meetings of the Steering Committee and the larger facilitator meetings and the interviews. Some also emerged in the Likert scale by the participants' comments.

Sequence

This semantic relationship revealed the following major themes: (a) steps in creating a framework for the Consortium, (b) steps in creating opportunities for collaboration, (c) steps in creating support for the Consortium, (d) steps in assessing student progress, and (e) steps in providing adequate and effective leadership. These could be generalized as initial planning, collaboration, positive outlook, student progress, and leadership. All of these are previously discussed in observations, interviews, and comments written on the Likert survey.

Domains in a Cultural Setting

Spradley (1980) defines a domain in a setting as "a category of cultural meaning that includes smaller categories" (p. 88). From the domain worksheets, cultural domains were found using domain analysis procedures described by Spradley (1980) and included: teachers, administrator, community, activities, meetings, and self/professional development (see Appendix J).

Taxonomic Analysis

I developed a Taxonomy of Teacher Perceptions in a Rural School (see Table 4). Taxonomic analysis, according to Spradley (1980), allows the researcher to find relationships among the domains in the cultural setting being studied; in my case, rural schools. The cultural domains listed are all components of a rural school that I found were inter-related from the data. I separated teachers from administrators from

community, although they are all made up of living beings. Since I wanted to seek perceptions from the two stakeholder groups of teachers and administrators, it was logical for my research purpose to see them as different cultural domains. The other three cultural domains I listed are not beings, but they are actions and events that are shared by the teacher and administrator domains.

Table 4

Taxonomy of Teacher Perceptions in a Rural School

Perception Subset	Perception Theme		
	Independence	Isolation	Competition
<i>View of self as a professional</i>			
Feeling limited professionally	Creature of habit “Mourning loss of control”		
Seeks autonomy	Resists mandates Wants to collaborate, but not told what to do “Do their own thing”		
<i>Self-confidence</i>			
Writes own curriculum	Student success “My way is better” Disagree with State Sample sequence Years-experience		
Candid responses	“Jammed down our throats” Negative attitude “Gotta do it” Frustration Change is hard		

Table 4 (continued)

Perception Subset	Perception Theme		
	Independence	Isolation	Competition
<i>You are the department</i>			
Close door—leave me alone		Animosity toward outsiders I'm the guru "Teach how I want to teach" No need to collaborate	
Self-protection		Skepticism Teacher-specific curriculum The only one "Learned not to collaborate"	
<i>One teacher/grade level/subject</i>			
Uniqueness		Fear—they'll think we're clones No one to collaborate with The only one	
Lack of collaborative skills		Lack skills "Create our own curriculum" Sink or swim on our own	

Table 4 (continued)

Perception Subset	Perception Theme		
	Independence	Isolation	Competition
<i>Turf—compete in sports, activities</i>			
History of competition			Compare scores
Rivalries			Friday night games
<i>My school is best</i>			
Lack of sharing			“If scores not good” Hid scores “I did all the work”
My scores are better			“Won’t listen to that school” “Might cheat” Want to be better than you

“A taxonomy reveals subsets and the way they are related to the whole”

(Spradley, 1980, p. 113). I developed a taxonomy of teacher perceptions in a rural school which I determined from my interview data. The taxonomy illustrated three major teacher perceptions: independence, isolation, and competition. These were corroborated by other data such as my observations, field notes, and researcher journal. For example, the quote “might cheat” indicated a desire to be better than the others, which appeared to lend itself to a lack of sharing (in case it might help another school to do better than their own school), which fed the idea “my school is best” to the overall teacher perception of competition. Competition was a theme that was found in answer to Research Question 3: In what ways did the characteristics of rural school communities influence stakeholders’ perceptions of the implementation of the inter-district curriculum collaborative? The other teacher perceptions of independence and isolation, and which I included on my

taxonomy, were easily discovered from the data. The quote “mourning loss of control” led to the feeling that the Consortium, by using the State Sample Curriculum, was “constrictive.” Feeling constrictive meant feeling limited professionally. Several participants viewed themselves as professionals, which lent itself to the rural cultural perception of considering themselves independent. The various quotes on the taxonomy indicated connections which, when ultimately organized, led to the overall perceptions of independence, isolation, and competition in a rural school community (Table 4)

Componential Analysis

According to Spradley (1980), componential analysis is “the systematic search for the attributes (components of meaning) associated with cultural activities” (p. 131). I chose to focus on the teacher domain and the administrator domain, as these were the two stakeholder groups on which I focused my interviews. I determined that this would give me the best perspectives on the focus of my research—discovering perceptions regarding the implementation of this collaborative effort in a rural setting. Sections three and four below specifically discuss findings from the data related to Research Questions 1 and 2. Recurrent themes are given their own subsection, and voices from the teachers and administrators are compared and contrasted, along with my own as a participant researcher using Spradley’s (1980) contrastive analysis.

Question 1

Q1 What historical, cultural, and political phenomena led to the formation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth?

For this question, I observed, and participated in, numerous meetings held—at first by the group of superintendents who met representing the original 11 public school districts which make up the active members of the NEBOCES. These meetings were

open meetings, and other individuals, such as NEBOCES staff, attended many of them. Eventually, the original group narrowed to 10 participating districts, and a steering committee made up of administrative representatives from all 10 districts was appointed, of which I was a member. The steering committee included not only superintendent representatives, but also principals. I also interviewed six randomly selected administrators from districts who were participants in the Consortium. I decided to interview six administrators due to wanting a quantity of individuals that would hopefully produce enough data to corroborate perceptions of the administrator stakeholder group as a whole, but not more individual interviews than I could physically complete in the time constraints under which I worked to collect the data. Artifacts such as meeting agendas, email communications, numerous documents, and training session agendas were collected. As a participant and eventually a member of the steering committee, observations of those numerous meetings were done, and field notes were compiled.

Origins of an Idea

At meetings of the superintendents, discussions began to take place as to how our small districts were going to accomplish all the requirements that several of the new Colorado state mandates demanded. During these early meetings, many of us expressed frustrations at the perceived pressures we felt. Whether these pressures were actually a result of the new state mandates recently passed by the Legislature or whether they were self-imposed, it was very clear from comments made that the superintendents were feeling stressed. Comments such as “How can they expect us to get all these things done?,” “I only have one other administrator,” “When am I going to find the time to work on curriculum?,” and “There’s not enough time in the day to get it all done!” were spoken

(superintendents, January 10, 2013). These were actual comments I heard during that first discussion on January 10, 2013. Some time was spent simply commiserating about and establishing common perceptions regarding the new requirements of the Colorado Educator Effectiveness Law and the new Colorado State Standards for all subjects K-12, but especially about the coming new and, according to most preliminary information given out by the Colorado Department of Education, more difficult state assessment—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a, 2013d, 2013e, 2013g). The feeling of being overwhelmed was quite prevalent in the room as evidenced by comments generally made by all of us in attendance who expressed that perception. We had been told by NEBOCES Executive Director Tim Sanger that in states which had adopted the PARCC assessment, scores had plummeted in the initial assessment (personal communication, January 10, 2013).

There was an air of comradery in the meeting at first that slowly turned into an anger at all the mandates—all from the “outside” (meaning state level and federal level), and then to brainstorming about what we could do to help the situation for our rural and isolated districts. It was stated by several superintendents that it was not so much that these were “bad” mandates, but a general feeling of being overwhelmed by the work required and the lack of staff available to help the superintendents carry out these mandates. Several superintendents suggested working together in some type of collaboration across district lines as a strategy to relieve some of the stress and pressure all felt. Several superintendents, three to be exact, suggested that those of us who were interested in this idea plan to meet again to tackle the issue of curriculum alignment and

student assessment preparedness, and that an agenda be prepared to keep focus on the topic. I was not one of these three superintendents. However, I was one of those interested in meeting to further examine the idea. The reason given for the focus on curriculum alignment and assessments was that it seemed to touch more of the mandates than any other focus that anyone could think of that day. It would touch on curriculum alignment to the assessments; it could possibly touch the new teacher evaluation system mandate. If common assessments were developed that could be used as part of the 50% of a teacher's evaluation that had to be based on student academic growth as a factor, it could give teachers some control over that part of their evaluation.

A meeting was scheduled for February 5, 2013 to further pursue strategies that would help the small, rural school districts in which we worked, cope with these new and challenging mandates. It would take place outside of the regular monthly meeting of superintendents and include only those who were interested in joining in some type of collaborative effort. The principals would also be included in this discussion. Two superintendents and one NEBOCES director volunteered to set an agenda and focus on a couple of ideas for the interested group to discuss. The group was asked how many would plan to attend that initial meeting, and 11 of 12 committed to the meeting. Enthusiasm was palpable among the group. Only one declined to participate due to the local initiatives that were already underway in that district. The others were all anxious to begin a collaborative effort. There was some time spent on brainstorming exactly how that collaborative effort would look. Some discussion centered on staff's acceptance of any type of collaboration outside their individual districts, and some concern was expressed. Several superintendents stated that it would be important to provide active,

purposeful leadership and seemed willing to take on this responsibility as the educational leaders of their respective districts. Other discussion centered on strategies to deal with their local school boards. How would they respond to an inter-district collaborative effort? Finally, the importance of keeping any collaborative effort focused on student achievement and academic growth was discussed.

This side conversation, outside of the regular meeting agenda, took approximately an hour and one-half. However, my observation was that this discussion and tentative plan, even though very preliminary and informal at this point, created a type of relief among the superintendents that was not present at the beginning of the discussion. Because of the perceived historical and political actions that had placed numerous mandates on this group of superintendents, their mood as interpreted through their spoken comments was that they were more than willing to work together—for the first time—on a collaboration of this scope. The three individuals, mentioned above, who had stepped forward to lead the effort continued in those roles. They took the lead in volunteering to set the agenda, help maintain focus on the collaboration ideas, and do the groundwork necessary for the effort to emerge as a reality. Interesting to note, and because of my position as a participant observer who had worked with them for some years as a colleague, I knew they (the three who emerged as the leaders) were connected by their professional activities over the past several years. Therefore, they had shared many professional trainings and perspectives, even though, at present, they were working for different entities. They had close personal relationships outside of their professional connections. I observed that they were the instrumental and driving force behind this

initial effort. These observations were reinforced in interviews of both administrators and teachers, which I will discuss later.

Meeting, February 5, 2013

At the open meeting held on February 5, 2013, the superintendents and principals as well as other interested parties discussed: the official purpose of the “Curriculum Collaborative Project,” as it was called at that time; agreements that all participating districts would ratify; critical questions; roles of the NEBOCES staff, superintendents, and principals; and future planning (see Appendix E). With input from the principals, the superintendents decided that all participating districts would adopt the same curriculum and create common assessments in all subject areas that covered the common curriculum. It was decided to adopt the Colorado State Sample Curriculum and its sequence of units and that it would guide the creation of common assessments (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). Data from the common assessments would be shared between districts within collaborative groups made up of teachers of the same subject and or grade (in elementary). While I observed that excitement was present, apprehension was also apparent. A prevalent question that was spoken, especially from many of the principals, was, “How would staff receive the idea of a common curriculum and assessments?” Some principals seemed intimidated by the idea of giving their teachers such clear direction: “So, we are going to tell our teachers that they have to follow a specific scope and sequence? . . . My teachers are pretty independent and used to doing their own thing, so I’m not sure how this will go over,” (Jerry, pseudonym) and “How are we going to tell our experienced teachers that they have to change their order of units?” (Adam, February 5, 2013). There were other concerns as well. Most had to do with adopting the

State Sample Curriculum as our common curriculum document (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). There were expressed concerns with its quality and its scope and sequence. Judging from the comments heard, the biggest concern was requiring everyone to teach the subjects in the same scope and sequence. Most felt that the subject matter was generally covered in the classrooms to some degree, but probably not in the same order during the school year. Questions arose regarding how the order of units were decided. Would the current materials being used by the various districts, such as textbooks and workbooks, fit into the State Sample Curriculum, or should they? It was suggested that a representative contact official at the Colorado Department of Education to inquire the procedures used when the State Sample Curriculum was developed. It was mentioned that the State Sample Curriculum was broadly organized and did not contain actual lesson plans or assessments. These concerns were discussed more than once in various meetings.

Cultural factors began to emerge in comments made at the meeting that supported the idea that educators in rural areas are very independent: Burl (pseudonym) “I have an English teacher who has been there for 20 years, and her scores have always been good,” “My second-grade teacher has been teaching longer than I have been alive,” (Karl) and Darrel stated “My teachers are sold on the order of their units, and we’re going to tell them to change?” (February 5, 2013) These comments indicate that teachers in these administrators’ schools were very independent. Was this cultural phenomenon unique to rural environments because of isolation, or possibly due to teacher longevity or experience? Regardless, all expressed that they thought this was a good idea and seemed to appreciate the idea that together, we are stronger than when we are alone. It was also

clear from their comments, and my own experience, that curriculum was a major challenge for our rural districts. Many spoke the sentiment that I was thinking as a superintendent of one of the districts involved, summarized from my notes, that our subject and grade-level curricula was teacher created and, therefore, teacher- and room-specific. Only a couple of districts present, according to the superintendents' comments, had a formal curriculum located in a central location of their district. It was generally agreed that as a group, we would tackle the issues together and provide support and especially the rationale for this collaborative effort that would help sell the idea to our respective staffs and communities.

Steering Committee Meetings, February and March 2013

The first formal steering committee meeting, which was open to not only the Steering Committee members, but any interested parties, took place on February 20, 2013. A name was suggested, and the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth was born. It was obvious, even before the meeting since the agenda was emailed to the 11 superintendents who had committed to attending, that much work and collaboration had already taken place behind the scenes by the three leaders who had emerged earlier. A tentative "Administrative Guide" had been developed for us by the three leaders to examine, which eventually would be revised a total of six times, with the rest of the superintendents' input (see Appendix F). It provided general information as to the agreements to which all participating districts would adhere, roles of administrators, purpose, philosophy, and definitions. The agenda was very detailed, and time had been invested into developing a plan for the meeting. In addition to the 11 superintendents, several of the NEBOCES staff attended and took part in this initial meeting. A steering

committee was established, of which I was a member. The Steering Committee met for a total of nine more times during the period of this data collection. There were always agendas – see example (Appendix G). I was impressed with the seriousness with which all these district leaders undertook this effort. In every meeting, the importance of their leadership role was acknowledged—even in the design of the collaboration itself. At the March 4, 2013, Steering Committee meeting, it was suggested that all administrators, including superintendents and principals, would act as facilitators of the Professional Learning Community (PLC)-type groups that would meet to collaborate (DuFour & DuFour, 2012). Not wanting to bring any baggage of past PLC experiences and wanting to be original, it was decided to rename the groups Consortium Team Time (CTTs). Not only did the administration seem to understand the importance of their personal leadership in this collaborative effort if it was to be successful, but they looked for ways to use their leadership in the design of the collaboration. It was stated that the normal design of professional development in their districts had been for the teachers to participate in the trainings or meetings and for the administrators to be free to come in and out solely as observers, rather than active participants during the trainings. These district leaders expressed the desire to act as group facilitators so we would be seen as educational leaders by our teachers. However, even with the great intentions expressed in these early meetings, challenges along the way emerged with which the Steering Committee had to grapple and which will be discussed later. These challenges reinforced the importance of administrative leadership in this effort and provided positive and negative examples of leadership.

The Steering Committee meeting of March 4, 2013, was held at the NEBOCES building. At this meeting, a discussion was held as to the best way to kick off this major inter-district initiative. The superintendents on the Committee discussed how they could lead this effort in ways that would foster its success. It was decided that a big initial meeting would be planned, and invitations would be sent to officials at the Colorado Department of Education in order to draw statewide attention to this initiative. A person at the *Colorado Ednews*, an online publication of education happenings around the state, was also contacted and committed to come and observe on one of the scheduled CTT group days. She actually came to the October 28, 2013, CTT group day and published an online article in the November 11, 2013 edition (Schimel, 2013). We believed that the more publicity, the more positive momentum, which would help propel the effort forward among the teachers. This opinion was later confirmed in my interviews. One teacher stated: “I think it’s kind of exciting for [our region] to be innovative when the CDE [Colorado Department of Education] came and . . . I thought how neat that rural Colorado gets to be on the cutting edge of what’s happening” (Mandy, May 14, 2014). Arlene, an administrator, discussing this at a later date said “I also think it will help elevate the roles these small rural schools who have maybe seen themselves as these little burbs, that they are important” (May 5, 2014).

It was at the March 4 meeting that one of the 11 superintendents told me that his school would not take part in the Consortium, reducing the number to 10 (Ellen, personal communication, March 4, 2013). His reasons were that his teaching staff was not sold on it and because of that, his board was not on school board with their participation. While he, personally, thought it was a great idea, he decided that at this time, it would be too big

of a fight to include his district. Based on observed actions and comments, the other superintendents were generally understanding of this superintendent who decided that his district would pull out of the effort. There were no negative comments heard when he announced his decision.

Facilitator Training – Superintendents and Principals

The Colorado Association of School Executives Annual Conference was scheduled for July 24-27, 2013 in Breckenridge, Colorado. The superintendents and principals decided to meet two days earlier for some facilitator training, again open to interested parties, provided by a recognized expert on PLCs and collaboration. At this meeting, more discussion took place, and during those two days, I could sense a growing anticipation and excitement about the inauguration of the Consortium set for August 13, 2013, at the Northeast Junior College campus in Sterling, Colorado, by comments made and observing general attitude. The idea that we were going to be part of what we perceived to be a groundbreaking initiative in rural Colorado created excitement that could easily be perceived. The recognized expert conducting the training was also very encouraging in his comments about our initiative, and this gave us confidence in our plans.

Interview Data

In the interviews with the administrators, responses to the question “What is your understanding is the reason your district is participating in this consortium?” drew various responses in the interviews with the six randomly selected participants. Bart, an experienced administrator stated:

Top reason for us—our teachers did not want to write curriculum again—so when we got to the point that the State adopted the new Colorado Standards and we were going to have to go through that project . . . we didn't want to go through that again. (May 5, 2014)

Breck, an administrator with 18 years' experience responded: "We were going to be able to support one another through the new standards and new tests that were coming" (May 1, 2014). Marlin, a newer administrator stated: "I think it's a good idea to get everybody together and try to figure out all these new mandates and laws and everything else" (June 2, 2014).

One administrator, Kristi, not a current superintendent, stated: "This started with how were we going to meet all these mandates on our own" (June 2, 2014). Breck seemed to be very negative about mandates, in general, adding this: "I think there are some pretty frustrated people in education right now" (May 1, 2014). His comment seemed to support the perception that this collaboration was good because it had potential to relieve the frustration he perceived to be present among his staff due to the potential to alleviate some of the extra work required because of these state mandates.

Administrators' stated beliefs that their own leadership and involvement in the Consortium was important if it was to be a success, as previously stated from my observations of the numerous committee meetings, and was also supported by the comments from those administrators randomly selected for interviews. Breck described his role as "Someone that keeps people on course" (May 1, 2014). Kristi described herself in this way: "I'm the glue . . . my role is to communicate . . . to share information" (June 2, 2014). Arlene, principal with 17 years' experience, shared, "We talk about it at least once a month . . . and I think more than anything, I'm the ear" (May 5, 2014). Finally, Marlin, principal, added, "I think I need to make sure our teachers understand

why we're doing it" (June 2, 2014). These statements demonstrated the seriousness with which those administrators interviewed perceived their leadership roles and corroborated my observations and the spoken statements of the administrators at the Steering Committee meetings. The meeting minutes and summaries distributed afterward, compiled by NEBOCES personnel, corroborated the quotes from the individual participants written above. I received these minutes and summaries shortly after each meeting. I used them to compare to my own researcher journal notes and observations in order to make sure I did not interpret comments incorrectly – and also to see if the comments and observations of the NEBOCES person matched my own. After comparing them to mine, I found that it was rare that there was not common agreement between my notes and thoughts and the author of the summaries and minutes. The quotes from the interview transcriptions also corroborated the quotes I heard at the meetings.

In summary, to respond directly to the research question, What historical, cultural, and political phenomena led to the formation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth?, I discerned three major findings. The recent Colorado state mandates had indeed created a willingness on the part of the superintendents to consider inter-district collaboration on a scale that had not been done before. Also, there were perceptions that teachers in the districts might resist the requirement to implement a common curriculum with a required common scope and sequence, and that administrative leadership skills and direct participation would be required to successfully implement the consortium. Finally, a perception that past practices, possibly based on cultural factors, might affect the implementation on the part of all participants.

Question 2

Q2 What were the perceptions of two specific stakeholder groups, administrators and teachers, regarding the Consortium's formation, leadership, and potential outcomes?

Findings regarding the perceptions of the two specific stakeholder groups, administrators and teachers regarding the Consortium's formation, implementation and potential outcomes included: (a) suspicion that the effort would fade away over time as had others; (b) a longing for teacher agency (perception of lack of control over their profession); (c) perception that their district's administrative leadership was vital in any kind of initiative if it was to be successful; (d) that the purpose of any collaboration as perceived by the teachers was an important factor in their acceptance or resistance; and (e) that, generally, teachers had a positive outlook regarding the opportunities for collaboration, even though many concerns about its purpose existed.

Frustration with Initiatives – “Poof – it'll go away”

When asked the interview question “Where do you see the Consortium in two to four years from now?,” the teacher responses were very similar. Responses seemed to imply that the expectation was present that any continuum was unlikely over time. This perception that it was a passing fad or simply the current project which would fade with time as others had affected how much effort and time teachers were willing to invest in it. Past experience with other initiatives caused a lack of confidence in the permanence or longevity of this project. Nancy, a fifth-year teacher, stated, “I think two to four years down the road, it's going to be something different—everything is going to start changing again” (May 14, 2014), while Ashley, a 20-year teacher, stated “It seems as if we usually have a fad—we get together to meet a need for this moment” (May 8, 2014). Lucy, a

veteran teacher said, “Oh yeah, we’ll do this a little bit and then, poof, it’ll go away,” and “Oh, gee, I think it’ll continue until the state changes something, then we’ll go to something else” (May 21, 2014). From Kesha, another veteran teacher near retirement, speaking of the Consortium, “I’ll be very surprised if it continues into the next few years successfully” (April 14, 2014), and Ashley added to her earlier comment: “We’ve seen it all—lots have been a waste of our time—you get callous” (May 8, 2014). From these and other comments, there was the definite perception that things have come and gone so often in education, whether it be educational programs, mandates, curriculums, or assessments, that they have usually “run their course” and faded with new ones to take their places.

Administrators likewise doubted the sustainability of this initiative. Doris, an experienced administrator, shared, “I fear it will just have died out. There are enough changes going on with what the Legislature understands and what they think, and they forget that they have created all these layers, and they keep changing to the new” (April 7, 2014). Breck, an administrator with 18 years’ experience, expressed his frustration in this way: “I don’t know how many times that’s happened in my career. Had the best of intentions—within a year, it’s faded away” (May 1, 2014).

In my 37 year career in public education, I have been a part of many initiatives which have come and gone. I have been in the roles of teacher, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent. I have worked in districts with enrollments in the thousands, but mostly in rural districts with enrollments in the hundreds. The one consistency regarding educational initiatives is that they have indeed come and gone. It is not surprising to me that this was a finding from the interview data. In my participant

role in this Consortium, I overheard numerous comments at our meetings indicating the expectation that this initiative would pass over time and be replaced by something else.

During the CTT days, I personally observed actions and heard comments from many teachers that would make me perceive that they were frustrated with activities that were mandated by the State or documents such as the State Sample Curriculum that were produced by the State. In the Science CTT group, of which I was one of three facilitators, we spent most of the first meeting on September 30, 2013, discussing the validity of the State Sample Curriculum (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). We facilitators attempted to sell the virtues of the document. Even though we possibly had individual questions regarding parts of the curriculum, whether its scope and sequence had validity, and the fact that it was very broad, we realized that we needed to exhibit confidence in it if it was to be considered valid by teachers. One of the virtues of its broadness was the fact that teachers had the flexibility to develop various lesson activities and plans that could be unique rather than identical. Administrators stressed this flexibility. However, what was not flexible was the State Sample Curriculum itself and its scope and sequence. The final decision of the CTT group, after much discussion, was that we would move ahead with our task, even though many questioned the quality of the document and/or the sequence of units contained therein.

On the Likert survey, several comments indicated frustration with initiatives was based on educator dissatisfaction with some state products and mandates. To Statement 6 (I am relieved that I do not have to write curriculum since we have adopted the State Sample Curriculum.), one respondent wrote:

I am relieved, however, I do not feel that the state put out a very good product. Many gaps in contents, units are very large and simple spelling and grammar

errors make me concerned about the time that was spent creating the documents and the thoughtfulness that was put into it, as well. (Teacher)

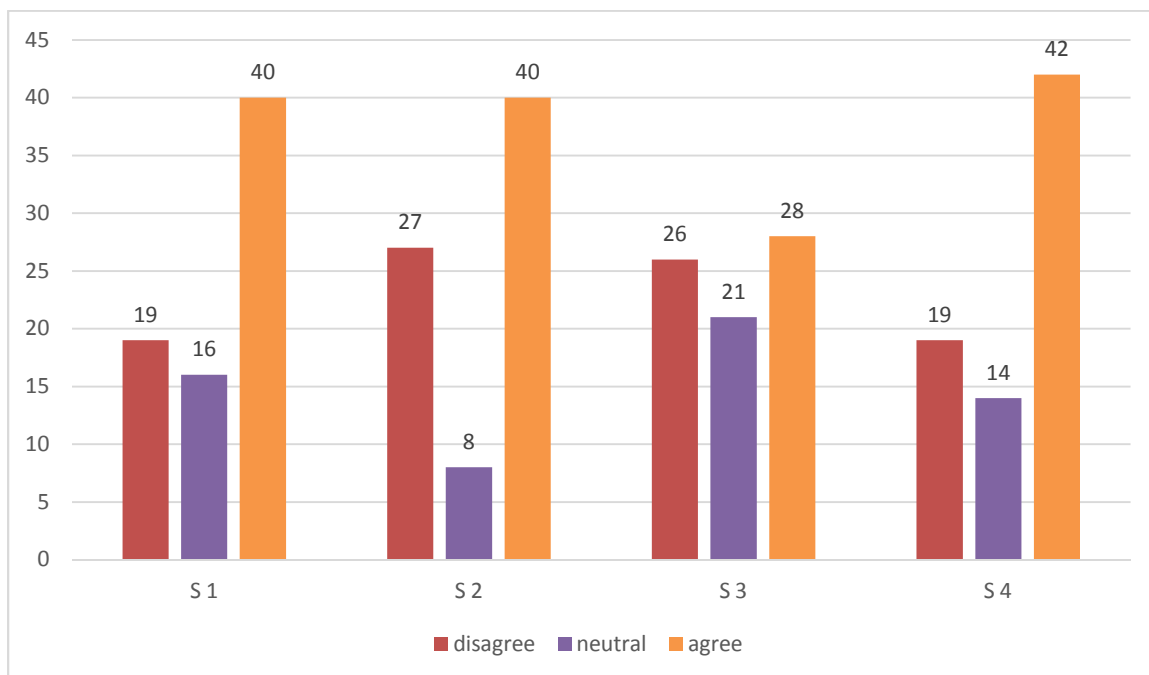
Another stated, “I had already written a curriculum with the new standards. In addition the Sample Curriculum was never intended to be the curriculum, especially in my content area” (Teacher). Still another commented, “I would enjoy still being able to write my own curriculum, but I realize it would be time-consuming” (Teacher). One commented:

I fear the “state curriculum” is going to jeopardize the individuality of teaching a class. Each class is different, and each student is different. I would rather follow the curriculum my district has bought and tweak it to meet the needs of my first graders. (Teacher)

By using the term “state curriculum”, indicating the State Sample Curriculum, it is obvious that the respondent did not consider it a local or his or her own curriculum. One respondent to Statement 6 (I am relieved that I do not have to write curriculum.) commented: “I DO NOT like the lessons that are in the sample curriculum!!!” (Teacher). On Statement 1 (This consortium is a good idea for my District.), one comment that was written stated, “Our district has always prided itself on local control . . . we have given up this control to the dictates of the State” (Teacher) To Statement 7 (The activities of the NE Consortium will improve my students’ overall education at my school.), one respondent wrote:

Expecting 10 districts to teach the same content at the same time for the same length of time only added to the growing stress and demands put on our teachers by the state and federal government. Strive for excellence in teaching, not the collapse of teachers. (Teacher)

Statement 3 (The activities I have participated in to this point have helped me in my teaching practices.) drew this response: “I haven’t changed too much about my teaching because I feel this, too, shall pass” (Teacher). These and other comments corroborate many of the responses in the semi-structured interviews.



S 1: This consortium is a good idea.

S 2: If I could choose right now, I would choose to continue participation in the consortium.

S 3: The activities I have participated in to this point have helped me in my teaching practices.

S 4: My participation in the NE Consortium has the potential to improve my student's performance on the assessments.

Figure 1. Likert survey statements 1-4.

While the different voices of teachers and administrators had different ways of expressing it, and perceived it from different roles, they were similar in their expressed frustrations. The teachers and to a lesser degree, the administrators both perceived that this initiative would be like others before it in that it would not last over time. The teachers mentioned it more often and to a stronger degree in their statements. They also both questioned the quality of products produced by the state in the form of the State

Sample Curriculum. Both felt frustration at the mandates which for the administrators caused them to initiate the collaboration across school district lines.

Teacher Agency

“Simply defined, the state of agency enables individuals (and, to some, collectives) to make free or independent choices, to engage in autonomous choices, and to exercise judgment in the interests of others and oneself” (Campbell, 2012, p. 183). A majority of teachers interviewed expressed a frustration regarding a lack of control and increasing limitations that they perceived affected their ability to make independent decisions in their teacher roles. Agency is that characteristic, which comes from within, that drives a teacher to act in their roles, and helps to define them as a teacher. Carla, a teacher with some experience, who had obviously already spent time writing curriculum in past initiative stated she suffered from “curriculum writing fatigue . . . we just don’t think we can do this again and keep it updated with the state,” adding “so much change in every district this year . . . the new curriculum, the new teacher evaluation . . .” (May 7, 2014). Veteran teacher Mandy said, “I think Colorado has placed so many demands on the teacher—they haven’t taken anything away” (May 14, 2014). She continued by adding:

Adding, adding, adding . . . is the motto here—we keep adding—where does something get taken away here except instructional time? Some of us are spending hours—I’ve always spent overtime hours—you do what you gotta do. (May 14, 2014)

Yet another second-year teacher, Carl, displayed his frustration with the following statements:

Yes, and I’m leaving for that—they just keep piling it on. I know there’s a lot of stuff happening at the state level that’s not coming from educators . . . totally

political . . . I think a lot of the time people are just out to make us all look like idiots.

and

I think there's two reasons I'm leaving the profession—one, there's all these things with no incentive—longer hours, more work, and the other big reason is everything that goes wrong in the classroom is my fault . . . the state is saying that teachers have been ineffective (spoken by a second-year teacher who is leaving the profession). (May 22, 2014)

Kesha, another veteran teacher, said,

I think part of the problem is we're so overwhelmed . . . guess you blame the State, but there is so much going on this year . . . so many new things being required. . . . People are trying to be positive, but it's hard when you're so drug down by all these new things coming down. . . . Teachers need less demands on them.
(April 14, 2014)

Veteran Lucy explained: "It was being jammed down our throats—a mandate—gotta do it" (May 21, 2014). First-year teacher Amber had this to say: "I think it's all overwhelming" (April 14, 2014).

Frustration was present regarding the recent mandates imposed on them in Colorado, the three biggest being the new State Standards, the new state assessments beginning the 2014-2015 school year, and the new evaluation system (Colorado Department of Education, 2013d, 2013e, 2013g). Lack of teacher agency was expressed in two related, but different, areas as previously noted in the interview findings: the feeling of being overwhelmed and having limitations placed on their professional choices.

Overwhelmed

It was quite clear that many were simply feeling overwhelmed in their efforts to do their jobs. They felt little control over their time since they were completely filled

with duties related to new mandates. According to Robinson (2012), “. . . agency seems to be about internalizing choices, about analyzing and reflecting, based on past experiences and future trajectories. The temporality of agency and the effects of external culture, expectations, and assumptions constrains or enable the extent to which agency can be achieved” (p. 233). The terms “overwhelmed” or “overwhelming” were used many times by those interviewees. Beginning teacher Amber was emphatic: “I think everyone’s kind of overwhelmed with it. . . . I think people [educators] are so overwhelmed” (April 14, 2014). Veteran teacher Kesha shared, “I think part of the problem [with the requirements of the Consortium] is we’re so overwhelmed” (April 14, 2014). This expression of the frustration in not having enough time to get the job done because of the perceived increase of requirements was not only expressed in spoken answers, but in the body language of teachers and administrators as they spoke their answers and strongly reinforced what was verbally communicated. Voices rose as they complained about the stress they felt. A tone of resignation that indicated a loss of control over their daily activities was apparent. Shoulders were, at times, slumped and a distant look was present as I perceived an air of defeat as many of the teachers and a few of the administrators answered questions and offered discussion. Some, especially those nearing the end of a long career in the classroom, spoke of their anticipation of retirement and a feeling sympathy for the younger teachers. One comment from veteran teacher Lucy spoke volumes of her frustration: “I am 716 days away from walking out [retirement]. . . . I feel really bad for our younger teachers—those that are stuck—been there too long to leave” (May 21, 2014). Carl, a younger teacher, spoke of “leaving” for the reason that “they [the State] just keep piling it on” (May 22, 2014). Most of those

who spoke of the frustrations of feeling overwhelmed blamed entities other than their own district or administration. They put the blame on the state. Carl continued, “well, the state has to step in and do all this testing because [the state believes] the teachers have been ineffective” (May 22, 2014). Candy, a teacher in mid-career stated:

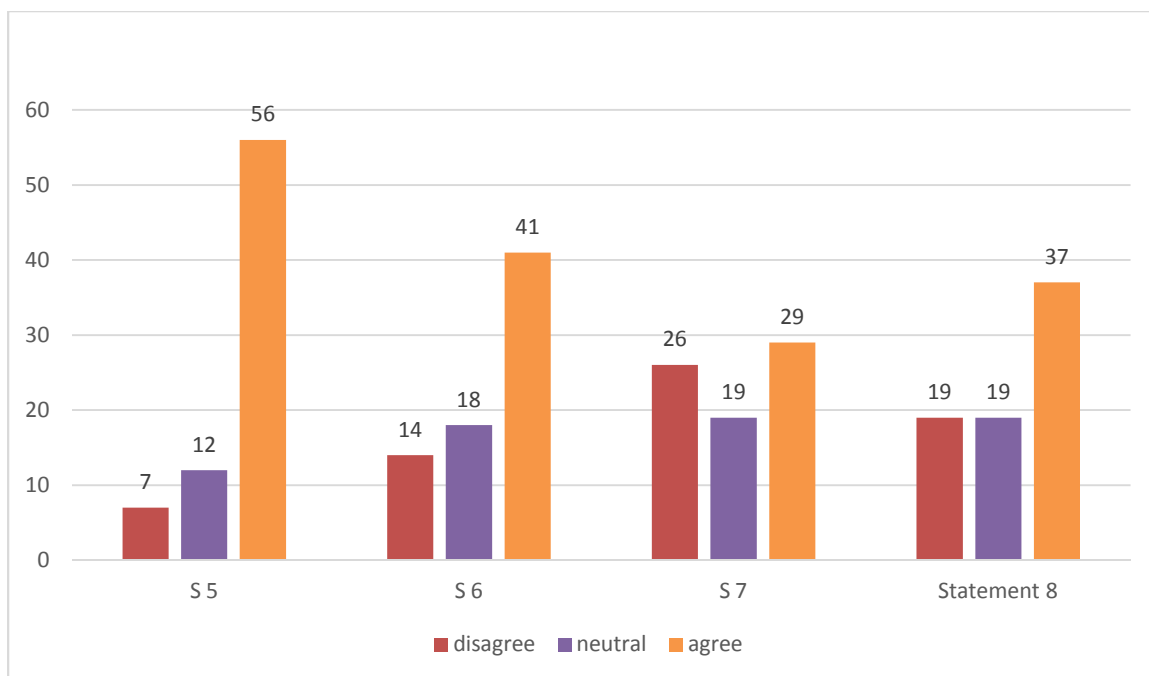
I just feel like we’ve worked hard to get where we are and they [the state] keep wanting to change that on us. . . . It’s just this perception that our record is pretty good and you [the state] keep telling us we have to do it different or better. (May 12, 2014)

Mandy had this comment: “So, I’m not sure what went on in Denver [the state capitol] when that was decided.” She continued, “We’ve got what—15 things coming at us in Colorado—and you’re destined for failure somewhere” (May 14, 2014). Kesha, an experienced teacher, commented, “As you know, Colorado has so many new things going on in education—and so some of this all runs together as a blur” (April 14, 2014).

Consider the following Likert Scale survey comment in response to Statement 6 (I am relieved that I do not have to write curriculum): “I think the sample curriculum is reinventing the wheel when there are other curriculums that are valid, research-based, and work to meet all learning needs.” One other comment on this statement was “We have perfectly good standardized curriculum that is currently being used . . . why are we reinventing the wheel (and not a very useful wheel at that)?” The term “reinventing the wheel” surfaced numerous times in the interview responses and always implied that it was a waste of time to not use something that was already out there, regarding the time spent adjusting curriculum and creating assessments.

Several of the Likert survey respondents used this expression to bemoan the fact that administrators were requiring them to complete tasks that they felt had already been completed. They perceived this to be wasting their time, thereby affecting their ability to

exercise teacher agency. To Statement 1 (This consortium is a good idea for my District), one commented, “With excellent scores up to this point, taking time away from our current curriculum has been very detrimental to our students’ educational experience” (Teacher). Another comment on Statement 1 was “It is just adding one more thing to the endless list of expectations” (Teacher). Another respondent commented on Statement 10 (The time I have spent in collaboration with other districts’ teachers has been beneficial), “To be quite frank, I have dreaded going because all we do is create tests. The time, for me, would be better spent grading, preparing lessons, or other educationally related items needed to be done in my classroom” (Teacher). Statement 6 drew this comment from one respondent: “I, for one, thought this was a huge waste of my time and the students!!” (Teacher). The voluntary comments on the Likert survey statements, while a mix of positive and negative perceptions, tended to contain more negative perceptions than the face-to-face interviews.



S 5: My building administrator supports the efforts of the NE Consortium and expresses that support.

S 6: I am relieved that I do not have to write curriculum.

S 7: The activities of the NE Consortium will improve my students' overall education at my school.

S 8: This consortium has made me a believer in inter-district collaboration.

Figure 2. Likert Survey Statements 5-8.

Limiting

In addition, the majority of teachers interviewed expressed that their professional judgment is being limited, or at least questioned in this collaborative, by outside entities and their new mandates. Several teachers perceived that the adoption of a common curriculum was limiting their professional freedom, even though the process that was used by the state included teams of teachers. This directly relates to teacher agency in that they perceived by having a curriculum mandated for them as opposed to them being able to design their own curriculum limited their autonomy thereby affecting their teacher agency, or their ability to make independent choices of action in their classrooms based

on their judgments and past experience. Additionally, many felt that requiring all consortium teachers use the same unit sequence or order was even further limiting their professional freedom to make autonomous choices. This was a spoken concern of the steering committee as previously noted during early planning meetings. Several teachers had major disagreements with the order or sequence of units in the State Sample Curriculum. This was a source of disagreement in several of the CTTs. When asked the question “Do you see this consortium as limiting your professional freedom, or helpful?,” responses mostly indicated that they definitely considered the “agreements”—or the items all district superintendents agreed to conform to—as limiting and are exemplified in a response such as Kesha’s, “I think it limits professional freedoms” (April 14, 2014).

Mandy stated:

I think if you poll the teachers in this building, they would say it’s very limiting . . . that they, not just their instructional freedom, but they and I feel like our professional judgment is not trusted. You’d find that if you’d come into the lunchroom and hear a couple of our intermediate teachers—very experienced, very strong teachers—I think you’d find that. (May 14, 2014)

Statements similar to these were common in answer to that particular question. Carl stated, “I saw it as a bit constrictive (pauses) because I do what I want” (May 22, 2014). However, not all those interviewed saw the Consortium agreements as limiting their professional freedom. Veteran teacher Ashley stated, “As far as I’m concerned, it’s finally a direction” (May 8, 2014). Heather said, “As a first year teacher, I don’t” (April 21, 2014). Candy said, “I think we see it as helpful—it reiterates what we’ve been doing” (May 12, 2014). Obviously, these did not perceive the State Sample Curriculum limiting in any way, as others did.

Administrator Bart stated, “I think we [my staff] definitely did—limiting what I do every day—more so after the first two or three meetings” (May 5, 2014). Two administrators perceived it was a “mixed bag,” with some seeing it as limiting, and others seeing it as helpful in that it gives them guidance.

One respondent on the Likert survey wrote this comment: “I have not received any benefit from participating and neither have my students. Rather, I feel that the exams I am now giving my students [developed though Consortium collaboration] are not as rigorous [as the ones I made and used before]” (Teacher). To Statement 6 (I am relieved I don’t have to write my own curriculum.), one respondent wrote: “Am relieved we don’t have to write curriculum, but resent being told what to teach and when to teach it. I think teaching is a fluid process and needs creativity” (Teacher). Speaking of trust and commenting on Statement 5 (My building administrator supports the efforts of the Northeast Consortium and regularly expresses that support when discussing it in meetings and with individuals.), one respondent wrote:

It appears as if the administrator is not trusting my skills as an instructor and is relying on someone else’s ideas [that Sample Curriculum writers]. . . . This prevents me from meeting the educational needs of my students as well as eliminates any creativity that I may have as an instructor. (Teacher)

Another frustrated respondent commented on Statement 1 (This consortium is a good idea for my District.):

I see incredible frustration with the Consortium among the teachers in my district. Curricula that has served us well in areas such as math is being discarded. Skills are being taught in an order that does not make sense for the students and often before students are developmentally ready. (Administrator)

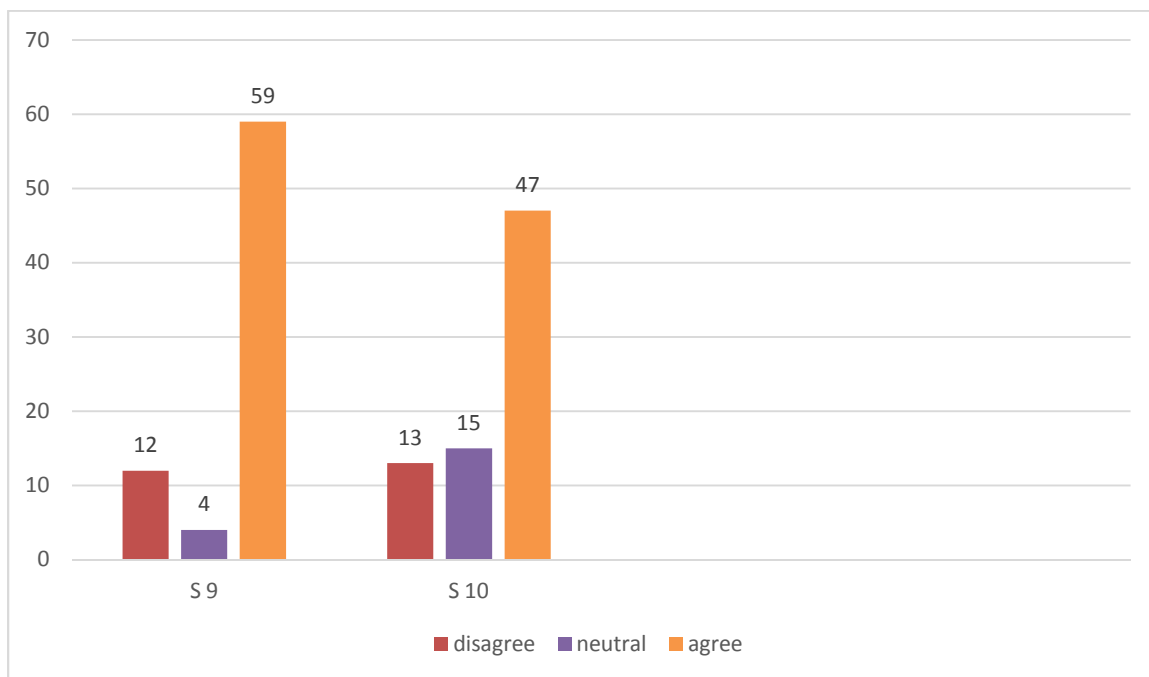
After rating Statement 6 (I am relieved I don’t have to write curriculum.) as *strongly disagree*, the comment was added, “I believe there is a lot of well-justified

concern among the teachers in my district that the students' education will suffer because teachers were forced by their superintendents into teaching poorly sequenced units of study" ((Teacher). When commenting on the new standards, one respondent stated:

The new state standards are not about innovation. They are merely tougher standards embraced by lawmakers who mistakenly think that if we just ask more of our students, they will miraculously deliver . . . merely adopting tougher standards is not a solution to solving our educational problems. (Administrator)

These comments and others expressed great frustration about not being trusted as teachers to actually perform the job, therefore resulting in creation of all these new requirements and mandates that limited their individual professional freedom to make decisions.

In my observations of the CTT groups, the most common and obvious frustration stated was the fact that it had been decided to follow the sequence set forth in the State Sample Curriculum (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). Disagreements about the order of the units and even the importance of all districts following the same sequence were prevalent in the first CTT meeting held on September 30, 2013 where I was a facilitator. We agreed on a compromise: teachers would reorder their units to follow the State Sample Curriculum for the current school year (2013-2014), and the topic of sequencing would be revisited at the end of the academic year, with possible changes for subsequent years.



S 9: I grew up in a rural setting.

S10: The time I have spent in collaboration with other districts' teachers has been beneficial.

Figure 3. Likert survey statements 9-10.

In summary, lack of teacher agency was a strong theme that I found in teachers' interview data. It was manifested among the teachers I interviewed as a perceived lack of time to complete all tasks given to them by others. They used the term "overwhelmed" consistently. Another manifestation of a lack of teacher agency was the perception that this Consortium was limiting their abilities to make decisions regarding curriculum, including scope and sequence and assessments. Administrators were sympathetic with the teachers' perceptions, but somewhat expected them based on data collected from earlier meeting statements and observations. Even though administrators voiced sympathy that teachers did not have more agency, they all decided that their districts

would conform to the Consortium agreements, one of which was to require the teachers to use the State Sample Curriculum – thereby reducing teacher agency. Creating common assessments, another agreement of the Consortium decided upon by the superintendents, also reduced teachers agency in the area of administering their own independently created assessments to their students.

Perceptions Regarding the Effects of Experience

One question asked in the interviews was “Do you perceive there is any difference in the acceptance or resistance to this consortium based on age or experience of staff?” The responses to this questions indicated that most thought that there was a direct correlation between the resistance to the Consortium and the number of years in the classroom. First-year teacher Heather stated:

I really do thinks there’s a difference. I think the more or longer a person teaches, the more convinced they become that their way is working—and the more they’ve invested to make sure it’s working—so, I’ve seen and heard that teachers that are closer to retirement are more ambivalent about the whole process. I think it’s a better situation for teachers like me who are newer. (April 21, 2014)

Carla, a younger teacher, said:

There are some older teachers who have done things the same way—I know one who even uses the same plan book every year. And so, I think that they don’t necessarily embrace change very well. Also, if it’s not broke, why fix it? They’ve had good scores. (May 7, 2014)

Veteran teacher Ashley said, “Yes, the older we get, the more we do not want to play . . . and other teachers have said the young like it because it gives them ideas and guidance” (May , 2014). Nancy, a young teacher, stated:

I see more resistance from older teachers—and like I said, they’ve been doing the same thing for years, and they feel like it’s working and, plus, they’ve had to go through more changes, whereas new teachers, we’re just getting started. (May 14, 2014)

These and other comments clearly indicated a perception among most of the teachers that longevity in the profession did, indeed, affect the perceptions of the participants. The perception was that the longer a participant had been teaching, the more resistant toward the Consortium implementation.

Likewise, administrators also had definite perceptions regarding the effect longevity of teaching had on the perceptions of the teachers towards the Consortium.

Administrator Kristi responded with her perception of teachers' opinions to the question:

I think it relates to experience . . . experience totally plays into it—so if you've been teaching 10 years and you've got your system figured out . . . it's got to be really stifling for someone to say "No we're going to do this now," I'd have a hard time with it for sure. (June 2, 2014)

Marlin, an administrator, responded that "they [the younger teachers] don't know any better. They're going to listen to you. Older teachers, who've had success, why do we have to change something that's been successful?" (June 2, 2014). Administrator Marlin had this opinion: "Depends on how many years they've been teaching" (June 2, 2014). Administrator Breck offered, "Older teachers see it as more limiting, and younger see it as more helpful" (May 1, 2014). The perception that their teachers saw the Consortium agreements as limiting their professional freedom and as dependent on the number of years of teaching experience that each teacher had was spoken by four of the six administrators.

My observations in working with teachers in the Consortium as a CTT facilitator corroborated this finding. The acceptance or resistance of the Consortium that I observed was, at times, experience-based. Most of the teachers in my CTT group with many years' experience seemed to grudgingly comply as observed and recorded in my field notes.

My own career experience has been mixed regarding how long a person has been teaching affects their attitudes towards accepting new initiatives. I worked with many teachers over the years and have witnessed acceptance of new initiatives by beginner teachers and those with many years of experience with equal reluctance or enthusiasm.

Yet again, there seemed to be broad agreement between the teachers and the administrators that a teacher's experience affected their perceptions of the Consortium. Generally, they agreed that the longer a teacher had taught, the more resistant they were to the Consortium initiative. Again, the teachers expressed this more often and gave concrete examples of scenes they had witnessed which supported their perceptions.

Administrative Leadership

In the meetings and in the interviews, administrators expressed a belief that their leadership was important in order to make this collaboration a success. As the development of the Consortium evolved and was focused around Consortium Team Time (CTT), superintendents and principals decided early on (at their initial meetings)—and later at the steering committee meetings—that it was important for the superintendents and principals to be the facilitators of the CTT groups, to be seen as active participants – a lead by example approach. The interviews later reinforced this thought. Mandy's comment was as simple as “[named a superintendent who was her facilitator] is our leader, and has done an amazing job” (May 14, 2014). This does not indicate that the superintendent was the only one who could have done an “amazing” job, but she did seem to appreciate the superintendent's involvement. While administrative leadership perceived as “good” by the teachers was important in a CTT group's success, some

administrators were not perceived as effective, neither was the group perceived as

successful. Lucy, a veteran teacher, said:

(named a superintendent who was the facilitator of her group)'s been great—[she] understood where we were coming from as a group . . . but when talking to other teachers in my school—math, not so much—it's got to be this way and this way, and I'm not sure where they are . . . they were feeling very frustrated. (May 21, 2014)

Lucy also said:

We'd go through the complete writing process [before the Consortium] . . . [but] if you look at the State Curriculum, that doesn't do that now, so I just put it in my principal's and superintendent's hands and just said, "You know. I can change, or I can do what we've always done." They said, "You better do what you're going to be tested on,"—so, we will not have the immersion in writing. (May 21, 2014)

When asked about the how the superintendent introduced the Consortium idea in her district, Ashley, complimenting her superintendent, stated:

I go to school board meetings with my husband all the time, so he actually started with the board and said, "I'm thinking about this idea. . . . you may see . . . you may hear . . . 'cause it's going to be different. But, I'm going to be talking with the teachers and wanted to give you a heads up. You may get calls." The next thing he did—he makes us a meal twice per year—so, he sat with us and said, "What do you think about this? You all have a voice . . . you're all professionals, and this is how we can have a voice" . . . he bounced ideas off us, and we shared with him. And then, he said, "OK, I'm having this meeting . . . principals involved" . . . [he was] very, very open about what he was doing, about the process. He just said, "I don't believe that the state should decide about your assessments . . . you need to decide . . . you need to get together and just kept visiting," and finally, he said, "I've visited with all of you . . . we've had these discussions . . . and not all of you will be on board . . . but I'm making the decision, and I hope you will come along with me and make this decision positive." Lots of conversations and prep work. (May 8, 2014)

Carla, a teacher, when asked the same question, said:

Starting off . . . he's had some wonderful classes on how to shape, how to prepare people for change. And, we've had the shared leadership model, and we started talking about this the year before this past year. Some people didn't find out last year until the last week of school. So, I think our district has done a great job preparing is for this—a lot of this is packaging—they've done a nice job with that. (May 7, 2014)

Candy, a teacher, commented:

We have great leadership in Mr. (she named the superintendent) and through the last few years of working with him, we put a lot of trust in him, and when he said this was going to make us better teachers and help our students along the way, we were on board . . . we trust our administrator. (May 12, 2014)

The administrators also perceived that their leadership, including personal involvement, was important in its success. Kristi, one of the administrators, stated, “I feel it was huge to have our principals in it with everybody” (June 2, 2014).

Administrators apparently perceived that their leadership in sticking to the agreements committed to in the initial meetings was important. When asked his role in the Consortium, Marlin, an administrator, said:

I think I need to make sure our teachers understand why we’re doing it because without buy-in from them, it’s not going to work . . . biggest challenge is motivating veteran teachers, and veteran teachers that are very good at what they’ve done for a long time, and veteran teachers that were my mentors. . . . They’re blanket talks to the whole staff, but then, it’s more one-on-one talks with them—they’re watching you [as a leader]. . . . We definitely went through leadership and went through accountability [speaking of accountability committee], and then we went through staff meetings. (June 2, 2014)

He was describing the leadership actions taken in preparing the staff for the Consortium participation. He continued, “I think you just have to stay positive, understand frustrations, but focus on how it [the Consortium] can be helpful . . . positivity across the board makes a big difference” (June 2, 2014). Breck, when asked to describe his role, said:

Leader—somebody who’s in it with them—maybe as a teammate at some point, and again we talked about a lot of times that one way to get them on board is to give them ownership, but if we ever get to that ownership piece, there’s got to be some real guidance in there, someone that keeps people on course. (May 1, 2014).

While administrative leadership was spoken of in many of the interviews as being essential to the success of this consortium, it was also reinforced in the Likert survey. Statement 5 (My building administrator supports the efforts of the Northeast Consortium and regularly expresses that support when discussing it in meetings and with individuals.) had the second-highest average rating of all 10 questions, surpassed only by Statement 9 (I grew up in a rural setting.). One commented on this statement: “My building administrator supports . . . but also takes into consideration the thoughts and concerns that we have as classroom teachers.” Another stated: “Our administrator is a staunch supporter of the Consortium.” Speaking about a group with poor leadership as the reason this respondent would not choose continued participation in the Consortium, the comment was written: “Our group was misguided from the beginning, and the experience has not been beneficial to my classroom program.” Statement 5 (My building administrator supports the efforts of the NE Consortium . . .) drew this comment from one respondent: “My principal does support the Consortium. She also listens very well to us teachers” (Teacher).

These comments support others made in interviews and also the comments made at the numerous Steering Committee meetings discussed earlier. As stated earlier, I was a participant in the early meetings where our roles as leaders were discussed in detail. I stated my opinion that we, as superintendents, should take an active role as group facilitators as we developed the design of the Consortium at the meeting held on February 5, 2013. The others agreed, and we decided that it would also be important for our principals to join in as facilitators, thereby firmly establishing our roles as educational leaders of our districts.

While teachers perceived that when administrators provided “good” leadership in the CTT groups, they were generally perceived as successful. However, the opposite perception was also true. There was an appreciation among most of the teachers based on their comments that administrators led by example in the Consortium. Administrators also perceived from comments in the original planning meetings, and in comments from the interviews that their direct involvement would display a lead by example approach and would be well perceived. Therefore, not only did the administrators predict this perception of teachers in their preliminary meetings, they also reinforced it by their interview comments. Ashley, Carla, and Candy, speaking of their own superintendents were very complimentary of them, praising them for actions they took in preparing their staffs for the Consortium implementation. Of course, my position of being a superintendent colleague of their superintendents might have influenced them to say positive things, in case it got back to them through me.

Purpose of Collaboration Questioned

Those interviewed repeatedly expressed a sentiment that dealt with the purpose of the Consortium. The stated and perceived purpose of the CTT groups was to align curriculum with the State Sample Curriculum and to create common assessments that were to be given to all students at the appropriate grade level and subject in each participating district. The results of those assessments would be shared and analyzed to instruct teaching. However, most of those interviewed were not happy with the above purpose of the Consortium and offered input on what they thought the purpose should be. John, one of the younger teachers, stated, “I was excited to get into it just because I wanted to be able to talk to other (names his subject area) teachers more about strategies .

. . (pauses as he describes his role with a negative tone) my role seems to be an assessment maker” (April 7, 2014). Heather expressed her frustration with the current purpose: “But, I question how long it will take us to get to the point where we can just collaborate because we’re so focused with just making the test” (April 21, 2014). Carla stated her frustration with the purpose of the CTT Group time in this way:

We were working on common assessments . . . we weren’t working on interventions, and I hope we get there because all the testing in the world isn’t going to help us if we’re just collecting data, and we’re not adjusting our teaching . . . maybe becoming that sharing community where we can share our resources and expertise. (May 7, 2014)

Carl, a second-year teacher, said that “I think it [the CTT group] was more beneficial just the networking and collaboration . . . the common assessment, I don’t know how successful that will be” (May 22, 2014). Mandy put it this way:

I don’t want to write a test. I didn’t go into education to write tests. So, I really don’t know if it makes sense to—I don’t think it’s good use of our time. . . . I think a better use of our time is taking a lot of the overwhelming amount of data that Colorado already has . . . I just think the time could absolutely be spent doing things more productive—[talk about] some resources, talk about strategies, activities. (May 14, 2014)

When asked to list her biggest concerns going forward, she said, “My first concern is if we only stay focused on adding more assessments, I’m not sure that’s going to drive instruction in any way, shape, or form” (May 22, 2014). Another similar comment from beginning teacher Amber was that “If we could just go and collaborate about strategies and stuff, I think that would be more useful than re-writing assessments and tearing everything [current curriculum] apart” (April 14, 2014). Nancy’s comment regarding the CTT groups’ purpose was “but I wish we just had more time to collaborate different ways that we’re teaching in the classroom, not so much how we’re assessing it, [but] how is it taught” (May 14, 2014)?

Some administrators also expressed the desire for the purpose of the collaboration to move away from developing common assessments. Marlin, an administrator, believed the focus of the CTT Groups should change:

I think if we can maybe steer away from assessments a little bit more and start to get into other stuff—my staff loves collaboration, people to talk to that are in their same grade level—they just don't have that and it's huge for them . . . they're not exactly sure why we're writing the assessments. . . . I think if it doesn't change its primary focus, which is writing assessments right now, that it's going to go away. (June 2, 2014)

Kristi, another administrator, said:

We haven't gotten into the meat of what true collaboration . . . and gotten past the assessments . . . to what true collaboration about strategies . . . and if I've heard one thing from the teachers, they would like to shift it away from assessments. (June 2, 2014)

My own experience as a participant observer corroborated the findings from the teachers and administrators. I consistently heard in my CTT group meetings and in casual conversations that I had at meetings and among teachers across the Consortium the desire that we would quit spending time on writing common assessments and talk about things more meaningful to teachers such as teaching strategies and practices used among our districts.

The Likert survey also strongly supported the interview responses regarding the desire for it to change the purpose of the Consortium, away from assessment making and toward collaboration about teaching practices. The majority of those randomly selected teachers and administrators wanted the CTT groups to move away from collaborating on curriculum alignment with the State Sample Curriculum and the common assessments and move only toward collaboration on teaching strategies, remediation ideas, teacher resources and activity ideas. One respondent stated, "I think if we met a few times of the

years to collaborate on teaching strategies, that would be beneficial” (Administrator), when commenting on Statement 7 (The activities of the NE Consortium will improve my students’ overall education at my school.). Another comment was included, “nor did we have time to discuss best practices and instructional strategies. If we are able to have these conversations in the future, I think the Consortium will help me improve my teaching practices” (Teacher). Still another stated, “We have not gotten to the point of discussing what we can do to improve student learning, only written assessments” (Administrator). One stated, “If they want to continue the CTT for 2014-2015, they would be better off to have teachers bring supplemental activities that work well within the units” (Teacher). Several others shared their opinions in comments about collaborating with a different focus: “It would be a good idea to meet with other teachers of the same grade level and get to talk about issues I need help with” (Teacher), “In collaborating with other teachers, I have brought back ideas I was able to implement. As far as the assessments developed, ‘NO.’ I think the Consortium could help if we focused our efforts more on helping each other pedagogically, rather than common assessments” (Teacher), and “We have not discussed teaching practices. We have developed tests” (Administrator). These and other comments strongly reinforce the desire of many in the Consortium that the purpose of the collaboration should move away from common assessment development and toward sharing best practices that individual teachers have used successfully.

A recurring theme I heard from teachers during the CTT time in which I was facilitator was regarding the desire that collaboration could involve more than creating common assessments. This finding corroborates the consistent finding from the

interviews that a desire to change the purpose of the Consortium was prevalent among the teacher participants. Interview data from administrators and through the Likert survey responses also corroborated these findings. However, from observations and field note from the earliest meetings, the administrators were the ones who decided that the purpose of the collaboration would be common assessment development at the very beginning of the Consortium.

Positive Outlook

Even though many of those interviewed and those who had responded to the Likert survey had concerns and expressed that they would like to see some changes in the Consortium's purpose and agreements, all but 2 of the 12 teachers interviewed responded "yes" when asked during the interview if they could decide whether to continue participating or not in the Consortium. However, only 4 of those did not qualify their choice based on changing or tweaking the purpose, structure, and time frame of the present Consortium. The more positive comments included this one from a teacher who had taught for a few years, Candy:

I truly believe . . . talking and spending time with people who were doing the same thing I was, was just such a relief . . . talking to people in the same boat as I'm in. . . . I would definitely go back. (May 12, 2014)

John, a beginner teacher, stated "Oh, I definitely would keep working on it. I don't want to scrap it yet" (April 7, 2014).

Others, while answering that they would continue, had some qualifications in their positive response. Nancy predicted rough waters ahead: "I would continue it. . . . I really enjoy getting out and meeting with other teachers and seeing what they're doing. I'm thinking, next year, it's going to be a mess—reading and writing" (May 14, 2014).

Mandy, said, “I guess, ‘cause I always want the best of both worlds, probably choose to continue . . . and glean what I could, but it would be nice to have the pressure off to not have those deadlines” [for completion of the assessments] (May 14, 2014). Heather, a first-year teacher, said this: “I would continue and hope for modifications . . . maybe fewer meetings . . . using those other days in our classroom . . . heard a lot of discussion about that” (April 21, 2014). Answers from those interviewed, both the teachers and the administrators, concurred that the CTT Groups needed to move away from assessment building and into more collaborating with teaching strategies, resources, and activity ideas.

Two individuals interviewed also responded affirmatively when asked if they would choose to continue, but had some fairly negative statements with their answer. Carla indicated that “I would probably say ‘yes’—my only concern is with the writing portion [reading and writing will be the curriculum area dealt with in 2014-2015] . . . I’m hoping we don’t end up dumbing it [the curriculum] down, so that’s going to be my hill that I want to die on” (May 7, 2014).

Comments from the two individuals who said they would not choose to continue were the most negative. Veteran teacher Ashley stated, “Selfishly, my group has not been as congenial or cohesive as I would’ve liked; so selfishly, I do not want to go back and feel that atmosphere . . . so, selfishly, ‘no’” (May 8, 2014). Veteran teacher Kesha had this comment: “If this was the only thing we were doing this year, the fact that I have so much on my plate, I would say, ‘forget it’” (April 14, 2014). Therefore, while most of those interviewed indicated that they would continue, the feeling was not unanimous.

Several administrators also had positive comments regarding continuing in the Consortium: from Breck: “Yeah, absolutely, I don’t think we’d be anywhere close to addressing the standards—I do know we’re far ahead [from where we’d have been without the Consortium]” (May 1, 2014). Possibly the most positive comment came from this mid-career administrator, Arlene: “Absolutely, absolutely 100%. . . . I think it’s better than fried ice cream” (May 5, 2014). Administrators interviewed also indicated they would stay in the Consortium, but had some qualifiers along with their answers. Two administrators thought it was a good idea, but wondered if it was too big in scope and might have worked better if it had been downsized. Bart stated:

I think so . . . there have been mornings when I’ve said, “We’re, could we just have done it ourselves or with just (named a neighboring district). How would it be different if we had split into two groups?” I’ve wondered that . . . could you just be a little more agile or clearer or more consistent? (May 5, 2014)

Kristi said, “I’ve had my fight-or-flight moments. . . . If I could, I would downsize everything . . . just downsize it so it’s not this heavy lift” (June 2, 2014). Doris, an administrator who had expressed doubts in her answers, answered the question this way: “I think I would say ‘yes’ because I think the benefits could go far, but I would tweak it differently. I would not do assessments first” (April 7, 2014).

Administrator Marlin had this comment after a long pause: “That’s tough . . . right now, I think you almost have to see it out one more year to see where it goes because after one year, how do you assess something” (June 2, 2014). Hardly a strong endorsement, but neither a complete rejection of the Consortium. Also interesting since in his role as principal, he assesses teachers’ performances based on one year of evidence, as required by the Teacher Effectiveness Act (Colorado Department of Education, 2013e).

Again, the Likert survey results showed agreement with the interview responses when it came to expressing a desire, even with all the negative comments, to remain in the Consortium. When comparing the respondents' comments to their rating, the rating would seem to slant toward the positive. For example, one comment on Statement 1 (The Consortium is a good idea for my District.) was: "Much of the time is wasted waiting for answers. Different groups get different directions, and there is no template for the tests. It's frustrating" (Teacher). By any judgment, this is a negative-toned comment. However, the rating put down for this question was *neutral*. Another rated the same statement as *agree*, even though the comment was:

Only for red-tape reasons—documentation, etc. I HATE that I lose productive time for it . . . in-service days are now for Consortium stuff, which means I have to spend personal time [weekends/evenings] keeping up with grading, planning, activity/lab setup, etc. (Teacher)

On Statement 10 of the survey (The time I have spent in collaboration with other districts' teacher has been beneficial.), one respondent scored it *strongly agree*, but included this comment:

However, I would like to point out that the less-structured collaboration has been beneficial—I could live without the rest. The free discussions have been amazing. But allow us to focus on what we see/experience in our classroom, rather than focusing on a task. As the unit tests are completed, I see this Consortium being more productive, but that is a long-term goal, and I will be irritated in the meantime. (Teacher)

These and other comments added by respondents on the survey show a negative feeling about the particular statement, but the rating seems more positive than the comment. It also appears to be another plea for teacher agency, discussed above.

The number of respondents rating Statement 2 (If I could choose right now, I would choose to continue participation in the Consortium.) as *agree* or *strongly agree*

was 40 out of 75, or 53%. It is paradoxical that even though many who chose to write comments wrote negative comments regarding many of the aspects of the Consortium as it is presently configured, overall they still supported the idea of staying in it. The number of respondents rating the survey Statement 1 (This consortium is a good idea for my district.) an *agree* or *strongly agree* was given also 40 out of 75 (53%). Finally, 47 out of 75, or 63%, either agreed or strongly agreed with Statement 10 (The time I have spent has been beneficial.). In examining all comments made on the Likert survey and classifying them as a negative comment or a positive comment, the vast majority of comments written were negative.

Sixteen of 18 teachers and administrators interviewed indicated that they would choose to stay in the Consortium. Several teachers expressed to me in the CTT meetings and also in informal conversations that they sincerely hoped that their district would continue in the Consortium for the next year. My observations of the organizational meetings, researcher journal notes, and meeting summaries all provided data that indicated a positive attitude and outlook for continuing participation in the Consortium by most participants. With some of the negative comments made in interviews, and on the Likert survey, the findings that many would choose to stay in the Consortium was somewhat surprising.

Teachers tended to be more negative in their comments regarding the Consortium than administrators. Several administrators perceived the unrest among the teachers. However, all the administrators expressed the desire to stay in the Consortium, and 10 of the 12 teachers interviewed agreed.

Summary

In summary, to respond directly to research question two: What were the perceptions of the two specific stakeholder groups, administrators and teachers, regarding the Consortium's formation, leadership, and potential outcomes?, I found the following themes: (a) suspicion that the effort would fade away over time as had others; (b) a longing for teacher agency (concern regarding a perception of lack of control over their profession); (c) perception that their district's administrative leadership was vital in any kind of initiative if it was to be successful; (d) that the purpose of any collaboration as perceived by the teachers was an important factor in their acceptance or resistance; and (e) that, generally, teachers had a positive outlook regarding the opportunities for collaboration, even though many concerns about its purpose existed. I used the interview transcriptions from the administrators and teachers to discover these themes. Generally there was more agreement among the perceptions of teachers and administrators than differences. In addition, my research journal added insight from meetings, discussions, and the interviews and these also corroborated the findings from the interviews. The Likert survey responses also corroborated the interviews regarding the major themes that I found. Summaries of meetings where concerns were discussed and that were prepared by NEBOCES personnel and distributed to the superintendents also gave voice to the themes that emerged from interview data.

Question 3

Q3 In what ways did the characteristics of rural school communities influence stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation of the inter-district curriculum collaborative?

In order to address this question, observations were done, field notes were written, semi-structured interviews were used, and domain analysis was conducted. A Likert survey was developed, and one statement included in the survey was used to corroborate the rural backgrounds of those participants in the Consortium who chose to complete the survey. These sources of data produced three major findings in response to research question three: the rural culture themes of isolation, independence, and competition did affect the perceptions of the participants in regard to the acceptance and or resistance to the Consortium.

Isolation

Several respondents pointed out that in answering the questions in the interviews and sometimes in the general discussion that accompanied the answers they felt alone in their buildings. They were the only teacher who either taught their particular grade level (elementary) or their subject (secondary). Mandy stated, “Most schools have only one teacher per grade” (May 14, 2014). When asked what the benefits were in joining the Consortium, Bobbie, a teacher, said, “I can go vent to the English teacher who’s really a good friend, but what goes on in her classroom is so different from what goes on in my classrooms, that she’s not been able to offer a lot.” She continued “The problem with small schools is that you customize so much based on every teacher that when you replace that teacher, it’s like all the gears have to move . . . but in larger districts [with] several teachers at each grade level . . . when they [students] move up [to the next grade], they’re not going to go from this teacher to this teacher, but from this level to this level” (June 12, 2014). Amber used the term “one track,” meaning the only teacher in her grade, and continued, “I like working with other first-grade teachers. I’m the only one,

so it's nice to be able to talk with them.” However, when I asked her if she ever talked with them in between the monthly meetings, she said, “No” (April 14, 2014). When Nancy was asked what she thought the motivation was for her district's decision to participate in the Consortium, she answered, “Some only have one teacher for grades or even for two grades” (May 14, 2014). Candy talked about the relief it was for her to be able to talk to other “people in the same boat as I'm in . . . such a relief” (May 12, 2014). This finding may also relate to the finding from the data regarding that fact that most participants wanted to continue in the Consortium, even when questioning its purpose.

When asked what she would have used for curriculum if her district had not adopted the State Sample Curriculum, first-year teacher Heather stated, “I would probably have just had to figure it out. . . . I would've just jumped in. And, I probably would've used the textbook as a guide. Looking back now, I would not count on using the textbook for anything” (April 21, 2014). This quote from Mandy sums up the perception pretty well: “We've always had to sink or swim on our own” (personal communication, May 14, 2014).

Administrators also noted the isolation in which rural educators worked. Breck said, “We live in our own little world, and we don't venture out.” When answering a question regarding the curriculum adopted and the reason for the formation of the collaborative, he responded, “Rather than be just alone out here. . . . We just haven't had that much opportunity to collaborate. They collaborate across grades, but unless you make a deal like we have here in this Consortium, there's not really any other first-grade teacher” [for example] (May 1, 2014). Doris, the veteran administrator, stated, “I think the isolation of our participants make it [collaboration] a lot different [than in larger

districts]. They're used to being the only guru in the building and maybe the district" (April 7, 2014). She was implying that collaboration was more difficult across rural districts since they were pretty much used to being alone and making all the decisions for their grade and/or subject area. The feeling of aloneness that came out in answers to various questions also, at times, stressed the overwhelming expectations that are placed on the teacher. For example, one administrator, Marlin, said when describing what happened when he got his first teaching position, "I asked for my curriculum when I started, and they said 'You create it'" (June 2, 2014). Kristi put it this way: "Somewhere along the way in rural isolation, we learn not to be collaborative" [since we do everything on our own] (June 2, 2014). Administrators, in several of the preliminary meetings during the formation of the Consortium mentioned more than once that having a curriculum that was not so teacher-specific was a motivation for their decision to join and help form the coalition. One specifically gave an example of hiring a high school English teacher a few years ago and said there was simply no curriculum that he could find in the school for that newly hired teacher. The teacher who left had not left any curriculum to follow for his successor. It was up to the new teacher to start from "scratch." This was a finding that emerged time and time again in many answers—that perception of isolation or the feeling of aloneness in their jobs.

In my role as facilitator, this is one of the themes I heard repeated as often as any other: the fact that the teacher participants liked the collaboration in the CTTs because they were the only teacher of a particular grade or subject in their school. Their comments suggested that their perceived isolation was a motivating factor in their willingness to participate in the Consortium.

In summary, the findings were that teachers' perceived isolation did in fact motivate them to participate in the activities of the Consortium. They perceived that contact with colleagues from other districts and the collaboration that ensued was a positive activity and gave them satisfaction that was not present, nor possible in their individual schools. The administrators also saw the Consortium as a way to overcome isolation. The very decision to establish a collaboration across school district boundary lines was, in part, based on a feeling of "not wanting to do this alone". This sentiment was spoken and implied at numerous early meetings.

Independence

Most teachers not only perceived that they were "independent," but were proud of that perceived characteristic. Mandy stated, "I'm pretty independent. I like to do my own thing" (May 14, 2014). Heather, complaining about the fact that all districts had adopted the same curriculum and were requiring all teachers in the Consortium to use the same sequence or order of units, said, "I think that requiring everyone sequencing [in the same order] takes away some of the autonomy we like to feel" (April 21, 2014). John said, "I can still teach the unit how I want to teach it" (April 7, 2014). Ashley put it this way: "And, I think people are mourning the loss—just being able to close the door and being independent—doing whatever they want" (May 8, 2014). Lucy, an experienced teacher, said this:

I fought back against the whole thing. [My district] changed its schedule so we could fit in with everybody else. and I was very opposed to it and am still very opposed to it. . . . I'm not a big fan of the Sample Curriculum. I'd rather have autonomy. . . . It was being jammed down our throats—a mandate—gotta do it. (May 21, 2014)

Further displaying her frustration of being asked to change her practice after years of successful experience, she stated:

And, I think I was really good at what I did, and all the sudden we were asked to stop that, so I think it [resistance to the Consortium] has to do with being brought up as an autonomous teacher where you developed things—there's not a department—you are the department. (May 21, 2014)

Another example of a veteran teacher who had confidence in what she was doing, Kesha, had this to say about being told to change:

When you have teachers that have taught for years, your curriculum and the order you taught it and you believe in it, and so to change those things up is a little unsettling. . . . We've been successful. I don't need a bunch of outside teachers telling me the order to teach. (April 14, 2014)

The young teacher, Carl, said, “So, there's things your community needs that the state curriculum doesn't account for” (May 22, 2014). He was speaking of a flexibility that he believed a teacher ought to be given to fashion their teaching based somewhat on community expectations, such as expectations that the local history be taught, or that a school song be mastered. He obviously perceived that the State Sample Curriculum did not take these factors into account. Candy, one of the elective teachers, speaking of her CTT group, said this: “That's our biggest fear, that the public will think we're all little clones” (May 12, 2014). She went on to state, “I think we [rural communities] do put up our guard a little bit more.”

The theme of independence was also common in the administrator interview data. Doris, the experienced administrator, stated, “They're (teachers) pretty much just used to doing their own thing in their own time in their own way” (April 7, 2014). Breck brought in the aspect of being trained as a professional, therefore not needing someone to make all the decisions for him: “You spend at least four years in college, and you're trained in

something and, basically, now you're being told what you're going to do and how you're going to do it" (May 1, 2014). Speaking of the independent spirit, not only of teachers and staff, but of her board, Arlene, administrator, said:

I know from my perception, these are really independent people . . . very conservative, very religion-based, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps—to heck with welfare kind of people. . . . They're a tough bunch, and if they get behind you, they'll make it work. They'll make it work. They'll grab ahold of that steer's leg and hold on. (May 5, 2014)

Arlene's perception was from one who had moved to a rural area from a larger metropolitan area; therefore, her experience enabled her to speak to the contrast she had experienced. Continuing to speak of her past experience of being told to use a specific curriculum and sequence when she taught, she continued:

I hated it, and the students hated it, and as a teacher, I always had it out when my principal came by—always looked good, but did I use it? No. Kids still got great results, but it wasn't [the State's] program. (May 5, 2014)

Doris, a veteran administrator who had worked in the same district for more than 25 years said, "Speaking of this independent culture, I think it is part of this weaving. I think people want to be cooperative, but it is still a culture" (April 7, 2014). She went on to describe her move into the small community she calls home after she married her husband who is a native. She still says that her daughter is accepted as an insider, while she is still considered an outsider by some, even after living there for 30 years. She elaborates further:

You know, some communities talk about others as not accepting, but it's more general . . . all [rural] communities hold that second-generational standard. And, what I find very interesting is that we think we're very warm and welcoming and draw people in and we *are* superficially, but it's a hard place to break in and know people. (April 7, 2014)

This goes to the perception of skepticism of anything that comes from outside the community discussed above. Breck stated, “I think we’d probably be more independent out here . . . rural is probably a little more independent doing things how they’re used to doing ‘em” (May 1, 2014).

In the many organizational meetings, this perceived rural culture of independence was brought up by the superintendents and principals as a possible deterrent to the acceptance of the Consortium. Findings from the interviews corroborated the perceptions of the administrators.

In summary, the theme of independence emerged through the spoken responses of most of those interviewed. Out of the 18 interviews, only 1 teacher and 1 administrator did not speak of independence when describing their perceptions of their fellow teachers. Most of those interviewed not only expressed statements that supported their feeling independent, but some explicitly stated it and all were proud of the characteristic of independence.

Competition

The idea of competition between schools and communities was also a finding from the data. Ashley, an experienced teacher stated:

The other thing we have to get over is competition. . . . I know it’s an issue. My scores had better be better than (named another school) and if they’re not, I just don’t want to talk about it . . . when we shared our scores [from the first common assessment], everybody had their papers like this (shows how they hid their papers when sharing their results). (May 8, 2014)

Veteran teacher, Lucy, was discussing her irritation that everyone had to be on the same schedule and stated:

The way I understood it was (named her district) can’t be done teaching ninth grade in December [on a block schedule] because everybody else isn’t. I heard,

‘Well, we can’t be letting (named her district) be getting that assessment in November because (names another district, for example) will hear about that [before their assessment]. I mean c’mon—you talk to other students about what was being tested? (laughs) That’s silly . . . they’re not talking about the test. (May 21, 2014)

Lucy had strong opinions on most topics discussed, and she was very comfortable sharing those perceptions. Speaking of a competitive perception, Kesha, a teacher near retirement, said that a colleague in her building was “upset—she said, ‘I’m basically going in there and giving them all my good ideas . . . telling them what to do, and they’re not bringing anything—just sponge up what I bring’” (April 14, 2014). These comments seem to suggest that there is the perception of an element of competition in rural communities that creates issues when comparing data between districts or sharing work.

Administrators also had perceptions that competition affected perceptions regarding the Consortium. In several of our meetings, the topic was who won the basketball game last week, or who might win the next one. A competitive spirit was observed numerous times between colleagues in different school districts. Jokes were made about how many years one school had beaten another. This was not solely regarding sports, but at times academic competitions. Bart, one of the more experienced administrators, put it this way: “We’re bringing together schools who basically compete against each other in every other area. And then, all of the sudden, this is a competition . . . listen to me, and I’ll show you why my school is best” (May 5, 2014). Doris said, “The attitude ‘why would I listen to that lady? I don’t think that school’s very good’” (April 7, 2014).

In summary, both teachers and administrators mentioned competition between participant schools as being a perceived factor in the acceptance of the Consortium

activities. I also observed in my CTT group a reluctance to share student data from the common assessment, unless it was perceived as good when compared to other schools' assessment data. As Ashley mentioned above, some teachers tended to hide their data from the other teachers or only shared certain data they were willing to share.

Other Observations

Other observations and findings that should be noted include the evolving number of participating districts as time has passed. It was noted earlier that 1 of the 11 districts dropped out in the initial planning stages. The staff in that particular district was never on board with joining the Consortium and, consequently, their school board never supported the idea. According to the superintendent, who is no longer in the position, their scores were very high on state assessments, and they saw no need in joining a consortium in which one of the agreements would cause them to change their curriculum and assessment program. Because of their success on standardized assessments, the superintendent decided to terminate their participation. That reduced the number of participating districts to 10. By the winter break, another district dropped out. The reasons were never made official or public. One of their campuses was rated lower on their accreditation rating than ever before, so a shakeup occurred among their administration ordered by their school board, who also directed the administration to cease participation in the Consortium, according to a conversation I had with their dismissed superintendent. Principals were re-assigned, and the superintendent was relieved of his duties mid-year. The board decided that they needed to take care of business at home and were not on board with giving up any of their autonomy to make

decisions regarding curriculum and assessments (Rocky, personal communication, March 25, 2014). The number of participating district was reduced to nine.

As the 2014-2015 school year approached, two of the remaining nine districts involved had a change in superintendents. The result of that change in leadership in those two districts was that they both dropped out of the Consortium. Therefore, the current number of districts that are still active participating members in the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth is at seven.

Summary of Findings

The findings from interview data, which were reinforced by observations, the Likert survey responses and comments, and from domain analysis suggested that there were common perceptions shared by the participants of the Northeast Consortium for Student Growth and Achievement during its implementation year (2013-2014).

When domain analysis was done and semantic relationships were listed, several cultural domains emerged from the data: (a) teachers, (b) administrative leadership, (c) community, (d) activities, (e) meetings, and (f) self/professional development. The teacher domain and the administrative leadership domain were selected for analysis. A taxonomy of teachers' perceptions in a rural school was developed, and three cultural themes of rural schools emerged: (a) feeling of independence, or a general skepticism or rejection of outside direction, (b) the perception of isolation or aloneness felt by administrators and teachers in rural schools, and (c) the perception of competition between districts. These reinforced the findings from my observations, the interviews, and the Likert survey.

To respond directly to research question one, What historical, cultural, and political phenomena led to the formation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth?, I found three major findings. The recent Colorado state mandates had indeed created a willingness to consider inter-district collaboration on a scale that had not been done before, a perception that administrative leadership skills and direct participation would be required to successfully implement the consortium, and a perception that past practices, possibly based on cultural factors, might affect the implementation on the part of all participants.

To respond directly to research question two, What were the perceptions of two specific stakeholder groups, administrators and teachers, regarding the Consortium's formation, leadership, and potential outcomes?, the findings included frustration with initiatives when they came from state or federal mandates or requirements, which were considered outside entities. Nancy, a teacher, commented, "A lot of it is made for bigger cities—not made for rural areas—we have to tweak everything and make it work." Comments regarding professional development, in general, indicated that this frustration was not new. There was frustration regarding requirements and trainings based primarily on their perceptions of past experience. The feeling of "this too shall pass" resulted in perceiving this effort as another requirement that increased their workloads for a time.

Teachers and administrators alike were concerned with a lack of teacher agency since they perceive so many decisions were made for them by outside entities. The theme of a lack of control was often repeated as a problem in their professional lives. Many comments in meetings I observed, in the interviews I conducted, and on the Likert survey optional comments mentioned the perception of being overwhelmed with the new

and increasing mandates. They indicated a perception of not having enough time to get it all done. They perceived that they were, in fact, not in control of their professional lives due to these mandates.

Associated with the teacher agency finding, was the perception of being limited due to the adoption of the common curriculum. The perception of a lack of the ability to make teaching decisions was a common irritation among many of the teachers' responses and comments. Remember the teacher Mandy's comment, "I think if you poll the teachers in this building, they would say it's limiting. That they—not just their instructional freedom, but they and I feel like our professional judgment is not trusted" (May 14, 2014). This was further perceived as a lack of trust in their skills as educators, in that they were not trusted to make good professional decisions. Some even perceived that many mandates or requirements were an effort on the part of outsiders and politicians to make them look like, as beginning teacher Carl put it, "idiots" (May 22, 2014).

Years of teaching experience was perceived to make a difference in the acceptance or resistance of the Consortium by both teachers and administrators. The perception was nearly unanimous in the interview data that this made a difference, and some comments spoken in meetings seemed to support this perception. However, when looking at the answers during the interviews and on the Likert survey, the majority of answers, regardless of years of experience, were to continue in the Consortium.

Another finding was the perception that leadership had a real influence on the acceptance or resistance of staff of the Consortium. Administrators as observed in meetings, and also in their interview answers were unanimous in the perception that their roles in presenting and implementing the inter-district Consortium were vital. They

believed that without direct leadership, even to the point of leading the individual CTT groups, the effort would fail. Teachers reinforced this perception in their responses.

One finding was that a desire on the part of many that the focus of the Consortium should move away from assessments. There was a nearly unanimous perception among the teachers that if the Consortium did not move away from stressing common assessment development and toward a true collaboration of ideas, teaching strategies, resources, and activities, it would fail over time. Many administrators agreed that the CTT group activities should gravitate away from developing assessments.

A positive attitude toward future participation in the Consortium, even though many had some negative comments about its direction, activities, or the mutual agreements that were signed off on by all participating districts, was an additional finding. It was interesting that after analyzing the answers to the interview questions and reading the comments by those who chose to comment on the Likert survey, there were numerous comments that were negative (see previous quotes and comments). However, all but two of those interviewed would choose to continue participation in the coming year. All six administrators expressed the desire to continue in the Consortium, and ten of twelve teachers agreed. Only two teachers expressed the desire to quit the Consortium.

In Chapter V, I will discuss implications from these findings and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Overview

In my professional career of over 37 years, which has been almost entirely in rural public school districts in three different states as a teacher and administrator, inter-district collaboration has been rare. However, in the spring of 2013, superintendents from 11 different public school districts in northeast Colorado, all of which are classified as rural by the Colorado Department of Education, a discussion began about establishing collaboration between the districts (Colorado Department of Education, 2013f). My own district, of which I was the superintendent, was a member of this collaborative group. Therefore, I was a participant observer in this case study (Spradley, 1980; Yin, 1994). The collaboration was eventually joined by 10 of the 11 districts, which initially began the discussion. This qualitative study was an attempt to examine the formation of this rural inter-district collaboration, pursue the reasons behind its formation, use interviews with randomly selected teachers and administrators to hear the stakeholders' perceptions of its implementation, and finally, to see if there were cultural factors of rural communities which emerged that affected those perceptions.

Analysis of the data collected, including many pages of artifacts, field notes, 154 pages (single-spaced) of transcription from 18 interviews, and results from a Likert

survey distributed to the nearly 300 participants in the Consortium, produced several themes. Domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis was done, and two cultural domains were analyzed: teachers and administrators. I used contrastive analysis to compare these two stakeholder groups.

Discussion

My findings were reached through detailed analysis of the data collected. As stated above, I was a participant in the early meetings of superintendents at which the idea of the collaboration/consortium initially originated from a discussion of the frustrations present among the group. According to comments, these frustrations were a result of attempting to deal with the many requirements of recently passed Colorado legislation: the new Colorado State Standards, the new Teacher Effectiveness system, and the new PARCC assessment scheduled for implementation during the 2014-2015 school year (Colorado Department of Education, 2013d, 2013e, 2013g). The superintendents were quite vocal at the meeting referenced in Chapter IV when communicating their frustrations. This indicated that, indeed, outside pressures can influence decisions regarding inter-district collaboration. The fact that these rural superintendents felt overwhelmed by their numerous and varied duties illustrated prior research (Chalker, 1999; Copeland, 2013; Franklin, 2012). The outside pressures in this case were the superintendents' perceptions that the growing number of changes and new mandates that were being required by the state overwhelmed them and their rural districts. Franklin (2012) discussed the perception of school administrators as feeling overwhelmed. The perception that we are overworked in our professions is manifested in several ways as documented by McCafferty (2014), who did a survey that included over 600 employees,

that included but was not exclusively educators: 88% said they worked more than 40 hours per week; 72% indicated that they work more than they prefer; 63% say they eat at their desks. This indicates that the feeling of being overwhelmed is not exclusive to educators. Entities and groups outside teachers and administrators control were deciding new changes and requirements. The data from the spoken comments at these early meetings of the superintendents indicated that the formation of this collaboration, the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth, was, in part, a direct result of these perceptions. In addition to the observations of the meetings described above, themes also emerged from the interviews of the administrators that reinforced the historical, cultural, and political phenomena which led to the formation of this consortium. In the eight years I had been a superintendent in this region, inter-district collaboration between the staffs of these districts had been rare and intermittent at best and was initiated by individuals, not by district leadership. I had posited that the increasing number of mandates in Colorado may have influenced the initiation of this inter-district collaboration by the administrators and the acceptance of it by the teachers. The data indicate that, indeed, these mandates were mentioned by numerous superintendents as a reason for the formation of the Consortium. The mandates were mentioned by the superintendents to their staffs as a justification for their district's participation in the Consortium, perhaps to overcome teacher resistance to changes in their professional practices that the Consortium agreements required.

Frustration Discussion

A general frustration with initiatives from participants, both administrators and teachers, but especially the teachers, and was displayed through answers and discussions

from the interviews as well as the Likert survey. Responses revealed that this frustration seemed to be based upon various perceptions.

This frustration was indicated in numerous answers to questions. It was apparent in almost every interview done. Teachers were generally frustrated with new initiatives and generally perceived they would be replaced over time with another one, their buy-in suspect which affected their perceptions of its success (David & Cuban, 2010). Almost to a person, those interviewed were very critical of the state and federal governments and regarded them as outsiders. Based on their personal experience, many expressed a perception that these mandates and requirements would pass over time, and others would replace them. Therefore, the general perception was “this too shall pass.” Conflict was apparent in some of the consortium Team Time Groups (CTTs) (Elmore, 2009). The perception of the impermanence of mandates, requirements, and programs in public education was pervasive. Argyris (1999) found that individuals create self-protections and individual defenses against organizational change, possibly explaining the ingrained skepticism that became apparent in this study. This perception affected those interviewed in several ways. They either (a) put up a front of compliance, doing only those things that indicated to observers that they were complying, or (b) dove into the effort even though they perceived it was the flavor of the day and that soon something else would take its place. However, since it was the current requirement, they would do their best to comply with it while it lasted. Research has shown that perceived success of any change does not come at the beginning of the effort, but at the end (Fullan et al., 2005). My professional experience has shown me that teachers are weary, in general, of the many initiatives and in-service programs that are thrown at them. This fits with research done

that indicated teachers' expectations of professional development affected their perceptions of its usefulness (Nipper et al., 2011). Therefore, if the professional development did not meet with their prior expectations, teachers were discouraged. Most of it is assigned without much input from the teachers. This may explain the comments revealing frustration at this implementation stage. History was expected to repeat itself.

Teacher Agency Discussion

“Simply defined, the state of agency enables individuals (and, to some, collectives) to make free or independent choices, to engage in autonomous choices, and to exercise judgment in the interests of others and oneself” (Campbell, 2012, p. 183). Many of the comments of those interviewed indicated a perception of a lack of control over their professional practices including curricular decisions. The administrators also reinforced this perception in their meetings while they discussed the formation and, eventually, the design of the Consortium. Prevalent also was their perception that educators lack agency – that many of those making decisions are outside the profession—i.e., legislators—or who are at least unfamiliar with their perceived pressures and frustrations created by the demands of their jobs. Some of the voluntary comments on the Likert survey indicated a perception that their own administrators were the ones who were constraining agency for them and their fellow teachers. These perceptions were especially expressed regarding the concepts of time and perceived professional freedom to make curricular and assessment decisions, or the lack thereof. The perception was strong among the teachers and administrators that the new mandates and requirements that followed them asked too much. Robinson (2012, p. 233) states:

In the past two decades, not only have teachers been knocked off their pedestals by a whole range of new voices at a number of levels outside of education – such

as politicians, policy writers, and even parents – but the definition of teachers' work has been dramatically redefined.

Teachers perceived that they literally did not have enough time in their days to accomplish those mandates/requirements (Chalker, 1999; Copeland, 2013; Franklin, 2012). I believe from my own experience, and previous research agrees, that this phenomenon in education – of those outside the role of teacher making decisions for teachers – does indeed affect teacher agency by constraining it (Robinson, 2012). This feeling of being overwhelmed is not a perception limited to educators, but a growing perception among all American workers (Davidson, 1993). He maintains that one of the reasons we feel overwhelmed is that

In America, too many legislators, regulators, and others entrusted to devise the rules which guide the course of society take shelter in the information overglut by intentionally adding to it. We are saddled with 26-page laws that could be stated in two pages, and regulations that contradict themselves every fourth page. (Davidson, 1993, p. 474)

This could be a phenomenon that, in part, is contributing to the feeling of being overwhelmed expressed by the participants. I have long believed that things are made too complicated, as expressed in the quote above. My experience is that things are made to be too hard, the result being that it contributes to our feeling of being overwhelmed.

The other perception related to the teacher agency theme that emerged was that this consortium was limiting their professional freedom as educators, thereby again affecting agency. This is a phenomenon that is a result of the increasing control exerted on local school districts that starts with the federal government and then trickles down (Whol & Strom, 2002). The federal mandates of high stakes assessments and the requirements of states and districts to hit certain levels of students being deemed as proficient on them was a major influence on the formation of this Consortium. As administrators felt

pressured by these requirements, they felt compelled to reach out across district boundaries and begin this collaborative project. Regardless of who shares the blame for constraining teacher agency in curricular decisions, the Consortium did, in fact, cause teachers to perceive it affected agency. Administrators stated that they believed their teachers would see this consortium as limiting their freedom to make decisions about curriculum, especially since the superintendents agreed going into the Consortium that all would use the State Sample Curriculum and follow the sequence of units therein. Most of the interviewed teachers indicated that they believed that not only did that decision limit their freedom to develop their own curriculum, but that it indicated a lack of trust in them to make those decisions. “One outcome of states’ standardized testing is teachers’ surrender of their control of curriculum content” (Thomas, 2005, p. 20). This summed up many of the teachers’ sentiments regarding lack of agency regarding curriculum and helps explain a continued frustration with the “outside” perceiving that most of the initiatives that they consider negative comes from outside their school. I have observed in my career that teachers’ agency was increasingly constrained because of the perception that the many mandates from federal, state, and local administration seemed to indicate that they were not permitted to make decisions – thereby constraining agency rather than enabling it. One teacher even responded that the perception he had from all these new curriculum requirements, assessments, etc. was that that it indicated that those in power (specifically, the legislature, and the government, in general) wanted teachers to look like idiots and that he was leaving the profession because of it. There is no doubt that the perceived constraining of agency affected the teachers’ overall perceptions regarding the Consortium. My fear is that by constraining teacher agency, the Consortium devalued

the teachers and this had detrimental effects on the job they performed. Robinson (2012) indicates that a lack of agency results in “de-professionalism, the erosion of status, and new definitions of the role of the teacher” (p. 231). It explained the reason that beginning teacher Carl was leaving the profession, and makes it hard for teachers to have confidence in their own abilities to teach. Carl expressed frustration that the Consortium and other factors made him feel constrained in making decisions regarding teaching. One final factor relating to this was that the number of years of experience a teacher had was a factor in how much they saw the participation in the curriculum limited their professional freedom. The longer they had taught and had confidence in their curriculum and assessment decisions, the more they perceived it to limit their professional freedom.

Teacher peer collaboration was seen as a method that had the potential to increase teacher agency (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012). I believe the sharing of teaching practices and development of common assessments, in the case of the Consortium, may, in the future, have the result of enabling teacher agency due to their involvement in decision-making and the building of confidence in their decisions, which in turn may increase agency.

Administrative Leadership Discussion

Administrative leadership emerged as a factor in the perceptions of whether the Consortium would be accepted or resisted by its participants. Early on, administrators perceived that the very success of the Consortium would depend, in large part, on their leadership within their districts. This perception is accurate based on much prior research that leadership is vital to successful change (DuFour & DuFour, 2012; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2010a). The discussions at the organizational meetings, where

the design of the Consortium and the agreements on which all participating districts would sign off were being decided, were always dominated by the role of leadership and how important it would be in the respective communities in developing a positive perception and an acceptance of the Consortium as a good thing for the districts. Many of the discussions revolved around the roles of the superintendents and principals (see Appendix E). For example, it was decided that we would all act as CTT Group facilitators. By serving as facilitators, it was perceived that we would be accomplishing several desired outcomes. We were aware of research which found that involvement and participation of leadership helped ensure overall success in the effort (DuFour et al., 2006). First, as we all wanted to be considered instructional leaders, this would be a role that outwardly stresses that role. There were spoken concerns about getting and keeping teachers on board with participating in the Consortium. Leadership by example was an important and common belief among the administrator group and supports previous literature (Somera, 2007). The administrators believed in this to the point that facilitator training was scheduled on two occasions, one during the summer and another in September, 2013, so they would have the skills necessary to be successful in those roles. The administrators took to heart the research of DuFour and Marzano (2011) that found that leaders not only empower, but direct their teachers in successful PLC-type collaboration, which entailed learning those skills. In addition, facilitator meetings were regularly scheduled throughout that implementation year to keep discussions about concerns and successes between the facilitators ongoing, thereby establishing collaboration among that group, also.

The teachers were also clear about their perceptions of the importance of administrative leadership in the activities of the Consortium. Those interviewed who felt that their leadership had adequately prepared their districts and their communities, or actually included their staffs in the decision to join and participate in the Consortium, had a much more positive perception of the Consortium than those who felt leadership was lacking. Additionally, those who perceived that their particular CTT Group had strong administrative leadership had much more positive responses to the interview questions. As described in the responses of teachers in their district, two districts stood out regarding administrative leadership and the importance of its role in their districts' and communities' acceptance of their participation in the Consortium. One respondent went into detail about the steps and the time her superintendent took in preparing them to join the Consortium. It was not just an announcement of a decision at a faculty meeting. He began a discussion with his staff and culminated his actions with open and public discussions with his school board members at their regular meetings. This teacher was complimentary of his efforts and perceived that she and the community, represented by the Board, were part of the decision. This also confirmed prior research on the importance of great communication skills (Cottrell & Harvey, 2004).

One teacher in another district whose superintendent used a shared leadership model in his district with all major initiatives and decisions appreciated his approach. According to the teacher, shared leadership was well-received in her district and contributed to the staff's acceptance of the consortium (Williams & Lindsay, 2011). Those respondents from that particular school district had a strong perception of confidence in their administrative leadership—again, feeling a part of the decision as

contrasted with some whose answers implied that they felt like a victim of their administrator's decisions. When teachers felt included in the decision-making, they also accepted shared responsibility as written about by Sullenberger (2012). This supported recent writing of a "partnership approach" for leadership, which created collective leadership (Gialamas, Pelonis, & Medeiros, 2014, p. 80). This implied that shared leadership encouraged teacher buy-in for initiatives such as the NE Consortium.

The school district that dropped out mid-year also had a mid-year turnover in leadership mandated by its Board. A principal was reassigned, and the superintendent was relieved of his duties. Both of the two districts that chose to discontinue their participation for the second year (2014-2015) also had a change in leadership, with both superintendents taking positions in other districts. These events further indicate that administrative leadership skills are vital and were intertwined with the implementation of this rural inter-district collaborative effort.

Wrong Collaborative Focus Discussion

One clear theme was the nearly unanimous perception that the Consortium had the wrong focus. While all respondents and those who chose to make comments on the Likert survey questions expressed a belief in the value of collaboration, they also perceived that the focus on assessments in this consortium was misplaced. All 12 of the teachers interviewed and most of the administrators hoped that the focus on designing common assessments would eventually diminish and that the collaboration would revolve around teaching strategies, activity ideas, resources, and common problem-solving. The interview responses that were reinforced by the comments on the Likert survey clearly showed this was a universal perception. Most perceived that not only did students

already have enough assessments, but that there were plenty of valid assessments already developed available online and through other means. Some of the teachers did not feel the assessment focus of the CTTs was beneficial to improving student learning and, therefore, did not perceive the effort was as successful as it could have been had the focus been collaboration on teaching strategies (David & Cuban, 2010). Many teachers did not feel that the CTT Groups fulfilled their needs as teachers, so their demand for change increased (Jaffee, 2001). While most took their tasks seriously when working in their CTT Group and produced common assessments in their respective subjects, many felt that it was a waste of what could have been productive and professionally beneficial time, had they collaborated on other things, rather than assessments. The administrators had also picked up on this perception and expressed the desire to change the focus of the Consortium for the 2014-2015 school year. Some went so far as to express the thought that if the direction and focus did not move away from assessment creation the following year, then the Consortium would not survive over time. However, although the superintendents expressed the desire for the focus to change, and they had the power to immediately change the focus, they did not. Even though, they expressed a resentment of the mandates that were being required, they did not change their own mandate on the teachers.

Positive Outlook Discussion

One theme that was present was the positive outlook that most of the respondents maintained regarding the Consortium. While many of the comments were negative regarding the purpose of and, in some cases, the leadership of their CTT Groups, all but two stated that they would continue in the Consortium if given the chance. When

analyzing the data, this stood out as incongruent, given the many complaints that were voiced by the teachers in their discussions and responses during the interviews.

However, this supports research that indicated that forming relationships with colleagues gave teachers satisfaction (Haughey & Murphy, 1983). Even those who chose to voluntarily comment on the Likert survey, of which the majority of comments were negative, 40 of the 75 would choose to continue in the Consortium for the following year, while 27 would choose to drop out (8 were neutral). On the Likert statement that the time had been beneficial, 47 responded that it had been beneficial. What explanations are there for this seemingly contradictory data finding? One explanation might be the perception and recognition of research showing that collaboration among peers is a good thing, even though they might be questioning the purpose at the beginning (Blanchard, 2007; Friend & Cook, 2013; Lohman, 2005). Another might be that the teachers may not wish to go back into the normal daily isolation of being the only teacher of their grade or subject matter in their respective schools. Teachers and administrators began to see collaboration as a “professional responsibility” rather than simply an option (Babione, 2010, p. 8). Even though the collaboration might not, at present, have the focus they perceived to be useful, at least they had some professional collaboration. Finally, teachers may have perceived that maintaining a positive attitude was not only important for their own well-being, it was already ingrained in their personalities as research has shown the importance of teachers’ positive attitudes in student learning (Hellner, 2005; Muchnick & Bryan, 2010; Wilson, 2008).

Rural Communities Discussion

In looking at the data to determine if there are characteristics of rural communities and, therefore, their schools that contribute to the acceptance or rejection of an inter-district collaboration, several themes emerged from the interviews which were supported by Likert survey comments and personal observations of the many meetings and discussions of the Steering Committee. It became obvious that these rural school districts had more commonalities than differences (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). One area of research regarding rural culture relates to the concept of “place” (Fowler, 2012; Green, Noone & Nolan, 2013; Williams, 2012). The participants’ concept of place was apparent in many of their comments and observations that I made. Three themes emerged from that analysis that affected inter-district collaboration and were related to rural place: isolation, independence, and competition.

Isolation Discussion

In general, teachers from these rural school districts who were interviewed felt isolated from their peers. Many teachers choose to be isolated (Cuban, 2013; Hargreaves, 2009; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Smith, 2008). However, when a teacher is alone in his particular role in a building, it is not voluntary. This perception of isolation and feeling of aloneness created a yearning for collaboration with professional peers. Collaboration in the Consortium reduced isolation, as is normal as noted in literature (Drago-Severson, 2006). Time and time again, statements that revealed the feeling or perception of isolation among the teachers participating in the Consortium were spoken. The fact that the overwhelming majority of teachers were the only ones in their school who taught their subject in secondary grades or their grade level in elementary played a large factor

in their positive perceptions of professional collaboration. The teachers realized that isolation can prevent improvement (Schmoker, 2005). Maybe the involuntary isolation of being the only one teaching a grade or subject causes this realization in rural teachers. In other words, when an individual teacher does not have the opportunity to collaborate, he or she more clearly sees the need than those who have daily collaboration opportunities. In their organizational meetings, the superintendents also spoke of having to do this alone (referring to dealing with the numerous new mandates that they perceived to be overwhelming). Apparently, the perception of aloneness when dealing with the duties and complexities of teaching or school district administration was a factor in creating the desire to collaborate across district lines. Without it, considering the negative comments made about consortium participation by those interviewed, it is doubtful that a desire would be present to form and participate in such a consortium.

Independence Discussion

One of the strongest themes that emerged from analysis of responses and domain analysis was the fierce independence of the rural teachers and administrators (Chance & Segura, 2009). The source of this independence was a result of several factors that emerged in discussions, interviews, Likert survey responses, and domain analysis. Was the isolation discussed previously a factor in this independence that was valued in rural communities? Did the longevity or experience of these administrators and teachers in rural environments contribute to their culture of independence? One factor that was mentioned by some of those interviewed was their “upbringing.” The values that were mentioned as being taught in homes included the value of hard work and the concept of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps supported in the literature regarding rural

place (Thomas, 2005). Community values were mentioned as important and the perception that students should pick up the rural values, which are mentioned in the literature as “hard work, honesty, and practicing religious faith” (Thomas, 2005, p. 23). Another term used in describing the independent spirit of rural communities was the value of being tough. Associated and intertwined with the desire to be independent was the suspicion of anything that comes from the “outside.” The “outside” was a bit vague, but definitely included state and federal governments. They separated the fact that their school was an arm of state and federal government. Their school was considered part of the local fabric, which was buffeted and, at times, tormented by those outside forces that mandated actions and requirements of them. The federal and state mandates were seen as diminishing independence (Benson, 1996). My own experience living in rural communities for over 25 years reinforces the fact that independence is perceived as a desirable trait in rural communities. Any action taken on the part of school administrators seen as rebelling against those “outside” forces is perceived in high regard. In my experience in multiple rural districts, anytime I took a stand against an organization, entity, or agency that was not local, and seen as an outsider, I gained esteem with the rural community. Comments from respondents indicated that they were more comfortable visiting with teachers in their own buildings than with those in other schools (Hite, Reynolds, & Hite, 2010). The comment from the respondent bragging about ignoring the directive to teach from a certain curriculum and teaching from her preferred curriculum, in her past experience, and even going so far as hiding the fact by having the “required” curriculum on display in case her principal came by, further suggests that this independent spirit is generally ingrained in rural culture. The one teacher who is leaving

the profession, basically because he perceives a lack of trust in his professional judgment and an effort, again, from the “outside” to distrust his professional judgment, further demonstrates a possible result of rural independence.

I have witnessed over my 37 years’ experience an increasing encroachment of federal and state mandates and increasing loss of local control by school districts. It has created a growing frustration in the rural districts where I have lived and worked in that it creates a tension for the very rural cultural values that are prized by rural communities.

Competition Discussion

Also associated with independence was the ever-present idea of competition with neighboring schools’ teams, whether they be sports or academic. The competitive atmosphere between communities was a real phenomenon (Clauss, 1999; Green, 2008; Sears & Lovan, 2006). At times, the perception that their school was in competition with their neighboring schools carried over into collaboration. Athletic rivalries or competitions, spoken of by Fowler (2012) as he describe rural characteristic and values, carried over into the CTT groups and at times created a competitive atmosphere. It was prevalent for the casual discussions that took place before the CTT groups began their work to center around competitive events that had taken place or were about to take place between schools in the Consortium. This would indicate and corroborate the findings that were evident from the interview comments regarding competition. Several of those interviewed mentioned the fact that some of those who participated in the CTT Group collaboration were protective of their strategies and their assessment results. When teachers physically hide their results from others in their group, full collaboration and sharing are diminished. Teachers who perceived their results were positive when

compared to the other districts were more willing to share—and to brag. I know in my own experience, positive comparisons with neighboring districts were always welcomed, while losses in sports or lower scores on state assessments when compared to neighboring districts were not willingly shared. In my observations of CTT Groups when it was time to share the results of the first common assessment, if they were low, excuses and complaints about the assessment and the Consortium were not uncommon. Competition, while it can be a motivator for trying harder, can also be a deterrent in collaboration across school district lines. Many school incentives are based on competition between schools, such as the Race to the Top awards (McNeill, 2014). This in turn reinforces the competition between schools that is so prevalent in rural areas. My own experience as an administrator in rural communities is that competition with other area school districts is a real factor in convincing boards, staffs, and communities to collaborate with each other. However, as supported in the literature, collaboration between the participants in the Consortium reduced competition by bringing communities together to share leadership in school decisions and created the team approach (Drago-Severson, 2006). As the CTT groups collaborated throughout the year, relationships formed and competition was diminished among the collaborators.

Limitations of the Research Study

When looking at rural culture and characteristics, a comparison was not possible with a non-rural inter-district collaboration since non-rural schools were not included in this study. The themes that emerged from this study might also emerge from a study of a similar inter-district collaboration effort among non-rural districts. Many of the perceptions of those interviewed were real to the participants included in this study, but

they might not be unique to rural schools. Even the perception of isolation might be possible in bigger schools if the climate of collaboration is not present. My own perceptions as a superintendent have been developed by my experience in exclusively rural school districts in Texas, Colorado, and, now, Wyoming. That means my perceptions have not had input from non-rural settings in their formation and, therefore, while reinforcing the findings of this study, they are most probably skewed by the rural mindset to which I have been exposed and which have been a part of my administrative career.

Implications of the Research Study

The main purpose for this research, as described in Chapter I, was to examine the implementation year of a rural inter-district collaboration to determine its effectiveness and to explore how its findings may guide future collaborations between rural school districts. Inter-district collaborations, based on my extensive experience in rural school districts, are increasingly necessary in order to accomplish the many tasks required of public schools in small, and sometimes isolated, rural communities. Additionally, a purpose was to determine if characteristics and/or the culture of rural schools and communities affected the acceptance or rejection of an inter-district collaboration, which has been rare in my experience as a rural administrator of over 25 years (Green, 2008; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992; Sears & Lovan, 2006). According to the Executive Director of the Northeast Board of Cooperative Educational Services (NEBOCES), Tim Sanger, this inter-district collaboration was one of three efforts that took place during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years in rural areas of Colorado among rural public school districts (personal communication, September 5, 2013).

One implication is that the scope and number of the state educational mandates in Colorado that took effect beginning in the school year 2013-2014 for public school districts did have a direct influence on the initiation and formation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth (Colorado Department of Education, 2013d, 2013e, 2013g). This influence was a result of the perceptions by the rural administrators and teachers of being overwhelmed by all of their job requirements (Chalker, 1999; Franklin, 2012). This supported the general implication that outside forces can, indeed, move entities that have operated independently to form partnerships or collaborations. Teacher agency was perceived to be affected by teacher participants in that it was perceived to be constrained by the Consortium requirements. When teachers felt overwhelmed by the Consortium requirements and limited by its mandates, it had the effect of constraining agency. The history and culture of rural schools and communities impacted how and when this collaboration took place (Muijs, 2008; Sears & Lovan, 2006). The participants' perceptions of independence and isolation were overcome by their perception of helplessness or of being overwhelmed by "outside" forces or powers (Franklin, 2012). Another implication is that inter-district collaboration was much more likely to be perceived as positive if administrators were fully supportive and took on active roles in the collaboration, not just supervisory roles (DuFour et al., 2006). The additional implication related to leadership is that when leaders are active in preparing the groundwork for an inter-district collaboration, publicly and clearly, which involves the participation of staff, it is more positively perceived (Cottrell & Harvey, 2004).

These findings show an implication that administrative leadership is vital to the success of rural inter-district collaborations. This supports research that leadership is

important in schools, whether it be at the campus level (principal) or district level (superintendent) (Fullan, 2010b; Gulka, 1993). Much time was required to prepare for the implementation of this consortium with numerous planning meetings and trainings for leadership. This study implies that those in leadership roles in rural school districts cannot just make inter-district collaboration happen without extensive personal involvement. Much time is required for leaders of the districts considering future collaboration to not only prepare their staffs for the implementation of the collaboration between districts, but also to decide a focus for the collaboration and to plan for strategies to maintain that focus.

There is also an implication that collaboration is strongly perceived as a good thing by the rural educators documented in this study. Even when they disagreed on the direction, usefulness, or purpose of the collaboration, they were reluctant to discontinue the collaboration. One reason for this was the isolation and aloneness that rural educators perceive. The general implication was that rural inter-district collaboration was not as hard to accomplish as some of us rural administrators thought. This also implied that rural teachers generally agreed with the research that professional collaboration between educators is a powerful tool for student academic improvement, and efforts at collaboration between rural districts should be encouraged and considered worth the obstacles that have to be overcome in order to implement it (DuFour et al., 2006; Elmore, 2000; Friend & Cook, 2013; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Lohman, 2005). This general perception—that collaboration between teachers in different rural districts is a positive action—can be used by administrators to expand the sometimes small professional and personal world of rural teachers. This has the potential to reduce the isolation so often

experienced by teachers and administrators in rural schools where a “go it alone” approach, which in my own experience is the norm, is continued.

While collaboration was perceived favorably by the participants in this study, there was also the implication that mandates or requirements for educators to change their current practices were perceived unfavorably. Therefore, while the definition of “good” collaboration by the rural educators interviewed for this study included the sharing of strategies, practices, resources, and ideas, it did not include any requirements to discard current practices in favor of those shared ideas. This was intertwined with perceptions of the importance of professional freedom to make judgments on what is best for their students and a resentment that there are those outsiders who do not trust their judgment. However, when these rural educators were presented with the implementation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth, they accepted it and although they had many negative perceptions of it as expressed in interview responses and voluntary comments on the Likert survey, they generally desired to continue and perceived it as personally beneficial. This also reinforced the implication that collaboration with peer professionals is favorably perceived by rural educators, even when inhibited by the perceptions of independence and competition between the schools involved in the collaboration (Clauss, 1999; Green, 2008; Sears & Lovan, 2006). This positive perception of collaboration or sharing of ideas with other teachers in similar districts may be used by rural administrators to nurture needed changes in their own rural schools. This can happen through inter-district collaboration by exposing their staffs to different practices, while simply mandating changes in the isolation of their own rural district may be met with resistance.

Finally, and maybe most important, the implication is that cultural characteristics of rural schools, while at times created challenges in forming collaborations with entities and individuals outside their school and community, did not preclude the formation of those collaborations. With the proper type of leadership, rural inter-district collaborations can be successful.

Why, one may ask, is rural inter-district collaboration and, consequently, the implications of this study important? As public education comes under increasing public scrutiny, mandates have and will continue to require changes in the current practices of schools. As an educator for the last 37 years, 32 of which I served as a teacher or administrator in rural districts, I have become increasingly aware that the requirements that have been mandated on the districts where I have worked have taken a toll. My own personal experience tells me that while requirements and expectations of all public schools have increased, expertise and personnel needed to accomplish those tasks in smaller rural districts are sometimes lacking. In the future, inter-district collaboration may not be just perceived as a positive activity in public education. It may be perceived as a way for small, rural public school districts to survive.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study suggested that rural inter-district collaboration is doable and desirable. More research is needed to compare the findings from this rural inter-district collaboration to inter-district collaborations among non-rural school districts.

Questions that emerged in this study include:

- Would perceptions in non-rural inter-district school collaborations be similar, or are these perceptions unique to rural schools and communities? While it is

easy to stereotype traits such as independence as synonymous with rural culture, is it accurate to do so?

- Is the feeling of being overwhelmed by state mandates as strong in non-rural schools as it is in rural schools and, if so, what are its effects?
- Is the perception of aloneness or isolation present in non-rural schools?
- How is the role of leadership perceived in non-rural schools? Does the fact that individual educators may be more removed from leadership in non-rural schools cause differences in those perceptions?
- Did my role as a superintendent, a position of power, influence the reactions of my CTT group and those I interviewed? Did they perceive me more as facilitator or superintendent?
- Does collaboration in rural districts have the potential to improve the quality of student achievement among diverse population groups?
- Are the characteristics that emerged from this study of rural schools truly unique? Are there commonalities independent of place among the perceptions of educators that affect collaborations across district lines?

A comparative case study of inter-district collaboration is a suggestion to truly compare rural and non-rural districts. Such a study would highlight the real differences and similarities, if any, between the perceptions of those professional educators who work in those two types of districts.

Conclusions

I set out to examine, through a qualitative case study, a specific rural inter-district collaboration of which I was a participant observer. It was the first such undertaking of a

collaboration of this scope of which I had been a part in my 37-year career in public education. I was looking for the forces that prompted its formation and wanted to discover the perceptions of the stakeholders in the year of its implementation. I also wanted to discover characteristics, if any, of rural schools and communities that either encouraged the acceptance or the resistance of such a collaboration between the schools. Being a superintendent of one of the participating districts gave me a unique perspective and nearly unlimited access to my fellow superintendents, their principals, and staffs.

Several themes emerged from my research, including: (a) a strong perception of skepticism of mandates and other requirements that came from outside their school; (b) a victim mentality among educators resulting from a perceived loss of their professional freedom; (c) the perceived importance of administrative leadership in the success of the collaborative effort; and (d) a general positive outlook regarding the Consortium, in spite of numerous critical responses and comments.

Cultural characteristics of rural schools emerged which could be grouped into the following three themes: (a) independence, (b) isolation, and (c) competition. These three characteristics, which emerged from interviews, observations, a Likert survey and domain analysis, affected the perceptions of the stakeholders regarding the Consortium.

Rural education has dominated my professional and personal life. It is near and very dear to my heart as I have chosen to stay in rural school districts for over 30 years. I am somewhat surprised, but heartened, that collaboration between rural districts was perceived as beneficial and in a positive light by the stakeholders in this collaborative effort, even though many concerns were expressed in this study. This study has made it clear that the real and perceived isolation of rural teachers created a hunger for peer

professional collaboration in northeast Colorado and is likely shared by other rural districts as well. It is also clear that while rural culture can make collaboration across district lines difficult, with the right leadership efforts, it is entirely doable and worth the effort. Note, Lucy's, a 20-year veteran teacher, comment at the end of the implementation year: "I was very skeptical—pushed back to [named her superintendent], but then I could see how I could be helped—so I don't think it's been a waste of time for me." She became convinced of the usefulness of the Consortium as she participated in it.

Based on my own personal experience as a rural administrator, I am convinced that inter-district collaboration between rural school districts may become vital in their efforts to fulfill the obligations and their communities' expectations. I am encouraged by the findings of my research that rural inter-district collaborations are very possible. Bart, an experienced administrator, summed it up in this way at the end of the implementation year: "[After this], I think we'll have more of a culture of collaboration from now on . . . we will never go back to closing our door."

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APPENDIX A**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS/
TEACHERS (RANDOM SAMPLING)**

1. Describe your experience in education (roles, districts, etc.)
2. Describe your history with this District.
3. What is your understanding as to the reason your district is participating in the Curriculum Consortium?
4. Do you have any previous experience with collaborations between school districts?
5. What do you perceive your role to be in the implementation of the Curriculum Consortium?
6. What are the challenges that you have faced so far in the implementation?
7. What do you perceive is the general attitude of your staff and your district towards the Consortium?
8. Do you have any concerns regarding the Consortium as you move forward in its implementation?
9. What do you perceive the benefits that the curriculum collaborative to be to you and your school and district?
10. Do you have strategies that you have used or might use in the future as an educational leader to insure the success of the implementation of the curriculum consortium?
11. What do you perceive to be the biggest challenge of selling the curriculum consortium to your staff?
12. Where do you see the curriculum consortium in two or three years? Five years?
13. Do you perceive there is any difference in implementing an inter-district collaboration in urban or suburban districts when compared to our rural setting?
14. What are some comments you've heard from your teachers regarding this Consortium effort? Do they see it as beneficial for their students? What are their perceptions?

15. Are most of your teachers from rural backgrounds? Do you perceive this has any effect on their acceptance or resistance to this consortium? Why?
16. Do your teachers see this consortium as limiting their professional freedom, or helpful to their efforts? In what ways?
17. If you had the opportunity to make the decision to participate in the Curriculum Consortium at this time, would you participate? Why or why not?
18. Do you perceive any difference in the acceptance or resistance of this Consortium effort based on age or experience of your teachers?
19. Do you perceive there is any difference in the acceptance of or resistance to the Curriculum Consortium due to the fact that it is based in a rural setting vs an urban/suburban one?
20. Do you have any concluding thoughts that you would like to share at this time?

APPENDIX B

OPEN-ENDED LIKERT SCALE QUESTIONS

What is your role in the Consortium? Teacher or Administrator

Please select the number that most matches your perception to the statement:

1-strongly disagree

2-disagree

3- neither agree or disagree (neutral)

4-agree

5-strongly agree

1. This consortium is a good idea for my district.
2. If I could choose right now, I would choose to continue participation in the Consortium.
3. The activities I have participated in to this point have helped me in my teaching practices.
4. My participation in the Consortium has the potential to improve my students' performance on the commonly developed assessments.
5. My participation in the Consortium has the potential to improve my students' performance on the state assessment.
6. I am relieved that I do not have to write curriculum.
7. The activities of the Consortium will improve my students' overall education at my school.
8. This consortium has made me a believer in inter-district collaboration as a means to improve my teaching.
9. I grew up in a rural school and setting.
10. The time I have spent in collaboration with other districts' teachers has been beneficial.

APPENDIX C
IRB APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO



Institutional Review Board

DATE: March 21, 2014

TO: Jim Copeland, M.Ed.
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [521414-2] Implementation of an Inter-District Curriculum Consortium Among
Ten Rural School Districts in Colorado: A Case Study

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: March 19, 2014

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

PROJECT TITLE: Implementation of an Inter-District Curriculum Consortium among
Ten Rural School Districts in Colorado: A Case Study

RESEARCHER: Jim D. Copeland, graduate student, School of Education

970-571-1338

email: cope4444@bears.unco.edu

GRADUATE ADVISOR: Dr. Mia K. Williams, School of Education

602-677-7199

email: mia.williams@unco.edu

PURPOSE & DESCRIPTION:

The implementation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth collaborative is a large undertaking requiring much time of the leadership of the ten cooperating districts. The effort began in earnest in the spring of 2013. Three questions will guide this qualitative research case study: What historical, cultural, and political phenomena led to the formation of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth? What are the perceptions of two specific stakeholder groups, administrators and teachers, regarding the Consortium's formation, leadership, and potential outcomes? In what ways do the characteristics of rural communities influence stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation of the inter-district collaborative? The broad case is defined as composed of the ten member school districts of the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth, located in Northeast Colorado.

Face to face semi-structured interviews will be conducted with eighteen individuals from the All Star Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth member school districts using random sampling techniques. Vulnerable populations (minor children, prisoners, pregnant women, or individuals with cognitive disorders) will not be included in this study. The breakdown of these interviews is as follows: six administrators and twelve teachers. These interviews will be taped and will last approximately an hour to an hour and a half. Additional follow-up interviews may become necessary and will be conducted in the same manner as the initial interviews. I will contact you personally if this should become necessary to clarify my interpretation of your comments. These eighteen individuals will each receive a \$20 gift certificate to Bully's Pub and Grub, located in Fleming, Colorado.

In addition, all teachers and administrators on the staffs of the ten participating school districts will receive an electronic open-ended Likert Scale survey and will be asked to anonymously complete it and return it using Survey Monkey.

Participants do not stand to benefit directly. The findings will be shared with the Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement and Growth member district superintendents and might affect future directions of the collaborative effort. In addition, results might contribute to a better understanding of how collaboration takes place between rural school districts. At the end of this study, I would be happy to share the findings with you at your request. However, only the researcher will know the identities of those interviewed. Pseudonyms will be used in the place of all participants' names who take part in the interviews. Names of districts will be changed to protect identities.

Potential risks in this program are minimal. Participants may feel anxious about sharing their opinions or information. However, all individual names and the districts' names will be kept confidential.

Participation is voluntary. Any selected person for an interview may decide not to participate in this study and if they begin participation, they may decide to stop and withdraw at

anytime. Their decision will be respected. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would allow me to conduct this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have concerns about your selection or treatment as a participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639. You may also contact me with any questions or concerns at any time during this study at the phone number listed above.

Thank you for assisting me with my research

Sincerely,

Jim D. Copeland

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX E

FEBRUARY 2013 AGENDA

Curriculum Collaborative Project
Feb 5th Meeting with Superintendents and Principals
9:00 am – Noon at the BOCES Office
Agenda

- A. Ask for comment on the agreements
 - 1. All schools will utilize the same curriculum document setting the order of units and an approximate pacing of the units.
 - 2. All schools will commit to the outcomes stated in the curriculum document and will work together to for consortium-wide assessments to measure attainment of the standards.
 - 3. Schools will have flexibility in the use of materials and daily lesson-planning- there are many routes to the end products.
 - 4. All schools will/may participate in the professional learning communities and house curriculum, educational records, and common assessments on the DREAM site.
 - *May have some issues with calendar/contract that could call for some flexibility*

- B. Ask for input on critical questions
 - 1. How should the professional learning communities be organized?
 - 2. What training do your teachers need to be successful in a professional learning community?
 - 3. Who should facilitate the groups and keep them productive?
 - 4. Should he principals have a PLC group?
 - 5. How should the 6 PLC days be organized?
 - ✓ Location – Same central location? Move it around? Enough room for all these people?
 - ✓ Travel time – time to get there and leave early enough for after school duties/coaching
 - ✓ Breakdown of the day
 - ✓ +/- of all together in one day at one location vs cluster groups that meet at different times and use substitutes
 - 6. What products do we want teachers using?
 - ✓ Assessments for each new unit (potentially to be used for 191 SLO)
 - ✓ Expectations for building out DREAM as a resource
 - ✓ Collaborative planning for the next unit
 - ✓ Digging through the results together of the previous unit assessment
 - 7. What other professional development time will be needed on these days?
 - 8. Is there a need for building staff meeting time on these days?

- C. Roles
 - 1. What do we need from BOCES staff?
 - 2. What do we need from Principals?
 - 3. What do we need from Superintendents?
- D. Additional Information
 - 1. Dates and plan established for June curriculum workshops
 - ✓ June 14-15 CDE Curriculum Workshop for Northeast Region (NEBOCES and RE-1)
- E. Clarify purpose of the collaboration and the intended benefits.
 - ✓ *To collectively implement the new Colorado Academic Standards and improve instruction through collaboration and alignment*

APPENDIX F
EXCERPTS FROM ADMINISTRATIVE GUIDE

Purpose (of the Consortium) (p. 3):

To collectively implement the new Colorado Academic Standards and improve instruction through collaboration and alignment.

Agreements (by all participating districts) (p. 3):

1. All schools will utilize the same curriculum document setting the order of units and an approximate pacing of the units.
2. All schools will commit to the outcomes stated in the curriculum document and will work together to form consortium-wide assessments to measure attainment of the standards.
3. Schools will have flexibility in the use of materials and daily lesson-planning – there are many routes to the end products.
4. All schools are invited to participate in the professional learning communities six times per year at a central location and house curriculum documents, educational resources, and common assessments on DREAM
5. Participate in a shared cost structure for resources identified by the Superintendent's Advisory Committee.

Common Beliefs (p. 4)

- We believe quality CTTs will benefit teachers (partial list of bullets below).
 - Expanding your collaborative network
 - Support system for new teachers (new to the profession or new to an assignment)
 - Not the CTTs of old but rather collaboration with clear outcomes and skills facilitation

- Developing assessments together for new standards and State Sample Curriculum provides a great opportunity to use classroom/curriculum based assessments as part of SB191 requirements.
- CTTs expose all teachers to new and valuable strategies, rather than pockets of success.
- Teachers value assessments from their classroom because they know they directly align with what was taught making them a better judge of effective teaching than a state test.
- We believe quality CTTs will benefit principals (partial list of bullets below)
 - Decisions in curriculum and assessment can be grounded in results and advocated for by teachers
 - Principals will be more involved than ever in curriculum, instruction, and assessment
 - Data elevates all conversations about strategies, resources, and curriculum
- We believe quality CTTs will benefit students and communities. (partial list of bullets below)
 - Teachers have more expectations on them with SB191 law
 - Adds credibility to the SLO data used in evaluations under SB191
 - Teachers are simultaneously facing new standards, curriculum, assessments and evaluation law so they need time to work with others to handle the change while still maintaining a focus on their classrooms.
 - School Boards can have more confidence in instructional choices of all teachers, even first year teachers because of the power of the collaborative

- The shift from competing with school districts by withholding good strategies to a collaborative effort can raise scores in all schools and solidify a reputation for Northeast Colorado as the place to be for outstanding student achievement for all students

Sample CTT Daily Schedule (p. 12)

9:00	Whole Group
10:00	CTT Meetings (12: K, 1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th , 6 th , MS-HS language arts, MS-HS math, MS-HS science, MS-HS social studies, K-12 music, K-12 art, foreign language, CTE, K-12 ESL, K-12 Rdg Interventionists, K-12 Special Ed, K-12 PE)
1:45	DREAM/Agenda – Groups will upload anything they have created to DREAM and the group will determine what work will be done at the next meeting
2:00	Building Time – If needed, time will be set aside for each District or Building to meet and to use that time in any way that is deemed most effective. SAC will decide.
2:30	Load up and Leave

APPENDIX G

**SAMPLE STEERING COMMITTEE AGENDA
(4/9/13)**

**Northeast Consortium for Student Achievement & Growth
Steering Committee Meeting
4-9-13**

Materials/Data to Bring

- District Count of Teachers
- XXXXXX Schools floor plan, copies for all – XXXXXX

Admin Guide

- Any need for additional information to be added?
- Is it ready for a proof read and to be shared?

CASE/PLC/Facilitator Training

- Review proposal submitted to XXXXXX
- Final selection of a vendor that XXXXXX can start working with

Curriculum Topics

- Order of curriculum units
 - Information from the State (XXXXXX) is that there is not a methodology for the order of the units as presented, so we need to go through that process
 - Determine the process for ordering units
- Matching content to specific grades levels or courses
- Review August 13th kick off date agenda
- Additions to Curriculum Calendar

PLC Topics

- Review and revise PLC facilitator guidelines
- Review XXXXXX floor plan for Aug. 13 and other PLC dates

Dream

- Visits to districts this spring for support for DREAM

Future Sub-Committees

- Facilities/Logistics – XXXXXX and XXXXXX
- Food Service – XXXXXX and XXXXXX
- Curriculum – XXXXXX and XXXXXX
- PLC – XXXXXX, XXXXXX and XXXXXX
- DREAM – XXXXXX and XXXXXX
- Agendas/Communications – XXXXXX and XXXXXX

Next Steps

- When is the Admin Guide ready for distribution to all principals?
- Steering Committee's next meeting
 - Dates?
 - Work still to be done?

APPENDIX H
LIKERT SURVEY RESULTS

1. This consortium is a good idea for my District.
(75 Respondents)

strongly disagree	8	(10.67%)
disagree	11	(14.67%)
neutral	16	(21.33%)
agree	33	(44.00%)
strongly agree	7	(9.33%)

2. If I could choose right now, I would choose to continue participation in the Consortium.
(75 Respondents)

strongly disagree	13	(17.33%)
disagree	14	(18.67%)
neutral	8	(10.67%)
agree	30	(40.00%)
strongly agree	10	(13.33%)

3. The activities I have participated in to this point have helped me in my teaching practices.
(75 Respondents)

strongly disagree	10	(13.33%)
disagree	16	(21.33%)
neutral	21	(28.00%)
agree	26	(34.67%)
strongly agree	2	(2.67%)

4. My participation in the ME Consortium has the potential to improve my students' performance on the commonly developed assessments and the state assessments.
(75 Respondents)

strongly disagree	10	(13.33%)
disagree	9	(12.00%)
neutral	14	(18.67%)
agree	36	(48.00%)
strongly agree	6	(8.00%)

5. My building administrator supports the efforts of the NE Consortium and regularly expresses that support when discussing it in meetings and with individuals.

(75 Respondents)

strongly disagree	0	(0.00%)
disagree	7	(9.33%)
neutral	12	(16.00%)
agree	32	(42.67%)
strongly agree	24	(32.00%)

6. I am relieved that I do not have to write curriculum (since we adopted the State Sample Curriculum).

(73 Respondents)

strongly disagree	9	(12.33%)
disagree	5	(6.85%)
neutral	18	(24.66%)
agree	26	(35.62%)
strongly agree	15	(20.55%)

7. The activities of the NE Consortium will improve my students' overall education at my school.

(74 Respondents)

strongly disagree	12	(16.22%)
disagree	14	(18.92%)
neutral	19	(25.68%)
agree	25	(33.78%)
strongly agree	4	(5.41%)

8. This consortium has made me a believer in inter-district collaboration as a means to improve my teaching.

(75 Respondents)

strongly disagree	6	(8.00%)
disagree	13	(17.33%)
neutral	19	(25.33%)
agree	31	(41.33%)
strongly agree	6	(8.00%)

9. I grew up in a rural setting.
(75 Respondents)

strongly disagree	5	(6.67%)
disagree	7	(9.33%)
neutral	4	(5.33%)
agree	22	(29.33%)
strongly agree	37	(49.33%)

10. The time I have spent in collaboration with other districts' teachers has been beneficial.
(75 Respondents)

strongly disagree	6	(8.00%)
disagree	7	(9.33%)
neutral	15	(20.00%)
agree	33	(44.00%)
strongly agree	14	(18.67%)

APPENDIX I**SAMPLE DOMAIN ANALYSIS WORKSHEET**

1. **Semantic Relationship: cause - effect**
2. **Content: Interviews/observations**
3. **Example: Teachers' positive perceptions is a result of leadership**

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Term
Teachers feeling success in CTTs	is a result of	leadership
Teachers' respect of the process	is a result of	leadership
Teachers' acceptance of consortium	is a result of	leadership
Teachers' production of Common assessments	is a result of	leadership
Teachers' positive outlook	is a result of	leadership
Adoption of common curr.	is a result of	leadership
Decision to lead CTT groups	is a result of	leadership

APPENDIX J
CULTURAL DOMAINS AT A RURAL SCHOOL

Teachers	Administrators/Leadership	Community
Skepticism	Frustration	Skepticism
Isolation/aloneness	Skepticism	Isolation
Competition	Mandates	Pride
Sharing	Overwhelmed	Acceptance
Coping	Evaluating	Evaluating
Closed door	Compares	Compares
Overwhelmed	Time management	Competes
Mandates	Feels responsibility	Religion
Seeks expertise	Public relations	
Sees self as a professional		

Activities	Meetings	Self/Prof. Dev.
Curriculum writing	Staff meetings	Trainings
Lesson planning	Informal meetings	Self-taught
Daily duties (lunc, bus, etc.)	School-level	State-required
Strategy planning	Board meetings	NEBOCES
Grading	NEBOCES meetings	Assessments
Assessments	Tutoring meetings	Past trainings
Scheduling	Parent meetings	W/experts
Assigning	Open house	
	experts	
	state officials	

APPENDIX K
PARTIAL DOMAIN LIST

1. x is a result of y (cause-effect):
 - leadership causes
 - independence is caused by
 - isolation is a result of
 - time constraints cause
2. x is a reason for y (rationale):
 - reasons for collaboration
 - reasons for creating common assessments
 - reasons for creating a common calendar
3. x is used for y (function):
 - things to do for collaboration
 - things to do for creating common assessments
 - things to do with the State Sample Curriculum
4. x is a way to do y (means-end):
 - ways to deal with mandates
 - ways to collaborate
 - ways to take control of evaluation
 - ways to create common assessments
 - ways to keep focus on tasks
5. x is a step of y (sequence):
 - steps in creating a framework for consortium
 - steps in creating support for consortium
 - steps in creating opportunities for collaboration
 - steps in providing leadership